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How to Speak Out (Visually) at Your Library

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What is Information Literacy?

Information literacy allows users to become life long learners. The American Library Association (ALA) defines information literacy as a "set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information." (2000) These skills include the ability to:

- Establish the amount and level of information required
- Access the information efficiently
- Assess information and its sources analytically
- Integrate the chosen information into one's knowledge base
- Use information effectively to achieve a goal
- Recognize the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information
- Access and use information ethically and legally

What is Visual Literacy?

Visual literacy has been discussed for the past ten years, but there is still no clarity about what constitutes visual literacy. We can find many definitions. For example, visual literacy is defined as "the learned ability to interpret visual messages accurately and to create such messages" (Heinich, et al., 1999) or the "active reconstruction of past visual experience with incoming visual images to obtain a meaning." (Sinatra, 1986). The definition provided by Wileman (1993) will be used as a working definition by the authors. Wileman defines visual literacy as the "ability to turn information of all types into pictures, graphics, or forms that help communicate the information."

How Visual Literacy connects to Information Literacy?

Both visual literacy and information literacy require the ability to find, evaluate, and use information. Visual literacy is more complex, as it requires the ability "to understand, interpret and evaluate visual messages, and in turn to use visual language to communicate with others." (Bristor, 1994).

Visual literacy helps to:

- Develop communication
- Critically evaluate information
- Teach how to find and explore new resources
- Teach how to use a variety of media

Why teach Visual Literacy?

Children are inundated with visual messages which they must learn to interpret. Children have naturally developed visual perception, which grows through continued exposure to media, TV, games, etc. It is one thing to appreciate and understand visual messages; it is another one to create them. Children need the opportunity to try. As Manifold states, "As we enter the 'information age' our need to process volumes of data quickly and efficiently increases." As more and more information is communicated through a variety of non-print media, the ability to create and think critically and visually about the images presented is crucial. In addition, teaching visual literacy opens the door to those who learn visually, thus creating motivation..

Instructional Strategies for Visual Literacy

Visual literacy skills are the analysis and evaluation of visuals for meaning, relevance, and context, as well as the manipulation and organization of data or images to communicate meaning. Pearson says that, "Doing and studying [the visual arts] calls into practice many kinds of cognition--visual processing, analytical thinking, posing questions, testing hypotheses, verbal reasoning and more." To teach visual literacy we must teach people how to decode or read visuals to interpret meaning and also to encode or write visuals to express and communicate ideas. When we teach visual literacy, we must keep in mind that age and culture will contribute to these interpretations. Here are some ideas for teaching visual literacy:

- Visiting museums brings together powerful objects, potent words, and evocative environments to create ideas in the mind of the visitor. Curators, anthropologists, designers, educators, technicians, and artists focus their energy into a single creative act that stands as the expression of their creative ideas.

- To refine observational skills, teach drawing for the purpose of representation as a way of combining details and spatial relationships. Drawing forces students to focus attention effectively and to experience the art of seeing.

- Visual literacy skills can be used for pre-reading strategies. Complex ideas and processes can be represented with key visuals such as timelines, web or mind maps that draw attention to significance. In literature, double time lines help with historical fiction. Encourage verbal description of readings using evocative, vivid words to enhance recall.

- Teaching metaphorical thinking to relate to new and prior knowledge (Williams, 1983). This is where culture and age make a big difference in perception and interpretation. Creating graphs, charts, and spreadsheets enable us to see how numbers work together and allow us to manipulate formulas for investigation.

- Creating multimedia and hypermedia affords us more creative expression. Students are intrinsically motivated, realize real-life applications, learn project management skills, refine their visual literacy skills, translate knowledge for access and meaning, and design to attract and maintain the attention of the audience when creating hypermedia and multimedia.

- Teaching aesthetic appreciation and formal standards for critique is another way to incorporate visual learning.

- Include visual elements in representational and abstract formats.

- Using visual concepts that we've gained knowledge of to invent new and inventive ways of doing things (Eisner, 1994).

- Using body language to provide feedback to students and coworkers. Some students are intimidated about approaching us for help. Are we presenting visual messages that we're interested in helping our students or that we'd rather not be bothered?

Other Uses for Visual Literacy Beyond the Classroom

We can see visual literacy being used everyday in advertising, media, and websites. Politicians use visual messages to get across their ideas and to sway the audience, often by putting down their competitors, both verbally and visually. The best use of visual literacy beyond the classroom is to market your library. You can use flyers, brochures, newsletters, and your website to market your library using visual messages. Moreover, each of us is a visual messenger for our library.

Research on Visual Literacy

The authors have begun a research project, surveying students about their preferences on the design of library instruction worksheets. Most librarians are use handouts that list information resources under various headings. The research project compares this handout style to a visually enhanced handout with graphics, various font sizes and types, text blocks and charts, colored paper, and a page layout that uses both sides of the paper. Students were asked which handout looks easier to use and why, including font size, font type, graphics, page layout. They were also asked which they would prefer to use and why. The results thus far have been

very interesting. Ninety one percent of students preferred the visually enhanced handout. The written in comments were similar: “faster to read”, “easier to read”, “easier on the eyes”, “charts”, “information stands out”, “less crowded”. For the 9% of students who preferred the old style handouts, the reasons were that they “do not like colored paper” or would rather that the “information [is] all on one page”.

Conclusion

It is important for librarians to use visual skills and visual literacy to promote learning. Education is undergoing a shift to analysis and innovation (Stokes, 2002). Multiple literacies are necessary to meet the challenges of today's society. For students, visual strategies can be motivational. In an academic environment, the library has two identities, physical and online. For most students, a first impression of the library will happen visually from one of these identities. If we do not use visual skills and visual literacy in person and online, we are letting students down, and not really doing our job as librarians, because visual skills are an integral part of information skills and "all thinking begins with seeing" (Fleckenstein, et al., 2002).

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