

“Big Picture” Pedagogy: The Convergence of Word and Image in Information Literacy Instruction

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Many agree that the use of images and the informational dynamic between words and images in contemporary print and online publications has changed the way we think about the traditional concept of “the text.” The proliferation, availability, and increased use of images due to electronic technologies has spurred not only discussions on the need for visual literacy training and but also reconsiderations of the critical thinking abilities required to navigate our image laden terrains. Disciplines across the academy have, at the very least, adopted the use of images and imaging technology in innovative and purposeful ways; many of these disciplines have also endeavored to reconsider the instructional needs that are associated with such shifts in pedagogical strategy.

Still, theoretical reconsiderations for how images are used in higher education have not always been easily accepted in academic circles, especially in areas of study that value alphabetic English texts. As Lester Faigley suggests,

[e]ven after a century and a half of saturation

with mass-market image technologies, the heritage of alphabetic literacy from the Enlightenment still dominates within the academy and in literacy instruction. The totemization of alphabetic literacy and the denial of the materiality of literacy have had the attendant effect of treating images as trivial, transitory, and manipulative.¹

At times, images can be trivial, transitory, and manipulative, but to apply such conceptualizations to all manner of visual texts is reductive and irresponsible in light of the contemporary influence of images and alphabetic/image hybrids.

Faigley would not argue that functional reading literacy is less relevant than other forms of literacy acquisition. In fact, the last 15 years of literacy theory suggest the existence of a multiplicity of literacies that are rarely performed in isolation from one another. Media literacy, computer literacy, visual literacy, and of course information literacy point to a variety of skill sets that are consistently intertwined in the encoding,

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decoding, and presentation of texts, regardless of their medium of delivery.

One of the challenges in recognizing the literacies (plural) as enhancing one another as opposed to competing for dominance lies in the academy itself. Teaching faculty who have attempted to include visual literacy instruction in the classroom—classrooms already weighted by historical, institutional, and technological expectation—will likely offer a consensus on the difficulty of introducing this topic into the curriculum. One point of contention relates to the appropriate location for this type of instruction. The discussion and analysis of images and imaged texts will often exceed the expectations of both students and administrators in certain topical fields. “Other areas of study” are often credited as offering this instruction, a line of thinking that suggests there are locations where images and visual literacy are more or less relevant than in others. In addition, visual literacy instruction often requires “back-to-basics” methods, strategies that require the kind of time rarely available in the syllabi of faculty members.

For some, there is the argument that focusing on images will not help students write their research papers or finish term projects. In many ways this is true. David Jay Bolter has critiqued the fact that while academic cultures are aware of the influence of and the increasing value of highly visual online texts, academic publishing and student assignments seem completely and utterly oblivious to shifts in textual forms and publishing avenues.² Despite issues introduced through technological innovation, the forms of written expression encouraged by electronic communications, and the use of computers that complicate as much as ease the writing and research process, the final text expected of writers remains tied to historical forms. With its 12-point standard font, one-inch margins, and style sheet formatting, texts written by the contemporary student look remarkably similar to those completed on manual typewriters decades ago. Appearances would suggest that nothing has changed. In fact, everything is different. And yet, traditional research papers and term projects sans images or design continue as the *sin qua non* of student work involving research.

Further, when the visual has been introduced into the classroom as a teaching/ learning text, the purpose of such instruction has been immediately suspect as either lacking the gravitas of other scholarly pursuits

or as a requisite response to the bulk of mass media influencing the lives of students and teachers alike. “Even many media studies programs (where one might expect a sympathetic treatment of visual culture) present visual literacy as a means of inoculating the unwary against the snares and baits of advertising, television, music, videos, photography and other forms of visual representation.”³ This pedagogy of suspicion is instructive in a sense, but remains reductive in light of the opportunity to deploy critical readings and writings on the visual, not as a means of medicating students, but as a means of multimedial literacy education.

