Picturing the State of Visual Literacy Initiatives Today

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Abstract

This chapter provides an overview of the existing visual literacy and related visual arts education initiatives in the United States and abroad. Although prior literature explains previous initiatives or resources, no up-to-date resource exists to explain current initiatives, organizations, or resources – and much has changed in the intervening years. This chapter seeks to fill the void by outlining current visual literacy and related visual arts education initiatives that have been realized in several sectors: K-12 education standards; frameworks and standards outside of education; higher education initiatives; museum and education partnerships, national and international organizations; and industry initiatives. By examining these existing initiatives, it is possible to understand the current state of visual literacy and related visual arts education initiatives at home and abroad.

Keywords

visual literacy; visual literacy initiatives; higher education; K-12 education; curricula
**Introduction**

Imagine a world in which students – from grade school to graduate school – knew how to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, use, and create images and visual media. Teachers and professors would be free from the worry that the rapidly increasing rate, the ease of duplication and transmission, the increase in the available channels, or the contradictions and inaccuracies in the visual information available online would stymie their students. The age of visual literacy would have dawned, and students would be empowered to participate in the visual culture in which they find themselves. Unfortunately, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, this is not the case. Visual literacy as a concept (at fifty years and counting) has yet to be integrated systemically into education systems.

Accepting this state of affairs as evidence that visual literacy is not regarded as a societal priority (Pauwels, 2008), this lack of systematic inclusion can be explained in two ways. The first is a lack of an established definition (Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011). In the past fifty years, establishing a definition for visual literacy has been a primary goal of scholars (Ausburn & Ausburn, 1978; Avgerinou & Ericson, 1997; Michelson, 2017; Serafini, 2017) but, as of yet, scholars have yet to agree what it means to be visually literate (Avgerinou, 2003; Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011; Brill, Kim, & Branch, 2007). The second is the multitude of disciplines which explore visual literacy (Blummer, 2015). As Hattwig, Bussert, Medaille, and Burgess note, visual literacy “has evolved into a multifaceted, interdisciplinary concept” and “its scope and definition are dynamic and have often been crafted to best fit particular contexts” (Hattwig, Bussert, Medaille, & Burgess, 2013, p. 62-63). Visual literacy as a concept has been discussed in such different disciplines and ‘particular contexts’ as art history, anatomy, architecture, astronomy, biology, business, civil engineering, chemistry,
computer science, dentistry, economics, education, geography, geology, history, law, library science, linguistics, mathematics, medicine, occupational therapy, oceanography, philosophy, psychology, rhetoric, semiotics, sociology, and zoology (Avgerinou 1997; Bamford 2003; Elkins, 2007; Schellenberg, 2015). While it would appear that the exploration of visual literacy across many disciplines would indicate inclusion into the curricula, these explorations lack a common language; each exploration stands on its own, in its own context, rather than as one part of a whole.

Although many disciplines have explored visual literacy, crafting the concept to fit their particular disciplinary needs, and even though an established definition eludes the field, this multi-faceted, interdisciplinary concept is evident in many previous and current independent education initiatives. Taking stock of visual literacy resources in 2007, Alessia Zanin-Yost described twenty-six available articles, databases, online projects, and organizations (Zanin-Yost, 2007). Following quickly, Peter Felten published a resource review for visual literacy that included twenty-five publications and twelve websites (Felten, 2008). The most recent examination comes from Barbara Blummer, who conducted a literature review of ninety-four published visual literacy initiatives in academic institutions from 1999 to 2014 (Blummer, 2015, p. 22).

Even though each of these works sheds light on previously existing initiatives or resources, no up-to-date resource exists to explain current initiatives, organizations, and resources – and much has changed in the intervening years. This chapter seeks to fill the void by outlining twenty-one current visual literacy initiatives and eighteen related visual arts education initiatives that have been realized in six sectors: K-12 education standards; frameworks and standards outside of education; higher education initiatives; museum and education...
partnerships, national and international organizations; and industry initiatives. By examining these existing initiatives, it becomes possible to understand the current state of visual literacy and related visual arts education initiatives at home and abroad. The following review highlights these current initiatives.

