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Visual Literacy is an area of study that has spawned varied theoretical writing, definitions, practical applications, and interdisciplinary insights over the past few decades in American education. In 2011 the Association of College & Research Libraries presented its Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education. The standards identify skills that students in the 21st century need to access, interpret, evaluate, and create meaningful images. This study interrogates if and how competency standards are used amongst academic librarians who work in art libraries, with data visualization, or who simply incorporate some aspect of visual literacy into their instruction sessions or research consultations. Conclusions are drawn from interviews with seven local academic librarians, and the author identifies major trends, as well as areas of disagreement, in visual literacy and is standardization in higher education.

Headings:

Visual literacy – Study and teaching

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ACADEMIC LIBRARIANS' PERCEPTIONS OF VISUAL LITERACY STANDARDS

by
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INTRODUCTION

Visual Literacy is an area of learning that has spawned varied theoretical writing, definitions, practical applications, and interdisciplinary insights over the past few decades in American education. In this paper, I review the literature surrounding Visual Literacy in higher education from the late 1960s through to contemporary issues in Visual Literacy instruction, primarily within academic libraries. I examine how a concept that has so many approaches gets codified into competency standards like those published by the Association of College & Research Libraries in 2011. Drawing from Information & Library Science studies that survey academic librarians' engagement with visual literacy skills, I conduct interviews with academic librarians about how they engage with competency standards surrounding Visual Literacy, and what their perceptions and opinions are about standardizing a concept that is vital to higher education, yet difficult to pin down in theory, definition, practical application, disciplinary differences, and varying levels of support from students, faculty, library staff and administration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

DEFINITIONS

Visual literacy is a term that has been defined and redefined over the years, and holds particularities of definition, approach, and theory across disciplines. The educator John Debes is credited as having coined the term in the late 1960s.[1] Debes wrote with K-12 educators in mind, and he laid the groundwork, along with his Rochester School colleagues Clarence Williams and Colin Murray Turbayne, for some theoretical foundations of visual literacy. As Moore & Dwyer wrote in Visual Literacy: A Spectrum of Visual Learning, Visual Literacy in education circles developed "from a confluence of theories of many disciplines that include linguistics (Noam Chomsky, Gozemba, Feldman), art, psychology, and philosophy."[2]

Debes and his colleagues also founded the International Visual Literacy Association, which still operates today and publishes the *Journal of Visual Literacy*. Debes, along with Roger B. Fransecky and the members of the National Conference on Visual Literacy expanded on the definition in Visual literacy: a way to teach (1972):

> "Visual literacy refers to a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects, and symbols natural or

> man-made, that he encounters in his environment. Through the creative use of these competencies, he is able to communicate with others. Through the appreciative use of these competencies, he is able to comprehend and enjoy the masterworks of visual communications."[3]

Designer and educator Donis A. Dondis wrote the influential 1973 *Primer on Visual Literacy*, the stated purpose of which was:

> to construct a basic system for learning, recognizing, making, and understanding visual messages that are negotiable by all people, not just those specially trained, like the designer, the artist, the craftsman, and the aesthetician…This book will attempt to present exactly what its title proposes, a basic handbook for all visual communication and expression, a survey of all the visual components, a common body of visual resources with an awareness and desire to recognize the areas of shared meaning.[4]

Dondis, like Debes, was reacting to the need to adapt to a world of visual communication that was ever growing and changing through mass media and new technology, as well as the need to push visual literacy initiatives outside of art and design education.

In the history of visual literacy studies there is, however, an inextricable connection to art. As Moore & Dwyer's cover in their review,

> "Barley (1971) said, 'visual literacy draws heavily on the field of art' (p. 9) Scholars in art have enthusiastically supported the visual literacy concept…In fact, Arnheim's (1967, 1969) theory on visual thinking may be the most important aspect of the visual literacy concept. Art educators such as Nelson (1975), Davis (1875), and others offered rationales for incorporating art into the school curriculum…Art historians like Lewis (1968) suggested some historical background in art for visual literacy theory."[5]

Art museum education has unsurprisingly been a main venue of thought on visual literacy. Brian Kennedy, the director of the Toledo Museum of Art, is an accomplished writer and speaker on the subject of visual literacy and art/museum education's role in it. He has shared his thoughts via high-profile speaking engagements like TED talks.

Kennedy thinks of visual literacy not as a skill, but as a "form of critical thinking that enhances your intellectual capacity…Visual literacy is the ability to construct meaning from images."[6] The visual aspect of critical thinking is echoed by many authors discussed below who specifically address visual literacy in academic libraries. Kennedy touts art museums, "the repositories of the greatest examples of visual communication in human history" as "specially equipped to help people learn how to unlock the meaning of images."[7] The following section of literature review will explore the role of Visual Literacy beyond its relationship to visual art, and outside of the museum and into our institutions of Higher Learning and in particular, within academic libraries.