It cannot be argued that librarians and information professionals have neglected or ignored the influence of images in the production and reception of texts. And yet there appears to be a considerable lack of attention to this topic in the professional literature. Authors are quick to write about the mechanics of creating or managing a digital image collection. Articles are published that offer strategies for instruction that include images and technologies raining with visuals. A “big picture” understanding for why images must be recognized in information literacy learning and instruction is developing at a far slower rate.

It is not as if this is not a topic or the work of our profession. Barbara Maria Stafford contends that “the explosion of multimedia—that unstable collage of video, audio, text, and graphics collected with an electronic interface—raises serious questions concerning the kinds of training needed to navigate meaningfully through a blurred and fluid informatic realm.”⁴ The word “navigate” seems purposeful here, and the locations requiring navigation have been extended. Whether the room is equipped with a television, a film screen, or a computer, the increasingly wired world of the academy is rarely without the influence of the visual. And even if this were not the case, individuals in the classroom (both student and instructor) are increasingly informed and stimulated by a plethora of images and visual information encountered outside of their academic lives.

The navigability of these terrains and the evaluative methods made necessary by the Web are clearly concerns of librarians and information professionals. The need for instruction related to the creation, transmission, and reception of the visual moves away from the lines of thinking that believe functional (reading) literacy instruction to be all that is necessary for stu-

dents to function as readers, writers, and participating citizens. Students (and others) are constantly decoding texts that exist in a variety of media, and these media are becoming predominantly and increasingly visual. Writers are often placed in the position of being designers as well as researchers and writers. As Billie Wahlstrom contends in regard to visual literacy instruction, “functional literacy may help our students get jobs, but in this era only a broader set of literacies will enable students to develop fully as competent communicators, ethical agents of change, and engaged citizens.”⁵ Interrogating the images that form and inform the daily lives of students offers an opportunity for greater comprehension of the communicative and persuasive powers of images, both in and also when incorporated within written text.

Here, in brief, are a number of considerations for re-valuing and re-evaluating the role of images in information literacy instruction theory and its discussion. While each of these considerations focuses on the theory or rationale behind instruction in the encoding and decoding of images and imaged texts, each also suggests potential for practical instructional strategies.

1. Words are images.

While it seems simplistic to be reminded that words are simply images designed to connote ideas, objects, people, et al., the fact that words are really just strings of pictures is a valuable concept in thinking about the convergence of word and image in contemporary texts. The false binary opposition between word and image is one that has been fostered almost exclusively by publishing standards. Originally, images were subjugated to alphabetic print text because the technology of printing words was easier and more efficient than the printing of images.⁶ After the age of the illuminated manuscript, after Gutenberg, the fluid relationship between word and image had become increasingly disassociated.

The various media used for information delivery have encouraged online readers and writers are encouraged to rethink the dominance of alphabetic text. Richard Johnson Sheehan writes that “electronic texts are essentially ‘visual’ texts—much as printed texts are ‘literal’ and speeches are ‘oral.’ Of course, elements of the visual, literal, and oral play a role in all texts.”⁷ He focuses on the issue of medium of delivery to understand why electronic texts, in particular, are more

visual than literal or oral by saying that “the controlling rhetorical element [of a text] shifts to suit the medium. Therefore, if the medium is electronic, the controlling rhetorical element is *visuality*.”⁸ Sheehan’s claim should be qualified; due to the multimedial character of online texts, they have become spaces in which the word, the voice, the eye, and the hand meet at a point between (in the middle or at the medium) interlocutors, and it is with this space that the historical dominance of alphabetic writing is being displaced. The connection between word and image that is fostered by electronic texts and communication takes its place within what Bolter calls “the response of prose to the visual technologies of photography, cinema, and television.”⁹ His work on the “remediation” of one medium by another suggests that the interrelation of media has been ongoing throughout the 20th century, and scholars in various disciplines have been exploring this textual displacement for decades.

While understanding the image/word (dis)connection continues to have value, knowing what to do about it now is important to information professionals working with topics related to information literacy and fluency. It is helpful, then, to consider how alphabetic and visual images function together in the transmission and reception of information.

