(Re)Activating Educational Displays

Micaela Deogracias
Indiana University, USA
Christina Ulrich Jones
Indiana University, USA

Abstract

This chapter presents a case study examining the impact of visual literacy instruction on pre-service teachers. The study is contextualized within the Banned Books Week programming at an academic library. Considering the widespread presence of educational displays in schools, the authors focused on the social injustice of censorship to highlight the influence of school bulletin boards and classroom doors. The students engaged in two activities: first, a lecture and discussion about contemporary censorship in schools; second, explicit visual literacy instruction to prepare for creating their own educational display. Students implemented their designs on the classroom doors of the institution. The authors' analysis of the decorated doors suggests a positive correlation between the instruction and visual impact of student designs. The authors recommend further efforts to offer visual literacy instruction in teacher education programs and additional opportunities for hands-on experience to cultivate a culture of social justice in schools and classrooms through educational displays.

Keywords: Social justice, Educational displays, Teacher education, Visual literacy instruction

## (Re)Activating Educational Displays

Bulletin boards have been a part of the American landscape for a hundred years, with the first patent issued in 1923 to George W. Brooks (Brooks, 1923). The easily changeable nature of the bulletin board display, coupled with negligible costs and upkeep, made the bulletin board a staple in classrooms and schools. As teacher education programs evolved throughout the twentieth century alongside audio-visual technological advancements, more explicit instruction in visual literacy appeared in curriculums. Higher education course catalogs from the late sixties and early seventies showed that audio-visual courses were the primary means for visual communication instruction (Indiana University, 1969; New York University, 1968).

As educational technology became increasingly sophisticated and surpassed the creation of simple visuals, curricular revisions eventually relegated visual literacy instruction to art education courses. However, this relegation did not mean that students and educators stopped developing bulletin boards. While there were some resources about producing effective designs, such as Jay's (1976) *Involvement Bulletin Boards and Other Motivational Reading Activities* (see Figure 1), case studies such as this appeared to decline. This lack of instruction and guidance ultimately left students to look for outward sources of inspiration (ex. Pinterest and Teachers Pay Teachers), rather than relying on an internal skill set to develop effective designs.

Free online tools such as Pinterest were quite revealing regarding the state of bulletin boards--namely, that they were largely decorative and lacked informational and instructional qualities. Examples of these tools abound with school and classroom bulletin boards themed around vague statements such as "Amazing Things Happen Here" and "Taco 'Bout a Great School." Aside from the visual white noise offered by decorative displays, research shows that their proliferation negatively affects student outcomes (Fisher et al, 2014). The authors quickly identified the benefits of visual literacy instruction as part of a Banned Books Week workshop that culminated in students creating a door display (explained in the next section). The first goal was to help show students how they might effectively utilize a bulletin board rather than limiting it to mere decoration. A second epiphany occurred upon realizing that one could leverage the creation of visuals and visual literacy instruction for social justice.

Figure 1.
Example of a 1970s bulletin board designed for student engagement.
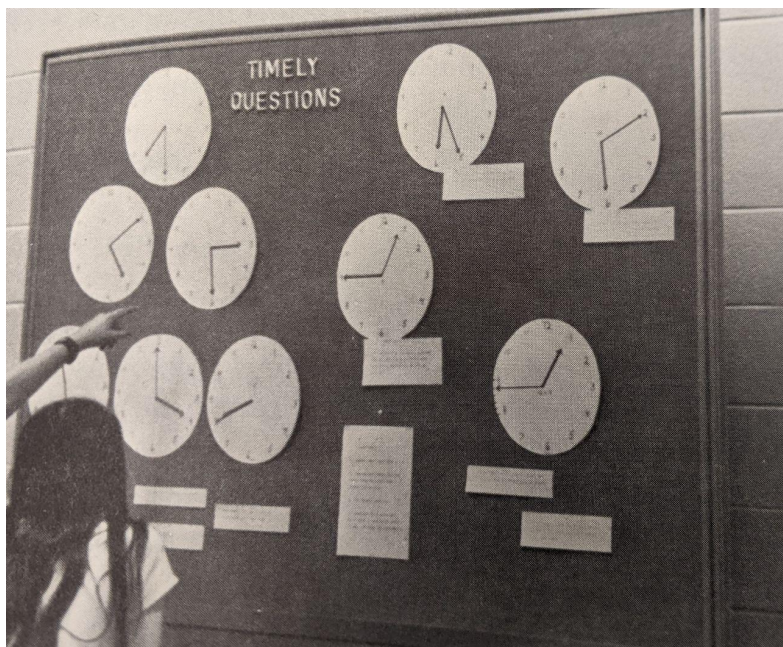
Note. From *Involvement Bulletin Boards and Other Motivational Reading Activities*, by Ellen Jay, 1976, p. 93. Reprinted with permission.

