Exploring Visual Literacy

Secondary Teacher and Consultant Reflections on How Increasing Visual Literacy Impacts Adolescent Learning

Lois Keller & Karon Guttormson
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Research Coordinator
Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation
2317 Arlington Avenue
Saskatoon SK S7J 2H8
Telephone: 1-800-667-7762 or 306-373-1660

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Authors’ Statement

This teacher action research team revealed insights and experiences with visual literacy that both confirmed and celebrated the role it has in engaging learners in content areas in our high schools.

The following individuals participated in this project by sharing their thoughts in reflective logs, participating in regular collaborative learning sessions and finally in sharing their experiences in extensive interviews:

- Joanne Newman Boots, Walter Murray Collegiate
- Lori Cline Flath, Nutana Collegiate
- Belinda Daniels, Mount Royal Collegiate
- Candace Elliott-Jensen, Bedford Road Collegiate
- Bailey Fischl, Mount Royal Collegiate
- Jacqueline Helman, Bedford Road Collegiate
- Shona Iverson, Nutana Collegiate
- Cathi Johnston, Mount Royal Collegiate
- Leanne Kadyschuk, Bedford Road Collegiate
- Calene Muir, Nutana Collegiate

As educational consultants, we guided the action research journey into visual literacy and responded to the experiences and questions raised by each action research colleague. We were fellow travelers in a quest to understand how the increase of visual literacy instruction might impact both the teachers and students involved.

In many ways we felt peripheral, observing and sharing in conversations as teachers made sense of their experiences. Karon Guttormson, the Arts Education Consultant, brought her artistic eye and expertise from years in teaching visual arts classes. Lois Keller, the Literacy Consultant, brought her inquiry lens and experience in activating marginalized youth. Jacqueline Helman, in moving back into a teacher librarian role, brought observations grounded in practice while supporting, planning and leading learning sessions. The planning and preparation of this action research project was a recursive immersion into a world both visible and sometimes invisible.
Teaching visual literacy as a way to increase student engagement and improve student achievement remains largely untapped in high school content subject areas (Draper & Siebert, 2010; Siegel, 2012; Hirsch & Hansel, 2013). Prior to this inquiry, while supporting teacher learning and adolescent literacy in English language arts, we found a need for pedagogy that offered a holistic and multimodal understanding of literacy. Multimodality is the social practice of making meaning by combining multiple semiotic resources (Siegel, 2012). While the Saskatchewan renewed English language arts curricula (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2013) includes visual and digital literacies implicitly throughout curricular outcomes, our experiences as consultants and classroom teachers indicated that the skills needed for achieving these outcomes remained underdeveloped and often poorly scaffolded for both students and teachers. Teachers attending our learning sessions voiced concerns about teaching visual literacy skills in conjunction with an inquiry-based approach to learning. This action research study responds to the perceived need to increase visual literacy skills.

We were curious if increasing visual literacy instruction could open up additional modalities in selected content areas. Our interest in the potential of increasing visual literacy was further piqued while conducting two particular professional development sessions for secondary educators in the fall of 2013 and the spring of 2014. It was evident from teacher feedback that an expanded view of literacy was needed to ignite an inquiring mode of thinking about various forms of text. Most apparent in practices shared by teachers was a continuation in predominantly traditional reading and writing learning opportunities and the completion of assignments. Our observations were supported in the research findings of Kucan, Lapp, Flood and Fisher (2008) and Draper and Siebert (2010). Although information is increasingly visual and digitally accessed, there continues to be a reliance on print text and a gap between those traditional reading and writing tasks and increasing visual and digital literacy tasks.
When we look at those core curricular objectives in terms of engaged citizenship, in terms of lifelong learning, a kid might think, well, I can write an essay and therefore, I can be successful throughout my academic journey. But I think when you give them a bin of markers and a white piece of paper, and you say, okay, let's represent our understanding in this way—I think that's a good thing because it's good to continue to develop and to be challenged in different kinds of ways. The result is that more kids feel empowered in their journey as a student, which means more of them are going to feel confident that they can be successful. And I think self-efficacy is huge in terms of making it through adolescence and successfully completing high school.

Testing is about temporary retention and regurgitation but it doesn't get into deeper levels of consciousness. I feel like connecting ideas with colour or with symbol, having a chance to talk about those—we've just got so many ways that are being valued.

I have always been a visual learner myself and I try to incorporate it into the classroom as much as possible. I took a look at how I was teaching in the past and the same course that I had taught in the last three years or so, and looked at areas that students struggled with in the past. I'm using images for prompts so that's kind of the first step that I took. When it came to the discussion piece around the images, almost all of them—and this is a fairly quiet class that we had started with, now it's not so much—but they all were engaged, and there were a few that were usually quite to themselves and definitely would never volunteer answers, they were quite heated in the discussion. They were definitely engaged and felt confident in their opinion.

Maybe I'm still getting there. At first it was like oh, I have icons and I put pictures on my assignments so I think I'm using visual literacy but I don't draw well. But now it's so much more than that, right? It's the process of learning through visuals and having students walk through and exploring on their own, and not just connecting a picture to text, but it's almost a replace of text and a scaffolding process to get to text if that is your end goal.

I'm constantly amazed by the artistic ability of a lot of my students because I consider myself a very visual person but I don't draw well. And when students find out that their choices are broadened, where they can express themselves through drawing or painting, for example, they are about coming to class and having a choice about how they're engaged. They are very proud of what they have created. And how much more excited they are about coming to class and having a choice about how they're engaged. So that's something very exciting, and very valid about visual literacy and instruction. I'd like to see it become mainstream. The reality is our students are changing, and how they view the world and the tools that they recognize that visual strategies are going to tap into those differences.
Many animated debates ensued between instructional consultants revealing that our collective interest was embedded within the intertextuality of traditional forms of text and the seemingly lesser understood visual forms. Initial work, documented in a LibGuide by Jacqueline Helman, Educational Technology Consultant at the time, provided a foundational resource for our work. With the support of the McDowell Foundation’s funding grant we set out to conduct action research on our professional development sessions of visual literacy skill scaffolding and the instructional practices of 10 secondary teachers. We collaborated outside of our traditional consultant role assignments to encompass literacy, technology and arts perspectives.

