CHAPTER 7

Killing the Hidden Essay

Supporting Disciplines to Move to Multimodal Public Communication Assignments

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This chapter will consider the role of nondisciplinary, library-based professionals in supporting faculty academic staff and students in approaching public communication assignments in a way that values their multimodality—in particular, moving away from what we describe as "hidden essays" with visual elements ignored in favour of assessing the academic discourse within the textual content alone. We argue that visuals and formatting can play an important, if not equal, role in effective multimodal public communications and show, through two case studies, how our expertise has been applied.

The Need for Public Communication Assignments

All UK graduates need to develop skills to communicate disciplinary knowledge to non-specialists. Every UK higher education programme of study has to comply with the Quality Assurance Agency's *Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications* (FHEC), [1] which advises that at level 5 (second year) undergraduates should be able to "effectively communicate information, arguments and analysis in a variety of forms to specialist and non-specialist audiences." [2] By level 6 (final year) students should be able to "communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences." [3] These extracts clearly indicate that the ability to communicate with

non-specialists (most commonly the general public) is an expected graduate skill regardless of the discipline studied. We argue later that such communication is necessarily multimodal with visually rich assessment artefacts more able to replicate the ways that the general public choose to receive information. However, despite the FHEC statements, many students graduate without being given the opportunities they need to become skilled in producing such multimodal messages.[4]

The importance of communicating with non-specialists is further reinforced in many subject benchmark statements (SBSs), with some explicitly referring to visual communication or to a variety of audiences. For example, the 2019 *Sociology* SBS states that skills needed include "written, visual and oral communication skills in a variety of contexts and to different types of audiences"[5] and the *Biosciences* SBS states its graduates should be able to "communicate about their subject appropriately to a variety of audiences, including the general public, using a range of formats and approaches."[6] Whilst not all SBSs have such or similar wording, most disciplines with statements that do have been found to have higher levels of visual literacy development in their programmes.[7] This shows the importance of recognising the need for visual communication at disciplinary rather than sector level.

Public communication assignments also align with some HE institutions' move to competence-based curriculum design and assessment processes. For example, at the University of Hull, the move to competency-based education was launched as part of the Transforming Programmes project, aiming to provide students with programmes that are at the forefront of disciplinary knowledge, practice, and student experience. The project launched the University's competency-based education model, based upon three pillars: disciplinary and professional experience; knowledge management; and self-awareness.[8] To be competent, students need to demonstrate the required knowledge, skills, and abilities to do something effectively.[9] While there is much variation in how competencies are defined,[10] some can be more easily assessed when students are undertaking authentic assessments, built on real-world questions, problems, or issues which emulate the tasks students will likely face in everyday life or work. Here lies the potential of public communication assignments as a rigorous assessment mode that can simulate professional experiences and allow students to demonstrate alternative ways of managing and sharing disciplinary knowledge.

In our experience, specific public communication assignments are still relatively few and far between, but their popularity is nevertheless growing. However, many faculty academic staff (by this, we mean teaching staff/lecturers actively delivering and assessing learning) admit to feeling uncomfortable teaching students how to produce these visually rich, multimodal forms of communication. Their academic backgrounds have not prepared them for anything beyond academic forms of communication. In the examples we give in this chapter, we show how non-disciplinary specialists, especially those working within academic libraries, can support academics to develop the necessary skills in their students and move away from the dominance of assessment by essay. We believe these examples demonstrate the value of library support in helping disciplines develop assessments that value visuals and support students in using them effectively.

Visual Literacy and Public Communication

Public communication assessments test the ability of students to communicate complicated academic ideas in an accessible way that mirrors communication outside academia, making them a perfect fit for a competence-based approach. They involve the use of a variety of authentic assessment formats, including posters, blog posts, letters to the editor, magazine articles, opinion pieces, wiki pages, podcasts, and newspaper articles. As images, infographics, diagrams, and other visuals can form an essential component of many of these communication formats, visual literacy can itself be framed as an essential competency. Accessible communication is a significant part of these formats and their associated visuals. Not only does accessibility require students to ensure they are communicating in an approachable written style, avoiding complicated academic phrasing without dumbing down, it also requires students to ensure their assessments are technically accessible, including features like alt text, appropriate fonts, and a suitable read order. As a result, if students regularly produce such assignments, they can develop and demonstrate competencies associated with all seven of the visual literacy standards produced by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL),[11] as well as many of the knowledge practices and dispositions identified in the more recent *Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education*: Companion Document to the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (VL Framework).[12] For example, in Case Study 1 below, knowledge practices from the VL Framework associated with communicating information (defining the need for visuals; assessing the audience and project needs; evaluating and selecting appropriate visuals; implementing accessibility principles; prioritising ethical practices) could be highlighted.[13] In Case Study 2, these knowledge practices were also covered, but the student level and disciplinary context meant we could also encourage the development of dispositions such as considering the varying role of visuals in their discipline, allowing for evolving communication trends, and appreciating visuals from different cultures. [14]