VISUAL LITERACY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Underlying practice in museums, libraries, and classrooms, is a messy state of theoretical work in Visual Literacy studies. Maria Avgerinou, a Professor in the DePaul University Education Department, addresses the issue as such:

> "Lack of VL theory need not be considered entirely as a disadvantage. As in the area of visual communication which is also multidisciplinary and multidimensional, and where the same situation has puzzled scholars over the course of its study, 'this rich mélange of viewpoints is' however 'an asset because of the insights that come from cross-fertilisation"[8] and has "kept the process of searching the theoretical basis as well as the raison d'etre of VL so lively and intellectually stimulating."[9]

Avgerinou's research study yielded 11 VL abilities, as follows: Visualization, Critical Viewing, Visual Reasoning, Visual Discrimination, Visual Thinking, Visual Association, Visual Reconstruction, Constructing Meaning, Re-Constructing Meaning, Knowledge of Visual Vocabulary & Definitions, and Knowledge of Visual Conventions.[10]

Bearing in mind the slippery definitions, disciplinary differences, and theoretical 'rich mélange of viewpoints', the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) has provided a definition that is jam-packed but generic enough to apply to most scenarios where visuals are being searched for, evaluated, used, created, and cited, especially in a library context:

> "Visual literacy is a set of abilities that enables an individual to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, use, and create images and visual media. Visual literacy enables 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 a body of shared knowledge and culture."[11]

This definition will serve as the working definition for this paper, and will be revisited later when discussing the ACRL's role in guidelines, frameworks, and standards in academic libraries.

What are some issues in visual literacy today? In the era of the "digital native" generation of today's college students, there are false assumptions about this generation's facility with images. "Today's college students are often referred to as the digital generation. Some have claimed that today's students are 'visual experts' (Tapscot, 2009, p. 106) and that they 'prefer their graphics before their text (Prensky, 2001). But are they visually literate and to what degree?" ask Richard Emanuel and Siu Challons-Lipton in their 2013 article, "Visual Literacy and the Digital Native: Another Look."[12] In their study, Emanuel and Challons-Lipton test image recognition among 358 then-college students of 16 well known images: famous paintings, photographs, and everyday symbols. Only 1 respondent could correctly identify all 16 images. An interesting part of the data collected was the

variety of levels of identification of images, from identifying the title and author of a painting, to simply guessing that, for example, the radiation symbol was "a symbol for something toxic, hazardous or dangerous."[13] While this study focused on only one aspect of visual literacy: recognition/identification of popular images (biased towards the Western art historical canon, no less), Emanuel and Challons-Lipton's conclusion that "visual literacy – even at the identification/understanding stage – occurs on a continuum"[14] points to the idea of visual literacy as a way of thinking critically rather than a fixed skill set.

Eva Brumberger's study, "Visual Literacy and the Digital Native: An Examination of the Millennial Learner" found that, "The data certainly gave no indication that students can 'translate images and information effortlessly' as the digital natives argument would have us believe; in fact, their ability to respond critically to visual material appears rather weak."[15] Brumberger continues, "exposure to visual information does not necessarily lead to visual literacy – to the ability to decode and create visual messages – one of the underlying assumptions of the digital natives argument."[16]

Recently, much attention is focused toward Media Literacy and News Literacy in LIS literature and mainstream literature about the role of the library in the wake of "fake news."[17] Visual aspects of news, advertising, media literacy are especially well documented in recent studies. Anne Marie Seward Barry, in her book *Visual Intelligence: Perception, Image, and Manipulation in Visual Communication*, urges that visual intelligence is important because one needs to:

> "understand the visual logic employed in the manipulation of images, such as in slick political campaigning but also the application of this understanding in order to better our social, economic, and political environment – whether in terms of media regulation or the use of particular colors to soothe the suffering of mental illness or to increase shopping appetites…Visual intelligence suggests the ability to think in different, more abstract, and more perceptually oriented ways as our linear logic fails us in the presence of overpoweringly beautiful, violent, or political images."[18]

Kate Brigham's exceptional 2002 thesis project from MIT, "Decoding Visual News Content" consists of an essay and website that focuses on news magazine and television news content in the direct aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As Brigham explains the impetus for her project,

> "We looked to television news programs, web sites, and later to newspapers and news magazines for information, explanations and insight into what had happened and why it had happened. Thus, our experience of those events was powerfully shaped by mediated visual presentations of information. As a result, it is extremely important to look more deeply and more critically at what we saw, and how that information was presented to us…I also hope you will be able to use some of this information in the future, to help you look with more critical eyes at other examples of visual news content."[19]

Brigham incorporates interactivity into her website where users can change the photos and layouts used in real TV breaking news stills and magazine layouts to explore the carefully crafted narrative that each visually presents.

The popularity of sophisticated (or, in some cases, unnecessarily complicated and badly designed) information visualization calls for an increased level of sophistication in the makers and interpreters of those visualization. Shazna Nessa, a journalist and graphic designer, has criticized her profession's use of data visualization that does not take the user's visual literacy level into account. Nessa implores her colleagues:

> "It's very easy to get distracted by the amazing tools we have at hand today and as they evolve and we get better at using them, we should remember to shop and check our mission. We should be sensitive to the journalistic goal, respect our audiences and their time, and remember that we are not the audience. Every visual story involves negotiation between intuitive and learned aspects of visuals. But also, more importantly, they all require a big dose of human judgment."[20]

Producers of visual content, in other words, do not currently have standards of readability.

