Applying Visual Literacy to Pedagogy in Secondary Curriculum Design

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Abstract. This chapter describes a preliminary action research study builds upon the theory base of communication, social semiotics, and pedagogy to explore how secondary pre-service teachers apply visual literacy (VL) integration into their own curricular design. Using the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (2011), Fredette (1994) classroom integration principles, and the Avgerinou (2001/2007) Visual Literacy Index, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: 1) How do secondary teachers justify and incorporate visuals into their pedagogy to demonstrate their own level of VL ability? 2) How do secondary teachers promote VL in their students' work through their own use of visuals in their pedagogy and assessments? The initial results show that purposeful integration of the theory base, and time practicing VL abilities, influences the application of the standards and VL abilities in curricular design and may increase the VL ability to create meaning. The results also show a deficit in the application of the ACRL Standard 4 (evaluating images and their sources).

Keywords: visual literacy, pedagogy, curriculum design, assessment

My early training in visual literacy (VL) — that is, "a group of largely acquired abilities, …. to understand (read), and to use (write) images, as well as to think and learn in terms of images" (Hortin, 1994, p. 25) — began with my upbringing. I was born into a land surveying/civil engineering business that was run by my father. As I became tall enough to see the level bubble on the rod, he began teaching me how to work in the field but there was also work indoors involving drafting. My father trained me how to read survey plats and how to hand draft them. I remember distinctly the twirling motion that I had to apply to my pencil to produce an even line on the vellum, a prepared animal skin as writing material. My favorite book was on architectural renderings. As I grew older, my interest in the visual broadened to the theatrical. I was at home on the stage in junior high and high school, so when the time came to make a decision for a college major, I was torn between my two visual interests: architecture and theatre. As I later discovered, my drafting and architectural design ability became very useful as a theatre major when I took stage design. In college, I met and married a photography major, and many years after his death, I met and married an artist. Not until after I became an English/drama teacher did I even know what VL was, but it is obvious to me now that it had always been a part of my life, and I have come to appreciate the importance of this field of study through my own work as an educator.

Context

For the past five years, I have been conducting ongoing action research in VL using my Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) students as participants in my summer VL course. This work began as

a part of my dissertation in 2013, and was the result of my personal involvement in VL as a teacher and graduate student. An assignment that I gave to my students in a college-level writing class required them to select a photograph by Dorothea Lange and to write a visual analysis of the photo. The expectation was that they would address visual composition as well as the intent of the photographer. They were given an article entitled "How to Read a Photograph" (author unknown) which quickly ran through concepts such as subject, size, angle, frame, etc., but were given very little (if any) other instruction in VL. The results were superficial analyses from students who did not feel comfortable in their abilities. This was not just *my* students, this was the majority of students being taught by my colleagues from other schools as well. As a doctoral student, I took an English class that required a similar type of analysis, although we were given the opportunity to choose our own Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph, rather than being limited to one photographer. We were provided with some readings (student exemplars and information regarding analyzing an image), but no discussion or practice with the concepts of visual com-position. I confess that I did not do well. I could fake my way through, but I had never studied visual composition, and I now knew how my own students must have felt when they did their visual analysis writing.

As a trained educator, I know that I was not following best practices by expecting my students to complete a visual analysis with little to no training. Good pedagogy requires thoughtful design, and it takes into consideration instruction as well as assessment. This is why I have kept a visual rhetorical analysis as a part of my VL curriculum (requiring my students to use visual composition as well as personal response and historic context), but I have also prepared my students, through curricular choices and instruction, in order to have better results in their per-formance on assessments. My curriculum includes the work of Dondis (1973), Braden (1994), Fredette (1994), Seels (1994), Silverblatt (2008), Avgerinou (2007), and others.

