

Chapter 5

Visual Literacy in the K12 Classroom of the 21st Century: From College Preparation to Finding One's Own Voice

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ABSTRACT

Visual literacy (VL) is considered among the essential literacies of the 21st century not only due to its significance to most subject areas and fields of knowledge, but also because without it we are the illiterati of today's visually saturated world, suffering any implications that come with this serious void. The chapter discusses the importance of the VL concept in education, and then focuses on illustrating it from the trenches through (a) the design and implementation of a VL course in a pre-service educational technology context presented by two academic colleagues and (b) the personal trajectory of an in-service teacher's experiences and observations in visual literacy within informal and formal educational settings.

VISUAL LITERACY

*The dynamics transmitted by the image resonates
in the nervous system of the receiver ...
And these actions are not just physical gymnastics,
they are ways of being alive,
ways of being human
(Arnheim, 1989, p. 26).*

Visual literacy (VL), a term coined in the late '60s by Jack Debes (Avgerinou & Ericson, 1997), broadly refers to learning, thinking, interpreting, utilizing, communicating through visuals (Avgerinou, 2001; ACRL, 2011).

Grounded originally on the confluence of art, philosophy, linguistics, and psychology and their theoretical frameworks, over the past 60 years VL has encompassed a wide range of subject areas and professional fields who have not only epistemological, but also applied interest in it. Due to the diverging nature and foci of the fields contributing to VL's theoretical foundation, a consensus on the term's definition has not been reached by VL scholars and practitioners, while attempts at the theoretical organization of the VL field have been challenging and scarce (Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011, 2020; Messaris & Moriarty, 2005). The latest theory proposed by Avgerinou and Pettersson (2020) advances visual communication, visual language, visual learning, visual perception, and visual thinking as the five pillars that have successfully sustained and framed work on the field to date, hence can safely guide its research and practice agenda at present and in the foreseeable future.

Meanwhile, our visually saturated world and the pressing need to develop visual communication, thinking and learning skills –all involved in understanding, and creating visuals–, have thrust VL in the limelight, placing it either independently or as part of multiliteracy/multimodality (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Gee, 2004; Kellner, 1998; Kress, 2003) among the essential literacies of the 21st century (Avgerinou, 2009). At the onset of the century, Roblyer & Bennett (2001) advanced that VL could be perceived as the *fifth literacy* in the group of traditional(basic) literacy, computer, technology, and information literacy, and that teachers should be trained to utilize it effectively in the Information Age classroom. A long-term advocate of the inclusion of VL in the classroom, Serafini (2014) proposed a framework with new instructional strategies to teach VL “that does not pose an additional burden to teachers dealing with an already burgeoning curriculum” (p. 5).

Research on VL has identified eleven (11) core visual literacy abilities: visualization, critical viewing, visual reasoning, visual discrimination, visual thinking, visual association, visual reconstruction, constructing meaning, re-constructing meaning, knowledge of visual vocabulary and definitions, and knowledge of visual conventions (Avgerinou, 2001a; 2001b). Kędra and Žakevičiūtė (2019) report on three distinct categories of VL skills: visual reading, visual writing, and other visual literacy skills (such as visual thinking and learning skills, and applied image use including the ethical aspect). Advocates of the Digital VL concept (Spalter & vanDam, 2008), identify the following VL abilities in relation to handling digital visual information: (a) critical evaluation of visuals that are produced digitally (both two- and three-dimensional, static and moving); (b) decision-making on the basis of digital visual representations of data and ideas; (c) using information technology means to create effective visual communications. Significant qualities of the VL skills include their interaction with other sensory skills during informa-

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