**Visual Literacy Initiatives, Standards, and Organizations**

**K-12 Standards**

*Australian F-10 Curriculum*

The Australian F-10 Curriculum is the national curriculum for all primary and secondary schools in Australia and, since 2014, all states and territories have implemented this curriculum. There are seven general capabilities in this curriculum: literacy, numeracy, information and communication technology, critical and creative thinking, personal and social, ethical understanding, and intercultural understanding. ‘Visual Knowledge’ is an element of the literacy capability:

> This element involves students understanding how visual information contributes to the meanings created in learning area texts. Students interpret still and moving images, graphs, tables, maps and other graphic representations, and understand and evaluate how images and language work together in distinctive ways in different curriculum areas to present ideas and information in the texts they compose and comprehend. In developing and acting with literacy, students understand how visual elements create meaning. (Australian Curriculum, 2018a)

The “learning continuum of literacy” of the curriculum explains the learning outcomes for each grade level, specifically referring to Levels 1-6, which roughly corresponds to American K-12 levels. For example, by the end of Foundation Year, students should be able to “recognize the different meanings of words and images in imaginative and informative texts” and by the end of Year 10, students should be able to “evaluate the impact of different visual
choices in the composition of images, including symbolic images and movement of camera or light, to achieve different nuances” (Australian Curriculum, 2018b).

United States K-12 Curriculum

Common Core State Standards Initiative

Developed in 2010, the Common Core State Standards Initiative is an educational initiative that outlines K-12 English language arts and mathematics competencies for students in the United States. There are several English language arts standards that specifically reference visuals:

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.7: “Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.”
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7: “Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.”
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.6: “Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.”
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1: “Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.” (Finley, 2014, para. 3)

These standards seek to establish baseline knowledge across the United States and ensure that students are prepared for college or the workforce upon graduating high school. Referencing communication, the introduction to Reading the Standards states “Students must learn to work together, express and listen carefully to ideas, integrate information from oral, visual, quantitative, and media sources, evaluate what they hear, use media and visual displays strategically to help achieve communicative purposes, and adapt speech to context and task” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2018, para. 8). Extremely contentious because of perceived political motives, not all states have formally adopted the Common Core Standards. To date, forty-one states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) have adopted the standards.
Frameworks and Standards outside of Education

Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education

Published in 2011, the ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education provides a comprehensive definition of visual literacy for the twenty-first century, defining visual literacy 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 [ACRL], 2011, para. 2). The standards also include performance indicators and learning outcomes for higher education students. The seven standards are:

- Standard 1: The visually literate student determines the nature and extent of the visual materials needed.
- Standard 2: The visually literate student finds and accesses needed images and visual media effectively and efficiently.
- Standard 3: The visually literate student interprets and analyzes the meaning of images and visual media.
- Standard 4: The visually literate student evaluates images and their sources.
- Standard 5: The visually literate student uses images and visual media effectively.
- Standard 6: The visually literate student designs and creates meaningful images and visual media.
- Standard 7: The visually literate student understands many of the ethical, legal, social, and economic issues surrounding the creation and use of images and visual media, and accesses and uses visual materials ethically. (ACRL, 2011)

The document further explains the purpose of the standards, the goals of the standards, and how to use the standards:

The Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education establish an intellectual framework and structure to facilitate the development of skills and competencies required for students to engage with images in an academic environment, and critically use and produce visual media throughout their professional lives. The Standards articulate observable learning outcomes that can be taught and assessed, supporting efforts to develop measurable improvements in student visual literacy. In addition to providing tools for educators across disciplines, the Standards offer a common language for discussing student use of visual materials in academic work and beyond. (ACRL, 2011, para. 6)
These standards are the first to develop and articulate learning outcomes and performance indicators for visual literacy in higher education.

**Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy**

This framework was created from 2013 to 2016 by the European Network for Visual Literacy (ENViL) (see Organizations for more information), as part of the European Union funded project ‘Development of a Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy’ (CEFR-VL). The framework defines visual literacy as “a group of acquired competencies for the production and reception of images and objects as well as for the reflection on these processes” (Haanstra and Wagner, 2017, p. 1).

Figure 1. Basic dimensions of Visual Literacy (left) and Differentiation of sub-competencies (right) of the CEFR–VL competency model

Presented at the 2016 International Society for Education through Art (InSEA) conference (see Organizations for more information), the framework “describes the knowledge, skills and
attitudes students have to obtain (and own) to be considered visually competent. The competencies are related to specific situations in daily life as well as domain-specific competencies” (Wagner & Laven, 2015, p. 1). The framework provides a structural competence model of what can be learned in art education by defining levels of competence with respective scales (International Society for Education through Art, n.d., para. 1). The framework, published in English, French, and German, is meant to “cover national, regional, and subject-specific traditions in the diverse European context” (Haanstra and Wagner, 2017, p. 2) and to “describe and reflect art education practice in specific countries or situations” (International Society for Education through Art, n.d., para. 1).

**Learning Framework – The Jacob Burns Film Center, in Pleasantville, New York, USA**

The Jacob Burns Film Center (JCFC) is a nonprofit cultural arts center “dedicated to teaching literacy for a visual culture” and created the Learning Framework “based on a decade of experience with over 100,000 students” which “provides a progression of vocabulary, concepts, critical and creative thinking skills to support fluency with visual and aural communication for learners at all stages of their development” (Jacob Burns Film Center [JBFC], 2014a, para. 2).
Figure 2. Jacob Burns Film Center Learning Framework

Each level explains the essential understanding or learning outcome. For example, the Level One ‘Essential Understanding’ of ‘Viewing’ states “Visual texts use images and sounds to tell stories” and Level Six states “Deep, critical understanding is formed by the synthesis of the visual text, the creators’ point of view and the viewer’s subjectivity” (JBFC, 2014b). According to the JBFC, the framework serves to provide “a benchmark for literacy in today’s visual culture” (JBFC, 2014b). The JBFB provides resources for schools, teachers, and community organizations and has aligned their programs with the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy (JBFB, 2014c). The center has also developed the “Image, Sound, and Story” curriculum which “provides a scaffolded progression to support learners as they develop their visual and aural communication skills.” There are ten “curricular strands”: image, sound, story, character, setting, structure, mood, point of view, theme, and style. According to their website, “each curricular strand has ten projects designed to develop students’ visual literacy through viewing and discussing curated media; completing short activities called ‘View
Now Do Nows’; capturing and editing images and video; and revising and reflecting on their work” (JBFB, 2014c).

**The Art of Seeing Art™ – Toledo Museum of Art in Toledo, Ohio, USA**

The Art of Seeing Art™ is part of the visual literacy campaign developed by the Toledo Museum of Art (see Industry Initiatives and Museum and Education Partnerships for other initiatives developed by the Toledo Museum of Art).

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**SIX STEPS TO UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOU SEE**

**LOO**

The first step in the Art of Seeing Art™ process, looking may seem pretty obvious. But it is so important that it is worth calling special attention to. Allow yourself to take the time to slow down and look carefully.

**OBSERVE**

Observation is where close looking comes into play. Observation is an active process, requiring both time and attention. It is here that the viewer begins to build up a mental catalogue of the image’s visual elements.

**SEE**

Looking is a physical act; seeing is a mental process of perception. Seeing involves recognizing or connecting the information the eyes take in with your previous knowledge and experiences in order to create meaning. This requires time and attention.

**DESCRIBE**

Describing can help you to identify and organize your thoughts about what you have seen. It may be helpful to think of describing as taking a careful inventory. What figures, objects, and setting do you recognize?

**ANALYZE**

Analysis uses the details you identified in your descriptions and applies reason to make meaning. Analysis is also an opportunity to consider how the figures, objects, and setting you identified in your description fit together to tell a story.