Susan Metros, associate vice provost and associate information officer for Technology Enhanced Learning at USC and vociferous advocate for visual literacy notes many of the above concerns, like the rise to the mainstream over the last twenty years of information visualization, digital archives that are more copious, clear, and accessible, and journalistic trends like digital photography as reasons for higher education to brush up on visual literacy initiatives. Her 2006 essay with Kristina Woolsey, "Visual Literacy: An Institutional Imperative", concludes:

> "Satellite imagery and real-time webcams provide casual browsers and researchers alike with observational data that they had little systematic access to a few decades ago. Screen time – with its nonlinear clickability and elements of image, color, sequence, and motion – has been added to the once privileged paper space as a primary organizing format for expressing and exchanging knowledge."[21]

Barbara Blummer conducted a literature review of visual literacy initiatives in academic institutions. She identified these five categories of visual literacy educational strategies in higher education, including:

> "the availability of instructional scaffolds, faculty's creation of activities and assignments aimed at increasing students' abilities to interpret and create visual images, lectures and readings that promoted visual design principles, the development of programs and courses centered on visual communication and

> research initiatives that sought to identify and improve individuals' skills in communication visually."[22]

In addition to library services, Blummer explores resources throughout the University, including department-specific resources and Visual Resource Centers.

VISUAL LITERACY IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

Barbara Blummer's study introduced above contains a section on academic libraries, and documents initiatives at various libraries that serves "as another form of instructional scaffold on campus."[23] Blummer found that academic librarians' efforts to create visual literacy tutorials served as an "instructional scaffold on campus" – the tutorials she cites from the University of California, Irvine developed modules that centered on analyzing images, then additional modules that would focus on "charts, diagrams, maps, graphs, web pages, advertisements, image citation, and color theory. Librarians at the institution also developed a visual literacy LibGuides that contained a variety of information including: copyright, visual grammar, citing images, and image editing software."[24] Blummer also cites an Oregon State University survey from 2011 that inquired about freshmen's image search behavior. It found that "most respondents would use Google to locate an image rather than a librarian. The authors reported students did not appear concerned about copyright in using images. Research at the University of Athens indicated not all college students could correctly interpret a graph or a chart."[25] Blummer's study identifies a strong need for improved visual literacy, and proposes solutions like the successful UC Irvine modules as well as her idea of collaboration

between the library and the computer science department to design better websites using stronger design and understanding copyright issues.[26]

Kayo Denda documented a Rutgers University Libraries workshop using visual and multimedia resources for a student-led discussion-based interview project. Denda describes the workshop as teaching interview skills by using video interview clips, and understanding "visual elements of information…As our world becomes more and more visually oriented, visual literacy is an arena of fruitful engagement for academic librarians and worthy of critical attention."[27] Denda goes on, "The concepts 'media literacy,' 'digital literacy,' 'critical multimedia literacy,' and 'visual literacy' might have some differences, but collectively these literacies demonstrate a growing recognition of the emergence of new technologies that blend text and image for the delivery of information."[28] Denda points to the special place academic librarians hold on an academic campus with their physical resources, subject librarians, and often, compared with the rest of a university, "its remarkable flexibility in light of the digital turn of information."[29]

Some strategies that academic librarians have used to increase visual literacy in students are through instruction sessions, one-on-one consultations, and as has been popular in recent years, embedded librarianship. Amanda Milbourn explains that, "Embedded librarianship, when used in an academic context, refers to purposeful collaborations between librarians and teaching faculty where the librarian is more fully integrated into a course, virtual or real, than is customarily the case with 'one-off' IL [information

literacy] integration."[30] She goes on to explain that medical librarians first popularized the embedded position in the 1960s and 70s to address information needs as part of a team with patient, doctor, and other medical staff. We may initially think of embedded librarians as physically being inside a classroom, co-teaching the information literacy aspects of learning and research to a class that may have been co-designed by the librarian and the professor. However, Milbourn proposes that embedded librarianship can manifest in many ways, including, "embedding information literacy instruction into curricula, into physical space such as residence halls and department offices, and into virtual spaces like learning management systems and online instruction modules."[31]

Yan Ma focuses on ILS programs, and educating the next generation of librarians on standards. Ma writes:

> "LIS schools have been educating students with high standards in…mainly for text materials…In the visual information world, the task and challenge is the social construction of meaning in a visual test…This is the central core of a paradigm shift for LIS education to train students in the visual information world, carry out research in this frontier, and design visual information systems, measurement and evaluation schemas of such systems and services. The author has been offering a course of Visual Information Science to introduce students to study visual literacy for LIS fields since 1999."[32]

All of the literature reviewed thus far sets up the questions to be explored in the rest of this paper. With a history of interdisciplinary, admittedly messy theoretical groundings, and developing trends in multimodal literacy, what is the role of visual literacy competencies or standards? On the heels of these various studies concluding that more and deeper visual literacy can and should be conducted within universities and libraries, how are academic librarians responding? Specifically, how do academic librarians themselves view visual literacy standards? Do standards assist academic librarians in

creating instruction plans? In embedded roles in classrooms? In one-on-one research consultation? Or do academic librarians have varied or divergent understandings of what visual literacy is, and for whom it is useful?

The Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) is a leader in publishing and revising standards, guidelines, and frameworks, and model statements on topics of interest to academic libraries, like Academic Freedom, Competencies for special Collections Professionals, or Faculty Status for Academic Libraries. The ACRL is also a top reference for standards in various literacies, like Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (originally written in English and translated into 8 languages), Information Literacy Competency Standards for various subjects, like Journalism, Nursing, and Psychology, and of course, Visual Literacy Competency Standards.

