Ways of Seeing and Knowing: Visual Literacy and Filipino Librarians*

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Abstract

The paper presents visual literacy and its potential applications in librarianship practice. It provides definitions of visual literacy and its importance in contemporary living and enumerates requisite visual literacy skills and how such skills may be developed in individuals. It presents prospects on how Filipino librarians can integrate visual literacy and visual literacy instruction in librarianship and suggests six areas where visual literacy can be integrated into library services: organization, signage, display, communication, critical thinking, and reading comprehension. With this, learners can develop their visual literacy skills and better understand the conveyed messages.

Keywords: Visual literacy, Visual literacy skills, Literacy and librarianship, Filipino librarians

LEARNING WITH VISUALS

What do you see? Everywhere one looks, images are presented in various forms --- photos, posters, illustrations, signage, memes, and paintings, to name a few. There is a wealth of visuals nowadays, especially for young people with or without their devices. Images surround their lives. Some are visually pleasing, while others need help understanding what they represent or the message they want to communicate.

Images inundate individuals living in the 21st century, resulting from the activities in their communities and artifacts generated using current and emerging technologies. The advent of the internet, computers, and other electronic devices opened doors to abundant production of visual materials facilitated by easy access with a click or push of a button.

However, encoding and decoding visual information, interpreting non-textual artifacts, and actively engaging in visual communication have yet to be taught to most adults. In the past, the information source for many was primarily textual, but nowadays, communicating with others involves more pictures or a combination of both. With these changing patterns

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of communication, Kenny (2010) mentioned that students feel overwhelmed by the abundance of images but need more conceptual frameworks to evaluate them.

DEFINING VISUAL LITERACY

More than half a century ago, Debes (1969) referred to visual literacy as "a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences" (p. 27). Pettersson (2013) viewed visual literacy as an ability; however, others may consider it a competency or a skill. Further, he wrote that "visual literacy is an interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and multidimensional area of knowledge. … From a theoretical view visual literacy includes visual language, visual thinking, visual perception, visual communication, and visual learning" (par. 1).

As a skill, visual literacy enables an individual to discern and discriminate objects, symbols, or behaviors of others. Further, with good visual literacy skills, an individual could better interpret things observed or seen in a natural or manufactured environment. Pettersson (2013) commented that visual literacy as a communication skill impacts the work of those designing, producing, distributing, and using visual information.

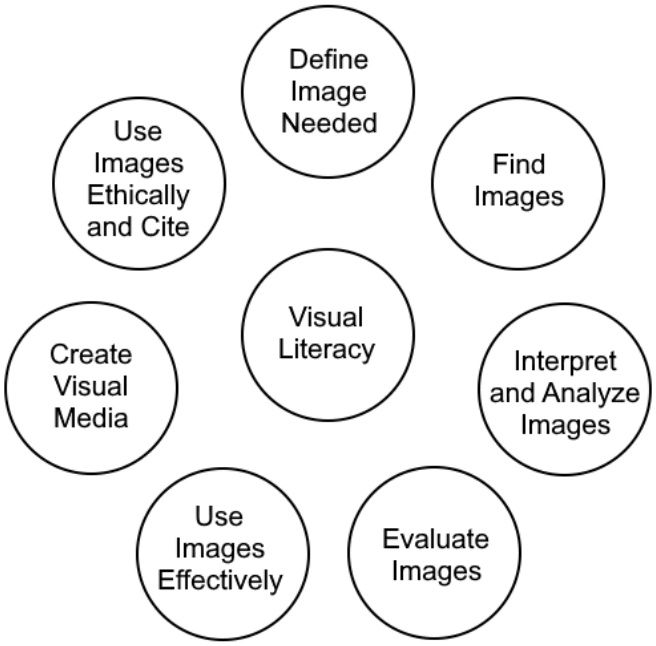
Multiple scholars and researchers generated and debated a working definition of visual literacy but have yet to reach a consensus (Avgerinou, 2003; Debes, 1969; Petterson, 2013). However, everybody agrees that visuals carry information to communicate and then be understood by the receiver based on the interpretation. Through the years, scholars and educators have studied visual literacy. A decade ago, a group of librarians defined it as "a set of abilities that enables an individual to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, use, and create images and visual media" (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2011, Visual Literacy Defined section).