I have known for a number of years that visual literacy is a through for knowledge for students. It’s taken on kind of a life of its own where we initially looked at one strategy, and then those teachers have gone out and shared it with other teachers, and they’re coming back and telling me how it went, and sharing it, and making it their own, personalizing it.

I’m definitely more deliberate when I bring visuals to students. I ask more specific questions and I’m more deliberate with what I’m looking for a response. This has reaffirmed the importance of visual literacy for me, especially with students who struggle in more traditional speaking, reading, writing domains. They can look at it and be able to express their ideas.

Where I really saw the difference was some of the students who tend to struggle. They improved tremendously; engagement improved, as well as their skill set improved with it. Confidence, competence. I had one student last semester say just over a simple venn diagram, they were just organizing ideas, and he said, “Like this is the most fun we’ve had all year!”

I have a deeper understanding of all the different layers and levels of visual literacy.
In spite of the changing nature of text and communication, we found traditional notions of reading and writing continued to serve as the foundation for literacy and assessment in high school classrooms. Prior to this study, we found a narrow focus continued to limit learning opportunities for students who had histories of failure and struggles with traditional learning tasks. We wondered if this particularly narrow approach to literacy had been at the expense of multimodal pathways to improved literacy skills. Hobbs (2011) illustrated the paradox we witnessed:

When people think of the term literacy, what generally springs to mind is reading and writing, speaking and listening. These are indeed foundational elements of literacy. But because today people use so many types of expression and communication in daily life, the concept of literacy is beginning to be defined as the ability to share meaning through symbol systems to fully participate in society. (p.14)

Motivated by our experiences and initial research, we focused our inquiry on the question, “How does increasing visual literacy instruction impact teacher and student learning?”

I thought if I can get even more instruction on how I can be better, why would I not because I already have ESL students taking my classes so let’s see what this is all about. The visual literacy combined with the SIOP; it wasn’t going to be two separate things I was taking on. They were going to complement each other. Because you talk a lot in SIOP about activating prior knowledge, background knowledge, and making activities that are meaningful, and making content comprehensible. So the visual literacy fit into that component very well.

I knew there was a power to a visual, I just didn’t understand any of the elements of design. I didn’t understand the meaning behind colour, I didn’t understand the colour combinations and I didn’t understand the power that that has. So learning about those things just gives me more insight into art. I love art, I just know nothing about it. So I can see in a different light. But I think it also makes things more powerful. But for my students to learn about that, too, to me is very exciting.

I just feel like students are coming away with more than when I first started teaching when things were more sort of worksheet and let’s just sit at our desks and do this. So there’s a lot of assignments that I’ve tried. That is this is how I’m using it or is this what I’ve tried. That is the most valuable especially for teachers, to be able to say, ‘What are other people doing?’

When we worked together on that John A. MacDonald picture, I thought that was a lot of fun. The students had fantastic feedback. They loved the morning, so it went really well. They were incredibly engaged. They were incredibly engaged. They were incredibly engaged. They were incredibly engaged. They were incredibly engaged. They were incredibly engaged. They were incredibly engaged. They were incredibly engaged. They were incredibly engaged. They were incredibly engaged. They were incredibly engaged.
I had my own understanding of visual literacy from an indigenous point of view. It came from the landscape, landmarks, and I was looking at the landscape, looking back and forth between the two. It was a place where everything shared ideas, where you get new perspectives. I see my classroom and my practice in a whole different light.

I've used graphic organizers a lot. I often try to incorporate visual elements. There's always the assumption that people are going to get what you get out of the image, but sometimes you have to lead them to that, and sometimes, you get what they get out of it.

We incorporated images and then gave students choice of the images that they wanted to use. We would start by doing a group analysis, or direct instruction and then let them choose. There's definitely an engagement piece there. It sparks curiosity. We tried to find intriguing images and it sparked an interest in the students.

We have so much information available to us, it's almost overload and I think it's great that we're able to help people deal with that. And to look at these sources and realize that they're valuable, whether it's a YouTube video, or an infographic or a meme, or just a citation on a product. We have to learn how to read visuals and anything that helps with that is good. You should treat an image like an onion, where you are layering it off.

I always look for opportunities to collaborate so it was a good opportunity to work with other staff. With visual literacy, you think about it consciously, you just activate something that's already there. I find that the students and the staff that I work with know a lot of things that they don't realize they know and you're really just tweaking it.

My philosophy has always been everyone deserves a chance to learn; everyone deserves to be taught in a way that's best for them.

Any time I've done a visual activity or something that involves images or video, kids are just more drawn into what's happening. I don't know what it is about words on a page that sometimes repels students, but if they can see something in action or if they see something that they make a connection with, they are automatically going to be more engaged and then more willing to participate with the text later.

When teachers are trying something new, they're a little bit scared if their kids are going to buy in or not. Coming and meeting with everyone involved in the project was really useful because it's a place where everyone shares ideas, where you get new perspectives. I see my classroom and my practice in a whole different light.
This research study occurred over a seven-month period and involved two instructional consultants working with 10 action research teachers in cross-curricular domains from four urban high schools. Teachers worked with students in grades 9 to 12.