The most recent ACRL Visual Literacy Standards are from 2011, and were written by the Visual Literacy Standards Task Force, which consisted of Denise Hattwig, Joanna Burgess, Kaila Bussert, and Ann Medaille. In 2016, the Visual Literacy Standards Task Force and the addition of Nicole E. Brown, expanded upon these standards with the publication of their book *Visual Literacy For Libraries: A Practical, Standards Based Guide*. The book breaks its six chapters down based on "what you *do* with images", and the purpose of the book is to be used, as a reference for the standards themselves (which can also be found easily on the ALA/ACRL website), but with the addition of features like sets of "Foundational Questions", "Coffee Breaks" (brief, guided brainstorming

activities), “More to Explore” list of resources, and “Visual Literacy in Action,” which are, “practical, outcomes-driven activities” to do with students.

The ACRL Visual Literacy Standards are the most commonly held for a higher education library context, but other standards, like Common Core, though aimed at K-12 students and not specifically broken down into visual information, communicate many of the same principles of recognizing, interpreting, and creating images effectively.

According to the ACRL, a visually literate individual in an higher education environment is able to meet the following standards:

> “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; and 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.”[33]

The ACRL states:

> “The Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education establish an intellectual framework and structure to facilitate the development of skills and competencies required for students to engage with images in an academic environment, and critically use and produce visual media throughout their professional lives. The Standards articulate observable learning outcomes that can be taught and assessed, supporting efforts to develop measurable improvements in student visual literacy. In addition to providing tools for educators across disciplines, the Standards offer a common language for discussing student use of visual materials in academic work and beyond.”[34]

In Mayer and Goldstein’s study, “Academic Libraries Supporting Visual Culture: A Survey of Image Access and Use,” the authors sent out a survey to faculty, academic

professionals, staff, and paraprofessionals, Mayer and Goldstein received 225 unique responses.[35] Mayer and Goldstein asked questions like, "How do academic librarians use and search for images? How and why to librarians teach users to access images? What demand do librarians see from faculty and students for images? Which licensed databases, links to free resources, or local collections do libraries provide for users' image needs?"[36]

The study described in this Master's Paper picks up where Mayer and Goldstein's work leaves off. It poses a new question in the same vein of renewed interest in visual literacy amongst academic libraries, but asks what standards the librarians use to guide their visual literacy planning, how these standards are used, and their impression of the quality and necessity of these standards. Seven academic librarians in the Triangle (Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill and surrounding) area of North Carolina were interviewed about their experience with instruction in visual literacy, embedded librarianship, and their relationship with and perception of the usefulness of visual literacy standards in their practice and in higher education generally. The interviewees were selected based on their having some previous experience with visual literacy instruction.

[1] John Debes, *"What is Visual Literacy?" Proceedings of the First National Conference on Visual Literacy* (Rochester, New York, March 23-26, 1969), 27.
[2] David M. Moore and Francis M. Dwyer, *A Spectrum of Visual Learning* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications, 1994), 6.
[3] Roger B. Fransecky and John L. Debes, *Visual literacy: a way to learn—a way to teach* (Washington, D.C.: Association for Educational Communications and Technology, 1972), 7.
[4] Donis A. Dondis, *A Primer of Visual Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1973), x.
[5] Moore and Dwyer, *A Spectrum of Visual Learning*, 9.

[6]"Visual Literacy," The Toledo Museum of Art, accessed May 29, 2017, http://www.toledomuseum.org/learn/visual-literacy/.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Maria D. Avgerinou and Rune Petterson, "Toward a Cohesive Theory of Visual Literacy," *Journal of Visual Literacy* 30, no. 2 (Autumn 2011), 2.
[9] Ibid., 3.
[10] Ibid., 9.
[11] Nicole E. Brown, et al, *Visual Literacy for Libraries: A Practical, Standards-Based Guide* (Chicago, IL: ALA Editions, an imprint of the American Library Associations, 2016), xiv.
[12] Richard Emanuel and Siu Challons-Lipton, "Visual Literacy and the Digital Native: Another Look." *Journal of Visual Literacy* 32, no.1 (Spring 2013), 8.
[13] Ibid., 16.
[14] Ibid., 16.
[15] Eva Brumberger, "Visual Literacy and the Digital Native: An Examination of the Millennial Learner." *Journal of Visual Literacy* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 44.
[16] Ibid., 45.
[17] Marcus Banks, "Fighting Fake News." *American Libraries*. December 27, 2016. Accessed May 2, 2017. https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2016/12/27/fighting-fake-news/.
[18] Anne Marie Seward Barry, *Visual Intelligence: Perception, Image, and Manipulation in Visual Communication* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997), 6.
[19] Shazna Nessa, "Visual Literacy in an Age of Data," *Source: An OpenNews project*, June 13, 2013, accessed May 29, 2017, https://source.opennews.org/articles/visual-literacy-age-data/.
[201] Ibid.
[21] Susan Metros and Kristina Woolsey, "Visual Literacy: An Institutional Imperative," EDUCAUSE, January 1, 2006, accessed May 29, 2017, http://er.educause.edu/articles/2006/1/visual-literacy-an-institutional-imperative.
[22] Barbara Blummer, "Some Visual Literacy Initatives in Academic Institutions: A Literature Review from 1999 to the Present." *Journal of Visual Literacy* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2015), 1.
[23] Ibid., 6.