DEVELOPING VISUAL LITERACY SKILLS

Beyond the visual literacy definition of one's ability to read, write (Avgerinou & Ericson, 1997), and create images (Harrison, n.d.), many initially perceived the concept as related to the fine arts, design, and art education. Still, others argue that it has wider applications to various sectors of society, for example, as a skill in language, communication, connection, relationship, and interaction. Harrison (n.d.) wrote, "Visual media is a linguistic tool with which we communicate, exchange ideas, and navigate our complex world" (para. 1). The ACRL task force charged with generating the visual literacy standards identified skill sets influenced by contexts and experiences (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

A graphic representation based on the ACRL Visual Literacy Standards



Note: Adapted from "Visual Literacy Standards in Higher Education: New Opportunities for Libraries and Student Learning," by D. Hattwig, K. Bussert, A. Medaille, and J. Burgess, 2013, *portal: Libraries and the Academy, 13*(1), p. 75 (10.1353/pla.2013.0008). Copyright © 2013 by The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD 21218.

Define image need. If an image is needed to support one's work, the individual needs to determine the nature and extent of the required visual material. Since an image has diverse formats, such as graphic, illustration, photograph, animated, or moving, the individual must decide which is most appropriate. Further, one must determine whether the image needed is realistic, symbolic, or representational to the communicated idea.

Find images. Once the individual defines the needed shot in terms of format and representation, one could

start looking for an appropriate one that meets the definition. The individual must find and access required images and visual media effectively and efficiently. For example, searching for ideas could be completed using different sources online. These sources could provide usable images that are free or for purchase. The individual could also create the images by taking photographs or using applications (e.g., Photoshop, Snipping Tool) on their devices.

Interpret and analyze images. If the individual encounters an image while reading print or accessing online materials, an interpretation or analysis of the image must be made for its meaning (Watts, 2023). The task becomes challenging if the image communicates something symbolic or represents something figuratively. Content knowledge of other disciplines might come in handy in correctly interpreting or analyzing the images.

Evaluate images. Nowadays, images found online may not be due to alteration, manipulation, or distortion using various editing software (e.g., Photoshop). Before using any image from the web, individuals must be cautious and employ content analysis, check for the image source, and review for technical quality (University of Washington Library, 2023). There are various methods and tools to determine if images are real, such as conducting a visual inspection (Singh, 2023), implementing an EXIF data analysis (Dube, 2022), using photo analyzing tools (Brookes, 2021), performing reverse image search (Collier, n.d.), and employing error level analysis (Dube, 2022; Singh, 2023). Today, it is important to evaluate the image first for the "truthfulness" of what it represents and then confirm that it came from a reliable source.

Use images effectively. Using an image to support a product or a website (C. Nelson, 2022) could enhance the latter's visual presentation, appeal, or impact. The user must consider the message's purpose vis-à-vis the image's quality and relevance (Malviya, 2020). For example, once individuals find photos to use, they decide how to integrate them to augment, enhance, or complement the showcased work. In website design or brand marketing development, the images used must align with the message one wants to communicate in addition to appeal and relevance by presenting originality and fostering engagement. If not, then the image will be ineffective in enhancing the impact of the work.

Create visual media. Sometimes, the individual resorts to designing and creating meaningful images or visual media since there is no appropriate one to use. A good background in visual communication (elements, principles, composition) would be an asset to the individual if tasked to create visual media. Further, the consistent use of colors, font types, and graphic elements across content could enhance the presentation of the visual media. High-quality images, graphics (pie charts, infographics), videos, and slide decks (Thompson, 2020) could make the visual media engaging, meaningful, and impactful to the target audience.