**INTERPRET**

Interpretation, the final step in the Art of Seeing Art™ process, combines our descriptions and analysis with our previous knowledge and any information we have about the artist and the work. Interpretation allows us to draw conclusions about the image.

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**Figure 3. The Art of Seeing Art™**

Six steps comprise the process of viewing art and images found in everyday life: look, observe, see, describe, analyze, and interpret:

- **Look**: The first step in The Art of Seeing Art™ process, looking may seem pretty obvious. But it is so important that it is worth calling special attention to. Allow yourself to take the time to slow down and look carefully.
• Observe: Observation is where close looking comes into play. Observation is an active process, requiring both time and attention. It is here that the viewer begins to build up a mental catalogue of the image’s visual elements.

• See: Looking is a physical act; seeing is a mental process of perception. Seeing involves recognizing or connecting the information the eyes take in with your previous knowledge and experiences in order to create meaning. This requires time and attention.

• Describe: Describing can help you to identify and organize your thoughts about what you have seen. It may be helpful to think of describing as taking a careful inventory. What figures, objects and setting do you recognize?

• Analyze: Analysis uses the details you identified in your descriptions and applies reason to make meaning. Analysis is also an opportunity to consider how the figures, objects and settings you identified in your description fit together to tell a story.

• Interpret: Interpretation, the final step in the Art of Seeing Art™ process, combines our descriptions and analysis with our previous knowledge and any information we have about the artist and the work. Interpretation allows us to draw conclusions about the image. (Toledo Museum of Art, 2018)

The framework walks the participant through each step, outlining questions and considerations for each. Opportunities for exploring visual literacy at the museum include classes, workshops, tours, and gallery experiences.

**Higher Education Initiatives**

*Center for Digital and Visual Literacy – Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Georgia, USA*

Originally funded from 2015 to 2017 by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Center for Digital and Visual Literacy was created to support the establishment of a program for digital and visual literacy. In 2017, the Center was awarded an additional grant to support initiatives to strengthen digital literacy efforts (Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, 2018) and the mission of the center has seemingly shifted to support digital literacy more so than visual literacy. According to their website, “the Center for Digital and Visual Literacy is a resource for staff, students and faculty to cultivate digital literacy. The center employs staff and student tutors who help facilitate the exploration of problem-solving options that advance digital and visual skills for academic, personal, and professional projects, ideas, and use” (Agnes Scott College, n.d., para.
1). The focus has shifted to helping students and faculty with the creation, curation, and maintenance of digital portfolios, online presence, and projects for academic and professional use.

**Center for Visual Literacies – San Diego State University (SDSU) in San Diego, California, USA**

The mission of the Center for Visual Literacies is to improve student learning through visually integrated teaching practices and explore the potential of visuals as data and for data analysis in qualitative inquiry (San Diego State University [SDSU], n.d.). According to their website, “The need for applying methodologies that deal with non-text/non-verbal data is high, particularly at a time when cultural mediation is dominated by image-based communication and in an area like San Diego with a high population of English learners” (SDSU, n.d.). The website contains resources such as a bibliography, list of online image banks, and teaching videos. The center is funded by the SDSU President’s Leadership Fund and the SDSU College of Education.

**Project Vis – Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York, USA**

The Project Vis initiative, funded from 2014 to 2017 by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, created “two central homes for visual studies on campus:” the John B. Moore Documentary Studies Collaborative (MDOCS) and the Program for Media and Film Studies (Project Vis) (Skidmore College, 2018, para. 1). Project Vis is now part of the Center for Leadership, Teaching, and Learning (CLTL) at Skidmore College and will continue “to enhance the ability of faculty, staff, and students to create and understand visual media, and to increase visual literacy throughout the campus community” (Skidmore College, 2018, para. 2). According to their website, the initiative will do this by promoting:

- a network for faculty teaching courses with visual content and otherwise engaged in visual studies
• faculty and staff collaboration with external specialists to supplement our own expertise
• partnerships with other institutions and organizations
• faculty and staff development and student learning opportunities that build on existing strengths, to encourage and expand visual media and literacy
• support for students as they transfer and apply their visual knowledge across courses and disciplines
• the integration of visual literacy in the context of Skidmore’s Goals for Student Learning and Development
• the development of a mechanism for assessing visual literacy (Skidmore College, 2018)

Additionally, the initiative created the Visual Literacy Forum which supports visual literacy across the college through workshops and programming.