Free online tools such as Pinterest were quite revealing regarding the state of bulletin boards--namely, that they were largely decorative and lacked informational and instructional qualities. Examples of these tools abound with school and classroom bulletin boards themed around vague statements such as "Amazing Things Happen Here" and "Taco 'Bout a Great School." Aside from the visual white noise offered by decorative displays, research shows that their proliferation negatively affects student outcomes (Fisher et al, 2014). The authors quickly identified the benefits of visual literacy instruction as part of a Banned Books Week workshop that culminated in students creating a door display (explained in the next section). The first goal was to help show students how they might effectively utilize a bulletin board rather than limiting it to mere decoration. A second epiphany occurred upon realizing that one could leverage the creation of visuals and visual literacy instruction for social justice.

Educational theory and practices by scholars such as Paulo Freire intrinsically link to social justice (Adams, 2016). One of the most salient examples is in Freire's (1983) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* in which he describes the awakening of critical consciousness as crucial to understanding and assisting those in oppressed communities and situations (p. 18). This is the first alignment of social justice education and visual literacy. Visual literacy, and literacy more broadly, lends itself to global understanding which, in turn, creates space for more equitable communities. Kevin Tavin (2003) from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago promotes this type of engaged learning in visual cultural studies, in which students apply their analyses to deconstructing oppressive structures in the following statement: "the analysis and interpretation of popular culture should engage students in confronting specific and substantive historical, social, and/or economic issues" (p. 200). While visual cultural studies are not the same as education, understanding culture is a key component of pre-service educators' learning and literacy. Teachers must be mindful of their role as "cultural workers" (Garber, 2004, p. 7) and be provided with the space to develop empathy that incites them to become engaged in social issues (Winard, 2020). However, they can only be truly empowered if they have the proper toolset to become engaged cultural workers. This empowerment must occur through their education. The Association of College and Research Libraries states in their visual literacy standards that students will be able to design meaningful images and understand the ethical, legal,

social, and economic contexts of images (American Library Association, 2011). Upon reflection, the workshop did just this: it made students aware of their role as "cultural workers" in relation to their ability to fight censorship to protect cultural minorities in their future classes and empowered their ability to do so through instructing them on the state of censorship in the United States and instructing them about basic critical visual literacy.

Banned Books Week Door Decorating Workshop

In order to activate student awareness of the threat of censorship in school communities, one of the authors presented a lecture on the prevalence of challenges to children's books, data on the national sentiment regarding such challenges, and an outline of an individual's right, in the U.S., to freedom of expression. At the time of the presentation, book challenges had increased at an alarming rate according to the American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom (2023). At the same time, a poll of registered voters on their view of censorship was published, which found that over 70% of voters of both major political parties opposed efforts to censor books in schools and libraries (American Library Association, 2022). Through a show of hands, students were uniformly concerned about the climate of censorship in their future schools and classrooms. One of the authors then presented students with an outline of their rights, and the rights of their students, to the freedom of speech under the First Amendment and the further protection of that right under the Fourteenth Amendment. The presentation discussed almost one hundred years of legal precedent defending the right to read, as well as bureaucratic measure in school systems to formalize complaints against books in schools. At the close of the lecture, students were encouraged to create a culture of *fREADom* by celebrating their First Amendment rights and raising the consciousness of their school community.