[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid., 4.
[26] Ibid., 23.
[27] Kayo Denda, "Developing Interview Skills and Visual Literacy: A New Model of Engagement for Academic Libraries." *Libraries and the Academy* 15, no. 2 (April 2015): 300.
[28] Ibid., 301.
[29] Ibid., 310.
[30] Amanda Milbourn, "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 (Fall 2013): 280.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Yan Ma, "Constructing and Reading Visual Information: Visual Literacy for Library and Information Science Education," *Journal of Visual Literacy* 34, no. 2 (Fall 2015), 7.
[33] "ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education," Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), November 22, 2016, accessed May 29, 2017, http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/visualliteracy.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Jennifer Mayer and Cheryl Goldstein, "Academic Libraries Supporting Visual Culture: A Survey of Image Access and Use," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 17.
[36] Ibid., 16.

METHODOLOGY

For this qualitative study I contacted 7 potential interviewees and conducted semi-structured interviews. The interviews were semi-structured as opposed to completely structured or unstructured. A semi-structured interview is the best data collection approach for my qualitative study. It is the ideal approach because my research question is about academic librarians' attitudes and perceptions on visual literacy standards, about which each individual interviewee gave a subjective and personal perspective. As the literature shows, recent studies yield a varied response among librarian's understandings of visual literacy, so exploring the topic in open-ended conversation is what the semi-structured interview allows.

H.R. Bernard frames structured versus unstructured interviewing as the level of control the interviewer has over the direction of the conversation. Bernard encourages the semi-structured interview approach in situations where you won't have more than one chance to interview someone. In his view, semi-structured has the best of both worlds, having the "freewheeling quality" and "requiring the same skills" of unstructured interviewing; "Semi-structured interviewing…shows that you are prepared and competent but that you are not trying to exercise excessive control over the respondent."[1] Similarly, D.E. Grey emphasizes the flexibility allowed by the semi-structured interview, writing:

> "The order of questions may also change depending on what direction the interview takes. Indeed, additional questions may be asked, including some which were not anticipated at the start of the interview as new issues arise…The semi-structured interview allows for probing of views and opinions where it is desirable for respondents to expand on their answers."[2]

Barbara Wildemuth describes in her chapter on semi-structured interviews the several steps that are required to incorporate them into a research study in the field of Information and Library Science. I followed Wildemuth's model for the interview guide, conducting the interview, and capturing and analyzing the data.[3] For the interview guide, Wildemuth cites Berg (2001) and his proposed four types of questions that should be included: essential, extra, throw-away, and probing, each of which incorporated in my guide, below:

Interview Guide

1. *Introduction*
    a. *How would you describe your position within the library?*

2. *Do you have a working definition, or description, of Visual Literacy?*
    a. *Does your approach to Visual Literacy change from discipline to discipline/subject to subject?*

3. *Have you received any training in Visual Literacy Instruction? Please describe any formal or informal training you have received.*

4. *Do you incorporate Visual Literacy considerations into your role in;*
    a. *Instruction? How so?*
    b. *Embedded librarianship? How so?*
    c. *Research consultations? How so?*
    d. *Online tutorials or LibGuides? How so?*

5. *Are you familiar with the ACRL standards for visual literacy?*

6. *Do you consult the ACRL standards, or any other standards, for Visual Literacy in designing instruction sessions, planning consultations, or creating online tools?*

7. *What do you think of the use competency standards for academic libraries generally?*

8. *What is your opinion of the usefulness of standards in Visual Literacy in libraries?*

9. *Do you see interest amongst students, faculty, library staff, or administrators regarding the importance of Visual Literacy?*
   a. *If so, what academic area(s) is this interest coming from?*
   b. *Has this changed over the years?*

I sent an email requests to the seven librarians I wanted to interview, and sent three more to librarians who I would use as back-up in case I was not able to recruit enough interviewees. Thankfully, all seven librarians graciously accepted my request, and I visited each at work for interviews over the course of two weeks. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed.

Barbara Wildemuth expands on the data analysis steps of semi-structured interviews, which includes preparing the data, developing categories and a coding scheme, drawing conclusions from the coded data, and reporting methods and findings.[4] I incorporated these techniques into my analysis.

My analysis consisted of coding for topics, themes, and key words found throughout the interviews, paying specific attention to variation of answers to what I considered the most important questions. These questions were peppered through each interview, and inquired

about what visual literacy is, and how/if visual literacy standards are helpful or important to the interviewee's everyday work.

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[1] H. Russell Bernard, *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Research Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 191.
[2] David E. Gray, *Doing Research in the Real World* (London: Sage Publications, 2004), 373.
[3] Barbara M. Wildemuth, ed. *Applications of Social Research Methods to Questions in Information and Library Science* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2009): 248 – 256.
[4] Ibid.

OBSERVATIONS

All seven interviewees were given the option to remain anonymous. The two interviewees who decided to remain anonymous will be referred to as Anonymous A and Anonymous B, and details about their job titles or departmental libraries will not be provided.

As expected, these seven librarians brought different perspectives on both the definition of visual literacy and the use of standards in visual literacy instruction, as well as the librarian's place in that instruction. In communicating a working definition or description of visual literacy, each interviewee had a really broad understanding of what visual literacy could mean, and what it does mean in practice to the specific users they serve. Most acknowledged that the "visual" in visual literacy applied across a variety of media. The breadth and depth of answers shows a nuanced and layered understanding of what visual literacy can mean, especially impressive considering the answers came unrehearsed.