2. Images are information.

Just as letters were refined and defined and pulled together into words and language, images have informational properties resulting from their interpretation and interrogation. We can think about images in classical terms, in the forms of photographs and portraits. We may also consider images or logograms that exist alongside alphabetic images. The dollar sign connotes certain information about a number. When spoken, we would add the word “dollars” in its place but on the page we see only the visual symbol: “\$.” Signs on restrooms, icons on computer desktops, et al. have become the hieroglyphs of our contemporary age, images that direct decoders to perform in specific ways or to follow specific paths.

From a historic perspective, images have also acted to enhance the value of information offered with alphabetic print, and images alone have inspired writers and inventors and creators of all kinds to act. As the profusion and use of images has exploded in recent years, and we find ourselves engulfed in what

has been called a “visual culture.” James W. Marcum contends that this requires more than just a consideration of the visual as an influence on culture, but that a “visual ecology” has developed, “a comprehensive and continuous participatory event, a universe of action, and a world of knowledge and learning rather than of information transfer.”¹⁰ While one must appreciate Marcum’s bold claim, the use of the word “ecology” suggests that this is akin to a natural occurrence—that people are not consciously involved in the influence of images on knowledge, contemporary learning, and cultural change. Even if this were the case, encoders would still have the intellectual agency to make conscious decisions about how their work utilized visual components and how these components enhance or alter alphabetic messages.

3. Images with words and images without words = different messages.

Images do not appear, either on their own or in context with words, by accident. There almost exists the perception that images are just “appropriate” to a specific situation or that they somehow insinuate themselves into the text. In fact, the communicative and often rhetorical purpose of image inclusion and placement has a direct correlation with the message transmitted in words. This dynamic has become even more complicated as electronic words and images have the appearance of being submerged or embedded within layers of other images (such as backgrounds, windows, and frames). In this way, images have become “naturalized,” that is to say, they have become a given element in almost any text and are now part and parcel of what we think of as the text’s “design.”

As decoders of these texts, we are forced to explore how the word and image work differently and similarly and how, as a result, they can interact in synthesis and synergy. As an experiment, one could take a web text and remove all of the visual elements aside from a white background and black font. The readers would ask themselves to assess the message or the information provided in the text. Then, look at the images that were removed from the context of words. What information is provided in these images? From background colors to bordering and the other images that make up the design of a web text, one might be able to think about how these visual influences are used in concert with words to provide information.

Ronald Fortune has claimed that as we develop an increasing understanding of this word/image interaction, we can make predictions as to the development of the future influence of visuals. He suggests that just as the writing and graphic abilities of encoders “must follow a developmental curve, their abilities to work with the two together must be allowed to mature gradually.”¹¹ This kind of farsighted perspective is a necessary part of big picture perspectives on the convergence of word and image, and is helpful to understanding how information literacy instruction will adapt to such developments. We will then ask the question, “What new literacies or what enhancement of traditional skills will be required as the information era flourishes?”

4. Reading images requires critical thinking.

Until recently, critical thinking focused almost solely on a deep and developed understanding of alphabetic texts. We know that due to the amorphous interpretations that can be constructed in relation to visual images, it is even more important that critical thinkers consider the context of images in relation to the encoder’s message. Further, how does this context relay information about the intentions of the author, his or her possible bias, and even the author’s credibility?

The introduction of images into discussion of information literacy is a means for thinking critically about the character of texts and how texts are constructed within different environments and situations. In addition, the interrogation of naturalized images encourages critical consideration of the subtle, often hidden messages that can be transmitted through the peripheral images that fill our screens. These acts of visually literate analysis are directly related to the kinds of critical thinking abilities that faculty and information professionals seek to foster in the intellectual work of our student populations.

If one believes that the literacies work in tandem with one another, then increased visual information literacy will be interrelated with students’ functional reading literacy, their critical thinking literacy, their media literacy, and so forth. Specifically, to include the visual—a component of the text that may be easily glossed over without an analytical eye—is to reinforce critical thinkings and readings beyond just images. If reading images requires the same time of critical literacies expected in information literate and fluent

students, then the opportunity for including images already exists.