Use images ethically and cite. Whether the individual "borrowed" or created the images used in one's work, it is important to "understand many of the ethical, legal, social, and economic issues surrounding the creation and use of images and visual media" (ACRL, 2011, Visual Literacy Defined section). Also, it is important to have a working knowledge of ethically accessing and using visual materials (ACRL, 2011). Citing images is essential for respecting intellectual property rights, maintaining academic integrity, enhancing credibility, and ensuring legal compliance.

Finally, a visually literate individual is a "critical consumer of visual media and a competent contributor to a body of shared knowledge and culture" (ACRL, 2011, Visual Literacy Defined section). Brown et al. (2016) identified an array of visual literacy skills, starting with understanding and analyzing the "contextual, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, intellectual, and technical components involved in the production and use of visual materials" (p. xiv; ACRL, 2011, Visual Literacy Defined section). Teaching visual literacy as an essential skill is as important as other literacies of reading, writing, speaking, and listening for 21st-century learners.

BECOMING VISUALLY LITERATE

In describing "understanding" as a visual literacy skill, Cruz and Ellerbrock (2015) stated that one can identify the setting or purpose of a picture or graphic beyond knowing the content. The learner needs to have the capacity to ask questions, allowing for a better grasp of the subject presented:

- What is the visual included?
- What historical period is depicted?
- What additional information does the visual bring to the presentation, article, or material?

[1] *I was also able to browse some physical copies of these materials within the same collection in the U-M archives.*

However, it is important to understand that visual literacy is a two-way street. Individuals play dual roles as passive consumers of what they see and experience and active contributors in creating images supporting various teaching and learning activities. As co-creators of new images, more nuance is added by remixing and matching things to communicate new ways of seeing and experiencing their surroundings.

Supporting teaching and learning activities with media requires visual literacy skills. Learners must critically evaluate a picture or graphic (Baker, 2012) to understand the visual's many competing and complementary layers of symbolism, representation, and meaning. Further, the capacity to analyze visuals forces the learner to question the content and the validity of the visuals (Cruz & Ellerbrock, 2015).

In addition, interpreting a visual allows learners to think more critically about what they are seeing and fully question their understanding of what they have read about the subject (Baker, 2012). Cruz and Ellerbrock (2015) stated that being visually literate means learners can understand, interpret, and analyze the visual content depicted not only in images but also in movies and television or graphics in print, such as newspapers and magazines.

Moreover, creating visuals to support an idea is becoming increasingly important as the world becomes more dependent on the instantaneous transfer of information. With the rise of social media outlets and the barrage of visuals to grab audiences' attention, Silverman and Piedmont (2016) argued that information relying solely on print seems ignored more readily than information accompanied by a visual.

FINDING VISUAL LITERACY IN LIBRARIES

Libraries serve "as a sanctuary for knowledge seekers and a reservoir of wisdom" (LIS Education Network, 2013, Library and Education section, para. 1) and provide foundational and multifaceted education in developing individuals, communities, and society. Libraries are "hubs for collecting, organizing, and distributing vast information resources, including books, journals, digital databases, and multimedia materials" (LIS Education Network, 2013, Role of the Library in Disseminating Information section). Librarians and professionals working in libraries provide access to information, records, and resources after gathering, organizing, and preserving. Further, the librarians' work involved curating collections, developing educational programs, and managing databases to support learning, research, and exploration. One can find librarians in various types of libraries: academic, public, school, and special.

Librarians have the responsibility to help learners understand what they see, not only by interpreting the background information but also by considering the emotion and cultural significance of the visual (LaVey, 2022; N. Nelson, 2004). They could help learners to critically evaluate images, whether they mean something relevant to one's experiences, i.e., something that is not true or something that is misinforming others of what is being communicated.