The Hidden Essay

With the rarity of public communication assignments, it is not surprising that both academic staff and students can subconsciously relate them to elements of academic communication with which they are more familiar. In particular, blogs, wikis, and magazine articles become essays in disguise, with teaching and marking rubrics dominated by the written aspects. Even the teaching and marking of public posters and infographics can lean towards academic conference-style posters that are often far too dominated by text.[15] This means that opportunities to develop the range of visual literacy competencies through teaching and assessment can be limited.

Challenges in Killing the Hidden Essay

The emphasis on assessing the written elements of such assignments, it is argued, is partly due to academic staff not having confidence in the academic rigour of more visual alternatives to the essay.[16] There is a reported "entrenched suspicion of the visual as superficial,"[17] and a lack of confidence in their abilities to teach and assess visual elements that can be as new to them as the students.[18] The guidance students get for public communication may emphasise the need to use approachable language and simplify concepts, but often fails to acknowledge the role that visuals play in communicating information more effectively and the role that they can have within a sound academic argument.

Likewise, students also like to feel comfortable with what is being asked of them and can become understandably more anxious with less familiar assignment types.[19] Without appropriate guidance, students often revert to essentially forcing an essay into a different format, much like Cinderella's stepsisters trying to force their unshapely feet into a dainty glass slipper—the result being unsatisfactory for everyone concerned. Looking online for help can often be fruitless too, as there is very little available to support public communication assessments in an academic context.

Whilst the literature suggests there is a healthy philosophical debate about whether images can be arguments in their own right,[20] it is generally accepted that visuals can be *part* of an academic argument, both as visual evidence (premises) and as visual rhetoric (persuasion). Both are needed in public communication pieces as they make information and arguments more approachable, understandable, and believable. For example, when producing a magazine article, images and visual elements need to be chosen or created that fulfil such functions as catching the eye to make people stop and read (part of visual rhetoric), providing examples and illustrating points in the text (visual evidence), explaining complex concepts diagrammatically (both visual evidence and rhetoric), and dividing up text and adding emphasis to some points (visual rhetoric).[21] As a result, students are learning to "communicate through multiple modes and involve other senses," as well as comprehending visuals' "aesthetic, evidentiary and persuasive functions," as suggested by the ACRL VL Framework.[22] Generally, we have found academic staff to be more aware of visuals as evidence than as rhetoric, and yet the latter is equally as important in a piece of public communication yet rarely assessed.

There is also nervousness when it comes to using images for public communication due to a lack of understanding of copyright laws. When producing public communication pieces to be authentically assessed, students must learn the skills they need to find and acknowledge images that can be legally used in the public realm. Whilst they may have unknowingly been protected by current UK "fair dealing" rules when using images from the web in coursework such as presentations and academic posters,[23] for public communication pieces, they need to understand image licensing terminology such as the Creative Commons licensing agreements[24] in order to find images that can be used freely and legally beyond an educational setting.[25] The appreciation of this is another disposition recognised in the VL Framework.[26] More importantly, although academic integrity is embedded

within their working practices, academic staff are often unfamiliar with how legal (attribution) and academic (citation) requirements differ with public communication pieces. This unfamiliarity can lead teaching staff to retreat to academic conventions, using more traditional assessment forms or removing authenticity from public communication pieces.

