Chapter 2
Visual Literacy in E-Learning
Instructional Design

ABSTRACT

Visual literacy refers to a deeper knowledge of what images convey, where the visual data comes from, how it is captured, how it may be manipulated, and how it may be deployed for the most effective conveyance of information. It may clarify nuanced messages embedded in imagery. This chapter addresses the principles of visual literacy in the context of e-learning. It will introduce some foundational terminology and visual phenomena. This will help readers evaluate the veracity of digital images and have a better understanding of digital visual effects. A sidebar by Jason Maseberg-Tomlinson shows the need for accessibility and how building this feature into an image is a part of visual literacy.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

- Explain some basic concepts and values of visual literacy
- Define visual literacy
- Explain the various angles of visual literacy related to digital imagery
- Introduce the importance of accessibility in visual literacy

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, there have been digital captures of mythical monsters, spaceships, and missing persons. Cell phones were lined up to “pop” kernels of corn. Public figures have used plenty of airbrushing of their...
images for publications and movies. Images with political implications have been launched to change people’s minds about one political candidate, scenario, or policy. There are “animated documentaries,” “edutainment,” and various mash-ups of different forms that confuse fact and fiction through visuals. Web information quality “ranges from very high to wrong to intentionally fraudulent” (Albers, 2007, p. 84).

People live and work in a “digital enclosure” of imagery of various qualities and provenance. Without some media savvy and visual literacy, people will continue to fall for illusions and digital sleight-of-hand. Even with the protections of visual literacy, given the sophistication of digital imagery creation and editing, and the massive floods of digital data (with less and less attention paid to their analysis), there may always be a degree of uncertainty as to the origins of an image and various interpretations of its meanings.

While there are some working definitions of information and media literacy, there’s not one widely accepted working one for visual literacy. Multiple disciplines, art history, education, rhetoric, philosophy, and graphic design, use this term. While visual literacy is not independent of a cultural context, there are some universals in the understanding of this term.

The rationale for having a working definition is to create an awareness of where visual images come from, how they may be manipulated, how to “question” the images, and how they are used in the world. This awareness may lead to a metacognition beyond the experiential.

This visual literacy may enhance an individual’s ability to engage the world of visual information with more savvy. Visual literacy relates to larger literacies needed for functioning in modern societies. “Anthropologists have found that literate human societies have evolved a wide range of literacies, each a complex set of practices and beliefs about communication and knowledge associated with particular educational, linguistic, and social contexts” (Walton & Vukovic, 2003, p. 65). These literacies involve awareness of visual conventions: “To be a ‘literate’ citizen one must increasingly be able to critically evaluate digital visual materials, make decisions using digital visual representations of data and ideas, and use computers to create effective visual communications” (Spalter & Tenneson, 2006, para. 1). It is important to realize that the media isn’t the only message, but the content is important (Franco, da Cruz & de Deus Lopes, 2006, para. 11). Ware quips: “We are all cognitive cyborgs in this Internet age in the sense that we rely heavily on cognitive tools to amplify our mental abilities” (2008, p. ix).

There have been some inroads made towards a definition, with one author illuminating some of the dimensions. “Visual literacy, like visual culture, is complex, multidimensional, and embedded within a range of visual, cognitive, aesthetic, and nonvisual (emotional, ethical) dimensions. The notion of the visual complex, that is, a relational or situational concept of visual studies, can arguably serve as a multidimensional and embedded working model, useful in providing the practical coherence for visual studies,” suggests P. Dallow (2008, p. 101).

Visual literacy involves plenty of background knowledge: what the visual capture, editing, and deployment technologies can do; the messages that images convey—both on a conscious level and a subconscious level; a “reverse engineering” awareness of how images were created; where the raw or originating imagery came from (if possible), and some ways to properly handle imagery. Visual literacy involves knowledge of relevant terminology. It also involves awareness of the legal information framework within which such images are used, with a role for ethics. Ideally, visual literacy would involve the ability to take part in this discourse, as a producer of imagery for others’ consumption.

Similarly, multimedia literacy involves both content and process literacy. The first involves understanding instructional messages from words, images, sounds, and actions. The process of literacy
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