Participants were invited to participate based on their interest in increasing visual literacy through action research, or due to their literacy support role in their high school. Teachers initially chose one specific content area class to increase visual literacy instruction. Over the course of the year, this grew to include most if not all assigned teaching areas during the action research project. Most teachers had multiple roles and ways of influencing change in traditional instructional practices in their schools. These roles included:

- Two teacher librarians.
- Two instructional coaches and/or English as an additional language support teachers.
- Two learning co-ordinators.
- Subject teaching assignments of English language arts, history, social studies, science, Native studies, practical and applied arts, and math.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

Qualitative data collected from monthly reflective logs, learning sessions and collaborative sessions offered extensive detailed description, artifacts and interview material so that the reader is able to understand and relate to the findings. The individual and collaborative work revealed in this study has significance and value for teachers in high school content areas as it illustrates how teachers adapted their pedagogy and the use of both print- and image-based texts. These findings may not be readily generalizable in the way that some large-scale, scientific experiments are thought to be. These findings do, however, provide rich and thick descriptions of learnings that are valuable for teachers, coaches, consultants, administrators and others and may, in the narrative tradition, be transferrable for others in similar situations. This qualitative case study was limited to a purposively selected group of content area secondary teachers and the classrooms of students they taught in grades 9 to 12. Participants were chosen from four high schools in our school system, so as to enable collaboration with a supporting consultant and an in-school support teacher.
Scanning the Research

Our research study was guided by a review of adolescent literacy literature and the work in particular from the field of visual literacy (Housen, 1979; Wilhelm, 2012; Yenawine, 2014). Initially we drew from the idea that thinking and learning needed to be made visible (Ritchhart, Church & Morrison, 2011). Along with that need, we centred our inquiry on the premise that adolescent literacy skills and engagement in learning is shaped both by a personal history of academic experiences and by the current societal norms and context (Gee & Hayes, 2011). Given adolescent participation in society is dependent on engagement in navigating increasingly visual forms of “text” and developing complex ways of navigating that text, we sought to address the underlying issues in navigating visual forms (Wilber, 2008).

For our professional learning sessions where we would model visual literacy skills, we sought a constructivist approach to decoding and encoding images. Leading arts education researcher, Elliot Eisner, provided many insights into multiple ways of knowing and representing knowledge illustrating how visual literacy is a necessity for all learners.

[I]t has become increasingly clear since the latter half of the 20th century that knowledge or understanding is not always reducible to language. Thus not only does knowledge come in different forms, the forms of its creation differ. The idea of ineffable knowledge is not an oxymoron. (Eisner, 2008, p. 5)

We wondered if increasing visual literacy opportunities would offer a pathway for successful learning when driven by inquiry. Medina (2008) illustrated through research on the neuroplasticity of the brain that we are constantly learning if we are responding to new sensory input. Multisensory learning therefore occurs not only when there is a kinesthetic dimension, it occurs when there is a visual inquiry that engages the viewer. Rourke and O’Connor (2012) in an extensive review of visual literacy instruction found visual elements led to better retention and deeper understanding. Of all the senses, vision was found to trump all and be the most powerful in supporting learning. This research suggested the possible gains visual literacy might offer and helped focus our work on the visual strengths adolescents might bring to their learning.

Our action research was initially premised on the ideal of making thinking and learning visible and the strategies from Project Zero (Ritchhart, Church, & Morrison, 2011). This foundational reading source for some of our teachers became a secondary reference as
we immersed ourselves in understanding and activating specific skills prevalent in a visually literate learner or teacher for that matter. To go beyond mind maps, webs and graphic organizers we searched for clearer definitions of visual literacy. Jerry Christopherson’s research presented at the 1996 International Visual Literacy Conference continues to provide an interrelated model for checking our progress with teachers and students. According to Christopherson (1996), the visually literate learner can:

- Interpret, understand and appreciate the meaning of visual images.
- Communicate more effectively through applying the basic principles and concepts of visual design.
- Produce visual messages using the computer and other technologies.
- Use visual thinking to conceptualize solutions to problems.

These four skills provided a clear goal for our teachers allowing participants to reflect on their ability to think, learn and communicate visually. This was supported by extensive research by cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen (1979) and the work from the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). Visual Thinking Strategies (2014) by Philip Yenawine, educator with MOMA, emerged as a pivotal inspiration. As our action research progressed through the seven months of collected response logs, our own definitions of visual literacy emerged and deepened.
Re-searching with Action Research

Using an action research methodology (Lewin, 1946) we analyzed and reflected on our professional learning of visual literacy strategies that were incorporated into daily classroom practices. Our inquiry centred on the question, “How does increasing visual literacy instruction impact teacher and student learning?” This qualitative investigation into what teachers believed to be visual literacy looked at how an increase in that element impacted students and teachers. Exploring the research question generated additional questions:

• What do participating teachers understand as visual literacy within the context of a secondary classroom?
• What visual literacy skills/strengths/needs do students bring to their learning?
• How can teachers build on strengths and skills in a responsive manner?
• What are the unique digital supports for building and supporting visual literacy skills?
We encouraged a personalized approach for each educator on our research team. During our initial learning sessions we approached the conceptualization of visual literacy and listed associated skills in a collaborative fashion. We then delved into a range of options for increasing visual literacy instruction.

Knowing that each teacher researcher was at a different point in both their understanding of visual literacy and their comfort level in applying that understanding during student instruction, we responded to needs expressed by individual teachers and school groups. Support included: school-based colleagues such as teacher librarians, instructional coaches, and visual art teachers; instructional consultants; and print and digital resources. During this time we developed visual literacy strategy cards that explicitly highlighted 20 of (what we predicted to be) the most effective approaches from our research resources. Effectiveness was determined based on a definition of visual literacy skills along with our experience and expertise in this field.

Initial teacher resources included: *Making Thinking Visible: How to Promote Engagement, Understanding and Independence for All Learners* (2011), *Digital Art Revolution* (2010) and *Enriching Comprehension with Visualization Strategies* (2012). Teachers chose from the texts, digital resources and strategy cards that illustrated methods that suited their context and student need. They then conducted their own classroom-based research on the impact of that method.

We collected a range of triangulated data that included products, conversations and observations. Each teacher determined the data they would collect and the method of collection that best suited their needs. Artifacts of learning were shared informally during in-school conversations and more formally during full researcher-team learning and sharing sessions. We prepared and shared questions for students to respond to at the end of semester one. Teachers who used them shared their findings with us (see Appendix 1: Student Questionnaire).

During our research project we continually discussed and explored the nature of conducting action research to assist teachers new to this process of co-generative inquiry. Questions about action research led to a review of the *Action Research Guide for Alberta Teachers* (2000) and we generated a recreated visual version of an action research model (see Appendix 2: Action Research Placemat). Teachers reported that the review of action research and the visual placemat helped guide their work.