In my previous work, I discovered low-performing areas in VL abilities (as defined by Avgerinou's VL Index), and during my first VL course, I drew some conclusions through obser-vation. In particular, I identified three areas: 1) concrete concepts (knowledge of design principles and their use), 2) defined concepts (knowledge and understanding of the meaning of signs and symbols), and 3) higher-order rules (verbo-visual relationships) (Avgerinou, 2001; Farrell, 2015). Avgerinou and Knight (2004) also identified the VL abilities that they deemed as critical. The five VL abilities I find relevant are

1) Visual reasoning — "coherent and logical thinking that is carried out primarily by means of images"

2) Constructing meaning — "the ability to construct meaning for a given visual message on the evidence of any given visual"

3) Visual reconstruction — "the ability to reconstruct a partially occluded visual message in its original form"

4) Visualization — "the process by which a visual image is formed"

5) Critical viewing — "applying critical thinking skills to visuals")

These VL abilities are represented in the three areas of challenge that I discovered. My goal is to incorporate information and practice in these three areas to increase my own students' understandings and VL abilities. However, as educators, there has to be even more reason for focusing on VL in our curriculum, which is how my theoretical approach developed.

Theory Base and Curricular Choices

The three areas of theoretical approach include communication theory (Austin, 1955; Barthes,1968; Braden, 1994; Gould, 1995; Hesford & Brueggemann, 2007; Langer, 1957; Moriarty, 1994; Silverblatt, 2008; Stephens, 1998; States, 1992), social semio-tics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), and visual pedagogy (Callow, 2008; Considine, Horton & Moorman, 2009; Dondis, 1973; Fredette, 1994; Postman, 1985; Robertson, 2007). Communication theory is firmly entrenched in the rhetorical triangle of the speaker (artist), listener (viewer), and message (image), and drawing particular attention to the idea that it is important to focus on the perception of the viewer and the multiple perspectives that viewers can offer to the understanding of an image. Social semiotics is important to include within this triangle, as it draws attention to the audience and the choices the artist must make when considering the audience. Finally, visual pedagogy must be at the forefront for MAT students because they need to have a firm foundation on why it is important to include VL in their own teaching as well as implementing practical ways to integrate VL into their curriculum.

The topics for my course include the following:

- Defining VL
- The Skills of Visual Literacy—VL Index
- Rationale for VL
- Common Core and VL
- Opposition to VL
- Communication and Rhetoric in VL
- The Language of VL
- VL and Movement
- Consumerism/Power Differential in VL
- VL Composition
- Perception and VL

Students need to understand the rationale for VL in practice. Students could reflect on the visuals used and identified as important to their own content areas. Also, students could pay careful attention to the teaching standards (i.e., Next Generation Science Standards [NGSS], National Core Arts Standards [NCAS], Standards for Health and Physical Education [SHAPE], Common Core State Standards [CCSS], National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], Career and Technical Education [CTE] Skill Sets among others) being used. Further, students are introduced to the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (2011) as well as the Inter-state Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) Standards (2011) as a basis for why they need to understand VL principles and to be visually literate.

Activities and Assessments

Figure 1 demonstrates the alignment of course assessments/activities with the theory categories, the ACRL Standards, and areas from Avgerinou VL Index. There seems to be a greater emphasis on communication theory in viewing the graphic. However, visual pedagogy (teaching that focuses on the use of visuals as a best practice) seemed to be more emphasized in the final project.

ACRL Outcomes	Theory Base	VL Index	Assessment
1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7	Visual Pedagogy	Visual Reasoning Visualization	Basic Elements Infographic
3, 4, 6	Social Semiotics	Visual Reasoning Constructing Meaning Visualization Critical Viewing	Pictionary
2, 3, 4, 7	Communication Theory	Constructing Meaning Critical Viewing	VRA
3	Communication Theory	Defined Concepts	Signs/Symbols Practice
1, 2, 3, 4, 7	Communication Theory	Constructing Meaning Critical Viewing	Ad analysis
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7	Communication Theory Visual Pedagogy	Visual Reasoning Constructing Meaning Visualization Critical Viewing	Final project

Figure 1. Alignment grid showing activities/assessments aligned with applicable ACRL Standards, theory base, and VL Index abilities. VRA=Visual Rhetorical Analysis.

In the next section, the narrative describes a classroom activity and one assessment that are represented in Figure 1.

