

Visual literacy through photography as a pathway to understanding complexity

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### **Introduction**

The classroom assignment and activity we will present visual literacy strategies to engage students in connecting course content to the world around them is relevant for both undergraduate and graduate classrooms which meet in-person. Adaptations for online environments are possible but are not a platform we will explore in this session. This work is beneficial and relevant to students across cultures and backgrounds as well.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings and Research on the Role of Visual Literacy in the Classroom**

The evolving human brain was designed to make quick inferences from its visual stimuli (Pinker, 2009; Wolf, 2008). The belief that young adults in this generation, who have grown up surrounded by and consuming a vast amount of technology and media are intuitively visual learners with extensive visual literacy is based on a ‘digital natives’ argument. However, Brumberger’s empirical study (2011) found students cannot either comprehend or create visual-based communication at a high level of effectiveness and states “in fact, their ability to respond critically to visual material appears rather weak” (p. 44). Therefore, it seems essential as educators, to help our students develop skills surrounding visual literacy such as observation, communication, critical thinking, and innovation-related skillsets. The Learning Network of *The New York Times* has published several interesting blogs about utilizing photographs (Gonchar, 2015) and mini-documentaries (Gonchar, 2016) in classrooms towards the goal of increasing students’ levels of reading and critical thinking skills. Our experience is that student engagement levels also rise with creative visual literacy assignments such as those requiring students to take their own photograph that connect to a given complex course theme.

The fields of museum and arts education have developed a number of methods by which educators facilitate viewers'/students' critical thinking and communication. These include the Visual Thinking Strategies™ organization whose useful website is committed to sharing practical, effective reasons and ways to integrate visual literacy in classes (<https://vtshome.org/>). This work is based on research from each of the co-founders of the organization, Housen (e.g., 2000-2001) and Yenawine (e.g., 2003) and works to support educators in furthering this effort.

Rorani (2015) suggests visual literacy is even useful in project teams within the workplace in order to create an efficient and effective common visual representation for a team's relevant information (e.g., stakeholders, products, tools). Northcut and Brumberger (2010) explain that

*“Teaching students how to “see” and how to articulate what they see—to describe their perceptual fields and to visualize ideas—is a valuable first step and a productive use of class time...[and is] a relatively unintimidating way to begin moving out of their verbal comfort zone and into the realm of the visual. Students ...begin to recognize parallels to the familiar realm of the verbal. Drawing students’ attention to perceptual experience can be achieved first by helping students separate their concepts of objects from the visual components such as line, light, texture, and perspective” (p. 466).*

Yenawine's (2013) *Visual Thinking Strategies* outlines a series of questions that entice viewers to describe what they see and support their pronouncements with evidence. The system moves the viewer from the concrete phase of description and stimulates the critical thinking process of evidentiary reasoning. The process is based on Housen's stage theory of aesthetic development that parallels Piaget's work in cognitive development and Vygotsky's linkage between thinking and culture (DeSantis & Housen, 2007). Its use has proven to develop critical

thinking skills that transfer across disciplines into areas not involving art objects (DeSantis & House, 2007).

Other methodologies include “Guided Noticing,” developed by the Lincoln Center Institute (Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Inc., 2008) based on the works of Greene (2001) and Dewey (1998), as well as Feldman’s (1994) process of art criticism which guides users in separating interpretation from judgment. Taken together, these processes informed our hybrid approach to this assignment.

### **Learning Objectives**

1. Participants will learn a technique to help students develop their visual literacy to aid them in understanding and discussing art (specifically photography) effectively.
2. Participants will leave with strategies for incorporating images into their own classrooms.
3. Participants will see and learn from a specific example of a photography-based assignment.
4. Participants will brainstorm their own ideas of implementing images in their courses with the help of feedback from others in the session.