**Learning to See Collaboratively**

Recognizing that information is increasingly visual in nature and digitally accessed, we prepared to situate learning experiences so that our teachers could help youth develop the required complex and sophisticated literacy skills needed to both understand and communicate effectively (Xu, 2008). Given youth in these high school settings had one hour each day to learn unique content area literacy, we were interested if there were common visual literacy skills that could be utilized in each area to unify teaching practices and better support adolescent learners. Working with teachers from differing content areas, we explored expanding notions of visual literacy and “text.” As well, we extended collaborative learning through an action research design while exploring the gap that existed between traditional reading and writing tasks and increasing visual and digital literacy tasks.
A unique facet of our methodology existed in multiple layers of resources to activate and support teacher action-researchers. In addition to text and digital resources, co-planning and co-teaching was encouraged as a means to model and practice visual literacy skills. This occurred in teacher-librarian and classroom teacher pairs as well as in instructional consultant and classroom teacher pairs. Collaborative investigation developed a deeper conception of visual literacy than merely its functional aspects.

Researcher-team learning sessions were iterative in nature and provided much needed time to explore visual literacy. Teachers participated as learners during each session, sharing ongoing reflections about teacher and student learning witnessed in their classrooms. We suggested both paper and digital versions of sketchbooks and scrapbooks as a creative and visual way to record ongoing learning and experimentation. Researcher learning sessions were used to: expand our understanding of text and literacy, to model specific instructional strategies that built on visual literacy skills, to share resources, to practice skills that are necessary for the visually literate person, and to ask questions about action research. In one session, teachers were invited to bring in an additional colleague from their school setting who might offer increased collegiality and support in their buildings.

Email and text messaging were useful in maintaining ongoing communication between teachers at four schools and instructional consultants at central office. Throughout the year, we attended to fostering “a set of self-consciously collaborative and democratic strategies for generating knowledge and designing action” (Levin & Greenwood, 2011 p. 29). That interplay between enactment and collaboration helped develop both social knowledge and effective social action (Lewin, 1946). This constructivist approach in learning and researching attended to how participants acquired, utilized, and diffused their knowledge of visual literacy.
Seeing Visual Literacy Through Reflective Journaling

The impact that increasing visual literacy instruction had on both student and teacher learning was anecdotally recorded through the use of ongoing reflective logs. All learning sessions were driven by teacher feedback gleaned primarily from reflective logs (see Appendix 3: Visual Literacy Reflective Log #4). Data collection was collectively conducted monthly through the teacher reflective logs with key Likert scale questions along with open-ended questions. We monitored the increase in instruction and nature of visual literacy through these responses (see Appendix 4: Responses Sample From Reflective Log #4). The reflective logs aided our professional development planning because they helped to clarify what each teacher needed in order to increase visual literacy instruction.

This data source was essential to our methodology as entries were carefully reviewed to determine the depth of using visual literacy strategies and to craft the components of the next researcher-team learning sessions. The reflective logs allowed us to respond to the needs of the individual along with the needs of the group.

Data was reviewed and discussed regularly by consultants which resulted in revelations about emergent themes and ways to continue shared learning at ongoing learning sessions. In February, teachers reviewed and analyzed the larger group data collected from monthly reflective logs, helping to create a community of researchers with a mutual goal. It was evident that our collective efforts were strengthening individual efforts of each teacher. Graphs generated over the first five months were analyzed revealing that each learning session while increasing teacher efficacy also challenged the norms and everyday practices of our participants. With the beginning of a new semester in February, some participants returned to original assignments, revealing the important role that time plays in changing practice. Both calendar time and intensive planning along with collaborative learning time were needed for the development of both skills and knowledge as we witnessed an ontological and epistemological shift.

Data collection culminated in semi-structured interviews with each teacher-researcher during the month of March (see Appendix 5: Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Teacher-Researchers). Audio recordings were transcribed, analyzed and codified for significant themes and research questions (Merriam, 2009). Interviews revealed the distinct conclusions of each individual researcher but also indicated an interconnectedness to the findings of the research project overall.

A final wrap-up session was held in April for each participant to reflect on and capture the individual research journey by using one of a choice of four visual literacy strategies. During a final talking circle and sharing of reflections, teachers presented either a visual artifact or story of their experience in understanding visual literacy.
Teacher Learning – Images of Practice

Increasing visual literacy instructional practices for teachers and students revealed the complexity of preconceived notions as to what visual literacy meant for each teacher and their practice. Initially we began with a constructivist approach to incorporating teacher beliefs and views as to what visual literacy might encompass. Over the course of seven months, teachers exhibited greater awareness of multimodal forms of literacy and an increased confidence in decoding visuals. Understandings of visual literacy grew into a more complex and multifaceted construct. While teachers of visual arts or English language arts initially saw more connections, teachers of science and math found the inclusion of visual literacy initially intimidating or seemingly unrelated. Cathi Johnston describes her shift in thinking:

I think my very first idea about visual literacy was the sort of the literal interpretation of pictures and demonstrations, that idea of visual, like them seeing it. Then, it shifted from that literal visual to seeing in your mind, that idea of making the thinking visible, and that’s where I shifted a lot of my focus. It became like my favorite go-to, the think alouds and talk alouds.

It took me a long time to wrap my head around whether or not I belonged in this work just ‘cause I felt the focus was on what we do in English classes. I actually used to teach English and now I teach so much Science that sort of disappeared. I remember when I used to teach English and Science at the same time, it was kind of like two different worlds, we would put up the visual and then attacking it in all different ways and looking for nuances. It’s not that I can’t do that in the Science, but it doesn’t seem to come as naturally.