It is fair to say that essays are easier to produce from a technical perspective. Students need only access to an electronic device (laptop or tablet) and a word processor (usually Microsoft Word). While such software can have complexities, writing an essay is often as simple as opening up a new document and starting to type. Essays are predominantly formed of body text, sometimes with an occasional heading. This is a contrast to public communications, which, as we have already established, are highly visual forms of communication. Effective visual communication goes beyond just using images to communicate ideas. It includes the very structure of the document itself. Authentic public communications should match the anatomy of the desired format. If students do not embrace these visual forms, their public communication pieces ultimately look no different from an essay. Yet assessment formats like magazine articles or blog posts should look fundamentally different from essays (see figure 7.1). This means that text might be arranged using structural elements like columns, by-lines, box copy, and pull quotes to layout pages. From a technical perspective, these are much more challenging for students to produce, often requiring them to use new software or the more advanced features of applications they may already use. For students with lower digital literacy, this can be particularly challenging and additional support is often needed.
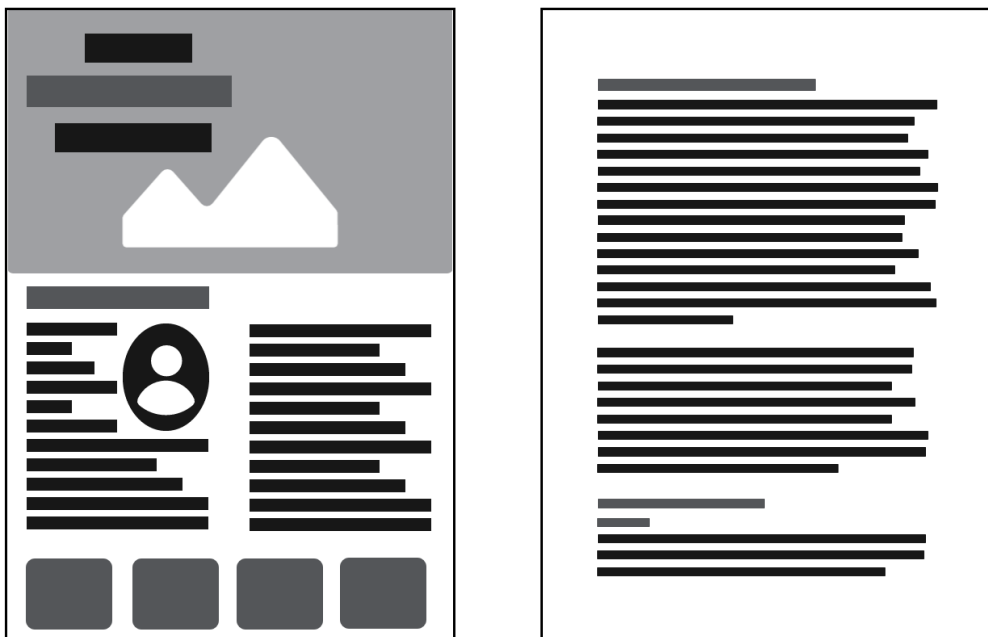
Figure 7.1

Public communication pieces (left) should look different from essays (right).

The Role of Third Space Professionals

As seen in the previous section, many of the problems of killing the essay are academic-driven. For this reason, support for developing multimodal public communication assignments is often needed from staff that sit outside traditional faculty-based academic roles. These can include library staff, learning developers, careers support, learning technologists, and educational developers. These professionals are often not on academic contracts yet undertake academic-related activities, meaning they sit between the academic and the professional. Whitchurch argues these professionals occupy a "third space" as they do not fit within the binary descriptors associated with either academic or non-academic roles.[27] These "third space professionals" often provide support essential to the function of the university and are a significant aspect of massified higher education. Academic institutions are now reliant on such professionals to support the growing number of students and staff with learning, teaching, or assessment. For example, learning developers work with students to demystify academic requirements,[28] and learning technologists work with academic staff to help to integrate the digital into their teaching. There is also a significant role for educational developers, working with academics to develop pedagogies and assessments that teach and evaluate visual literacies. We argue that the support offered by these professionals is essential to help students and academics navigate the potentially unfamiliar territory of multimodal public communications.

In our context, we are a team of learning developers based within the University Library. This places us in the academic centre of our institution and requires us to support students and staff from all our disciplines. Our team is responsible for supporting the development of a broad range of academic, study, digital, visual, and research literacies, and there is an expectation that we can support students with all forms of assessment. Our multidisciplinary experience and wide range of backgrounds have enabled us, as a team, to develop a broad skill set that stretches beyond the boundaries of a single discipline. For this reason, we have been approached by academics in the development of public communication assessments. This is often in recognition that their students will need support and that they do not feel best placed to provide it. As part of the initial discussions with the academics, it becomes clear they perceive us as experts in this area. For this reason, we have been invited to deliver or co-deliver teaching to support the assessment of the module. The following two case studies exemplify our work with academics in two disciplines: nursing and geography. In both cases the academics felt their module would benefit from expert input for their public communication assessments.