5. Images are already *there* in information literacy instruction.

The opportunity for considering images within information literacy instruction not only exists, but the images *themselves* are already included in the teaching/learning process. The use of images and imaged texts as well as imaging technologies abounds in the practice of information literacy instruction. However, the use of technologies raining in images seems to encourage an “audience-like” perspective for students and possibly for instructors as well. Information literacy session participants can be engaged by the visual delights of the media of information delivery, and neglect the intellectual work required to understand how images and the media through which they are transmitted are involved in the process of information transfer.

This engagement is an instinctive activity in light of the influence of other visual media such as television and film. Turn on a screen, any screen, in a room full of participants and even if you leave a screen blank, the potential for seeing something remains. “Students” become “viewers”—riveted to screens—those spaces where they may either interact with the visual or achieve the narcotized state encouraged by television viewing. Students are excited by what they might see, giving instructors a time-tested mode of engaging the audience. Information literacy advocates are then charged with the work of extending this engagement to the kinds of critical thinking activities that support the library and university curriculum and to encourage inspiration and participation while also guiding this enthusiasm toward the purpose and intention of the instruction.

6. Images are necessary components in the evaluation process.

As we introduce the topic of evaluation as it functions within source selection, we often establish criteria for the evaluation of sources. The unrestricted and uncontrolled presentation of information online has encouraged evaluative methods. Some criteria will include an evaluation of design, with a focus on determining the level of sophistication, effort, and time given to the organizational structure as well as the information within a given electronic source.

The word “design” would also connote the use of images to help the encoder/decoder navigate within the electronic space. What icons are provided or visual means of directing readers to information? What photographic or artistic images are included to enhance the reading space? How do these images interrelate with the information provided? These are questions that we should ask as we evaluate electronic sources.

But as a space of words and images embedded within other images, the series of planes within our screens can seem flat. These multiple layers require readers to localize different elements of the on-screen visual as they attempt to understand the whole. Word-focused evaluation of sites is only half of an evaluation. Even if a site is made up primarily of words, the color of the background, the design of the words—the *mise en page*—is a crucial part of understanding and evaluating a site. The discussion can then be extended to understanding the intention of the encoder in including images in a certain way or drafting a design that achieves a certain effect. While such discussions require as much interpretation as evidence, they further complicate the issue of understanding images in relation to information literacy.

7. Including images in information literacy instruction is an opportunity to open doors for the exploration of the ethical, social, and political character of texts.

A phrase like “the ethical, social, and political character of texts” is admittedly loaded with meaning. In the context of information literate activity, one thinks of the opportunity to discuss the ethical considerations related to attribution of the use of visuals in one’s own work, while also evaluating the work of others with a comparable critical eye. This seems to go without saying, and instruction related to the copyright of images and even design is already a consideration in the information literacy discussion.

To complicate this issue further, when students or any decoder of visual images are encouraged to think critically about how and why an image is used in relation to words to communicate ideas, the ability to see the messages that are communicated with images becomes more sophisticated. This is a positive move. At the same time, this move encouraged both critique of the image and its usage, and the use of images has not always been fair or ethical.

Images have been used throughout history not only to *depict* history but also to construct it. Just as words and written narratives control public perception on historical events or specific populations of people, images have acted in a similar manner. The idea that an image depicts “reality” or “what really happened” is even more widely accepted. Stafford suggests that “knowing something about the common myths surrounding images, their past uses and structure, would help forge models of future interactive communication as the old linguistic hierarchies fracture.”¹² Visual information literacy in the 21st century requires recognition of how visuals have played a role in knowledge and communication construction *over time* in order to understand how this process continues to be changed by new media.