Teach Visual – DePauw College in Greencastle, Indiana, USA; Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio, USA; and The College of Wooster in Wooster, Ohio, USA

Funded by the Great Lakes College Association Expanding Collaboration Initiative, a professional development program with major funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Teach Visual is a centralized web repository and portal for visual literacy resources. It includes assessment tools, assignments, lesson plans, syllabi, and readings about object-based learning in a liberal arts context (Great Lakes Colleges Association Museums, 2016). Educators are also encouraged to submit their own materials for consideration and inclusion. Sample assignments include “Dissecting Works of Art,” “Poetry and Painting in the 17th Century,” and “Close Looking Activities.”

Visual Literacy InFUSION Project – Lesley University in Boston, Massachusetts, USA

In 2015, Lesley University received a two year grant from the Davis Educational Foundation to “integrate teaching visual and textual based teaching methods across all disciplines” and enabled undergraduate faculty in the College of Art and Design to collaborate with colleagues in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (Cambridge Chronicle and Tab, 2015, para. 1). Sixteen faculty, eight from each college, were tasked with designing innovative teaching method and to
“explore multiple literacies in model interdisciplinary teaching projects such as teaching history by analyzing photographs rather than text, or teaching art students to articulate what they see through more writing” (Cambridge Chronicle and Tab, 2015, para. 4). As a capstone to the project, Lesley University hosted the 49th Annual International Visual Literacy Association (IVLA) (see Organizations for more information) conference in 2017 to showcase piloted projects and explain new pedagogical approaches for undergraduate teaching. According to their website, this professional development program will continue to use visual literacy to inform undergraduate learning experiences (Lesley University, 2018).

The Visual Literacy Toolbox: Learning to Read Images – University of Maryland College Park in College Park, Maryland, USA

Also known as Teaching Visual Literacy to Students with Technology, this initiative is funded by the Center for Teaching Excellence, the College of Arts and Humanities, the Department of History and the Visual Resources Center of the University of Maryland College Park. It includes learning outcomes, lesson plans, online activities, and a question bank. Examples of activity plans include “Literary Visualization,” “Media Analysis,” and “Visual Images: Seeing Everything in the Picture” (University of Maryland College Park, n.d.). Important to note, the site contains broken links. The date of the project is indeterminable, however, the project is listed in Alessia Zanin-Yost’s 2007 article “Visual literacy resources on the web,” and it is also widely cited on the web as a visual literacy resource. For that reason, it has been included here although it cannot be confirmed whether or not the resource is current.

Museum and Education Partnerships

Advanced Placement Classroom Visual Literacy Video Series – The Georgia Department of Education, the High Museum of Art, and Georgia Public Broadcasting in Atlanta, Georgia, USA
The Georgia Department of Education, the High Museum of Art, and Georgia Public Broadcasting jointly created a video series on visual literacy for the Advanced Placement classroom. The goal of the videos is to “provide teachers with instructional strategies and effective classroom activities for teaching visual literacy” and for teachers to “use these videos to help students interpret, analyze, and write about art and other non-text materials as it relates to their subject areas (Georgia Department of Education, 2018). The series covers an overview of strategies for using visual literacy in the classroom as well as teaching visual literacy in Art History, English Language and Composition, English Literature and Composition, Human Geography, World History, US History, and European History and within a museum setting. The videos are available to watch for free.