Social Semiotics

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) offered an image of a car drawn by a three-year-old. As can be imagined, a group of irregular shapes on a page does not clearly represent a car. This is a good example to use when teaching about communication theory as well as social semiotics because it clearly demonstrates that something must align between the artist and the viewer in order for appropriate understanding to happen. In the classroom, the image was shown to the MAT students and they were asked about it. They were given no other information. This situation emphasized the verbo-visual relationship defined by Braden (1994). If the age of the artist was provided to the students, then they might narrow down their ideas of what the drawing might mean. When given the name of the drawing or the topic (the car), the students could then begin to make other connections (number of objects, shape, proximity, etc.) to see the metaphor for a car in the image. Without the context and the topic, they were at a loss.

Prior to showing the students this image, they needed time to practice social semiotics — the central concept of which involves the artist selecting specific images that would elicit a predictable response from the viewer. It makes sense to teach this concept through a variation of game called Pictionary. The teacher grouped the students into teams of four or so, and then provided drawing paper. The pre-determined category "titles" was told to them with several song, TV show, or film titles having already been selected, such as "Jail Break," "The Sound of Music,"

and "Rocky Mountain High." Given a timeline, students drew and guessed what the drawing meant. A sense of competition kept them motivated. The teacher collected the drawings after the game and displayed them using a document camera. Quickly, the students saw that they have many similar features to their drawings (see Figure 2).
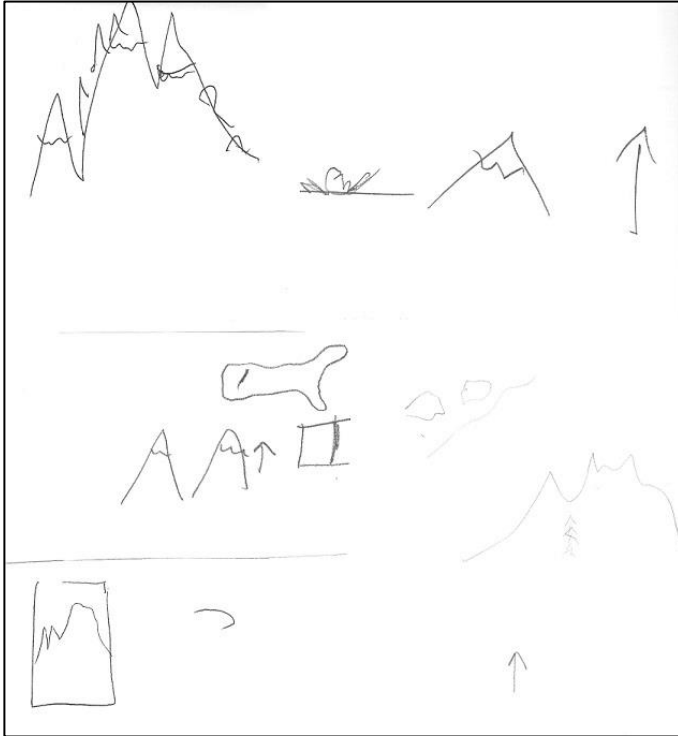
In this example, it is clear that an inverted vee (with jagged lines depicting snow at the top) is a standard symbol used for the word, "mountain." This game led naturally into a discussion of how we select what we believe would be appropriate symbols/signs to get our team mates to guess the correct answer. This experience primes the students for the car drawing and a discussion of symbols and signs as metaphors.

Figure 2. Student drawings for "Rocky Mountain High."

Final Project

The final project for this course assessed how well MAT students were able to make appropriate choices for using visuals to teach as well as using them to assess their students' understanding of the content. Prior to assigning this project, the teacher informed the students on how visuals could be used in the classroom based on the 6W approach outlined by Fredette (1994) which includes

WHAT TO USE — characteristics of visuals, types of visual media;

WHEN TO USE — selection based on teaching/learning objectives;

WHY TO USE — purposes for selecting visuals;

WAYS TO USE — teaching strategies, tasks;

WHO WILL USE — developmental and individual difference in students;

WHERE TO USE — environmental considerations in selection.