The tension in using visual literacy instruction was apparent many times as teachers struggled with balancing traditional learning tasks requiring reading print and responding in writing. A second tension existed between teachers’ notions that visual literacy skills were solely in the domain of visual art and photography teachers although they simultaneously continued to recognize the need for this way of understanding as creating additional pathways for learners. Accepting visual texts or art as representation of learning and equal in stature to written text was an ongoing challenge and continued to cause some reluctance in teaching visual literacy.
Spanning Across the Content Areas

Our teachers worked in many content areas. Initially, each teacher chose one classroom to focus their action research, but this soon spread to other assigned subject areas and classrooms. Over the course of the year, these academic content areas were incorporating visual literacy strategies: English Language Arts 9, 10A, 10B, 20, 30; Math 30; Native Studies 10, 20 and 30; Science 10; Graphic Arts 10; Social Studies 9; and History 20, 30. Veteran teacher Lori Cline Flath found:

As I got the ball rolling, I targeted every class I was teaching. That included a History 20 class, English Language Arts 20, Native Studies 10, and initially a plan for my History 30. The more I did it, the more I realized that in every lesson I was planning I was thinking about what strategy am I going to use, what image could I use for this project and consciously using graphic organizers in almost every activity that I was doing. I started really even consciously thinking about what image could I put on this handout that would help students understand what I am asking them to do, or even would trigger a memory for them for what they were being asked to do. I found it really seeping into every aspect of my practice.

According to Leanne Kadyschuk, who initially focused on understanding visual literacy in her Graphic Arts 10 class:

I very quickly implemented these strategies in my Social Studies 9, English 9, Advanced English 10, and so it definitely has become and will continue to become part of the way that I approach all my classes. These strategies become part of your way of differentiating and your way of seeing (when a) student isn’t engaged, to see something that worked for one student and bringing it to the whole class.

At the beginning of this journey, I had the sense that it’s about the student, and it’s about my job as the teacher to provide a student with multiple opportunities to demonstrate a skill or an understanding and then to show development of that as the semester goes. I feel like these strategies just really create, they invite more kids to be part of a journey of success.
Gradually the incorporation of visual literacy instruction and strategies led to innovation and re-examination of past teaching practices. Some teachers redesigned entire course content and approaches to learning. Others explained that as the project ended, they were just beginning in developing these skills and were excited about adding this to their regular teaching practice. They were also attaching learning to previous knowledge about responsive teaching practices and the action research experience acted as a reminder of practices they had utilized earlier in their career but moved away from for various reasons. Joanne Boots described how learning about visual literacy strategies enhanced her teaching:

I wanted to learn more ‘cause I only knew a little bit about what I thought visual literacy was. I don’t think I had the tools (initially) like I could talk about what it was, but I didn’t know if I could put it into action. I think when teachers are trying something new, they’re a little bit scared if their kids are going to buy in or not like that. I think that visual literacy empowers both the teacher and the learner because it makes teaching fun. The fun of teaching is when it’s dynamic. So in terms of empowerment and success- those are two words that I think are really integral to this project. I feel like increasing visual literacy has a huge positive impact on both teacher and student learning in terms of empowerment and success.

The terms “empowerment” and “empowering” appeared in all the interviewee's comments regarding the impact of visual literacy for their students and themselves. This was especially evident as teachers observed student engagement in learning.

Student Learning - An Expanded Vision

Inquiring into a visual image led to realizations about teaching practices and learning. Repeatedly, all teachers reported that increasing visual literacy instruction engaged youth in learning. Calene Muir, in teaching Native studies and history, realized that this form of inquiry gave voice to students and reduced the tendency for teacher dominance of the dialogue in class.

I found they were more engaged and really loved the idea of guessing, like what is this really about? I think a lot of times as a teacher, I take that power from them by giving them the answer. I think I talk too much and when I would use the visual strategies, they actually were doing most of the input, rather than me doing the input, and so I think that was powerful in terms of their own learning because they are going to own it if they were the ones coming up with it.

Teachers repeatedly expressed surprise at how the viewing art process opened student interest and engagement in learning. Exploring visually activated an authentic inquiry and learning opportunity for students to use their background knowledge. Bailey Fischl found in her English Language Arts 10 class that using image-based text opened learning opportunities for marginalized students in participation and confidence. When starting to read the novel *The Giver*, the students viewed historical photographs and explored the importance of memory.
I was very shocked at how much it allowed students to open up about past experiences, and their background experiences that connected with those events. I’d never seen them share so much and the discussion be so even throughout the groups. ... They felt confident to go and speak to another group. Print text wouldn’t have been able to get them to that point in confidence.

Belinda Daniels also saw how image-based text increased participation and engagement in Native studies and Cree language classes. The importance of working beyond traditional print text was highlighted in her classes as she saw visual literacy complementary with Indigenous ways of knowing and learning:

Students paid attention to the images. That was always intriguing for them. It’s kind of like taking the reading and writing and textbooks, and putting it on a brand new level. Kids are being a part of the creating of the visual learning that’s going on. For my experience teaching indigenous aboriginal students, we are visual learners for the most part, observing, watching, looking at pictures reaffirms learning or enhances the learning ... it just comes more natural(ly) to the learner, that’s my experience.

This effect on student engagement in learning seemed to be linked to the way the viewing art process activated memory, increased confidence and created connections for students to feel empowered. Teachers reported that using visual images in gallery walks provided an ambiguous and evocative learning experience for students that ultimately was safer and more personally relevant than working with print text:

Visual inquiry is not necessarily right and wrong or black and white. When kids are talking about an image, they feel it’s more safe because they can say what they’re seeing and then make their personal connection to it. There’s more personal relevance in visual tasks than read this and answer the questions. (Joanne Boots)

Student learning, as reported by teachers, manifested itself in increased engagement and enjoyment of exploring particular concepts through the analysis and creation of visuals. Initially teachers found this way of approaching learning took more time and initially was a concern. As teachers persevered, this outlook on investing in time shifted practices and results:

I really struggled with time at the start. I would say it took at least three weeks longer (for the novel study). I’ve realized how important it was to take time. If I hadn’t taken time, so many of them would think it’s just something that’s going to go away, an assignment here or an activity. It was a process that we went through daily or weekly, that was incorporated, that was just the way the course was. Now time isn’t an issue and students are engaged and understand the process. (Bailey Fischl).
Invisible Students Become Visible

Many students were able to interpret or create with images in a way that they were not able to with print text. This opportunity with visual images recognized other ways of knowing and representing as valid. In addition, instruction in visual literacy created a bridge to increase understanding of print text. Lori Cline Flath tells how incorporating visual learning and representation dramatically assisted teaching when students seemed disengaged:

I did a visual strategy lesson around education, looking at how First Nations people traditionally taught their children and then looking at residential schooling. I actually tied it to a literary piece by Richard Wagamese called “For Joshua.” I found this group didn’t work particularly well together as a group, but when we were working on this project, they were really engaged, wanted to share their ideas, and students that have difficulty expressing themselves in writing were very good at discussing what they were seeing in the images projected. It really helped segway into the piece of writing. I found their reflections made ties to the images in the photographs. It was exciting to see a group that I’ve really struggled with in terms of engagement being engaged.

