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MAKE IT POP: INTEGRATING VISUAL LITERACY INTO YOUR TEACHING “SONGBOOK”

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INTRODUCTION

In today’s visual, media-rich environment, information literacy involves more than finding, locating, and using books and articles. Across the disciplines, students are expected to critically engage and communicate with visual materials in their academic work. To do this, students must develop the visual literacy skills needed to find, interpret, evaluate, use, and produce visual materials in a scholarly context. The Association of College and Research Libraries (2011) defines visual literacy as follows:

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 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.

The recently developed *ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* are a flexible teaching and learning tool that can be used in conjunction with familiar information literacy concepts and standards to creatively incorporate images into assignments, the classroom, and other instructional contexts. The *Standards* cover seven broad areas. The visually literate student:

1. determines the nature and extent of the visual materials needed.
2. finds and accesses needed images and visual media effectively and efficiently.

3. interprets and analyzes the meanings of images and visual media.
4. evaluates images and their sources.
5. uses images and visual media effectively.
6. designs and creates meaningful images and visual media.
7. understands many of the ethical, legal, social, and economic issues surrounding the creation and use of images and visual media, and accesses and uses visual materials ethically.

Librarians are well poised within the academy to take a leadership role with visual literacy and to integrate visual resources into existing information literacy instruction. By gaining fluency in the language of images, librarians can play a key role in contributing to students’ visual literacy. This LOEX workshop presented several ways that instruction librarians can begin this important work.

INTEGRATING VISUAL AND INFORMATION LITERACY

Activity 1: Presenting Information Visually


Presenting and teaching with images is critical for learners to understand and remember information and concepts. Simply put, pictures are remembered better than words, especially when exposure occurs within a short amount of time. This is known as the “picture-superiority effect.” Memory experiments with pictures have shown that pictures access meaning more fully than words because they are processed more deeply in the brain (Zull, 2002). The old adage that a “picture is worth a thousand words” turns out to be true.

Librarians can help students learn information literacy and library research concepts more effectively by using images in their teaching. Teaching with images – whether still or moving – also creates a more engaging classroom and/or online experience. When librarians use and create images for their own teaching, they in turn become better able to help students use images effectively in their academic work.

To illustrate the power of images to convey information, LOEX conference participants were shown a typical PowerPoint slide containing only text except for a tiny clip art image. The example used was “Checking Out Books,” (Figure 1) a slide introducing library services to new students in orientation and first-year instruction workshops. Participants were asked to circle all of the textual elements in the slide that could be represented visually, and then to choose one element to sketch in an empty box. This exercise demonstrates that when information is presented with just text, it is not as memorable as an image. For example, the photograph of a person holding a stack of books (Figure 2) more effectively communicates the fact that students can check out an unlimited number of books – literally, “as many as you need (or can reasonably carry!)”

Figure 1: Checking Out Books Slide

Checking Out Books



- How many books can you check out?
 - As many as you need (or can reasonably carry!)
- How long can you check out books?
 - For 28 days at a time
 - Renew through the Library Catalog
 - Remember to set up your PIN
 - Late fees are 25 cents/day.
 - Tip: Keep an eye on your account!

Figure 2: Person Holding a Stack of Books



Participants had many ideas for visually conveying the “Checking Out Books” slide. One said, “I drew a calendar with checkmarks on 28 days.” Another suggested using an image of a coin to remind students of late fees. As participants recognized, the ways to represent ideas and concepts are endless, from using screenshots, to word clouds, to photographs. The key question to ask is: What information is being represented with the written word that could instead be represented visually?

In this exercise, participants were working with Standard 5: “The visually literate student uses images and visual media effectively” and Standard 6: “The visually literate student designs and creates meaningful images and visual media.” Librarians can apply these standards in their own teaching by using and creating images to communicate information literacy and library research concepts.

Activity 2: Exploring Cultural and Historical Context

Images can help students explore cultural and historical contexts, and librarians can easily integrate images into information literacy instruction for this purpose. A simple technique is to project an image, such as a photograph, related to the course content and to ask students to spend a few minutes freewriting answers to the following questions:

- What do I see?
- What is going on?
- Why do I think this image was created?

After students reflect on these questions, they are ready to engage in a discussion about their answers and, inevitably, their remaining questions. This warm-up is a great lead-in to a research workshop. The librarian can emphasize that research is very much like the image-based exercise – it is

an iterative, question-driven process. Students are curious to know the historical details of the image: What is it called? Who created it? What was the creator's intent? Such activities set the stage for an experiential information literacy session, where students are motivated to ask and attempt to answer interesting questions.

Advertisements can also help make history come alive. For example, examining newspaper advertisements via databases like *ProQuest's New York Times Historical Archive* can encourage students to explore the layout and the original context, while helping them to see newspaper articles as cultural artifacts. During instruction sessions, librarians can lead students to ads related to specific time periods, products, or services and easily launch into an interesting discussion. A 1956 ad for Pepsi-Cola inspires questions such as: What might it have been like to see this ad in 1956? What does this ad tell us about the ideal couple of the time? The ideal look? What role did Pepsi play in American culture and society? What sociological, political, economic, or cultural attitudes are reflected in this ad? Grappling with questions like these enhances students' visual and information literacy skills at the same time.