RETINA (RE-thinking Technical Interventions to Advance visual literacy of young people in art museums) Research Project - the University of Leuven (KU Leuven) in conjunction with the following museums: M Museum in Leuven, Belgium; Ludwig Forum in Aachen, Germany; Design Museum in Ghent, Belgium; Art and History Museum in Brussel, Belgium; and Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, Netherlands and the following research institutes at the University of Leuven: HIVA Research Institute for Work and Society and the Meaningful Interactions Lab (Mintlab)

The RETINA research project’s main goal is “to support art museums in defining digital strategies with regards to the topic of visual literacy” (KU Leuven, 2018). Specifically, the project wants to do this by “support[ing] national and international art museums in defining digital strategies with regards to the topic of visual literacy that appeal to the audience of young people; and use[ing] digital technologies to encourage the transfer of visual literacy abilities beyond the museum walls” (Mintlab, 2018). The university has partnered with the aforementioned museums and research centers, taking a participatory design research approach to achieve these goals. As of this writing, the results have not been published but are expected by November 2018.
Toledo Museum of Art and the University of Toledo in Toledo, Ohio, USA

The Toledo Museum of Art and the University of Toledo have partnered “to develop a campus-wide initiative in visual literacy that is available to all UT students across all majors” (University of Toledo, 2018a). The partnership includes the Toledo Museum of Art’s Center of Visual Expertise (COVE) (see Industry Initiatives for more information) and the University of Toledo’s Center for the Visual Arts in art education, Jesup Scott Honors College in interdisciplinary learning, and University Libraries. The initiative has created the following curriculum modules which can be integrated into existing courses: “Image Use, Search, and Appropriation;” “Infographic Interpretation and Creation;” “Visualizing Data; Translating Ideas through Images and Social Media: Second Law of Thermodynamics;” and “Principles of Design” (University of Toledo, 2018b).

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)

Visual Thinking Strategies is a research-based education nonprofit that offers consulting, curriculum, online summer series, school programs, and workshops to museums, schools, and colleges and universities. VTS is known for the Visual Thinking Strategies Method, an inquiry-based teaching strategy for all grade levels (Visual Thinking Strategies, 2018). The method is used to develop critical thinking, communication, and visual literacy skills and primarily consists of three questions:

1. What’s going on in this picture?
2. What do you see that makes you say that?
3. What more can you find?

Facilitators are responsible for asking the questions, paraphrasing the answers, and facilitating discussion. Students and participants discuss their observations, back up their ideas with
evidence, and ultimately, discuss multiple interpretations of the object of study (Visual Thinking Strategies, 2018).

Organizations

Association for Education Communications and Technology

Established in 1923 as the National Education Association’s Department of Visual Instruction, the Association for Education Communications and Technology (AECT) is primarily concerned with “promoting scholarship and best practices in the creation, use, and management of technologies for effective teaching and learning” (Association for Education Communications and Technology [AECT], 2018a, para. 4). The organization is comprised of eleven projects/committees: Culture, Learning, and Technology; Design and Development; Distance Learning; Emerging Learning Technologies; Graduate Student Assembly; International; Organizational Training and Performance; Research and Theory; School Media and Technology; Systems Thinking and Change; and Teacher Education. Members are from such varied backgrounds as the Armed Forces, colleges and universities, hospitals, libraries, and museums (AECT, 2018b, para. 1). The association produces two print bimonthly journals, *Educational Technology Research and Development* and *TechTrends*, and three electronic journals, *Journal of Formative Design in Learning*, *The Journal of Applied Instructional Design*, and the *International Journal of Designs for Learning*.

Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication – Visual Communication Division

The Visual Communication division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC VisCom) represents a variety of application, research, and teaching methodologies relating to advertising, broadcast, digital imaging, film, graphic design, multimedia, Web design, app design, computational journalism, photojournalism, propaganda
images, human-centered design, visual images and culture, visual literacy, and visual aspects of political campaigns (Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, 2018). AEJMC VisCom also hosts several competitions during the annual AEJMC conference: the annual Best of the Web competition with the Communication Technology Division, the AEJMC logo competition, the Creative Projects competition, and student and faculty research paper competitions. Since 1994, the division has published the journal *Visual Communication Quarterly*.