Again and again, teachers referred to the change in student behaviours. Joanne Boots found increasing visual literacy strategies increased student thinking and comprehension:

I’ve seen a change in the way I work, the way my students respond, and the level of thinking, I think is the really biggest thing. It’s more than just like comprehending and then throwing back answers; it’s like they’re really going deeper now which is really cool to see.

While students showed a marked increase in engagement in the classrooms, they also appeared more interested in pursuing subject areas not usually sought out and continuing with these teachers in subsequent years. Cathi Johnston reflects:

I don’t know if this is a good measure of success, but I have had students come up to me who I don’t think have traditionally shown interest in science or have had some success in my classes and they come they’re like, “You have a science period 1 right? Can I join that class?” And I say, “Okay, there’s already 36 and I have 2 chairs left.” I’m thinking, okay so obviously somehow this is touching them. So when I can see that they’re willing to take a highly academic course like physical science (which is chemistry and physics smooshed together) and come in period 1 when in this school it is traditionally the least attended period of the day and they feel like I want to be in this class and experience success, it makes me think that something about how I am presenting and what I am presenting is working.
Each teacher in the project found success in working with visual literacy strategies. This success with students encouraged teacher engagement in experimenting with visual literacy instructional strategies. Teachers consciously engaged in taking risks in how they worked with students in their classrooms and many mentioned how their instructional approaches changed over the school year. Each participant increased their collaboration with other colleagues either by supporting others or in seeking those who might help increase their skills. Our action research project confirmed the findings that collaborative learning generates a sense of motivation and self-efficacy. Throughout the year, we attended to fostering collaborative and democratic strategies for generating knowledge and designing action. The interplay between enactment and collaboration helped develop both social knowledge and effective social action (Lewin, 1946). This constructivist approach to learning and researching attended to how participants acquired, utilized and diffused their knowledge of visual literacy. With the teacher successes, there was also surprise at how motivating visual literacy was either in their work with students or in connecting their collaborative learning with colleagues. Frequently teachers repeated that they found the use of visual inquiry empowering to both students and themselves. Teachers reported positively about the learning they took away from sessions and the collaborative supports. This was an important foundation for teachers as they and their students became co-learners during the experience.

Supports for teacher learning were reported to be significant. This included experiencing a strategy in use and practicing it before returning to the classroom, resources in the form of strategy cards, and provocative images to ignite learning and co-planning or co-teaching with an instructional consultant or teacher librarian. The combination of professional learning experiences where they could be a participant experiencing visual inquiry and the demonstration of specific visual literacy strategies in card formats scaffolded their growth and understanding of visual literacy opportunities.

The cards were incredibly helpful. The fact they didn’t have very many words on them was very helpful to me. They guided questions, what to ask .... having those cards gave me the feeling that I can do this. I think that was hugely important because I think a reason we don’t try things is not necessarily just because of time (even though that’s what most people say). I think most of those days I don’t feel comfortable. If you don’t feel safe and comfortable, you’re not going
to try something new. So I think those cards gave you that security blanket—just that ability to say, yah, I can do this because all I have to do is follow these questions and you can build on it. (Calene Muir).

Action research in classrooms and school settings scaffolded teachers as they tried something new beyond a traditional approach of written assignments. Scaffolding found in visual literacy cards specifically supported teachers. As well, teachers had collaborative and independent reflection time. Leanne Kadyschuk, while a teacher of visual arts, found both herself and her students at times challenged and taken out of their zones of comfort when using visual strategies. Time to reflect personally was a significant influence on her professional development:

The strongest professional learning opportunity (beyond workshops and the strategy cards) was the time of two hours just to organize my research binder and to actually plan some stuff, and to take the time to step into it from the position of different kids, thinking specifically, okay, I remember that student and what kind of works for him. Or I remember when what we did that with those two girls and that usually this happens, but instead...

Collaborative learning opportunities, thoughtful reflection and the scaffolding of visual strategy cards deepened teacher understanding of visual literacy and a personal sense of efficacy. As well, teachers participated in using and observing visual literacy strategies in lesson contexts. Candace Elliott captures how layers of support fostered learning:

I have a deeper understanding of all the different layers and levels of visual literacy, where before it was more traditional symbolism and very almost superficial or literacy-device based; where now I understand more about the different layers that you can get to in thinking and understanding you can get through visuals. While I did look through books and they were okay, and the workshops were great in modelling some of the activities, where I found it most useful was the co-teaching that Jacquie Helman and I did. (She) would model, show, and we would collaborate, and then I would take that and teach it in the next level and kind of make it my own, personalize it, and really work together that way… that’s where I’ve found the deepest learning.
Revealing Ourselves Through Action Research

The project offered a visible way to experience authentic inquiry and led to a process of redefining pedagogy. As a group, we received many requests for sharing our learning resources with teachers and consultants outside of our study. Teachers in a support role, whether that was as a teacher librarian, instructional coach or learning co-ordinator, found their influence increased within the school and this encouraged opportunities to collaborate with colleagues. Shona Iverson and Jacqueline Helman found as teacher librarians in new work settings, their knowledge of visual literacy opened collaborative teaching opportunities and increased their presence in classroom support. While they initially began with two teachers in their buildings, their roles and the interest in visual literacy spread to others on staff.