Following the lecture on censorship in schools, one of the authors provided an overview of visual literacy principles. Through a series of slides the author demonstrated how visual elements may be organized or arranged to communicate information to the viewer effectively using student birthdays as an example of a common educational display in classrooms (See Figure 2). The first slide depicted a purely decorative bulletin board conveying each student's birthday. Subsequent slides demonstrated various ways to elevate the decorative design to an educational display. For example, student birthdays could be rendered in a pie chart indicating the number of birthdays in a given season of the year. After the lecture, students critiqued an example bulletin board based on principles addressed in the lecture. During the discussion, the authors observed students evaluating the example based on meaning rather than aesthetic preferences.

Figure 2
Slide Depicting Alternative Arrangements of Visual Elements from Banned Books Week Lecture

During the last portion of the workshop, students perused a set of curated children's picture books on an assortment of social justice themes. After selecting a book, students were assigned a classroom door and given materials to create a display based on important themes contained in the book. Students had several days to complete their design, culminating in a celebration of their work and the freedom to read.

Assessment

Developing an analysis method was arguably one of the most difficult pieces of this exploration. Due to this shift in this paper's goals between the workshop and the presentation, recognizing visual literacy in the students' work was no longer the end goal. Rather, it was a sign that students understood the basics of visual literacy well enough to implement it in their work, and through this we could expand on their understanding and place the new knowledge in the context of social justice and a sense of empowerment to engage in activism. If given the opportunity to run the workshop again, the method of collecting information will also adapt based on the shifted interest from students' understanding of visual literacy to helping them use visual literacy for social activism.

Since the visual literacy component initially was based on introducing the concept to students and reducing their stress about making a display from scratch, the assessment did not have an identifiable baseline from which we could compare students' understanding of visual literacy before and after the workshop. Based on students' responses to being asked "Who is familiar with the concept of visual literacy?" it is evident that there must have been some degree of expanded understanding and awareness of the concept, as only one student out of approximately 30 said they had heard of the term. However, awareness of visual literacy did not mean that all students were unfamiliar with concepts of design either from formal training or simply learning visual language from experiences of making posters for classes or observing informational materials in the spaces they occupied. It also is important to note that individuals' K12 education is highly varied, and this also influences their level of visual literacy (although, based on observations of state standards, it is unlikely that there is much visual literacy education outside of the art classroom).

As a result of this multi-entry point of interfacing with visual literacy for what was the first time for most students, the authors determined the assessment should reflect scaffolded instruction. A quantitative scale would not work, as all the doors were different designs centered on a base theme of "Books Unite Us" but did not use the same book. A qualitative scale based on the presence of visual literacy components, particularly those reviewed during the workshop, was better suited to the analysis of the doors. This qualitative analysis was based on a few different practices of assessment outlined by the European Network

for Visual Literacy (ENViL) in their Common Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy in conjunction with the Academic College and Research Libraries' Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education and their performance indicators (Groenendijk et al., 2018, p. 355-357). The doors were assessed based on the following areas of the standards of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL): to interpret and analyze the meanings of images and visual media, to evaluate images and their sources, and design and create meaningful images and visual media (American Library Association, 2011). These standards and the concepts of holistic and summative assessment as described by ENViL, were used to develop the following rubric (See Table 1). The rubric was then used to answer this question: Does the design indicate the presence of an understanding of visual literacy based on the questions?

Table 1
Evaluation Rubric for Banned Books Week 2022

ACRL Visual Literacy Standard	Questions for Assessment
Standard 3: The visually literate student interprets and analyzes the meanings of images and visual media.	- Did students identify images relevant to either amplifying the message of the book or the theme of the workshop: Books Unite Us? - If applicable, how did students use cultural themes/messages in the visual elements they chose to support their designs?
Standard 4: The visually literate student evaluates images and their sources.	- Did students use quality images? - Were students mindful of the amount of text/the message of text they used for their displays?
Standard 6: The visually literate student designs and creates meaningful images and visual media.	- Did students use visual elements creatively to create an aesthetically pleasing yet informative display? - Did students use any creative methods of arranging/making visual elements for their display to enhance the meaning of their door? (*Note: As the library was under renovation, students had an extremely limited selection of materials with which to create their designs. This lack of available materials and space to make the displays will influence the assessment of designs in relation to this standard.*)

Case Studies

Case 1: X460 All Stars

This door was one of the most exemplary in its creativity and showed distinct connections to the standards outlined in the rubric (See Figure 3). For their door, this group of students chose *We Are Water Protectors* by Carole Lindstrom (2010). In the story, the Ojibwe are fighting against the Dakota Access Pipeline's construction, describing it as a "black snake" that would harm the land and its people. The story calls for everyone "To stand for The Water, To Stand for the Land, To Stand as One against the Black Snake" (Lindstrom, 2010, p. 12). While the door is heavily based on the storyline of *We Are Water Protectors,* the students identified common themes between intellectual freedom and environmental wellness. Both risk of suffering because of the black snakes of censorship and oil pipeline construction, respectively.