Case Study 1—Public Health Promotion Posters on a Nursing Module

The nursing department introduced a new module in 2020 which looked at a nurse's role in promoting health. Part of the assessment was the production of a poster aimed at the general public of the type typically seen in a doctor's surgery or hospital waiting room.

Faculty academic staff did not feel they had the expertise to teach either the technical requirements or the theory behind what makes an effective poster of this type, as their experience was in producing academic conference posters. In our experience, nursing academics are always comfortable asking for help, and our team has an established relationship with this department; they knew that we had people in place who could potentially help. Initially, it was clear that the assessment rubric had been adapted from one for marking academic posters and did not take into account the difference in the role of visuals for a poster. For example, a poster awarded a first would include "excellent use of visual aids, graphs and formatting" when it would be unusual to see graphs used in a public health poster. Highlighting this and giving some examples of the visuals we would expect to see led to the simple but meaningful substitution of the word *graphics* for *graphs*.

Our main contribution came in the teaching, as the disciplinary academics were particularly unsure about designing, producing, and assessing visually rich content and felt they needed more expert help. Due to the pandemic, this was all online and had both asynchronous and synchronous content. The asynchronous content was a video (a narrated PowerPoint presentation) covering established design theory and looking at general principles for successfully using both images and text. Students always have a tendency to fill posters with far too much text (almost a mini-essay in many cases). The importance of keeping text to a minimum was emphasised with the examples given.

Some slides from the video are shown in figure 7.2, and you can see that these were contextualised to health promotion. The narration explained the slides more specifically, and some points had further examples.

Figure 7.2

Examples of slides from teaching video

The synchronous sessions were live demonstrations of how to use PowerPoint to produce a poster, with an opportunity for questions and discussion. Poster creation was demonstrated using environmental messages rather than health topics in order that no student's initial ideas be accidentally used in the demonstration. The two posters that were produced for this activity are shown in figure 7.3. Every step of the iterative creation process,[29] from finding (and editing) images that could be used legally for public display, to layout, font, and colour choices, was explained and demonstrated. This session was deemed particularly necessary for nursing students in recognition of the greater number of students from non-traditional backgrounds who we know lack confidence with their digital skills.

Figure 7.3

Example posters created during the live demonstrations

Following this teaching, the students produced some excellent posters, impressing the departmental staff, who were able to award a greater proportion of higher grades than in some other modules. Many nursing students traditionally struggle with written assignments, and this assessment gave them the opportunity to showcase alternative communication skills that could be more appropriate for the diverse population they work with.

The module was so successful that it is now firmly embedded in the programme. The next round of teaching will be on campus to give students hands-on experience of the technical aspects during the workshop.

Case Study 2—Public Communication of a Development Issue in Geography

In 2019 the geography, geology, and environment department introduced a new assessment requiring first-year geography students to write a public communication piece on a development issue with a global north or global south focus to demonstrate their understanding of geographic differences and connections. This was a reasonably open assignment, allowing students the choice of writing a blog post, magazine article, letter to the editor or opinion piece. An academic from the faculty approached us for help delivering a session on writing and communicating to a non-specialist audience. While the academic was very comfortable with the subject content the students were writing about, they had little previous experience of supporting and assessing student writing for a public communication piece. In our initial work with the academic, we made the case to assess the students' use of visuals as well as their ability to tailor written communication. They were keen for students to authentically present their work in one of the aforementioned public communication formats. Our contribution was to demonstrate the role of visuals in achieving this.

