

The Holding Project

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Abstract

The authors argue that community-engaged arts practices like The Holding Project can and should be brought into closer alliance with each other and can be mutually beneficial. We suggest that the 2011 Visual Literacy Competency Standards are entrenched in a Western Enlightenment worldview. While the values undergirding these worldviews may be valuable in some contexts, they are not universally shared and serve as an inadequate foundation for collaborative, community-engaged arts projects. Further, the 2011 Standards and the proposed “Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education” (ACRL-VLRT, 2021) currently under review may not go far enough to model a more inclusive and egalitarian approach to community-engaged work. We hope that by calling attention to the implicit Eurocentric bias inherent in the 2011 standards, we can make a small contribution to the ongoing efforts within the visual literacy community to support “social justice through visual practice” (ACRL-VLTF, 2021).

Keywords: ACRL, Community-Engaged Art, Competency Standards, Eurocentrism, *The Holding Project*

Introduction

In the spring of 2021, during a conversation among collaborators, Lee Fearnside (writer, artist, independent curator, and educator), Ashley Pryor (philosopher, artist, educator), and Barbara Miner (artist, educator) about the state of the world and the direct impact that the COVID-inflamed upsurge in race-based hate crimes was having against members of the AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islanders) and on American society, we decided that we should respond to these traumas through our art. As three white artists of European descent, we were sensitive to our outsider status. We were aware that we could not “speak for” any community to which we did not belong.

And yet, we also felt action in response to this situation was critical; that saying or doing nothing was to ignore and give silent approval to the ongoing violence. We had been down this road before as we grappled with an appropriate response to violence against Black Americans, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, women, and members of other identity groups living in the United States. We considered our personal experiences with violence and marginalization, and we reflected on the increasing polarization of American society that continues to make it difficult to share these experiences. We decided that art could provide a safe space for community dialogue about feelings of safety and unsafety and how these feelings about community shape individuals’ lives.

We knew that we did not want to create a work that spoke “AT” people; instead, whatever work we created had to speak “WITH” people. We needed to create a mechanism for our community to make their voices visual, and we wanted to create a vehicle for “holding” those voices. This was the genesis of *The Holding Project*. As educators, all of whom had been engaged in some way with promoting visual literacy, we also decided that it was important to review and take into account the best practices outlined in the 2011 ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards. Standard Seven spoke to the role that visual literacy might play in educating learners about “ethical, legal, social, and economic issues surrounding the creation and use of images and visual media, and accesses and uses visual materials ethically” (Hattwig et al., 2011, n. pag.) However, we found the Standards of limited value for our project. While the ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards are useful for thinking through Western paradigms of image ownership, copyright,

and appropriation, the Standards were not conducive to designing a community-engaged arts project in which the borders between artist and community participants are in continuous flux and play.

This paper will explore some of the challenges that community-engaged arts practices like *The Holding Project* pose to the 2011 Visual Literacy Competency Standards. We will consider how the Standards may unintentionally hinder collaborative or community-engaged arts projects and how the proposed “Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education” (ACRL, 2021) addresses many of the concerns we raise in our critique. We believe that visual literacy and community-engaged arts practices can and should be brought into closer alliance with each other and that this relationship could be mutually beneficial. Through designing *The Holding Project*, and referencing the older Standards for appropriate benchmarks, we have come to believe that the 2011 Visual Literacy Competency Standards are deeply entrenched in Western Enlightenment and Romantic worldviews. While the values undergirding these worldviews may be valuable in some contexts, they are not universally shared and serve as an inadequate foundation for collaborative, community-engaged arts projects. In fact, the 2011 Standards and the updated Framework currently under consideration may not go far enough to model an inclusive and egalitarian approach for community-engaged work. We hope that by calling attention to the implicit Eurocentric bias inherent in the 2011 Standards, we can make a small contribution to the ongoing efforts within the visual literacy community to support “social justice through visual practice” (ACRL, 2021).

About The Holding Project

The Holding Project consists primarily of community response cards, but also face to face dialogic interactions between and among the artist-facilitators and the rest of the community. We consider *The Holding Project* to be an evolving, community-engaged arts project that is enriched both by its reference to the Visual Literacy Competency Standards as well as best practices associated with community-engaged arts projects. This final section will discuss how our process toward building a meaningful partnership with our community expanded our thinking about visual literacy’s role in community-engaged arts.