For this activity, workshop participants were given the following image (Figure 3) and accompanying metadata:

Figure 3: Entertainment at the Grand Ole Opry



Metadata

- Radio Singer & Comedian, Minnie Pearl entertaining with Gov. Frank G. Clement and his wife and Mitch Miller at the Grand Ole Opry.
- Location: Nashville, TN, US
- Date taken: November 1956
- Photographer: Yale Joel
- Size: 1280 x 831 pixels (17.8 x 11.5 inches)

- <http://images.google.com/hosted/life/e518d552e3eec8f7.html>

Participants had one minute to explore the image and metadata and to list all of the questions that come to mind. After this independent reflection, they shared with nearby colleagues. Some examples that emerged were: *Why is everyone wearing hats? Who was Minnie Pearl? What is WSM?* This is an excellent technique to help students explore cultural and historical context. The focus on questions and the emphasis on various disciplinary perspectives are analogous to the question-driven nature of the research process.

In this exercise, participants were working with the ACRL Visual Literacy Standard 3.2: "The visually literate student situates an image in its cultural, social, and historical contexts." Asking students to think of critical questions while engaging with images is a natural bridge between visual literacy and information literacy. Simple questions to use are:

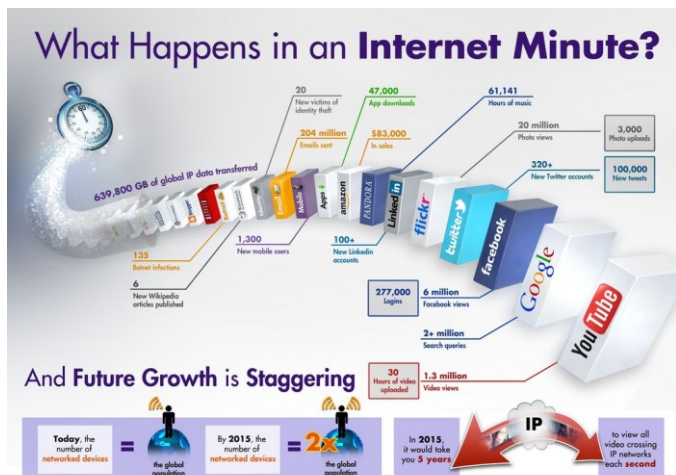
- Why do you think this image was created?
- What message do you think this image is trying to convey?
- Who is the intended audience for this image?

Activity 3: Analyzing the Aesthetic Qualities of Images

The creator of any graphic makes many choices in relation to color, font, shape, alignment, contrast, and other design elements and principles. Librarians can help students not only to interpret information presented in graphical formats, but also to identify what qualities make for the clearest presentation of information. One way that librarians can teach image evaluation strategies is to focus on the aesthetic qualities of graphical representations of information, such as charts, maps, diagrams, and infographics.

For this activity, participants were shown an infographic, "What Happens in an Internet Minute," (Figure 4) and asked to describe what they liked or disliked about the image. Participants discussed the use of font, line, color, and logos, as well as the amount and placement of numerical data, and the presentation of information along the bottom of the image. Through isolating and identifying the effectiveness of these design choices, participants described factors that may have contributed to, or detracted from, the clarity of the infographic.

Figure 4: Internet Minute Infographic



Librarians can help students evaluate images by introducing them to simple design elements and principles, and by giving them the vocabulary with which to dissect and discuss images. For example, librarians might take a design principle, such as contrast, and explain to students that contrast is the juxtaposition of different elements. Contrast can be used to highlight elements, to create interest, and to show the viewer what is most important in an image. Contrast may be created by using many different elements such as color, shape, size, etc.

Other good elements and principles to explore with students are color, font, shape, repetition, alignment, composition, and image choice; understanding these can help students not only to become better image evaluators but also to become better image creators. Fortunately, there are many excellent resources that can help librarians learn about design and gain confidence in discussing design with students (for examples, see Duarte, 2009; Reynolds, 2008; Tufte, 2006).

Once students understand a specific design principle, librarians can ask them to observe and explain how that design principle is used in various types of graphics. This exercise can also be used with academic posters, especially in classes in which students are being asked to create a poster as part of a class assignment. When teaching about design principles, it is helpful to show students a wide range of examples. It is also important to help students recognize that there is not necessarily a right or wrong answer when it comes to design. Some images may appeal to some people and not to others, or some elements may be more effective within an image and others less so.

In this exercise, participants were working with the ACRL Visual Literacy Standard 4.2: “The visually literate student evaluates the aesthetic and technical characteristics of an image.” When instruction librarians equip students with basic design vocabulary, they are preparing them to evaluate images and to use and create visual materials for their academic work.

CONCLUSION

Librarians must gain the tools and confidence necessary to engage with and implement visual literacy concepts on their campuses. Fortunately, it doesn't take a degree in art history to incorporate visual literacy into information literacy instruction. Librarians can engage students with images, teach them to analyze visuals, and introduce them to design principles. In addition to the examples discussed here, the *Visual Literacy Standards* provide 100 possible learning outcomes that can be used to make teaching “pop!”

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APPENDIX A

Activity 1 – Presenting Information Visually

a) Circle elements that can be represented visually.

Checking Out Books



- How many books can you check out?
 - As many as you need (or can reasonably carry!)
- How long can you check out books?
 - For 28 days at a time
 - Renew through the Library Catalog
 - Remember to set up your PIN
 - Late fees are 25 cents/day.
 - Tip: Keep an eye on your account!

b) Choose ONE element to depict. Sketch a visual.



Activity 2 – Exploring Cultural and Historical Context

Examine the image and metadata.

a) Write down all of the questions that come to mind.

b) Share with your neighbor. What new questions emerge?

Activity 3 – Analyzing the Aesthetic Qualities of Images

a) What is one thing that you like about the image?

b) What is one thing that you don't like about the image?
