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NAVIGATING THE COMPLEXITIES OF VISUALS AS COMMUNICATION

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INTRODUCTION TO PART II

Navigating the Complexities of Visuals as Communication

Sara Schumacher

“Learners perceive visuals as communicating information” is a deceptively simple sentence that starts the introduction to the second theme of the *Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education: Companion Document to the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (VL Framework).¹ This seemingly direct statement hides complexities, as perception is not absolute—and the bounds for what can be considered a visual are ever shifting. Building the capacity to recognize these complexities and develop strategies to grow one’s visual communication skills is a continuous process. Learners need opportunities to experiment with unpacking the layers of meaning by applying both theory and technical skills when reading and creating visuals. In this section, each chapter’s authors find innovative ways of pairing visual literacy concepts, knowledge practices, and dispositions with disciplinary and real-world examples. They guide us through visual rhetoric theory, help us examine how visuals are used as evidence in different fields, encourage us to build innovative communities of practice, and critically consider our responsibility to push further to open visual literacy to all.

The VL Framework describes visuals as “works that communicate visually, but can also communicate through multiple modes and involve other senses.”² While frustrating in its inability to place all visuals into easily defined containers, this broad approach allows practitioners freedom to target the most relevant visuals for their needs. The authors in this section unpack the interpretative and generative concerns of visuals, including data visualizations, web comics, virtual reality simulations, multimodal public communications, and sociograms. The inclusion of many of these examples shows that researchers and educators are reaching beyond what might be considered a stereotypical visual work, such as a painting or photograph, at the heart of visual literacy. They are utilizing these visuals and applying complex visual communication strategies that can

integrate, distill, and transmit entangled blocks of information and context, requiring learners to hone their analysis skills.

Many visual literacy practitioners discuss this process of analysis using a text-based metaphor—“reading a visual”—which can include dissecting and examining the layers of meaning within visual communication. In the VL Framework, “learning to read visuals requires deconstructing and interpreting different elements and contexts of visual communications in order to comprehend their aesthetic, evidentiary, and persuasive functions.”³ Case studies in the following chapters analyze these functions, demonstrating how learners can investigate different aspects of visual creation and dissemination. They focus on the formal, technical, and stylistic qualities of the visual as an artifact and how these qualities were impacted by the intentions of the authors during production and how they impact the reception of the audience during utilization. However, analysis is only one aspect of understanding visual communication, and the end goal of the “Learners perceive visuals as communicating information” theme is that “visual literacy learners can produce, use, and remix visual media to create visual messages that prioritize inclusivity or are tailored to the needs of specific audience.”⁴

This statement emphasizes the importance of creation as a fundamental component of visual literacy, and the VL Framework further prompts learners to “reflect on the role of personally-created visuals as meaningful contributions to research, learning, and communication.”⁵ This can be challenging because many learners struggle to see themselves as visual creators. The term *creator* often evokes a vision of graphic designers and artists whose talent comes from a combination of innate ability and intense practice, a skillful combination of elevated aesthetic sensibility and technical excellence that can seem unattainable to many of us. Yet everyone is a visual creator, using the power of visuals to inform and connect viewers to our lives and our work. Case studies in this section provide models and instructional examples that spotlight the iterative and multitiered process of visual creation—demonstrating that visual literacy professionals can support the creation process by providing guidance and feedback, helping learners refine their visuals to meet the needs of their audience.

However, navigating where and how to support visual literacy learners can be complicated by the ways in which visuals “communicate messages based on cultural, community, and disciplinary conventions.”⁶ In academic contexts, visuals can look and function with marked difference according to the discipline. Many disciplinary faculty, particularly outside of the realm of the arts, may not value or even be aware of visual literacy as a pedagogical concern. Additionally, they may silo the librarian’s role in visual disciplinary scholarship practices to instruction on searching and attribution. Some case studies in this section tackle this inclusion of visual literacy instruction in the curriculum by highlighting the benefits and challenges for librarians and academic support staff to collaborate directly with disciplinary faculty for visual literacy instruction. Other case studies feature library-run programming and training. Regardless of approach, the authors in this section exhibit dedication to expanding and interrogating our views of visual literacy and its role in higher education.