*European Network for Visual Literacy*

The European Network for Visual Literacy (ENViL) was established in 2010 and is funded by the European Commission. From 2013 to 2016, the organization was responsible for developing the European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy (see *Frameworks and Standards outside of Education*), a project supported by the European Union under the Lifelong Learning Programme in 2014 and 2015. The organization is comprised of art teachers, curriculum developers, specialists of didactics, and teacher trainers from twenty-five countries in Europe. Specific working groups include topics such as assessment/visual rubrics, competence levels, early childhood education, museum education, the theory of artistic thinking, and the visual language of adolescents (European Network for Visual Literacy, 2018).

*International Visual Literacy Association*

The International Visual Literacy Association (IVLA) was established in 1968 and is a nonprofit association of artists, designers, educators, media specialists, and researchers who are “dedicated to the principles of visual literacy” (International Visual Literacy Association [IVLA], 2014, para. 1). Members come from diverse backgrounds, including but not limited to: the arts, business, communication, computer applications, education, health, instructional technology,
photography, and videography. According to their website, “IVLA was formed for the purpose of providing a forum for the exchange of information related to visual literacy. We are also concerned with issues dealing with education, instruction and training in modes of visual communication and their application through the concept of visual literacy to individuals, groups, organizations, and to the public in general” (IVLA, 2014, para. 2). The association produces the *Journal of Visual Literacy*, which from 1981 to 1988 was known as the *Journal of Visual Verbal Languaging*.

**Industry Initiatives**

*Seeing the Whole PICTURE™ – Center for Visual Expertise*

Developed by the Toledo Museum of Art, a partner of the Campbell Institute at the National Safety Council, and opened in 2018, the Center for Visual Expertise (COVE) teaches visual literacy within the occupational safety industry. According to their website, as part of the visual literacy training program “COVE has developed a series of training modules to help integrate Visual Literacy into your health and safety programs — to mitigate risk and improve safety” (Center for Visual Expertise [COVE], 2018). The Toledo Museum of Art and Campbell Institute have published two white papers which informed the creation of COVE: “Visual Literacy: How ‘Learning to See’ Benefits Occupational Safety” (2017) and “A Second Look: Update on Visual Literacy” (2018) (Campbell Institute, 2017).

**Related Visual Arts Education Initiatives, Organizations, and Standards**

**K-12 Standards**

Although public schools in the United States are required to meet local and state standards, it is not mandatory that they follow national standards. While some states have adopted national
standards as their state standards, other states merely use national standards to inform the development of their own standards. Because of this wide variance, standardization across the curricula exists in degrees. The following are several examples of existing national standards that relate to visual literacy.

*Content-Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education*

Published in 1995 by the Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), a private, 501 (c)(3) education research and development corporation, the “Compendium” has now been mapped to the Common Core standards. However, McREL still lists the original standards for subjects ranging from the arts to technology on their website. Standard Nine of the Language Arts standard specifically relates to visuals: “Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media” (Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, 2014). The standard is broken down by grade level (Level Pre-K corresponds to pre-kindergarten; Level One corresponds to kindergarten to second grade; Level Two corresponds to third to fifth grade; Level Three corresponds to sixth to eighth grade; Level Four corresponds to ninth to twelfth grade.) Learning outcomes are listed for each level.

*National Core Arts Standards*

In 2014, the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards published the National Core Arts Standards (NCAS), a revision of the original standards published in 1994. According to their website, since 2014:

…twenty-seven states and the Department of Defense have adopted revised arts standards in one or more arts disciplines. An additional state, New Hampshire, has updated Arts Competencies for its schools. Currently, ten states are in the process of revising their state arts standards. Some states have adopted the voluntary national standards as their own, other states reviewed or made changes to their standards employing the National Core Arts Standards as one of their revision sources. Many states have acknowledged the emerging art form of media arts by adopting standards for education in the media arts as a
part of their revision processes. As of January 31, 2018, 22 of the states that have revised their standards or competencies, twenty-two have added standards for media arts education and an additional three states that are in the process of revising will be including media arts standards (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards [NCCAS], 2018a, para. 2).