TEACHING VISUAL LITERACY SKILLS

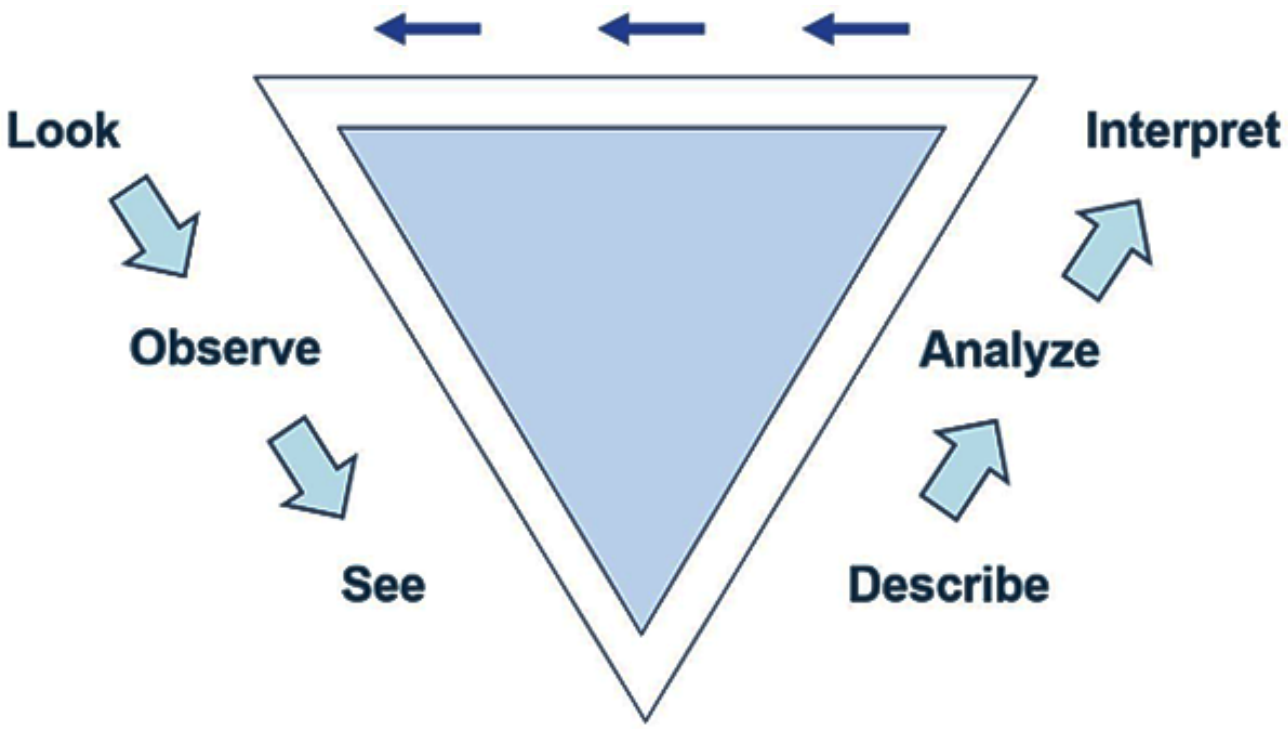
There is a need to apply and integrate the teaching of visual literacy into the curriculum so that students can fully understand and critically evaluate the visuals they encounter daily (Farrell, 2015). In developing visual literacy skills, learners must have the opportunities to think through, think about, and think with pictures (Donnchaidh, n.d.; Finley, 2014; Huddle, 2023; Ozel, 2018). Through the thinking process, the learners can analyze and interpret visual information. They also have the opportunity to make an evaluation. Eventually, as they organize the outcome of their thinking, they better understand what they see, which could result in the construction of new knowledge.

In responding to the challenge of building visual literacy skills, Yenawine (2013) worked with K-12 teachers to learn how to teach viewing skills with sets of lessons, which he called visual thinking strategies (VTS). At the core, the strategy asked for three key questions:

- What is going on in this picture?
- What makes you say that?
- What more can we find?

Figure 2 illustrates the process learners consider in understanding what they see. As Yenawine (2013) pointed out, the first steps involve looking, observing, and seeing in asking learners about an object (e.g., a picture, photograph, computer screen, or a three-dimensional artifact). Looking means physically focusing on the object. Observing encompasses identifying attributes or characteristics of the object. Finally, seeing engages the learners in communicating what is visible to their eyes.