Ahead of the session, we worked with the academic to refine their rubric (originally based around an academic report with data visualisations) to take into account public communication's written and broader visual elements. We then ran a two-hour workshop with the students covering several VL Framework concepts, including exploring choices made in the production of visual communications and assessing the relationship between audience, communication format, and selection of visuals.[30] During the workshop, we
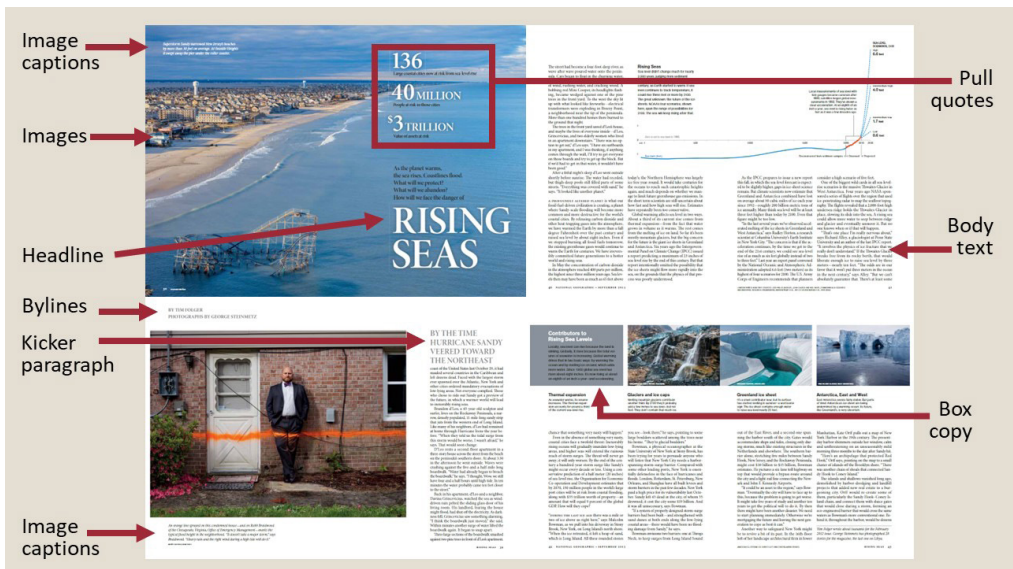
Figure 7.4

The anatomy of a magazine article

highlighted how visuals can be used to draw attention, aid understanding, and promote recall, as well as covering the use of visual structures to improve legibility, create emphasis, and break up content (see figure 7.4). To contextualise our session to the discipline, we selected appropriate examples of the effective communication of geographic ideas. This also supported students to prepare effective visualisations and use visual means to communicate geographical ideas—a core part of the *Geography* subject benchmark statement.[31]

This was an effective example of collaboration as the academic treated us as part of their course team. At the end of the module, we were involved in the evaluation process, and the final student evaluations were shared with us. While a new form of assessment can be a source of student anxiety, we found they appreciated this assignment and rated it favourably.

The Value of Third Space Professionals

In-curriculum teaching is only a part of our role as learning developers. We deliver personal appointments, workshops, and online self-help resources to support the broad range of academic, study, digital, visual, and research literacies we cover. We have already seen an increase in students seeking support for public communication assignments via our appointments. To build capacity and enhance our in-curriculum sessions, developing new self-help guidance for students was one of our priorities in expanding our public communications and visual literacy support. At our university, we use Spring-Share's LibGuides platform to publicly deliver our self-help content while also having the capacity to embed content into the virtual learning environment (VLE). Through this platform, where we have an extensive range of guides covering traditional assignments, such as essays, reports, and presentations, we launched our new Public Communication SkillsGuide.[32] Predominantly written by one of our student interns and still in development, the new SkillsGuide was based on the teaching content created for our collaborations with academics. As this SkillsGuide was developed centrally, it can benefit multiple departments, preventing duplication of effort. We have also been able to use this as part of our in-curriculum teaching, embedding all or part of the SkillsGuide into modules sites on the VLE. As the content is publicly accessible, it also benefits students on programmes with no direct involvement from our team. This kind of self-help content is an excellent example of how we can add value as third space professionals, taking advantage of our expertise and multidisciplinary perspectives.

Collaborations like those exemplified in our case studies represent the gold standard of support for disciplinary academics. However, they are not scalable to the whole institution—especially if public communication pieces become as widespread as we feel they should. Therefore, it is necessary to support academic staff in becoming more autonomous in supporting and assessing their students. Accordingly, we are working on a project with our team of educational developers to provide generic, yet customisable, rubrics for a variety of multimodal assignments. These will serve three main purposes: firstly, introducing staff to a wider range of assessments than they may have previously considered; secondly, reassuring staff that such assignments meet centrally

endorsed academic standards and rigour is maintained; and finally, demonstrating to staff the wider range of visual literacy competencies that such assignments can assess. For students, these rubrics also provide transparency in what is expected of them by an unfamiliar assessment format. The rubrics will be provided alongside links to the online SkillsGuides and other support provided by the library to help the students develop the necessary competencies. An excerpt from a draft rubric can be seen in figure 7.5.