Figure 3
Door 1. Based on We Are Water Protectors, by Carole Lindstrom (2020)

In order to make this clear to the audience, the students labeled the snake "book banner," so even if the audience had not read *We Are Water Protectors,* they could infer that the snake is a negative part of the landscape shown in the door design versus a coexisting piece. The new label on the black snake then transforms the quote from standing as one against the pipeline to standing as one against censorship, showing the students' awareness of how elements can be redefined by text and create a deeper meaning. This transformation also calls back to the unifying force of books and the need for everyone to speak up against censorship.

It is also worth mentioning the visual design elements of the door. As noted in the rubric, students had minimal access to design resources, as the library was under renovation during this time. Despite this, all three groups described in this paper created beautiful displays. One of the most notable features of this door is its use of texture to create visual weight and interest. The variety of textures keeps viewers engaged with the piece and emphasizes the black snake and the issue of book banning, as the bright blues are a stark contrast against the black and red of the snake and the "book banner label." The diagonal use of text to create movement is also worth noting, as it follows a downward motion that is repeated by the curvature of the snake and the flow of the water. This leads the audience's eyes from the text, which contextualizes the issue of environmentalism and pollution and helps viewers understand the dual significance of the snake when they observe it.

Case 2: Dean's Advisory Council

This door, unlike the previous display, overtly tackles the theme of "Books Unite Us! Censorship Divides Us!" by emphasizing the unifying power of books rather than the issue of censorship (See Figure 4). Book bans target minoritized groups without understanding the damage they cause to these groups. *Hair Love* shows how books celebrating cultural and racial differences empower young children, making it clear that censorship does more harm than good. Even if a viewer cannot relate to hair being a part of their cultural identity, they can identify with it being a part of self-expression, which relates to the theme of censorship and how it is harmful. Books are part of self-expression through what individuals choose to read and what identities are represented in banned books. Without representation, minoritized groups being targeted in these book bans feel ostracized, and perhaps fearful of what others in their community think of them when there are fewer visual reminders of solidarity.

Figure 4. *Door 2. Based on Hair Love by Matthew Cherry (2019).*

The minimal visual elements emphasize the text "I love that my hair lets me be me!" and help create the understanding that hair is an important part of expression and identity. The group's color choice for the words strengthens this connection by emphasizing "hair" and "me" in red. Using purple for the other words strengthens the hierarchy by using a heavier color so that the highlighted words do not disrupt the flow of reading. The placement of the elements also creates an excellent flow that creates a dialogue between the visuals and the text. The person at the bottom of the door looks up at the text to meet readers' eyes as they finish reading the sentence. The diagonal skew of the individual portraits adds visual interest while keeping the focus on the key parts of the elements (that is, the words and the person at the bottom of the door).

Case 3: Kelley Kids

Like the previous door, this design focused on unification versus censorship (See Figure 5). *Everyone…* by Christopher Silas Neal explores the various emotions one experiences throughout life (2016). The first three sentences from the top of the door to the middle are summaries of common feelings and feelings that the boy has in the book. The last two sentences are a direct quote from the book. To emphasize the theme of community, the group highlighted the word "everyone" in blue creating greater unity within the design. The cloud at the top is one of the illustrative elements in the book; however, the lightning bolt that emphasizes the boy getting mad was a choice made by the students. The cloud rains down on the boy and the bear hugging below. In the book, the boy and bear are sitting in a field of flowers. However, at a distance, the field could also be read as a puddle of water from the rain cloud that the boy and bear are floating upon.