Here’s the irony for a librarian - the more knowledge we gain the more we want to share. But it’s really difficult to get into classes. This project was amazing because we were able to share it with a few people and it’s growing. Originally we had started off thinking that we would just have two teachers involved in it. And what happened is because one of them is the coordinator for English Language Arts, the stories spread and the successes spread to other areas. We found we started to build a critical mass of people at our school that are starting to speak the language (of visual literacy). (Jacqueline Helman)

Shona, like Jacqueline, also transferred as the teacher librarian to a new school for the year and found:

It was great to just have a place as soon as I came into the building, like kind of a starting point. It has helped me make connections in my staff. It also gave me the opportunity to further my own knowledge as well ‘cause I was digging into research and making an effort to do something with it, to stretch it beyond just working with two people.

By the middle of the year Shona worked with more staff in requested professional learning sessions.

I shared some information about the project that we’re working on, just a little bit. And then I had the opportunity to walk them through a couple of projects. I’ve had a lot of feedback from the staff – I have them sending me visuals that they’re planning on using with their class, and asking me to review them. So it was again, another opportunity to connect with more staff members. It’s definitely working with colleagues.
Candace Elliott-Jensen who activated using visual literacy in her English language arts department shared her concern about investing time and energy into traditional professional learning sessions:

It’s a lot of time away from the classroom and it’s a lot of extra work. And sometimes it doesn’t pay off. This was not one of those projects. This was something that I feel was extremely valuable to myself, to the teachers around me, and especially to the students. I think it just benefited everybody and it was something that was worth the extra time, energy, and vulnerability to try new things, to put myself out there, and give something I wasn’t sure about a try, tweak it, learn it, adapt it, and get even better next time around. This was worth it.

The action research project that began with an open and constructivist approach to understanding visual literacy culminated in interviews and shared experiences. Reflecting on the project beginnings and action research inquiry, Belinda Daniels concludes:

it was just like a huge vortex in the beginning, but it did narrow down. I think we’re all going on this learning journey, trying to define it, confine it, and use it to our advantage … as educators, we’re all action researchers, … progressing, trying to figure out how do I be a better teacher every day.
Increasing visual literacy instruction had a discernable positive impact on teacher and student learning. Most prevalent in the data was the effect in changing teacher perspectives and practices. In addition to the commitment from educators to this action research project, the effect is related to responsive supports and resources offered through the structure of our interactions. Visual literacy strategy cards, co-planning, co-teaching and follow-up communication led to a connected community of professional learners. Our action research design embedded supports by arranging clusters of teachers participating in four schools along with a partnership in learning led by two instructional consultants. A collaborative inquiry was fostered and maintained in most participating schools. These collaborative opportunities were frequently referenced as the important aspect in actualizing the use of visual literacy strategies.

Dialogue became central both in the classroom, in learning sessions, and through the written responses in the reflective log as we mirrored the viewing art process. As the act of talking about teaching paralleled talking about images, it led to an increased reflective stance and increased depth of knowledge (Whicher, 1996). As we journeyed, our research was often organized around relearning to see.

Teacher beliefs about the role of images in education and culture will continue to form and inform pedagogical approaches to teaching through various forms of text. Understanding images as text or conduits of meaning was central to our guided learning experiences with teachers. Our acquisition of visual literacy skills gradually increased over time and learning experiences, as is evidenced in the graph cited on page 12. Initially, the readability of an image and creating communication through images was met with trepidation and doubt. The experience was one of resisting and relenting to the meaning embedded within the visual. Initially, few developed the independence to lead students in visual literacy strategies that they had not previously seen modeled and most individuals relied on using the identical images presented in sessions.

Teachers repeatedly identified and questioned the gap between visual inquiry and traditional reading and writing tasks. Although forms of text have shifted from primarily print to multimedia contexts, few classrooms prior to this study were supported in how to activate visual and digital literacies. Often teachers expressed the concern that print continued to be overly privileged in schools when multiple forms of text are increasingly prevalent in the worlds of their students. Our participants wrestled with the historical privileging of print and wondered how visual literacy learning could act as a bridge to becoming more literate.
Teachers repeatedly identified the need for confidence and knowledge to increase visual literacy strategies in their daily practice. The reason why we often don’t change our instructional practices was referenced revealing the need for confidence, safety and time to reflect and collaborate with a supportive peer. Each participant spoke to how this action research empowered their practice with students and with other colleagues.

Although we were not able to interview students directly, their voices come through teacher testimonies. Teachers expressed wonderment at how engaged students were when they frontloaded any learning activity with visual inquiry. Students were engaged in learning in a markedly new way when they were asked to hone skills in observation, perception and questioning, much like an artist would. Dissecting film, art and photographs led to an invitational and inspirational learning environment. Visual literacy questioning patterns in the strategies provided to teachers supported a modality of inquiry. Students were able to ask their own questions and to engage in a dialogue with a visual text with the goal of increased understanding.

While viewing images and engaging in the viewing art process increased and changed traditional approaches, it remains unclear how many teachers frequently offered increased opportunities for students to represent their understanding in creative and non-traditional ways. Although visual decoding and encoding became increasingly evident, we wonder how this will continue to develop and become a routine part of teaching praxis in these content areas. As well, while initially we wanted to incorporate digital supports more deliberately, this became less important to understanding visual literacy and the strategic ways to increase student engagement in learning. What was interesting during this study was that the actual visual literacy strategy activated engagement in learning much like a technological tool.

Further research is needed to examine the transferable nature of skills of a visually literate person to other forms of text. How can this free-reign thinking aid us when approaching any text that needs to be “read” or interpreted? As well, it would be worthwhile to examine how particular visual literacy strategies can transcend subject boundaries and assist students in learning.