The teacher also provided instructions on ways that students could incorporate visuals into their teaching, such as the following:

- Openers — attention getters
- Establishing the knowledge base for a topic (direct instruction)
- Inquiry based learning
- Transitions
- Feedback
- Assessment (Fredette, 1994)

In brief, the directions for this project included the following instructions:

Your final project will consist of creating a learning unit plan that integrates visual literacy into the curriculum. Specifically, you will be assessing the VL abilities of your students by selecting specific VL concepts to assess rather than overall VL ability. You will select a grade level and content that lends itself to VL integration, so that you are teaching both content and VL. Plan on developing a 1-3 week unit — determined by the content and the grade level you select. (Farrell, 2016)

Specifically, they were to create an instructional visual that they would use to teach a concept and one exemplar of the product they expected their students to create somewhere within the unit.

Research Question

The research question being pursued for this portion of the action research is, How do secondary teachers promote VL in their students' work through their own use of visuals in their pedagogy and assessments? The answer to the question could come from the students' demonstration of their ability to analyze the visuals used in instruction, engagement in various activities, and the assessment completed.

Preliminary Assessment Results

As this research is ongoing, the results provided are initial in nature and have not been analyzed in-depth; however, the information provided here does provide the solid basis for answering the research question. Initially, the researcher collected the frequencies of the use of the seven ACRL Standards. For the teacher's instructional visuals, the researcher used Fredette (1994) defined categories such as openers, direct instruction, inquiry based learning, and transitions to track how often MAT students used these in their activities. For student exemplars, the researcher considered and incorporated both the ACRL Standards as well as Avgerinou's VL Index abilities (visual reasoning, constructing meaning, visual reconstruction, visualization, and critical viewing). The data collection (A and B) involved two consecutive cohort years to provide a greater number of participants as well as a way to compare the two cohorts. The A cohort had 19 participants while the B cohort had 29.

Raw Scores of Frequencies

Two separate data tables displayed the frequencies of both the teacher instructional visuals as well as the student exemplar assessments. Tables 1 and 2 show the frequencies for the A cohort

and Tables 3 and 4 show the frequencies for the B cohort. The frequencies of Tables 1 and 3 do not limit the number of ACRL Standards demonstrated, but the Fredette (1994) categories only allow for one selection because the teacher is using the visual for only one purpose. Likewise, Tables 2 and 4 do not limit the number of ACRL Standards demonstrated nor do they limit the VL Index categories to just one per exemplar.

Table 1. Summer A Teacher Instructional Visuals

# of Students	ACRL 1	ACRL 2	ACRL 3	ACRL 4	ACRL 5	ACRL 6	Fr O	Fr DI	FR Inq	FR Tra
18/19	17	16	1[a]	1[a]	15	14	2	15	1[b]	0

Note: Frequencies of occurrences for each ACRL Standard and Fredette criterion.
Fr O = Opener; Fr DI = Direct Instruction; Fr Inq = Inquiry; Fr Tra = Transition.
[a]Outlier was math student who had to find an example of a hyperbole.
[b]Outlier was PE student who used visual to lead inquiry.

Table 2. Summer A Student Exemplar Visuals

# of Students	ACRL 1	ACRL 2	ACRL 3	ACRL 4	ACRL 5	ACRL 6	V Rea	CM	V Rec	V	CV
19/19	11	10	11	3	14	16	19	9	0	17	10

Note: Frequencies of occurrences for each ACRL Standard and VL Index criterion. V Rea = Visual Reasoning; CM = Constructing Meaning; V Rec = Visual Reconstruction; V = Visualization; CV = Critical Viewing.

Table 3. Summer B Teacher Instructional Visuals

# of Students	ACRL 1	ACRL 2	ACRL 3	ACRL 4	ACRL 5	ACRL 6	Fr O	Fr DI	FR Inq	FR Tra
29/29	29	28	0	0	26	25	2	27	0	0

Note: Frequencies of occurrences for each ACRL Standard and Fredette criterion. Fr O = Opener; Fr DI = Direct Instruction; Fr Inq = Inquiry; Fr Tra = Transition.