Figure 5
Door 3. Based on Everyone… by Christopher Silas Neal (2016)

The decision to align the elements in such a way strengthens the design immensely by creating visual flow and a bookend to the design (the rain cloud and the puddle or field of flowers below). The diagonal flow of the letters adds to the ease of reading the design, as there is a clear direction for viewers to follow when taking in the elements. The addition of the lightning bolt also helps viewers start at the top of the design and work their way down, rather than only focusing on the middle parts of the door that are at eye level.

Overall, the case studies show that the visual literacy standards embedded in the presentation were met in the door designs, proving that the instruction was effective. In the future, the authors will conduct pre- and post-workshop surveys to further understand the efficacy of the instruction. Sample questions might include: Do you feel more empowered about making designs? Does this knowledge help you to feel more confident in participating in activism through making visuals? Do you feel like understanding visual literacy helps you to feel more confident in your learning?

Discussion

Throughout the creative process, the authors observed a high level of engagement by the participating students. Students chose books with care and took time to discuss with one another how to best connect the spirit of their chosen book to the overall theme of the event. During the design process, students planned and negotiated the placement of visual elements. The authors were encouraged by the students' enthusiasm to create engaging designs in service of the freedom to read. The effect of the decorated doors was palpable. The authors received numerous comments from students, faculty and staff telling them that the hallway of classrooms felt activated and provocative. The doors remained decorated for two weeks, culminating in a celebratory tour of the doors with their creators. Due to this high level of engagement, the school community pressed to make a Banned Books Week door decorating event and annual occurrence.

Each year, graduates from the authors' institution account for thirty percent of new teachers in the state. Given the high visibility of the decorated doors, the potential to raise awareness of the social injustice of censorship in schools throughout our state is considerable. Moreover, students will have had the opportunity to practice creating impactful educational displays before entering the classroom as professionals. The authors hope that elevating classroom displays from decorative to activist in nature will create school communities rooted in equity and justice.

Looking Forward

Overall, this project sparked interest in furthering visual literacy instruction for pre-service educators due to its social justice implications that align with teacher education programs of study at the authors' institution. As future teachers, students will face the issue of intellectual freedom and censorship. Awareness of social issues and how they can participate in social activism will help them foster a culture of equity and justice in their classrooms. This event activated students to speak up for intellectual freedom for themselves and their future students, but perhaps more importantly, it gave them the power to feel like they had the ability to speak up and become social activists.

The latter is why it is important that we continue instructional sessions that are gateways to students and educators becoming mindful, empowered, and engaged citizens. The goal of social justice education is "full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs… [and] includes a vision of society that is equitable, and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure" (Bell, 2016). Social justice is not just about making space for the affected to speak up; it is about taking action after listening to what must be done and how people are negatively impacted by oppressing legislature and ideologies. It is not easy to stand up, and there are many barriers that make it difficult to engage in activism. However, standing up becomes easier when there is a clear plan of how to do so. This plan can take shape through instructional sessions and workshops, such as the one described in this chapter.

As there is minimal space in pre-service educators' curriculum dedicated to learning how to make educational displays, and educators are positioned in a way that they engage in social justice, it follows that they would benefit from opportunities such as this workshop. As previously discussed, visual literacy is often relegated to art education classes; pre-service educators who are not studying art also have minimal opportunities to engage in artmaking. While libraries cannot offer sustained instruction as semester-length classes, targeted instruction yields heightened awareness of visual literacy and modest gains in skill.

The workshop also created an opportunity for students to become active participants in their learning and support the idea that in their future roles as educators; students have agency and are not simply "technicians" that provide information for students to regurgitate (Garber, 2004, p. 7). This sense of agency links to the importance of full, equal participation that is important in creating globally aware, lifelong learners (Bell, 2016, p. 3). Passive learning is not positioned to help students become critical thinkers, nor does it help students feel like they have the ability to contribute and make change. There is also the concern that "in [educators'] zeal to convince [their] students about the need for social change, [they] may silence [the students'] voices" (Garber, 2004, p. 13). In our workshop, students' voices were not silenced--they were empowered to share their unique perspectives on the issue of censorship through their creative displays that fostered discussion. These displays also supported visual literacy education, as it connects to Garber's concept of art as engaged citizenship. Thus, through visual literacy instruction in the context of social action, the authors endeavored to help students feel more comfortable exercising their creativity, as they were given a toolset and a form of parameters within which they could work.

