

Opening Eyes, Opening Minds: Standards for Visual Literacy

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From national conferences (Schneiderman, 2012) to brown bags (Konkiel, 2012), sessions about data visualizations are extremely popular. The Indiana University Bloomington Libraries (IUB Libraries) are reimagining space and services to support, among other things, digitization and visualization technologies, media analysis tools, and film research (IUB Libraries, 2012). What is the common feature of all of these activities? They involve visual media.

One certainly doesn't have to be on a college campus to be exposed to visual media. It's an election year. For months, friends and family have been flooding our inboxes and social media feeds with visual memes, mashups, and political cartoons. Companies inundate our existence with commercial media telling us which personal products or car insurance to buy. Visual media is pervasive and "[t]he importance of images and visual media in contemporary culture is changing what it means to be literate in the 21st century" (Visual Literacy Standards Task Force [VLSTF], 2011).

Thus begins the document approved by the ACRL Board of Directors in late 2011, *ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*. The *Standards* defines visual literacy as:

...a set of abilities that enables an individual to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, use, and create images and visual media. Visual literacy skills equip a learner to understand and analyze the contextual, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, intellectual, and technical components involved in the production and use of visual materials. A visually literate individual is both a critical consumer of visual media and a competent contributor to a body of shared knowledge and culture. (VLSTF, 2011)

Following this general definition are brief discussions of visual literacy in relation to higher education and information literacy, suggestions for implementing the *Standards*, a list of key resources upon which the *Standards* is based, and a bibliography.

The *Standards* outlines seven standards or tasks that characterize a visually literate college graduate. In brief, those standards are:

1. Define the need
2. Find and access
3. Interpret and analyze
4. Evaluate
5. Use
6. Create
7. Understand ethical and legal issues

The authors expand upon these seven standards, outlining twenty-four performance indicators and ninety learning outcomes.

The publication of the *Standards* is timely. The recently published *NMC Horizon Report* (Johnson, Adams, & Cummins, 2012) identifies visual literacy as the third greatest technology adoption challenge facing higher education:

Despite the widespread agreement on the importance of digital media literacy, training in the supporting skills and techniques is rare in teacher education and non-existent in the preparation of most university faculty... we are far from seeing digital media literacy as an expected norm for academic professionals, nor as a key part of degree programs. (6)

Institutions are already responding to the *Standards*. At the last meeting of the Image Resources Interest Group at ALA Annual, Nicole Brown, Multidisciplinary Instruction Librarian at New York University Libraries, and Stephanie Beene, Visual Resources Coordinator at Lewis & Clark College, Portland, presented programs on integrating the *Standards* into teaching and learning at their respective campuses. As “[d]igital media literacy continues its rise in importance as a key skill in every discipline and profession” (Johnson, et al., 2012), libraries must consider opportunities for teaching and assessing student information literacy for visual as well as for textual materials.

References

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