Beyond the rhetorical uses of images related to historical representation, the continuing use of images to create and influence contemporary culture is a consideration. Kathleen Ethel Welch has contended that visual texts and visual literacy instruction has tended to be dismissed within the academy *for this very reason*, and when they are considered, they are rarely contextualized. “The sophisticated explication of these texts,” writes Welch, “which to a large extent promote, defend, and extend corporate capitalism, sexism, racism, and other aspects of the status quo—is not only necessary but crucial.”¹³ In light of the topic of information literacy and its instruction, such a position seems like an activist stance. One must leave such positioning to the individual and to localized communities of professionals. At the same time, to neglect the ethical, social, and political ramifications of visual information literacy instruction would be a reductive move and would shift our focus from goals of information literacies and fluencies that encourage learners to become critically conscious citizens.

Conclusion

There are a number of methods for considering the role of information literacy in regard to images. Each of these considerations suggests methods for including instruction in visual information literacy as a part of contemporary information literacy instruction. While stand-alone courses that deal with visual information literacy may one day be feasible, the time and energy we have available to us may allow us only to touch on these topics. Consider these strategies:

a. Introduce a website to a class and ask for their evaluation of the site. Ask them how the images on the site were valuable to their evaluation. Ask them to count or note the images on the page. Do they find all of the images? How many of the images become lost, submerged or embedded? Which draw their focus?

b. Remove students from their comfortable context of the screen and introduce them to the print archives, where the convergence of word and image is less naturalized. Then return to electronic locations and allow students to make connections between how words and images have functioned in print and are functioning in online spaces.

c. Enhance instruction of image databases to show how images from the database are used in a number of other contexts. Encourage students to explore how images and words work together in one situation, and how this might differ in another.

While this paper is designed to start conversations and foster further discussion (both agreeable and critical), such “big picture” perspectives encourage and require considerations of continuing and future change. As we regard the big picture and look at not only how words and images are interacting on screens but also how this interaction relates to our instruction in information literacy sessions and situations, we should keep an eye on the future. We will be observing not only how *images* influence and alter notions and constructions of alphabetic text, but also how the increasing advance and influence of *oral/aural components* are changing our work. At what point will the word and image be once again remediated by sound? What is the next big thing? Regardless of the answer, we are heading there, and gaining speed.

Notes

1. Lester Faigley, “Material Literacy and Visual Design,” in *Rhetorical Bodies*, ed. Sharon Crowley and Jack Selzer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 188.

2. Jay David Bolter, *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates, 2001), 111.

3. W.F. Garrett-Petts, “Developing Vernacular Literacies and Multidisciplinary Pedagogies,” in *Miss Grundy Doesn't Teach Here Anymore*, ed. Diane Penrod, (Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1997), 79.

4. Barbara Maria Stafford, *Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Images* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 71.

5. Billie Wahlstrom, "Teaching and Learning Communities: Locating Literacy, Agency, and Authority in a Digital Domain," in *Computers and Technical Communication: Pedagogical and Programmatic Perspectives Series: Volume 3*. Ed. Stuart A. Selber (Greenwich: Ablex Publishing Corp., 1997), 129.
 6. Bolter, 48.
 7. Richard Johnson Sheehan, "Being Visual, Visual Beings," in *Working with Words and Images: New Steps in an Old Dance*, ed. Nancy Allen (Westport, Conn.: Ablex Publishing Corp., 2002), 75.
 8. Sheehan, 75.
 9. Bolter, 47.
 10. James W. Marcum, "Beyond Visual Culture: The Challenge of Visual Ecology," *Libraries and the Academy 2* (2002): 189.
 11. Ronald Fortune, "Image, Word, and Future Text: Visual and Verbal Thinking in Writing Instruction," in *Working With Words and Images: New Steps in an Old Dance* ed. by Nancy Allen (Westport, Conn.: Ablex Publishing Corp., 2002), 102.
 12. Stafford, 23.
 13. Kathleen E. Welch, "Reconfiguring Writing and Delivery in Secondary Orality," in *Rhetorical Memory and Delivery: Classical Concepts for Contemporary Composition and Communication* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Earlbaum and Associates, 1993), 26.
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