With all the challenges and fears that permeate our polarized society, it is easy to become hopeless and feel like one person's voice cannot make a difference. However, if one educates students in a way that their voices matter, it potentially creates the space for students to feel more comfortable in their voice. Instead of feeling apathetic and hopeless, there is hope that their singular display, their singular voice, may positively influence their community. The displays these educators make in the future have the potential to create a more socially just world by creating instances in which students imagine these better futures and

can then strive to actualize them (Beyerbach & Ramalho, 2011). In this way, visual literacy education becomes more than fostering visually literate individuals; it empowers students to cultivate social awareness and be competent enough to make a change through visual pieces that resist oppression such as censorship. Academic libraries have the potential to help resist oppression, so it follows that they can become one of the central points of advocating for social justice education that is enhanced through visual literacy instruction. In the future, the authors hope to continue expanding this workshop so that more pre-service educators may feel empowered to make displays and engage in social justice and activism.

References

Adams, M. (2016). Pedagogical foundations for social justice education. In L. A. Bell & M. Adams (Eds.), *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (3rd ed., p. 27–54). New York: Routledge.

American Library Association. (2011, October 27). *ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*. http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/visualliteracy

American Library Association. (2022, March 21). *Voters oppose book bans in libraries.* http://www.ala.org/advocacy/voters-oppose-book-bans-libraries

American Library Association. (2023, April 20). *Censorship by the numbers*. http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/by-the-numbers

Bell, L. A. (2016). Theoretical foundations for social justice education. In L. A. Bell & M. Adams (Eds.), *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (3rd ed., p. 3–26). New York: Routledge.

Beyerbach, B., & Ramalho, T. (2011). Chapter fifteen: Activist art in social justice pedagogy. *Counterpoints*, *403*, 202–217. https://www.jstor.org/stable/42981606

Brooks, G.W. (1923). Bulletin board and the like, US1494583A, United States Patent and Trademarks Office. https://patents.google.com/patent/US1494583A/en

Cherry, M. A., & Harrison, V. (2019). *Hair Love*. New York: Kokila.

Fisher, A. V., Godwin, K. E., & Seltman, H. (2014). Visual environment, attention allocation, and learning in young children: When too much of a good thing may be bad. *Psychological Science*, *25*(7), 1362- 1370. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797614533801

Freire, P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Garber, E. (2004). Social justice and art education. *Visual Arts Research, 30*(2), 4–22. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20715349

Groenendijk, T., Haanstra, F., & Kárpáti, A. (2018). A new tool for developmental assessment based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy – an international usability study. *International Journal of Education through Art*, *14*(3), 353–378. https://doi.org/10.1386/eta.14.3.353_1

Indiana University. (1969). *Indiana University School of Education Graduate Course Descriptions: 1969-1970*. Indiana University. Retrieved from *College Source:* https://cso.collegesource.com/viewer/CSO_coursecatalog.aspx?iid=12118&pguid={16DB35C8-F86F-450F-98F5-C79235B671F0}.

Jay, M. E. (1976). *Involvement bulletin boards and other motivational reading activities.* Syracuse, N.Y.: Gaylord Bros.

Lindstrom, C., & Goade, M. (2020). *We Are Water Protectors*. New York: Roaring Brook Press.

Neal, C. S. (2016). *Everyone...* Somerville, Massachusetts: Candlewick Press.

New York University. (1968). *New York University School of Education Bulletin*. New York University. Retrieved from *College Source:* https://cso.collegesource.com/viewer/CSO_coursecatalog.aspx?iid=12528&pguid={33AED83F-FA84-477F-9172-37CD0F674541}

Tavin, K. M. (2003). Wrestling with angels, searching for ghosts: Toward a critical pedagogy of visual culture. *Studies in Art Education*, *44*(3), 197–213. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1321009

Winard, A., Haas, L. E., & Aboulkacem, S. (2020). Preservice teachers' perspective of Photovoice and visual literacy experiences. In D. M. Baylen (Ed.), *Crossing boundaries and disciplines: The Book of Selected readings 2019* (p. 44–60). International Visual Literacy Association.