Section	Weighting	1st		3rd
	[Decided by tutor]	80%		45%
Argument Purpose could be to: • effect change • explain, inform or educate • share informed opinion.		The article has a clear and well defined purpose. All arguments are clear and persuasive; supported by highly relevant and convincing evidence. Whenever possible, written and visual material interrelate, with relevant visuals appropriately integrated into arguments.		Article purpose is hard to recognise. Most arguments are weak and may include lack of clarity, poor quality of evidence or unconvincing/ incomplete analysis. No attempt is made to integrate included visual material into arguments.
Structure and format		The article is structured to provide a clear narrative throughout. The format enhances the approachability and readability of the article. Visuals are used effectively within the structure using a range of formats such as lead images, inset images, infographics, borders, dividers etc. Appropriate features such as pull quotes, kicker paragraphs, subheadings, or boxes/dividers are used to emphasise points.		Some structure is evident in the article, but formatting may be confusing. Visuals are presented inline with no use of additional formats. Use of basic formatting such as headings but no evidence of additional features common to magazine articles.
Public communication style		Word choice and visuals are appropriate for a general audience throughout. Concepts are accessible to a public audience without being trivialised or over-simplified throughout. Grammar and style are to a professional standard and appropriate for a public facing article. All image and text sources are suitable/licenced for public use and attributed/cited appropriately.		Word choice or use of visuals has not been adapted sufficiently for public communication. Most concepts are explained too academically or are trivialised/ oversimplified. There may be some issues with grammar and style that would affect readability for a public audience. Most images and text are attributed/cited, though this may not be presented suitably for a magazine article. Some images may not be licenced or appropriate for public dissemination.

Figure 7.5

Excerpt from a draft rubric for a magazine article showing sections relevant to visual literacy. Criteria for only 1st and 3rd classifications are shown for brevity.

This chapter has established the challenges facing faculty academic staff in the development of authentic, multimodal, public communication assessments with their need for strong visual components. Without support, such assignments often focus on adapting written skills with little emphasis on developing visual arguments and rhetoric. Assignments to produce blog posts, wiki pages, posters, or magazine articles for a non-specialist audience can become essays by a different name if assessment rubrics fail to acknowledge the role visuals play in these formats. Without support, many students are less ambitious with their approach to public communication pieces, defaulting to styles of argument and structure that they feel are more academic and so failing to develop a wider range of communication skills. It is common for academic institutions to have third space professionals supporting students in developing their written arguments. However, support must now be broadened to include visually rich multimodal messages. Our public communication SkillsGuide is a part of this process. In addition, our case studies demonstrate that although disciplines differ in their approaches to and rationales for setting public communication assignments, third space professionals can bring interdisciplinary expertise that the academics would not be expected to possess. Such expertise could be in the visual, textual, or technical aspects of communication. Academic libraries are the epitome of interdisciplinary knowledge and literacies; we are perfectly placed to support our disciplines in unframing the visual in public communications.

Notes

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3. Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, *UK Quality Code*, 26.
4. Jacqueline A. Bartram, "Bridges and Barriers to Developing Visual Literacy in UK Undergraduate Students" (EdD thesis, University of Hull, 2021), https://hull-repository.worktribe.com/output/4223611.
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13. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Visual Literacy*, 6–7.

14. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Visual Literacy*, 6–7.

15. It is worth noting that whilst for many subjects, academic conference–style posters and presentations are the main vehicles for demonstrating visual literacy, these do not count as public communication pieces because their intended audience is almost exclusively other academics who, whilst they may not be experts in the specific area the poster is covering, are nevertheless specialists in the wider subject matter.

16. Luc Pauwels, "Visual Literacy and Visual Culture: Reflections on Developing More Varied and Explicit Visual Competencies," *Open Communication Journal* 2 (2008): 79–85, https://doi.org/10.2174/1874916X00802010079.

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19. Tracey Bowen, "Assessing Visual Literacy: A Case Study of Developing a Rubric for Identifying and Applying Criteria to Undergraduate Student Learning," *Teaching in Higher Education* 22, no. 6 (2017): 705–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2017.1289507.

20. For an excellent discussion of this debate, see Georges Roque, "Should Visual Arguments Be Propositional in Order to Be Arguments?" *Argumentation: An International Journal on Reasoning* 29, no. 2 (May 2015): 175–99.

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23. Intellectual Property Office, Exceptions to Copyright (Newport, UK: Intellectual Property Office, UK Government, March 2014). https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/315025/copyright-guidance-creatorsowners.pdf.

24. Creative Commons home page, accessed July 22, 2017, https://creativecommons.org/.

25. We acknowledge that as these *are* assessment pieces, they are still being produced in a way that is covered by fair dealing, but in order to learn appropriate competencies, fair dealing needs to be disregarded.

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