Each of the artist-facilitators has been involved both formally and informally to promote visual literacy within our various professional domains of concern. Each of us has likewise been concerned with access issues within higher education and within our local art community. We understand that many points of our critique of the 2011 ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards apply equally to many of the built-in assumptions inherent in higher education, the art world, and even within aspects of *The Holding Project*.

To date, *The Holding Project* has tried to negotiate two sets of competing and sometimes conflicting demands. On the one hand, the facilitator-artists felt the urgency of a timely response to the cultural crisis that impacts our community (acts of violence committed against some members of our community) and the sense (and felt obligation) that we should bring our experience and artistic expertise to create a work that would invite broader community participation. On the other hand, given our ethnic/racial outsider status, coupled with our commitment to fostering truly dialogic and democratic art practices, we knew that this project exceeded the customary relationship of artist and community and that consequently, we would need to reimagine and relinquish control over many aspects of the project, to better reflect community responses and needs.

From the outset, we were determined to make *The Holding Project* as accessible and interactive as possible. Likewise, the structure needed to convey our seriousness of purpose and commitment to the project. While ideally, we might involve the community in this initial design process, our decision to create the holding structure reflects our desire to balance the committed need to create a timely response to the crisis at hand while still creating something that was visually appealing to attract interest and participation.

After multiple internal discussions, we decided that an infinitely expanding accordion book structure that could hold community responses would best serve as a vehicle for sharing community reflections concerning safety and unsafety. We made test book constructions using various materials and different weights of paper. We dyed torn paper and looked at edge quality. We created paper pulp and pulled sheets of hand-cast paper to use for the individual pockets stitched to our book’s pages. We wanted each material choice to emphasize tactile qualities appealing to the human hand. Further, we wanted the final artifact to be very obviously handmade and not machine-made to underscore the time and attention the three

facilitators were willing to dedicate to the project. We understood this work as an aspect of building community trust. The act of hand-creating the paper sheets, stitching parts of the book together, and hand-stamping our little response cards was intended to indicate to our community that we were committed to the importance and respect we held for the dialogue we hoped to foster through the project. We were intentional in our desire to start the dialogue by conveying to the community that their responses to the project were precious. Our project was created from the heart, and our process had to mirror that origin.

As we considered ways to encourage community participation in this project, we took our cue from successful community-engaged photography projects like Photovoice, and Therapeutic Photography programs, to create open-ended questions to get at the heart of the overarching concept: “What makes you feel safe? What makes you feel unsafe?” We then stamped hundreds of little cards with our queries and added a small paper band (think of the little paper fortunes from cookies) around the cards with: “Did you know” facts about kindness, interracial empathy, art as a tool for social change, and guides for selecting anti-racist, age-appropriate books for children.

The Holding Project was accepted for presentation at the Arts Commission’s “Momentum,” a city-wide arts weekend in downtown Toledo in September 2021. At the “Momentum” event, participants at the festival were offered materials, i.e., papers, pens, glue, scissors, to use when completing their cards. Pryor, Miner, and Fearnside were on hand to engage in dialogue about the project and our desire to have a positive impact through civil discourse with the community as participants filled out their cards. Additionally, as part of the display, didactic materials were included about groups that support AAPI people and resource materials for learning more about the significant questions of race and inclusiveness.

After the initial presentation of *The Holding Project*, the artists approached the Toledo Lucas County Public Library system, which includes 20 library locations, with the idea of situating the project in each branch library. As the project aligns with the educational, community support, and engagement goals of the Library, it was welcomed. The artists created 20 “kits,” including a 4-page sample of the final accordion book-form, a response card collection box, response cards, colored pencils, and didactic materials about the project. The kits were distributed to each of the library branches for a display period of two weeks and two “meet the artists” events were held.

As a result of the original pilot and the library installations, *The Holding Project* has gone through additional design iterations, morphing in response to feedback from our audience/participants and continued research and reflection on the part of the artists. Gathering community responses to build civil discourse and offering alternatives to negative interactions continues to be of paramount importance; it is the underpinning of the entire project. The artists intend to build on the welcome received from the community. Finally, we seek to provide the community with additional opportunities to reflect on their experiences surrounding community safety, provide a mechanism through which they can express things they might otherwise be afraid or unable to say, and make these expressions visible in order to foster community dialogue and understanding.