Figure 2
Learning to Look Approach



In communicating what is observed or seen, the learners describe the object to others in written or verbal forms. After describing the object, learners could analyze it for what it represents. For example, if learners describe the object as having four wooden legs and a flat top, the object could be interpreted as a table based on these features. From this experience, Yenawine (2013) and the teachers observing the learners could assume that they develop visual literacy as a product of "complex thinking and the language to express it, listening, increasing interest in and capacity to write, and collaborative problem solving" (p. viii).

CONNECTING TECHNOLOGY AND FILIPINO LEARNERS

The impact of technology on all levels, especially those in educational settings, is immense. Portus (2015) studied Filipino youth's internet technology literacy. They found four groups exhibiting various states of impact: 1) Awareness (availing of technology), 2) Acquisition (using technology to procure knowledge), 3) Interpretative (generating meaning from acquired knowledge after using the technology), and 4) Critical (analyze the acquired content and question motivation, utilization, and values). Portus discussed the technology's impact on the study participants' privacy, relationships, financial resources, and values at the critical state.

The use and integration of technology for teaching and learning are of interest to librarians, especially in teaching information literacy. They teach students to find the necessary information, including navigating library-based resources, using research techniques, and evaluating information content influenced by social, political, and cultural contexts. However, Bautista (2021) reported that senior high school teachers need additional training due to a limited understanding of media and information literacy content and skills.

In the Philippines, Santos (2018) examined the perceived competencies of Filipino librarians and found that they viewed themselves as "pro-active, adaptable, advocate, an effective communicator, and well-informed" (p. 288). Librarians play a crucial role in promoting information literacy, which includes visual literacy, among students and other library users. In teaching information literacy, they use interactive activities, such as games, to increase student motivation and engagement during instructional sessions (Yap & Peñaflor, 2020).

INTRODUCING VISUAL LITERACY BASICS FOR FILIPINO EYES

Developing visual literacy skills starts with mastering one's understanding of visual elements and principles. Focusing on images requires a fundamental understanding of the visual elements, principles, composition, and angles to unpack the message. Further, knowing good or bad visual composition is an important skill, including familiarity with angles, i.e., the perspective used when viewing objects or the camera's direction when taking pictures (See Figure 3).

Visual or design principles facilitate the creation of an aesthetic appeal. The principles guide the work and interact with each other to maximize the user experience. Though no definite principles exist, researchers and practitioners identified some as the focal point/emphasis, balance, proportion, rhythm, movement, pattern/repetition, alignment, contrast, proximity, unity, and harmony (Hagen & Golombisky, 2013). The Filipino architectural designs have evolved through time, given the influences of Spanish and American colonizers. Traveling from urban areas to the mountainous and coastal regions of the country exposes individuals to the diverse use of the visual principles of repetition, contrast, unity, and harmony beyond building structures and interior spaces and see them played out in the intricacies of design in woven clothing materials.

Researchers and practitioners identified visual composition style as "the arrangement of elements within a design" (Brown et al., 2016, p. 77). A typical composition technique is the rule of thirds. Other composition styles include line (leading and diagonal), framing, figure versus ground, fill the frame, dominant eyes, patterns and repetition, and symmetry. The adaptation of specific composition styles is identifiable in the picture-perfect marketing of tourist destinations, such as the white sand beaches of Boracay, the clear waters of El Nido, and the surging waves of Siargao.

The camera angle refers to how one composes a shot given the camera's location of the subject. Researchers and practitioners classified the camera

