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Visual Competency

Visual competency is the process by which individuals operationalize the concept of visual literacy. Visual literacy is an approach to iconic thinking and the grammar of imagery, which continues the tradition of Debes (1968), Arnheim (1969) and Dondis (1973). Visual literacy is commonly illustrated in the constructs of visual learning, visual thinking, and visual communication, as proposed by Randhawa (1978). The relationships between visual thinking, learning, and communication are often explained as laying along a continuum from internal processing, thinking, to external action, communication (Moore & Dwyer, 1994). Visual messages existed before text-based messaging in the forms of prehistoric pictured communications and other symbol systems, but a single definition of visual literacy that enjoys the consensus of the visual literacy scholarly community is still evolving. However, all definitions of visual literacy refer to the ability to interpret and create visual messages (Smaldino, Lowther, & Russell, 2011). Thus, visual competency applies the concept of visual literacy to make meaning.

Visual Competency occurs through the application of seven abilities:

1. Analyze visual image needs
2. Efficiently locate visual images based on this need
3. Interpret meanings of visual images
4. Evaluate visual image sources
5. Effectively use visual images

6. Design and create visual images
7. Understand ethical, legal, social, and economic issues related to using visual images

(Visual Literacy Standards Task Force, 2012)

Accurately interpreting the meaning of a visual image depends upon the context, purpose, level of knowledge, interest, and situation (Choi, 2010). However, a semantic gap often occurs when context, purpose, level of knowledge, interest and situation are misaligned. A visually competent individual is able to close this gap through the application of collection knowledge (how to find), domain knowledge (what to find), and world knowledge (other issues) (Enser, 2000).

Hug (2011) defines visual competency as "those abilities and skills, which are necessary for exploring the tectonics of subjective, inherent and intended meanings and of the qualities of visuals (validity, comprehensibleness, coherence, tenability)" (p. 6). Müller (2008) defines visual competency as "a paradigm for basic research on the production, distribution, perception, interpretation and reception of visuals, aimed at understanding visual communication processes in different contemporary social, cultural and political contexts" (p. 103). Competence is comprised of four visual dimensions:

1. Production competence
2. Perception competence
3. Interpretation competence

4. Reception competence.

These four dimensions also comprise a visual competence cycle where perception influences meaning attribution, which translates to interpretation. Interpretation may evoke emotional and cognitive reactions, which, in turn, influences reception. Reception may evoke physical actions and/or reactions, which impact production. Production leads to dissemination, which is then perceived by individuals. The various definitions of visual competency represent the shifting importance of images and visual media in the changing landscape of what it means to be literate (Visual Literacy Standards Task Force, 2012). Therefore, it is important to evaluate the context in which visual competency is described when determining which definition to use.

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