The structure of *The Holding Project*--the book serving as a container for multiple voices from the community--connects effectively to the proposed *The Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education* document (ACRL, 2021). Our project encourages exploration of social justice by incorporating a diverse set of voices and building reciprocal relationships through gathering responses and displaying the finished work, which includes those responses at the Library. The artists of *The Holding Project* designed the project “acknowledging the limits of their knowledge, and seeking to understand better their worldviews, biases, and perceptions, as well as those around them, learners can become conscientious contributors to a more just world” (ACRL, 2021). There were 133 response cards submitted at the Library locations. The majority of cards (60%) responded to the prompt question “What makes you feel safe?” while 40% responded to the prompt question “What made you feel unsafe?”. Most respondents wrote only words (62%), 27% wrote words and included images, and 11% of respondents drew images only. The majority of the images (69%) were representational, while 31% were abstract or non-objective.

The response cards were coded and analyzed for themes and patterns. The most consistent response (43%) to “What makes you feel safe?” was family or friends. Other significant responses included 13%

indicating community (for example, “my neighbors looking out for me”); 8% indicating emotions (for example, “love”); and 6% indicating a physical place (for example, “my bed” or “my home”). The responses to “What makes you feel unsafe?” were more dispersed. The most consistent response was person-to-person violence (17%), followed by weapons (11%). Other responses of note were social ills, such as racism or white supremacy (11%) and being alone (9%). Interestingly, a similar percentage of responses indicated that law enforcement made them feel safe (2%) as unsafe (3%). Only one response indicated that disease made them feel unsafe. Sadly, 6% of cards responded that LGBTQIA+ people made them feel unsafe, which, if nothing else, suggests an opportunity for education. These responses were the genesis for brainstorming the next phase of *The Holding Project*. The artists continue to consider how to respond to community concerns about safety and use *The Holding Project* as an opportunity for social justice.

The Holding Project and the Community-Engaged Arts Movement & The ACRL Visual Literacy Standards

The Holding Project is a collaborative project both for the artists and between the artists and our community partners. At the heart of the project is an invitation to community members of the Greater Northwest Ohio region to reflect on the meaning of recent acts of violence toward members of the AAPI community specifically and continuing acts of violence in our communities more broadly. As artists grounded in different disciplines and arts practices, we brought a wide set of skills together when designing our project to convey a visually compelling invitation to our community and encourage broad participation in the project. *The Holding Project* is ongoing because of the very nature and magnitude of the issues it seeks to address. As we move through different stages of the project, we have had to make continuous adjustments to our own assumptions and biases about artistic practice, the relationship of artist(s) and audience, and what a genuinely community-engaged arts project can look like. In brief, we have had to radically rethink and decenter our self-understanding of the artists’ roles in the project to make room for a more expansive understanding of community–shared artistic practice. Even at this early stage in the project, we are inclined to understand our role as artist-facilitators rather than as *the* artists creating the project.

While an exhaustive account of what constitutes community-engaged arts practice exceeds the scope and purpose of this article, we recognize that this emergent form of arts practice is unfamiliar to many and warrants a brief overview to provide context. Community-engaged arts projects seek to establish meaningful relationships between the community and sponsoring artists or arts organizations. As Sholette and Bass (2018) observe in their preface to *Art as Social Action: An Introduction to the Principles and Practices of Teaching Social Practice Art*, social practice or community-engaged art employs “the varied forms offered by the expanded field of contemporary art as a collaborative, collective, and participatory social method for bringing about real-world instances of progressive justice, community building, and transformation” (Sholette & Bass, 2018, n. pag.). Hallmarks of successful community-engaged arts projects include, but are not limited to, the following elements:

- Building relationships with the community
- Creating projects that are mutually beneficial to the sponsoring artist(s) and community participant artists
- Collaborative design/implementation
- Designing a project maintenance plan
- Providing the community with significant access to and “authorship” of the final artwork

General interest in and practice of community-engaged arts projects has gained increasing visibility as legitimate art practice. New funding opportunities through national and regional arts commissions and foundations, as well as in the emergence of new programs like Arizona State University’s Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts, Portland State’s MFA program in Art and Social Practice, and other prominent universities and college programs reflect the interest in community-engaged arts projects. There is now an abundance of scholarship (Borwick, 2012; Chonody, 2014; Grant, 2016; Sholette & Bass, 2018) as well as practical application (*Clothesline Project*, 2013; *Photovoice*, 1999; *Project Row Houses*, 1991; *The Laundromat Project*, 2005) to inspire and guide community-engaged arts projects. *The Holding Project* benefitted from consulting these projects. Our attempts to align our project with the 2011 ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards were less successful.