Figure 3
Basic Visual Literacy Concepts

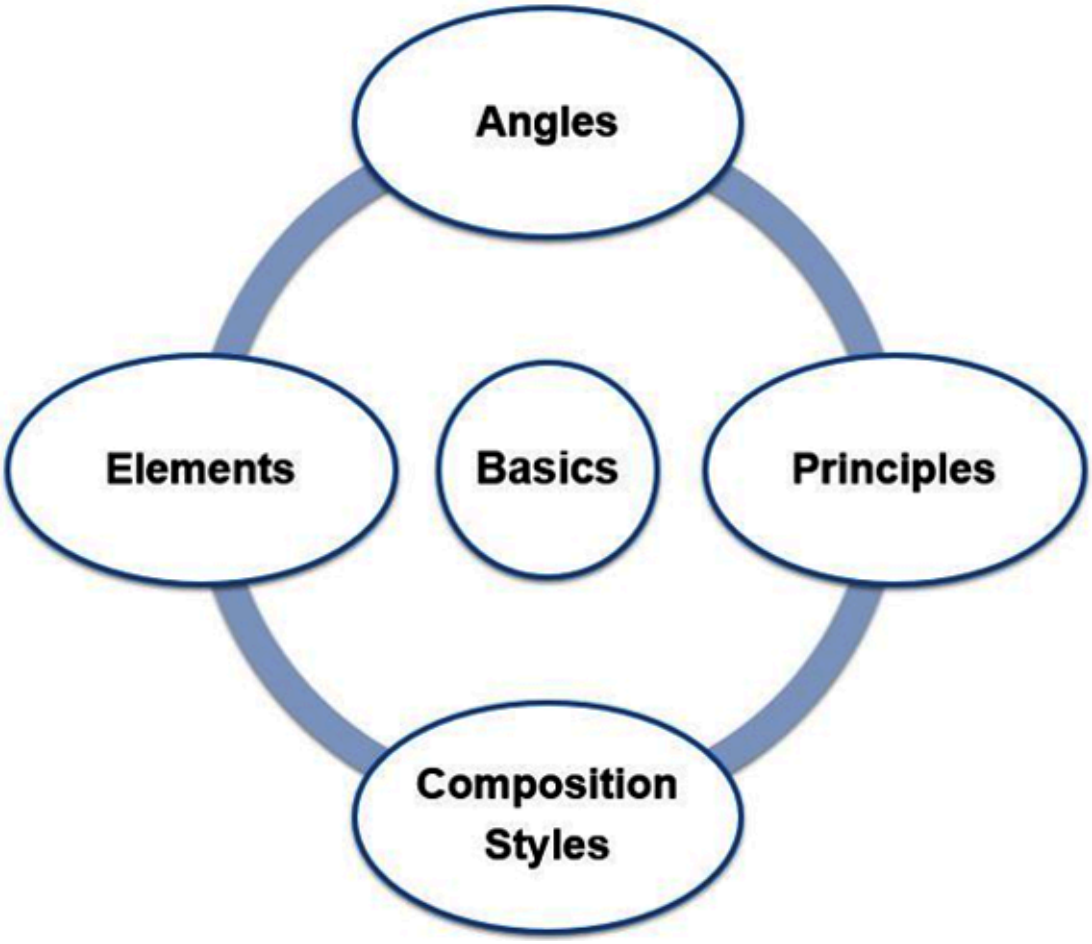
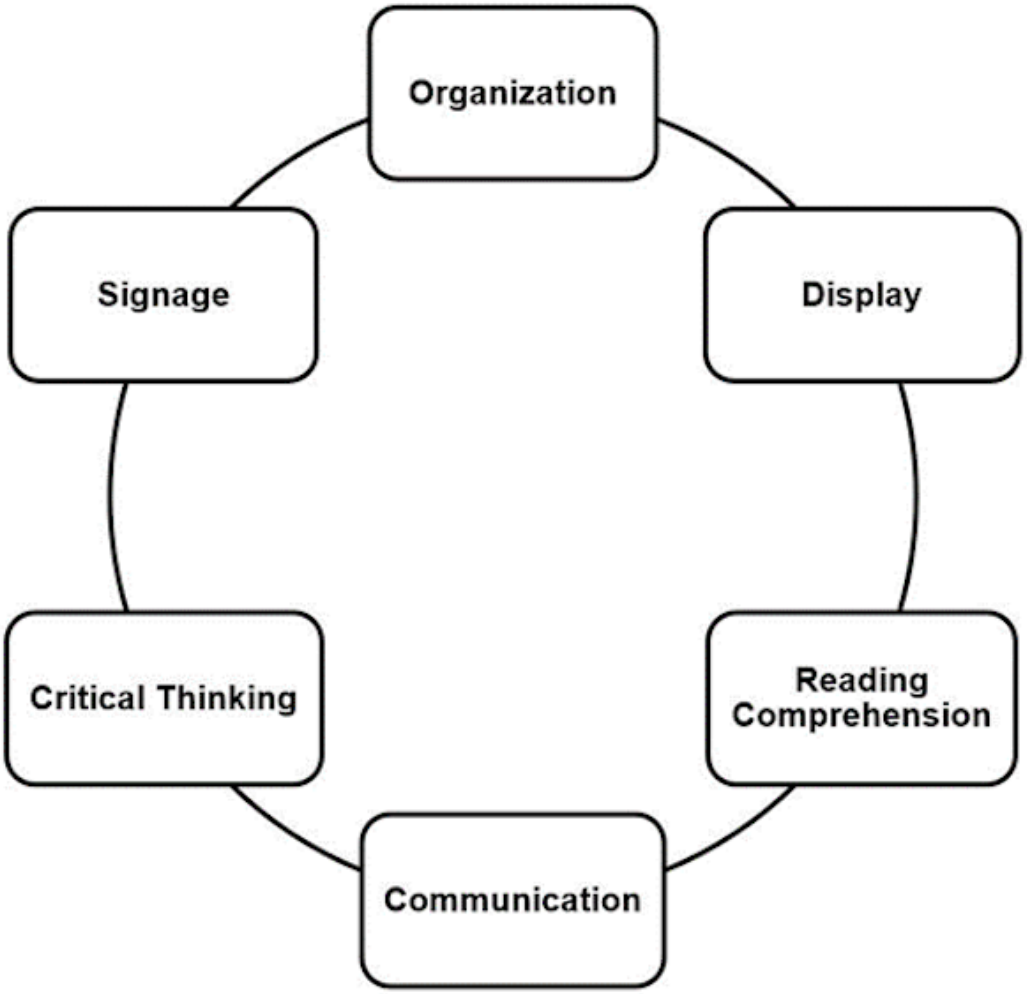