While we initially mentioned we often felt peripheral to the deep classroom work and relationship of teacher with students, it was clear that consultants were helpful in catalyzing and supporting ongoing classroom and school-based work. The ongoing learning sessions and collaborative work time where teachers experienced visual literacy strategies were repeatedly referred to as important to both assisting and challenging pre-existing learner notions of literacy. As consultants, we also played a major role in synthesizing a large array of literature on visual literacy and producing a condensed version of usable strategy cards which provided support for teachers. These visual literacy strategies helped participants develop the confidence and sense of safety needed to take risks and challenge existing practices. The release time made possible by the financial support of the McDowell Foundation provided important collaborative and co-teaching time needed for learning and planning. Finally, the implications for educational consultants from this project indicate that our current siloed approaches to teaching content area literacy is problematic and that if we are to engage adolescents in learning, we need a more holistic approach as demonstrated in the visual literacy projects embraced by these teachers. It was encouraging how the good news stories spread among teachers leading to increased and unexpected participation within each school setting.
References


Appendices

Appendix 1: Student Questionnaire

Picturing Your Ideas

1. Thinking about your learning ....
   
   a. What helps you learn best?
      
      • When I hear it
      • When I do it
      • When I see it
      • When I see it and then get to show what I know
      • When I hear it and then get to show what I know
   
   b. Explain a situation where learning has been organized this way in this class?

2. What opportunities have you had to learn from or interpret a variety of visual formats?
   
   • For example: Diagrams, charts, illustrations, photographs, images, symbols, posters, three-dimensional objects or models, video presentations, dramatization.
   • Please explain or demonstrate:

3. What opportunities have you had to communicate your ideas or demonstrate your understanding in a variety of visual ways?
   
   • Have you tried creating any of the following: Diagrams, charts, illustrations, photographs, images, symbols, posters, three-dimensional objects or models, video presentations, dramatization.
   • Please explain or demonstrate:
Appendix 2: Action Research Placemat

Action Research Model

Select a Research Focus
How does increasing visual literacy instruction impact student & teacher learning?

Collect Data:
What are you noticing about student & teacher learning?

Take Action:
Which instructional intervention is used?

Analyze & Interpret Data:
What effect did the intervention have?

Reflect:
In what ways is the situation changing?


Made for sharing by Karon Guttormson
guttormsonk@spsd.sk.ca
Appendix 3: Visual Literacy Reflective Log #4

Learning about and increasing visual literacy is exciting, but also a process.

Thank you for sharing your experiences and thoughts.

1. How has increasing visual literacy instruction impacted your own learning and teaching?

2. How has increasing visual literacy instruction impacted your students’ learning?

3. Please rate the following statements:

   I regularly teach visualizing strategies with students during instruction
   Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

   I regularly adapt materials so they have a visual element based on my students’ learning needs and engagement level.
   Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

   I model effective viewing skills to extend and complement students’ comprehension
   Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

   I provide opportunities for students to respond to, interpret, and critically evaluate a variety of visual texts.
   Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

4. Which visual literacy strategy cards have you used with students?

   Since starting this action research project we have shared and used specific visual literacy strategies that have been produced on cards. These are also in some of the resource books provided.

   • Viewing Art Process
   • Visual Think Alouds
   • Zoom In
   • CSI- Colour, Symbol, Image
   • See-Think-Wonder Triptych
   • Photo Gallery
   • Floorstorming
   • Postcards
   • Reading Pictures
   • Picture Talk: Historic Photographs
   • Camera Crew

   Please share a specific example of how you used this strategy with your students.
   Can you include the class context, concept being taught, and how you adapted the strategy and how students responded.

5. For our next full day learning and collaborative opportunity on February 25th, what would you like to learn and come away with?

   In other words, if this was the best professional development, ever...what would that look like for you?

6. Is there anything you would like to add or ask?
Appendix 4: Responses from Reflective Log 4, February 2015

1. How has increasing visual literacy instruction impacted your own learning and teaching? (Anonymous responses- February 2015)

Although I have always tried to include visual elements both in materials that I prepare for students and as possible products that they prepare, I find that I am revisiting projects that I am revisiting to include many more. Most recently, I converted the instructions for an assignment into a detailed flowchart, which was accompanied by another visual project guide that included a completion checklist and screen captures to illustrate the processes that they needed to complete the project using Photoshop Elements. After having used the revised project, I am further adapting it for fourth quarter based on student response to it.

It has made me more thoughtful in my planning and execution of my lessons. I am more aware of my own metacognitive processes in a way that can be articulated to students.

I think I am becoming more of a visual learner myself and I am seeing more opportunities to incorporate visual learning into my class, which is awesome. I have received a positive response from many students regarding visual strategies in the classroom, from graphic organizers and images to help contextualize course material. I’m constantly thinking and re-evaluating my lessons to incorporate visual literacy. Even my handouts and course outlines have changed dramatically to be more visually engaging and less text heavy.

I do find myself considering a visual literacy component to almost every lesson I teach. I have used graphic organizers for a long time, but I’ve really expanded my “ideas” about what visual literacy involves and I’m trying to incorporate viewing activities into my work on a regular basis.

I have had many “aha” moments in the past while. It is one thing to read about it, talk about it, but once you start to work with the students you find out what are the “gaps” for your learners and you begin to see the forethought and planning that is necessary to really supporting teachers and students to comprehend and create visuals. I was working with a particular class and we were discussing “what is a quality image”. I realized that this skill set is beyond intuition - it requires much more than just “googling” an image and hoping for the
best. It involves a whole variety of skills—skills we just don’t have as teachers (beyond a visual arts teacher). It really struck home for me that I need to really scaffold better and when working with teachers and students to have some of these resources/skill sets available for them to access.

I’ve enjoyed this process. Its research, engagement but with a different approach to teaching.

I am feeling more comfortable implementing new strategies and reaching out to colleagues to listen and share.

Which visual literacy strategy cards have you used with students?

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<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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Appendix 5: Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Teacher-Researchers

1. Why did you become involved in this action research project?
   • What was the initial context you chose to apply the visual literacy action research to?
   • Why did you choose this particular class?

2. What actions did you take to increase Visual Literacy instruction with students?
   • What did you try that you are particularly proud of?
   • What do you wish you could have changed or done differently?

3. How do you now understand Visual Literacy?
   • Did that change during the project? How/Why?

4. What did you notice about your students’ learning and participation when you used Visual Literacy strategies?
   • Describe a scenario.

5. What particular resources were the most helpful for your learning?

6. What did this action research project do for you, your students, and your teaching practices and philosophy?