### **Exercise Overview**

When facilitating this assignment that includes a full class day activity on the day it is due, we run a 30-minute workshop with the students one week prior to help them develop skills to be effective and thorough observers of photographic images. This gives students structure and the means through which to write and think critically about photography. A mini-version of this workshop will be conducted in our session. The prompt for the assignment is as follows:

*Take your own photo of something that represents a particular course topic from the list below. It’s best to take a new one and not bring one that you’ve taken in the past because it will require you to think specifically about the topic you choose as the main purpose of the photo.*

*Bring one hard copy of the photo to class on its due date (in color) along with a 1 page double-spaced summary of why it's relevant to that topic and what the photo means to you. We'll share these in class. State the term(s) you are choosing early in your write-up and paraphrase its definition. After this, demonstrate how it's relevant to the course and persuade us that you've thought it through. No people are allowed in the photo at all so you'll need to be creative!*

*Topics to choose from: **discrimination, love, community, altruism, hate, peace, power, generosity.***

We have done this assignment and activity for class sizes of 22-30. We utilize a full class period of 1 hour and 15 minutes on the activity of sharing their assignments. During this class, the first 15-20 minutes is designated for students to do the following in groups of about 5-7 people:

- 1) Share your photo one person at a time
- 2) Allow group to consider photo for a minute or two and write down what they think the topic is that you chose
- 3) Explain the photo & what it means to you – using your write-up as a reference
- 4) Discuss the following questions in your group: How was your experience for this assignment? Describe process in deciding the photo. How did it add to your understanding of the topic you chose, if at all?

After doing the above (during which we walk around to different groups to listen in on their conversations), students tape their photographs around the walls of the classroom (they cannot put their write-ups on the walls, only their photos). Then, I give them about 10-15 minutes to walk around the room focusing only on the photos of their classmates who were not in their small group, to ensure they've seen them all. As they are doing this, I have them stay on

task by giving them post-its where they write what course theme/concept they think the photographer meant to capture and this put this guess on the wall next to each photo. Next, students sit back down and I ask the following question: Which photo intrigued you or do you want to know more about? Students then chime in with which one they found most interesting and I ask them to state what concept they guessed it was about. After guessing and saying why they felt that, I ask the student who was the actual photographer for that photo to indicate what concept it was based on and why they took this photo. We spend at least 15 minutes on this. The final debrief, is to ask the students to point out whether they noticed any themes (e.g., every time we do this session we notice students mostly choose positive themes instead of negative ones such as hate). We discuss why this theme may be present which leads to a conversation about the purpose of this assignment, which was to get students to notice all facets of the course's topics out in their everyday life in different contexts. Students respond very positively to this type of assignment design (as evidenced in both informal feedback they provide as well as teaching evaluations for the course).

### **Session Description**

1. Informal overview of presenters' backgrounds as context for their interest in visual arts in the classroom: 5 minutes

2. Mini-workshop demonstration of how to teach students to observe and fully experience photography. This is an interactive component that our students actually do in the classroom to prepare prior to taking their own photos for the assignment: 15 minutes

- Questions asked: "What is going on this image?" "What in the image makes you say that?" "What do you notice?" "What colors do you see?" "What shapes so you see?" "What relationships do you see between the colors and shapes?" The questions are low-

key in nature which is effective in lowering the risk of students talking about art. The process is both iterative with the repetition of questions as well as generative in its capacity to reveal additional noticings and wonderings about the photos under scrutiny. Photos to be shared in this workshop were downloaded from the Library of Congress collection of the Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives.

3. Share and explain the presenters' actual assignment and structure (will provide the template to all participants) with time built in for questions by participants: 10 minutes
4. Share examples of student work (student photos) in a gallery format by posting them on the walls of the classroom and having session participants a)look through them closely while walking around the room and b)guess which of the provided themes/class concepts are demonstrated in each photo (e.g., power, discrimination, generosity, community, etc.). If time allows, we will show a few of our students' one-page papers describing how their photo is relevant to the given theme/class concept they chose: 15 minutes
5. Discussions of participants' ideas for incorporating photography in their own classrooms, time for feedback from others, & full group debriefing of the session: 15 minutes

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