Figure 4
Areas of Impact by Visual Literacy Initiatives in Libraries and for Librarians



shot angle as eye level (front or back of the object), high angle (top), low angle (bottom), or diagonal (right or left). Using different camera angles to take a shot can provide different experiences for the viewer that may elicit an emotion. For many Filipinos, a wedding photoshoot would be much more memorable from different angles if taken in front of a historic landmark (Jaro Belfry), before a façade of a religious structure (Miagao Church), with the background of a manufactured wonder (Banaue Rice Terraces), or inside an intimate botanical space (Paco Park).

IMPLEMENTING VISUAL LITERACY IN PHILIPPINE LIBRARIES

The proliferation of fake news or information has impacted academic work quality. Today, librarians play a critical role in mitigating not only plagiarism but also the inability of users to find correct information (Prabowo & Manabat, 2021). Continued education through the delivery of information literacy programs has put librarians at the forefront in combatting access to and dissemination of false information. However, learners or library users could also benefit from participating in a visual literacy education program.

What visual literacy initiatives could Filipino librarians consider, given their contexts? Visual literacy could significantly impact teaching and learning needs in six areas (Organization, Signage, Display, Communication, Critical Thinking, Reading Comprehension) (see Figure 4).

Organization. Elements of color and space and principles of emphasis, alignment, and balance provide tools librarians could use to support their daily activities. For example, alignment and balance as principles could guide librarians in arranging materials

for visibility and ease of access. Further, colors are prominent highlighters in sorting voluminous reading materials. Colors are useful in communicating significant items in an article or book pages. Various colors could guide learners in determining what things must be stored and encoded for recall. Further, colors are useful in creating connections or identifying relationships between concepts and terminologies.