The first two chapters in this section engage with visual rhetoric, a field that studies the communicative aspects of visuals—particularly their persuasive functions—to interrogate visuals as artifacts and their impacts on peoples, communities, and cultures. The chapters provide readers with grading rubrics and evaluative questions that highlight how librarians and academic staff can operationalize knowledge practices in the VL Framework, including “Define and articulate the need for visuals within a project, assessing the audience for the project and the manner in which it will be shared, as well as how the use of visuals supports the purpose of the project” and “Evaluate a range of visuals with attention to format, creator, and rhetorical message in order to select the most relevant for an intended purpose or context.”⁷ In “Killing the Hidden Essay: Supporting Disciplines to Move to Multimodal Public Communication Assignments,” Jacqui Bartram and Lee Fallin argue that visual rhetoric is a necessary component for inclusion in public communication assignments, despite it rarely being discussed at their institution or included in grading rubrics. Bartram and Fallin advocate that staff whose duties and spheres of influence straddle the academic and professional divide can be key to supporting students in developing the rhetorical skills and visual literacies needed for these assignments. In “Critical Data Visualization in Visual Literacy,” Susan E. Montgomery positions data visualization as a form of visual rhetoric to develop evaluation criteria informed by the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*⁸ Montgomery further argues that librarians can be vital in building instruction around data visualizations by combining visual rhetoric theory with visual analysis and evaluation strategies.

Woven into the visual rhetoric discussion are elements of “visuals as evidence,” a concept that is foregrounded in “Aligning Visual Literacy Concepts with Nursing Curriculum Objectives to Maximize Potential.” Amy Minix and Jackie Huddle argue that “in the context of nursing, visuals are patients, data visualizations, health reports, virtual patient portals, and so on.” Their work demonstrates how to put VL Framework dispositions like “Consider the varying role of visuals in disciplinary scholarship, examining evolving trends and standards for communication impact, style, purpose, creator intent, and audience reaction”⁹ into practice. Minix and Huddle chart the techniques and theories that have informed visual literacy in the nursing classroom, finding applicable strategies and gaps in educational outcomes. Using their analysis to inform a curriculum map, they link visual literacy with nursing educational competencies and standards.

In “Connecting the Dots: Making Sense of Sociograms,” Jennilyn M. Wiley uncovers visual evidence in a different form, revealing an application for the knowledge practice “Explore creative or generative engagement with visuals to conceptualize, research, and analyze complex topics, such as mind mapping, photo elicitation, visualization, and other methods.”¹⁰ Wiley delineates the role of visual analysis in social network analysis (SNA) as a visual methodology, as well as the sociogram as a form of visual communication. She posits that librarians can use SNA as well as sociograms to highlight diversity issues in research networks and points to the role librarians can play in supporting the use of SNA and sociograms by patrons.

Supporting patron needs gets expanded into the act of actually creating communities of learning in “Collaborative Approaches to Teaching and Building Visual Literacies.” Here, Chris Lopez, Salma Abumeeiz, Neha Gupta, Simon Lee, Sylvia Page, Ashley Peterson, and Monique Tudon give examples and learner perspectives that highlight many of the phases of creation as seen in the knowledge practice: “Anticipate that the process of visual creation is iterative and involves many phases, including inspiration, transformation, experimentation, synthesis, and refinement.”¹¹ The authors demonstrate how visual literacy learning benefits from the inclusion of a variety of perspectives in creative and collaborative environments.

Inclusivity becomes the center focus in the final chapter in this section, “Unforeseen Consequences of Visual Literacy: Alternative Mechanisms for Creating a More Inclusive Environment.” Engaging with disability as a critical framework, Lorin Jackson, Kelleen Maluski, and Jonathan Pringle push the reader to advance visual literacy beyond dispositions like “Recognize how incorporating accessibility practices and principles can enrich the experience of visuals for all users.”¹² The authors prompt the reader to question biases and assumptions and highlight the ableism that is often invisible in the language, policies, and systems of librarianship—including our work with visuals and our very conceptualization of visual literacy as a field of practice.

While the chapters in this section cannot cover all the nuances of visual literacy skills surrounding visuals as communication, librarians can find inspiration in the included theories and real-world applications for exploring new modes of visual communication, research topics, and instruction strategies. Expanding the field of visual literacy emboldens us to support learners. We can understand the functions and values of visuals for peoples, communities, and cultures, uncover personal biases, and grow as ethical and socially responsible visual consumers and creators.

Notes

1. Association of College and Research Libraries, *The Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education: Companion Document to the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2022), 6, https://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org/acrl/files/content/standards/Framework_Companion_Visual_Literacy.pdf.
2. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Visual Literacy*, 6.
3. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Visual Literacy*, 6.
4. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Visual Literacy*, 6.
5. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Visual Literacy*, 7.
6. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Visual Literacy*, 6.
7. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Visual Literacy*, 6.
8. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2016), <https://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org/acrl/files/content/issues/infolit/framework1.pdf>.
9. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Visual Literacy*, 7.
10. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Visual Literacy*, 6.
11. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Visual Literacy*, 6.
12. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Visual Literacy*, 7.

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