While the ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards may provide valuable guidelines for thinking through the social and ethical implications of images that individuals create, we found they were less helpful for strategizing and staging levels of community engagement. The reasons for this are two-fold: 1) the majority of references to image creation imply that a single agent is at work in image-making/artistic production (and not a collective or community group), and 2) references to “ethical, legal, social and economic issues” appears imbricated in a Western, Eurocentric, Enlightenment orientation--a worldview that is not universally shared.

ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standard Seven states that the visually literate student “understands many of the ethical, legal, social, and economic issues surrounding the creation and use of images and visual media, and accesses and uses visual materials ethically” (Hattwig et al., 2011, n. pag.). Despite the implication that these “ethical, social, and economic issues” are universally applicable, the actual learning outcomes associated with the Standard betray a distinct historical bias concerning the way that ethics, the law, social and political structures are conceived and framed: namely, a western Enlightenment view. While a robust description of western Enlightenment thinking exceeds the scope and purpose of this paper, an abundance of scholarship on this topic identifies the following intellectual commitments and social dispositions as being central to this worldview (Bristow, 2010; Munck, 2000; Outram, 2019; Reill & Wilson, 2004):

- A belief that the rights, responsibilities, and freedoms of the individual are the primary unit of social and political concern
- A belief in the primacy of universal human reason and truth (that the truth is potentially accessible to all, and at the same time identical for all)
- A belief in scientific progress and tendency toward skepticism concerning “irrational” ways of knowing such as religion, spirituality, and art
- A cultural belief that land can be owned, and the tendency to prioritize the protection of private property above and beyond claims to the commons
- A tendency toward tolerant pluralism (especially as related to divergent religious practices within Christianity)

While it is true that individuals and communities outside the West (or indigenous communities that are located geographically within the West) may hold some of these intellectual commitments and social dispositions, not all do. There is ample evidence within the world-historical record to suggest that not all societies are primarily organized around the rights and responsibilities of the individual, or the belief that land is reducible to a commodity that can be bought, sold, and owned, or that ideas and artistic production are the “property” of the individual who first expressed them (Kly, 1989; Scott, 1992; Shohat & Stam, 2014).

The preponderance of learning objectives associated with Standard Seven (eleven out of twelve) speak directly to a western Enlightenment social and political preoccupation with property and privacy rights--and by extension, copyright, licensing, citation and attribution. For example, we find: The visually literate student “recognizes one’s own intellectual property rights as an image creator” and “states rights and attribution information when disseminating personally created images” (Hattwig et al., 2011, n. pag.). While we appreciate the need to continually educate the community about intellectual property, the ethics of cultural appropriation, and copyright law, as community-engaged artists, we believe it is equally important to balance this western Enlightenment ethical framework with other viable, alternative models for assessing mastery of learning objectives. In the West, for instance, artist collectives, guilds, found art, outsider art movements, and collage communities provide alternative models of social organization and production that do not prioritize the individual, property rights, privacy, or the legal instruments of their guarantee (Borwick, 2012; Federici & Caffentzia, 2014; Finkelppearl, 2013). With few exceptions, the performance and learning indicators attached to Standard Seven seem to address learners as consumers and would-be critics of images rather than learners as image-makers, collaborators, or artists. Of the twelve learning outcomes associated with Standard Seven, only three speak directly to the process of creating images, either by individuals or by communities; the remaining outcomes concern the proper legal attribution and dissemination of images and ideas. While these learning outcomes do not necessarily exclude collaborative, community-engaged projects, the heavy emphasis on copyright and attribution does not invite

it. While Standard Six, “The visually literate student designs and creates meaningful images and materials,” does address the learner as an image-maker or artist, the implied model of the creator/artist appears to be entrenched in a Romantic, Eurocentric concept of the artist. In this conception, the artist is an individual who creates *for* a community and not *with* a community (Borwick, 2012; Gorodeisky, 2016; SantAnna, 2017; Tayirova-Yakovleva, 2014). Standard Six likewise provides little guidance for fostering community collaborations or community-engaged arts projects where any one particular individual’s contribution to a project may be more complex and murky and is not of central importance to the outcome.

Finally, we consulted the 2011 ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards, in particular, Standard One, “The visually literate student determines the nature and extent of the visual materials needed” and the correlated performance indicator, “The visually literate student defines and articulates the need for an image” (Hattwig et al., 2011, n. pag.).