Signage. Guiding users in navigating the library space and finding resource materials is an important strategy that could benefit from good use of the visual element of lines, colors, and shapes. Using lines with arrows could assist in directing users to move from one library space to another. Also, color-coding the various spaces could guide users on how to use them. In using colors, a particular library section indicates various noise level zones, such as quiet, medium (paired interactions), and high (collaborative involving small groups). Finally, iconic images, such as computers, photocopiers, help desks, circulation desk, to name a few.

Display. Fluency in visual literacy knowledge could impact how librarians display their materials to attract users or create display materials to feature various resources. Basic visual elements, principles, and composition knowledge could generate inviting displays for various audiences. Visual literacy is understanding the messaging beyond the presentation using signs, symbols, icons, and colors. Visual literacy is about understanding and analyzing the contextual, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, intellectual, and technical components of producing and using visual materials. Visual literacy skills include designing and creating meaningful images and visual media. Incorporating visual literacy in display design is important in communicating effectively. Familiarity with the language of graphic design gives the creator a vocabulary to communicate visual ideas and culture and helps create more effective visual messages.

Communication. Visually literate individuals have good communication skills because they demonstrate skills in interpreting, evaluating, and creating visual artifacts (Harrison, n.d.; Watts, 2023). With these skills, they could use visual language to communicate and exchange ideas. Beyond understanding the technical components of artistic and design-oriented artifacts, visually literate persons would better interpret visual representations, such as maps, charts, and graphs. They could also analyze visuals as information carriers for contextual, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, and intellectual merits. Developing visual literacy contributes to strengthening communication skills. In the digital age, the use and production of visual media significantly impact communication.

Critical Thinking. Various visual elements are useful tools to create meaning or develop an understanding of the information presented before a viewer or reader. Students skilled in visual literacy can create meaning from images, improving their critical thinking skills and writing proficiency. Visualization tools, such as concept maps or mind maps, facilitate one's ability to discern patterns and relationships, contributing to critical thinking skills. With lines, arrows, and various shapes, one could connect related concepts or group them into meaningful categories or classifications. For example, the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) method is a simple activity designed to build students' background knowledge and develop thinking skills that use detail to enhance understanding, especially in museum education. Teachers can use VTS to help students analyze artwork and develop transferable skills for reading literature.

Reading Comprehension. Visual literacy is about more than just good eyesight and the ability to read text or written language in a book, website, or other media. It is about reading and understanding the textual content narrative supported by images. It is also an ability to read images in place of texts that communicate information to advance the acquisition of knowledge or skills. Visual literacy is the ability to interpret and use images effectively. It is a critical skill for 21st-century learners, as it builds stronger readers in managing texts and visuals combined to facilitate understanding. Further, using images to support reading encourages students to learn differently through reflection, analysis, interpretation, and knowledge construction.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Visual literacy is important for everyone, and the skills are essential today. Visual information is more memorable and transferable, transmitted or communicated faster. It is useful for studying arts or film and a critical skill for success in our increasingly image-saturated culture. Nevertheless, individuals need to navigate a visually complex world without intimidation. Educating for visual literacy fosters the development of critical readers, proficient writers, and strong critical thinkers.

Developing visual literacy skills helps learners communicate with the world around them through an enriched understanding of what they see. They become more educated in reading images, and non-English speakers have an easier time comprehending text-based

information coupled with pictures. Becoming visually literate increases the enjoyment of visuals in their surroundings as they develop visual literacy skills through various encoding and decoding techniques.

Filipino librarians have roles to play in developing visual literacy skills. By incorporating visual literacy strategies into lessons, encouraging visual literacy in the early years, using visual thinking routines, analyzing and evaluating visual media and sources, designing and creating meaningful images and visual media, and understanding the wider context surrounding the visual media, learners can develop their visual literacy skills and better understand the conveyed messages. Librarians can also develop teaching modules incorporating visual literacy concepts and use resources such as the ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education to guide their teaching.

Visual literacy is an important skill for Filipino learners in helping them improve their abilities to acquire knowledge and communicate with others. Filipino librarians could have a significant role in promoting the teaching of visual literacy skills among library users not only as academic support but also as a way of becoming effective critical thinkers, communicators, and collaborators during their education and in preparation for the world of work.

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