Bob Ladd, Media Design Specialist with the University of North Carolina's Health Sciences Library talks about how there is the interpretive, analytic, receptive side of visual literacy, and also a creative side:

> "I think of it as sort of maybe two things, or two aspects. One is for people who are looking at visuals and how they interpret visuals, so being able to think critically, being aware of how visuals can be misleading and that sort of thing, so there is sort of that. I guess that would be one aspect. The other aspect in my mind has more to do with the creative aspect. So if you are actually creating visuals, and that's another whole thing is being literate in using certain tools, like a camera, or Photoshop, or paintbrushes, or whatever it might be, and then developing your creativity and your design skills, so being effective at communicating."

Mike Nutt, the Director of Visualization Services for NC State University Libraries, put a similar idea more succinctly: "On a basic level visual literacy would include a facility with communication and analysis of graphic materials."

Anonymous 1 speaks about the overlap between definitions of visual, media, and information literacies in general:

> "…I first thought of media literacy and understanding all the issues that are in the media, whether it is in print, whether its pictures. I think of infopics right away, which describes a lot of information…Its understanding all of those little things when I think of visual literacy, so I think of all the ways that you can interpret data. Its numbers, in print, on the screen. In print on the screen. In print in print, newspapers, pictures."

Alice Whiteside, the Head of the Sloane Art Library at UNC, followed this train of thought about visual literacy as a subset of information literacy:

> "So the kind of concepts that we associate with information literacy in terms of understanding how information is maybe created and disseminated and how to access it, and how that creation and dissemination informs what we know about the information that we are accessing. For me visual literacy is all of that as it relates to anything visual, so including photographs and diagrams and visual art and also any kind of visualizations."

None of the interviewees had what they would consider *formal* training in visual literacy instruction, although many considered workshops, conferences, learning from colleagues, or reading up on the literature in visual literacy as *informal* training in which they took part about visual literacy and its instruction.

Lee Sorensen, Duke University's Library for Visual Studies and Dance, explained:

> "You know, most of librarianship is teaching yourself. Which is a good thing. If we can't teach ourselves, we are sunk. I belong to the Art Libraries Society, ARLIS, and ARLIS has wonderful workshops. In fact, I just went to one in New Orleans on visual literacy, where I learned a ton of things too, including the manipulative databases where artists put their--, by manipulative, I mean how to manipulate image and change them, and places where artist put their art for searching."

The interviewees were divided on how they incorporated visuals and visual literacy instruction into their own work, from teaching their patrons to use design tools, databases, make well-designed posters, to using special collections in instruction, to simply supplementing classroom instruction with library skills.

Bob Ladd speaks on how he doesn't teach visual literacy directly, but instead teaches design skills and tools:

> "I guess one way to answer that would be to say that I don't really think of myself--. On an individual project, its not like I'm teaching visual literacy, per se. Its more that I use visual literacy skills, or I am teaching people skills that involve visual literacy. So for example a lot of times I'll do consultations where people will need to improve some of their images for publication, or they might need help doing a poster, which is sort of a visual thing. And a lot of what I do there is--, I'm not just teaching software. I'm not just teaching Photoshop or InDesign or something like that. I'm teaching them some design skills but it is in the context of using certain tools."

Mike Nutt explains how different users have different needs:

> "99% of the faculty and students on this university are probably not going to be making 20-ft wide exhibits for our immersion theater, but they will be, say, publishing in a journal and including figures that go into those journals. So I guess there on a really basic level it is kind of visual literacy would include a facility with communication and analysis of graphic materials. That is something that applies to both the visualization side ad the high tech spaces side. So one of the things that I do when I meet with people to start planning projects for the spaces is to introduce them to what it is like to be a user who is encountering this material."

Alice Whiteside explains how Art and Art History student users have unique user needs at the library:

> "I have an art history background and part of art history and training is visual literacy, I would say, or at least some aspects of it. You do visual analysis and things like that. And so when I teach sessions for art history classes often we are engaging with that…frequently a student will come in when they are writing about a particular object, so we start with the visual and what we know from that as we tease out what questions we are asking, what do we need to find in the literature that is kind of based on, integrated with those visual literacy concepts. And them in terms of LibGuides I think about what images I am putting on my own guides."

Lee Sorensen uses the most of the resources around him, relying on his colleagues at Duke and beyond:

> "So we are working with [the Nasher] to see (a) how their curators can find out what we really had, so the curators don't have to rely on Google or just ArtStor. Which I want them to rely on ArtStor for sure, but there is way more than that. So it was working with the Nasher, working with workshops, and then looking at the literature periodically. It is just great to search Visual Literacy among YouTube and among libraries, and see what my colleagues are doing."

Anonymous 2 explains how their main role is not necessarily to teach visual literacy, but to supplement the work done in the classroom:

> "This is going to be a horrible disappointment to you. But I don't really teach people visual literacy. My sense, and this goes back to my own background too, is

> that the professors are the better person to their their particular discipline, their particular area, about visual literacy. They are going to to teach them the history about it and they are going to teach them all about the major things they need to know about. And the area I find they really fall down in is information literacy…I mean obviously images are a huge area of interest in all disciplines. And we do have a number of image databases people have access to. And I do always want to teach them about that and teach them about the resources that we have for images, but all of that comes with its own metadata, so if I'm teaching them, "Here's these things, and look, you can find out information about it here, you know, so that's kind of my focus is much more teaching them about the library process because that's where I find they need the most."