Table 4. Summer B Student Exemplar Visuals

# of Students	ACRL 1	ACRL 2	ACRL 3	ACRL 4	ACRL 5	ACRL 6	V Rea	CM	V Rec	V	CV
29/29	14	13	17	7	22	23	29	19	0	28	16

Note: Frequencies of occurrences for each ACRL Standard and VL Index criterion. V Rea = Visual Reasoning; CM = Constructing Meaning; V Rec = Visual Reconstruction; V = Visualization; CV = Critical Viewing.

Student Examples

Two MAT students' pieces were considered with their consent for a clear understanding of the different types of visuals that were submitted, These visuals were categorized as either a teacher instructional visual or a student exemplar visual. The selection of these visuals demonstrated how the MAT students engage their students with VL. Figure 3 shows a student exemplar of how visuals can create metaphors for different cellular structures in a unit for an 8th grade Life Science class. This exemplar resulted from a formative exercise. The 8th grade students created an overall metaphor representing various organelles and their relationship as their final project.

Figure 4 is an example of an instructional visual. The student took an existing poster design and reworked it by translating the texts into Spanish. High school students used this tool to create a visual analysis written completely in Spanish. Also, students chose an artist of Hispanic descent and provided information about the artist and his/her work. The students selected one piece of art from the artist to analyze using the terminology on the poster.
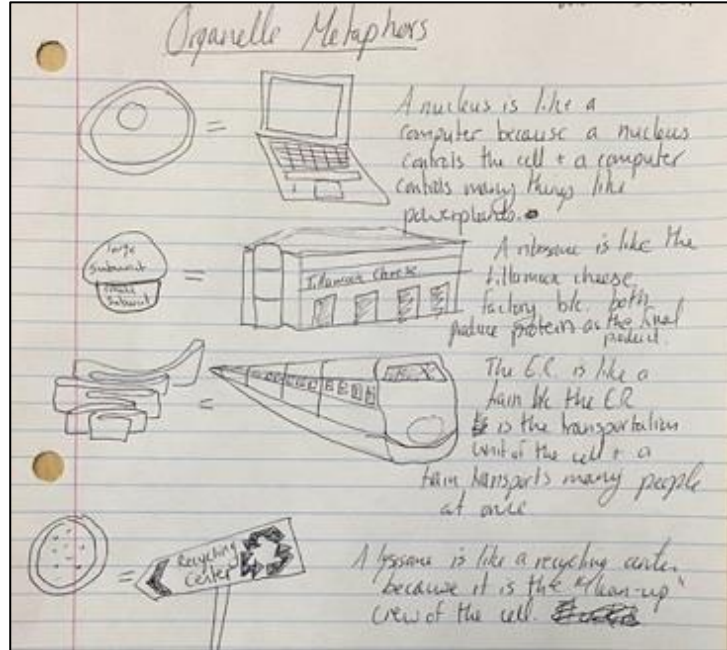

Figure 3. Student exemplar of formative assessment from life science unit on cell structures. Used by permission.

Figure 4. Teacher instructional visual to be used by students as they learned the elements of art and practiced using the terminology. Used by permission.

Comparison of Assignment Data between Two Cohorts

Secondary MAT students who were enrolled in the program made up the cohorts for this study. These students varied in age from 21 to early 50s and held endorsements in varied secondary subjects such as physical education, health, music, language arts, math, science, Spanish, and social studies. The program incorporated the VL course during the last term and students signed consent forms for the researcher to use the data for this study.

When comparing the frequencies between the two cohorts, the most frequent ACRL Standards addressed for the instructional visuals were

1) "The visually literate student determines the nature and extent of the visual materials needed;"

2) "The visually literate student finds and accesses needed images and visual media effectively and efficiently;"

3) "The visually literate student uses images and visual media effectively;" and

4) "The visually literate student designs and creates meaningful images and visual media" (Hattwig, Burgess, Bussert, & Medaille, 2011).

The most frequent instructional visual created and used based on Fredette (1994) application was for direct instruction.

