Chapter 2
Visual Literacy and Global Understanding

ABSTRACT

Visual literacy is taking on new importance in the media saturated culture in which we all live. Everyone is inundated with visual stimulation each day and with the amount of time spent on the computer, and with social media, that stimulation is not likely to decline. The result is a need to be able to critically evaluate visual information in the same way that we have been taught to critically read written text. This is the field of visual literacy, and while it has existed for some time, it has become the focal point of many twenty-first century skills frameworks. It is no longer optional to be able to understand visual information. This chapter explains what visual literacy means, and how cultural differences impact the interpretation of visual information.

WHAT IS VISUAL LITERACY?

Generally speaking, visual literacy refers to the ability that enables an individual to interpret and create images. Visual literacy is not a new idea or concept, and has existed from as early as the 1960s. However, the role and place of visual literacy has changed dramatically with the introduction of the Internet. Historically, visual literacy was discussed in the context of visual arts, and was really supplemental to other types of literacy. Our society has become so visual with technology that visual literacy is no longer a luxury, but is essential for all people in society. With the emergence of the central

focus of visual literacy, there have been a host of types of literacies defined relative to the consumption of media, and the definitions vary and are in flux, and are under the larger umbrella of "21st Century Skills" or "21st Century Literacy." (Jones & Flannigan, 2006) The components of these literacies are:

- Digital Literacy
- New Media Literacy
- Information Literacy
- Lateral Literacy: Hypermedia and Thinking
- Photo-visual Literacy
- Reproduction Literacy
- Today's Literacy
- Visual Literacy

Definitions for all of these literacies are not provided here, as not all of them are relevant to issues involved in developing visual assessments, specifically visual assessments that are culturally flexible; that is, they can be used across multiple cultures. This list is provided to illustrate the complexity of literacy in the technology age, where people are interacting with media in new and increasingly complex ways. The most relevant type of literacy for the purposes of this book is Visual Literacy. While there are myriad definitions of Visual Literacy, the themes of the definitions are very similar. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) defines Visual Literacy in a Higher Education environment as the ability to:

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

The most salient aspect of visual literacy in terms of engaging with a visual assessment is "interpret and analyze the meanings of images and visual

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