Answers about attitudes on standards ranged from adoption of standards in practice, to an internalization of standards reviewed long ago, to a critical stance on the use of competency standards at all. Interestingly, all seven participants claimed to *never* use the ACRL Standards for Visual Literacy, or any other Visual Literacy standard, as a type of checklist when preparing for instruction, consultations, or creating online guides.

Here is a sampling of the range of remarks:

Bob Ladd:

> "I have found, personally, it makes sense to have them, but I haven't really found personally that I have used them. And I think some of the guidelines are--, its hard to define. Its not a clearly definable area."

> "I think there is a desire in a lot of fields, including library science—its called a science, library science--, people want to be rigorous. They want to be able to quantify things…And some things are just not that easy to quantify, and I think there is a danger if you look at things as too cut and dry and you define things into certain real definite categories, you can miss a lot."

> "It is good to have these visual literacy standards, but I think the idea of teaching visual literacy by trying to say, okay we are going to cover this standard, and this standard, and this standard, and this standard, as though they are sort of isolated things, I think that could be problematic."

Anonymous 1:

> "I remember looking at them in 2011, I was a librarian before this and I remember it coming out. If I am having an issue and I feel like I need to--, if I'm missing something, I would consult standards. If I'm trying to do something new, like, 'Okay, let me up my game a little. I've been doing this for a while. Let me go up a notch,' I would probably consult the standards."

Alice Whiteside:

> "I don't go through the checklist of competencies. I talked about how they are really based on the information literacy standards, and they are written with more flexibility. I think the authors had that in mind and were trying to embed that in the standards document, but for me the language still feels pretty far removed from the language that I am actually using with students. So I guess maybe it is a framework that I have internalized in terms of like, okay, these are things I want students to know. But I definitely don't draw from it directly."

Mark Schumacher, Arts and Humanities Librarian, UNC-Greensboro:

> "I would say that it is more self-experience driven."

> "I certainly will go back and explore what those look like and see in what ways, without short-changing the other dimensions of the instruction that we do, see if there is a way and in what settings there would be to include a reflection on those standards."

Additionally, interviewees were asked about their opinions of the helpfulness of competency standards in libraries.

Anonymous 1:

> "So when they updated the information literacy standards, I did refer to them all the time. Because they were like 1.1.2. If you wanted to do evaluating or if you wanted to do instruction. So I do refer to those."

Alice Whiteside:

> "So I guess when I started out…that those standards played a bigger role in me trying o figure out what it is I am trying to do when I meet with students. I do feel like the framework is--, that the shift from the information literacy standards to the framework for information literacy has given me some different ideas and has been exciting. With the standards I was trying to take what I was already doing and shove it in to some slots to then be able to tell my boss I was doing something that was important because of x."

Lee Sorensen:

> "You know, I don't. But I listen to how other people do instruction in general because I have some very talented colleagues here. And whatever they do usually transfers to literacy instruction particularly. Most recently, hands on. It is no good to tell students how things work or where stuff is. Unless they are playing with the databases they are not going to remember it."

Anonymous 2:

> "I think all the competency stuff started to come up after I started working…I mean, I have certain things that I want them to learn but its not really based on the competencies. Its more based on what I think they need to know to get the most of our library here."

> "I would be interested too in how many people actually tailor their instruction to standards. Because it seems to me that that is the backwards way of doing it. I mean it is nice to have standards. It is nice to know what everyone ought to be learning, but you really need to tell your standards to the class and what the class needs to learn. And with the resources the library has."

Mark Schumacher:

> "I am assuming that my colleagues are transforming a language that I find to be very, well, not arcane, but very complexified. I mean its like they tried to make it sound more either philosophical or pedagogical or something than maybe it needed to be. It could have been said more simply…"

On the importance of visual literacy in their academic library community, and on recent trends:

Bob Ladd:

> "But I think there has been more of an acknowledgement that visuals are important, definitely. And if you go to classes in web design or whatever, or teaching with Power Point or doing LibGuides, anything like that, there is a recognition that the visuals are important. So I think it is recognized that visuals are important and probably awareness of that has increased some in the last decade, but you know, it is not an issue that people spend a lot of time talking about. Somebody will come to me and they have a need. They need to make their pictures look good for a publication, or they are doing a poster and they need some visuals for a poster of something like that. So yes, people understand that visuals are important. And the fact that I have the job that I have shows that this library thinks that it is important."

Anonymous 1:

> "I don't think they are calling it visual literacy. I think they are calling it, 'Let's make some more dynamic presentations that engage students more,' right? So they are saying, more stuff that tells the story in a better way, so usually that is in a visual way."
>
> "Especially with the fake news, I feel like visual literacy and media literacy has come to the forefront."

Mike Nutt:

> "I do think that we are seeing an increased demand for topics related to visual literacy. One thing that we have started to do is to try to kind of experiment with how you teach visual literacy to scientists. So we have a workshop that we are prototyping called Seeing Science, where we partner with--, so far we have partnered with a design professor who leads a—She is the expert in the room on design and visual literacy. Basically she leads a critique of scientific figures that people on campus have made, so it is kind of a strange format for--, a lot of scientists aren't familiar with the idea of critique, so we are introducing them to that format as well, but she is basically bringing graphic design and visual literacy principles to scientists."