When comparing the student assessment exemplars, the most frequent student requirements were for ACRL Standards 5 and 6. There were similar percentages for ACRL 3: The visually literate student interprets and analyzes the meanings of images and visual media (Hattwig et al., 2011) in student requirements (58% for Cohort A and 59% for Cohort B). The most frequent student requirements in the Avgerinou's (2007) VL Index were for Visual Reasoning and Visualization. There were also similar percentages in the Avgerinou's VL Index Ability of Critical Viewing in the student assessment requirements (53% for Cohort A and 55% for Cohort B). Also, the researcher noted an increase from 47% to 66% in the Avgerinou's VL Index of Creating Meaning from Cohort A to Cohort B. These results show that teachers are promoting their students' use of visuals as well as their creation of visuals.

What should be noted is the lack of attention given to ACRL Standard 4: The visually literate student evaluates images and their sources (Hattwig et al., 2011) when designing curricula. As with other standards, ACRL 4 does not always apply to the units that are designed, but it is important to identify that this standard is the least focused in this assessment (16% in Cohort A and 24% in Cohort B). In fact, what is intriguing about this finding is that the content area standards frequently require students to examine sources and the evaluation of images is critically important in certain subject areas to increase literacy in various media formats. This is similar to the area of concern presented by Considine, Horton, and Moorman (2009).

Limitations

Influences that likely have impacted these data sets are the differences in the instructional methods of the course as well as the course schedule. As in any of the researcher's classes, she works to continuously improve her practice. The researcher consciously increased the focus on the elements and principles of design in her pedagogy as well as the application of the elements and principles in analysis. She also increased an emphasis on the ACRL Standards and what they mean. The shift in the schedule for her course was contingent upon the other courses offered during the summer. As a result, Cohort A attended the class for 5 sessions at 6 hours per session. Cohort B attended 8 sessions at 3 or more hours per session. The total time remained at 30 hours. Due to the change in schedule, the researcher also rearranged the content which likely affected some of the formative assessment results which were not reported.

What's Learned? What's Next?

It is no mystery to those who work in the field of visual literacy that this is a complex field. When this field is added to another complex field like education, the variations grow exponentially. What has been learned concretely is that as one becomes more intentional in how one approaches VL instruction, students increase in their VL abilities and understandings. This study has only scratched the surface. The researcher needs to intentionally focus on measuring how well the MAT students performed in the ACRL indicators for their own instructional visuals. This will show the impact of the assessment on their own achievement in these standards. This means developing a valid and reliable rubric to measure each standard. This could be accomplished using multiple scorers for each student artifact and conducting a reliability study.

Also, the researcher would like to look at students' VL abilities in what they have produced to see if they are truly growing in those skills. This would take more effort than the ACRL Standards as the researcher would need to define how each skill is demonstrated within the context of each artifact in order to develop a rubric for measuring these abilities. This rubric must align with the abilities defined in Avgerinou's VL Index but by developing it, the rubric would likely serve many different student products.

The researcher would like to answer the larger research question --- How do second-dary teachers justify and incorporate visuals into their pedagogy to demonstrate their own level of VL ability? More specifically, in the following Avgerinou & Knight (2004) VL abilities: visual reasoning, constructing meaning, visual reconstruction, visualization, or critical viewing? In order to answer this question, the researcher will analyze both a written rationale that is required for the unit plan as well as their selected visuals and how they use them for instruction.

The researcher would also like to explore the following questions: Did they identify the correct ACRLs for their students? It is important to understand if the MATs are able to apply the standards to the assessments that they create.

This is a critical skill for a teacher.

1. Did their rationales provide strong reasoning for the inclusion of VL, and what patterns (if any) exist?

2. Teachers need to be able to justify their pedagogical choices. VL should be intentionally integrated into the curriculum.

3. Much work has been done to demonstrate the importance of visuals to the learning process; therefore, a solid rationale for including it is imperative.

4. Are they building the skills in the areas of challenge that were identified in the original study (Farrell, 2015)? These skills were deemed valuable, so they should be purposefully addressed.

Pursuing these questions using primarily qualitative analysis will help to better answer the larger research question and will expand the ability to answer this study's question as well. The researcher's goal is to develop a final project that can be replicated to apply to other teacher preparation programs.

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