We found that this Standard, while initially appearing broad enough to meet our needs, actually fell short. As it is currently framed, the Standard limits the materials to a solely image-based work/project. It does not address the critical work to be done as outlined elsewhere in the Implementation and Use of Standards by including language about multimodal presentations that appeal to other senses and other materials (Serafini, 2017).

Shifting Paradigms in Visual Literacy and the Proposed ACRL Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education

As Thompson and Beene (2020) observed, since 2011, there has been a significant “emerging shift in the paradigm of visual literacy” (abstract). A 2019-21 empirical study of “stakeholders in a range of roles and disciplines” indicated that scholars and practitioners of visual literacy had become increasingly aware of the vital function that visual literacy could play in pursuing “social justice through visual practice” (ACRL-VLTF, 2021). As such, the newest, third draft of the proposed framework suggests that “the pursuit of social justice must be recognized as integral to all aspects of visual practice” (ACRL-VT, 2022).

In recognition of this “paradigmatic shift,” in 2018, the ACRL Image Resources Interest Group (IRIG) convened a Visual Literacy Task Force (VLTF) charged with “re-envisioning” the 2011 Visual Literacy Competency Standards. The result of their work is the proposed new companion document, “The Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education,” that better reflects the scope of concern and practice within the Visual Literacy community today. The proposed framework not only explicitly addresses the role that visual literacy can play in promoting social justice, an element that was noticeably absent in the earlier ACLR Visual Literacy Competency Standards, but the very approach--creating a new framework, rather than simply revising “Standards” speaks to some of the concerns we addressed above. By moving away from a list of competency “Standards” and to a framework that describes “knowledge practices” and “dispositions” that are conducive to developing skills in visual literacy, the proposed companion document avoids some of the pitfalls of importing the western, Eurocentric biases inherent in the Visual Literacy Competency Standards. The proposed framework supports the ways that visual literacy “empowers learners to (re)assess images and media with an eye toward decolonization, diversity, representation, and inclusion” (ACRL-VLTF, 2021).

While we were unaware of the VLTF’s proposed framework when we launched *The Holding Project*, we find that several knowledge practices and dispositions support our community-engaged arts focus and will be valuable points of reference as we move into phase two of the project. The proposed framework encourages practitioners to:

- identify as both consumers and creators of visuals, acknowledging how positionality, bias, experience, and expertise inform the interpretation and communication of visuals;
- identify as contributors to a more socially-just world by intentionally and ethically including a diversity of voices in their visual media projects;
- prioritize ethical considerations for the cultural and intellectual property when creating, sharing, or using visuals;
- reflect on the dual role that visuals may play in either fostering or subverting harmful, restrictive, social, or cultural norms
- value the ways that different ways of knowing and being, including cultural, traditional, and

Indigenous knowledge, may be represented in visuals

As stated above, we find the proposed framework goes a long way to addressing some of the concerns we identified above. Not only does the framework explicitly address the critical role that visual literacy can play in “pursuing social justice through visual practice,” the framework implicitly makes room for collaborative visual practices, such as *The Holding Project*, by “valuing different ways of knowing and being” (ACRL-VLTF, 2021). As the Romantic notion of the individual artist (or author) has had such a stronghold on the Western imagination both inside and outside the academy, we would encourage more specific language to acknowledge the legitimacy and power of collaborative work as one of the dispositions or knowledge practices within the new framework.

Conclusion

Community-engaged arts and visual literacy are natural partners. Both practices care about images’ vital role in shaping culture(s). The ACRL Visual Literacy Standards attempted to provide a shared set of universal standards. The problem is that the very attempt to standardize and regulate competency created an implicit bias for an ethical system that favors a Western Eurocentric Enlightenment model that privileges individual expression/creation and property rights over collective practice and shared commons, which may sometimes be in tension with the mission and spirit of community-engaged practices (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014; Matarasso, 2019).


As a highly decentralized field of practice (by design) and emergent field, community-engaged arts has yet to regularize and regulate practice by setting competency standards. This omission may be strategic, as the attempt to codify standards is subject to the same problems that we see at play in the 2011 ACRL Competency Standards. On the other hand, as community-engaged arts practice gains traction and moves into institutions like museums and higher education, it may become more critical to have a set of standards or best practices to protect vulnerable communities from predatory, careerist bad actors. We urge consideration of a broad range of image creation and interpretation methodologies, including community-engaged art, to refine the new “Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education ” so it can be nimble enough to be relevant to practices today and in the future.

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