> "It is an interesting time to be in higher ed in North Carolina as well. I think there is a lot of pressure on the university system to basically prove that we are worth the investment, and I think visual literacy is dawning on people as important because they need to tart communicating better about the things that they do and the value of the things that they do. And a good way to do that is visually. Not just graphic literacy but also kind of visual storytelling is becoming more important, and I think that even scientists are considering those, what they consider soft skills, are kind of becoming important to communicate the value of what they do. So the library is actually in a pretty good position to help them learn those kinds of things. So we are excited about that."

Alice Whiteside:

> "…More recently there has been a lot of discussion or some discussion on campus about fake news. I mean there has been discussion all over but among the librarians too, when we were talking about instruction, and images have been a part of that, which has been really interesting to bring up. And how often people will believe images more readily than text, which is really interesting, because they can be manipulated so easily."
>
> "I think that there are obviously so many literacies that people talk about, like data literacy, and we have a digital visualization librarian over in Davis, and I think more could be done to kind of--, with peer to peer instruction and training around that because I certainly don't feel like all of my colleagues are very visually literate, and I'm not very data literate. I mean, only in the most basic sense. So in terms of visual literacy I think it is something that everyone--, maybe, I don't know if other people have heard of it elsewhere, but it is maybe a little more complicated than it sounds for somebody who doesn't have any kind of art or sort of visual training."

Lee Sorensen:

> "I mean, visual literacy has just exploded. There are several problems with it. Number one is, images are just so commonplace nowadays that people don't really--, it's the air they breathe. You know, they are just not in the same kind of dialogue with the text. And so I read someplace where 40% of undergraduate papers include images other than graphs. And you know, that's almost half of all undergraduate papers are referring to images. They just put it in. I mean its there and they do it. But from what I see is that they use them so immaturely. They use really bad images. They could get much better images, much better quality and much more precise images, if they were using the right search tools…And so one of my mantras I have been trying to do is get them to have this dialogue. When

> they seen an image: a) is it a real image, you know? b) Is it the best quality? You know, what's there and what isn't there? What's the ideology of--, if it's a photographer, which I most cases it is, what is the ideology of the photographer? What's the frame? You know what have they cropped out of this photo?"

Anonymous 2:

> "It has popped up on and off throughout the years that I've been in ARLIS and I think it keeps coming back and sort of cycling through and people talk about it then. It is never anything that library administration talks about. It is just never on anyone's radar."
>
> "What we are talking about now is visualizations. That is really the big area, data visualizations. Which certainly ties into information literacy, but the part that we are at right now is more about how do we make these things, and how do we make them in a way that people can understand them? So I don't feel like it is at the point where everybody understands how to do that, and now there are sort of more on interpreting and understanding them. Its more about people are just sort of trying to understand how to do it."

Mark Shumacher:

> "Well, my sense is that given, I guess the skill set that we are trying to develop in our students, which tends to be--, I would say text, not driven but oriented, that visual literacy remains sort of implied, perhaps."
>
> "I think there could be in some departments, of course. Art. Media studies certainly. There would be places where at least reflecting on the role of visual literacy could enhance students' ability to broaden what they're pondering when they look at a text with images or images without text, and of course looking at art strictly speaking."

CONCLUSION

Unsurprisingly, the wide range of answers from these local academic librarians yield few concrete answers. However, some conclusions can be made where the perspectives of these interviewees overlap. For example, it appears that standardization when it comes visual literacy instruction is not so widely consulted, and certainly not used as checklist that instruction sessions are bound to. Librarians displayed various reactions to the visual literacy standards, from ignorance of their existence, to an intention to brush up on them and keep track of updates, to criticism that the standards make the issue of visual literacy more complicated than it has to be. One librarian questioned, at least for their particular position, whether visual literacy instruction was simply better left to professors.

The most interesting insights into visual literacy came when talking about trends, like data visualization, in visual literacy in academic libraries and in higher education today. For example, Mike Nutt, Director of Visualization at N.C. State, emphasized the increased interest amongst students in taking workshops and classes about graphic design and infographics, in addition to using the high tech spaces that N.C. State's Hunt Library provides. Nutt referenced Duke's Data and Visualization Department as a source of helpful LibGuides about visualization, and observed that he is observing "more and more librarian positions are being created that have visualization as a component to them." Additionally, Anonymous 2, when the topic changed to their community's interest and

investment in data visualization, spoke very engagingly about various visualization projects happening on their campus, including 3D visualizations of urban renewal projects.

Visual literacy standards appeared to many of the interviewees to be considered tools that could be consulted occasionally, but were more often ignored in routine practice. A step-by-step, by-the-book approach to visual literacy instruction appears to not be of much value, at least among this sample population.

This does not lead me to conclude that standardization of visual literacy does not have its place. As Anonymous 1 said, when responding to my question about the usefulness of a shared professional vocabulary: "Absolutely. It's like the Catholic Church. It's like, same page." Most of these librarians spoke about their backgrounds, where a sense of visual literacy was ingrained into their own education (Art History, Fine Arts, Mass Communication, among others), and thus internalized into their practices as librarians and as self-described "visual" people.

As a complement to this study, perhaps further study into the use of standards for visual literacy for librarians could be conducted with librarians who *don't* have expertise in those fields that traditionally thought of as the most visually-oriented, or who don't have confidence in their ability to conduct instruction session using visuals or instruction about finding visuals. I would expect that there is still a wide gap of visual literacy among the

librarians themselves that would affect the tendency to turn to visual literacy standards as helpful instructional tools.

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