

How Can Visual Arts Literacy and the National Visual Arts Standards Support Learning in a Visual Age?



Visual Arts Literacy

Visual literacy constitutes the new thinking and learning skills of a digital age and a creative economy. These are the types of cognitive skills young people will need to find their place in a globally competitive workforce. The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis reports that the arts and culture sector is a \$699 billion industry, which represents 4.3% of the nation's GDP—a larger share of the economy than transportation and agriculture—according to a press release in early 2015. The nonprofit arts industry alone generates \$135 billion in economic activity annually (spending by organizations and their audiences) that supports 4.1 million jobs and generates \$22.3 billion in government revenue (Americans for the Arts, 2015). Technology innovations such as big data, data analytics, and visualization will simply increase the importance of visual and spatial learning skills.

Digital media, broadband Internet, streaming video, social media communication channels, video games, and related cyber innovations encourage end-users to rely less on traditional literacy and numeracy skills and more on visual acuity skills—including mastery of perspective, proportion, nuance, abstraction, and ambiguity. The new media environment does not ask its participants to memorize theories or apply rules to solve specific problems; rather, it challenges users to explore, discover, sample, collaborate, and—as a result of these new patterns of learning—sift value and meaning from a glut of electronic information. Stephen Apkon (2013) calls it a visual deluge. According to Apkon, the global population of 7 billion people in 2012

utilized 3.5 billion television and computer screens, while the rate of smartphone production outpaced the birthrate of human beings.

Visual media are redefining what it means to develop the tools of literacy to understand a changing world—with regard not just to the reception of information but also to its expression. (p. 9)

Marcel Just, Director of the Center for Cognitive Brain Imaging at Carnegie Mellon University, argues that text is a human invention while visual learning is biological and therefore a product of nature. “A picture is worth a thousand words” for a reason, and the digital age merely amplifies the meaning of this old adage. The explosion of visual images and animated or live-action stories, along with the relative decline of text-based printed information, is changing the way we use our brains to think and learn—for instance, de-emphasizing memorization and emphasizing multi-tasking (Just, 2010).

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As a result of this proliferation of visuality, our notions of literacy—fixed since Gutenberg’s time—are undergoing enormous changes. Where effective communication was once the product of being able to read and write, the new literacy depends not only on reading and writing but also on integrating images, animation, video, and sound. Using digital formats to communicate has crossed the chasm—from an isolated technology skill practiced only by experts, to a common literacy requirement for general social competency (Warlick, 2005).

Visual literacy within the creative economy will only gain in importance as the global economy itself evolves. Jeremy Rifkin (2014) talks about the shift that is taking place in terms of the Collaborative Commons, where “millions of self-managed, mostly democratically run organizations, including charities, religious bodies, arts and cultural groups” and other entities “generate the social capital of society” (p. 16). In this new economic environment, “prosumers” (p. 19) produce and share goods and services at or near zero marginal cost. “Ownership,” Rifkin says, “is becoming less important than access, the pursuit of self-interest is being tempered by the pull of collaborative interests, and the traditional dream of rags to riches is being supplanted by a new dream of a sustainable quality of life” (p. 19).

Next Generation National Visual Arts Standards

The next generation National Core Arts Standards (for visual arts, music, theatre, dance, and media arts) released in 2014 can play a major role in the development of art education advocates and leaders. Based on the Understanding by Design (UbD) principles of Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2005), Visual Arts Standards and Assessment Teams crafted the Next Generation Standards and Model Cornerstone Assessments to help art educators operate in the educational currency of enduring understandings and big ideas. The Standards identify 15 enduring understandings that guide teachers in their work with students from preschool through high school. The levels of sophistication and instruction change with time as students stack their learning as they grow. Both contemporary art and design are included to help better prepare students for subsequent jobs in the creative economy. As the digital age unfolds, visual literacy increasingly impacts how we live, where we go, and the choices that we make throughout life; the Standards will make a powerful contribution in guiding students in their cognitive, social, and emotional development in preparation for college, career, and citizenry.

The Standards will help art educators communicate beyond the *what* of their subject matter and into *why* art matters. With a common language in place, members of the wider art education professional community will be empowered to promote and advance the essential value of art education.

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