The standards are broken down by discipline (dance, media arts, music, theater, and visual arts) and include four ‘artistic processes’ (creating, performing/presenting/producing, responding, and connecting). Each process lists an anchor standard, enduring understanding, and essential question(s). The categories range from pre-k to eighth grade and high school is listed as proficient to accomplished to advanced.

![Figure 1. Example of the National Core Arts Standards for the Visual Arts – Creating Standard.](image)

The intent of the standards is to “inform curriculum, instruction and assessment nationwide and improve student learning and achievement in the arts by defining artistic literacy, shaping policy and research, influencing teacher training, practice and evaluation, and clarifying connections between the arts and 21st century skills” (NCCAS, 2018b, para. 2).
National Council of Teachers of English Standards

Originally published in 1996 by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association and reaffirmed in 2012, the Standards for the English Language Arts is designed to complement other national, state, and local standards. Out of the twelve standards listed, two apply directly to visual education:

- **Standard 4**: Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
- **Standard 12**: Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).
  
  (National Council of Teachers of English, 2012)

In their explanation of the need for the standards, the authors write:

> Being literate in contemporary society means being active, critical, and creative users not only of print and spoken language but also of the visual language of film and television, commercial and political advertising, photography, and more. Teaching students how to interpret and create visual texts such as illustrations, charts, graphs, electronic displays, photographs, film, and video is another essential component of the English language arts curriculum” (International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English, 1996, p. 5).

The National Council of Teachers of English currently has over 25,000 members and offers access to ten peer-reviewed journals and resources such as books, lesson plans, policy briefs, and research summaries on their website (National Council of Teachers of English, 2018).

**Higher Education Initiatives**

*Alliance for the Arts in Research Universities – University of Michigan in partnership with over forty other institutions*

Officially founded in 2012, the Alliance for the Arts in Research Universities (a2ru) is “committed to transforming research universities to ensure the greatest possible institutional support for arts-integrative research, curricula, programs and creative practice between the arts,
sciences, and other disciplines” (Alliance for the Arts in Research Universities [a2ru], 2018a, para. 1). The organization seeks to accomplish this by:

- Researching best practices for arts-integrative research, curricula, and creative practice in research universities
- Providing venues for presentation, leadership and faculty networking, and dissemination of research and creative scholarship
- Advocating for and promoting arts and design practices as fundamental forms of knowledge production applicable to all disciplines (a2ru, 2018b)

Each partner institution has a profile which gives an overview of the relevant major, center, and/or college, and the projects which the institution has undertaken. Founding partner institutions include Arizona State University, Dartmouth College, James Madison University, Johns Hopkins University, Louisiana State University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Penn State, Tufts University, The University of Alabama, The University of Alabama at Birmingham, University of Colorado Boulder, University of Florida, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, University of Iowa, University of Michigan, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, University of Virginia, Virginia Commonwealth University, and Virginia Tech (a2ru, 2018c).

How Do You Look? – Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, USA

How Do You Look?, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and sponsored by the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in cooperation with Duke Libraries, was created to promote visual literacy. It is possible to sort the homepage (dated 2013) by Frameworks, Medium, and Periods and Cultures. ‘Frameworks’ includes looking, exhibitions, and collection, collectors, and collections. ‘Medium’ includes paintings, prints, drawings, sculpture, photography, collage and mixed media, multimedia and new media, and installation art. ‘Periods and Cultures’ includes classical art, medieval art, outsider and folk art, African art, art of the Americas, art of Asia, art
of the Islamic world, and Russian art (Nasher Museum of Art, 2013). Each category gives background on the selected subject and a bibliography. The website also includes resources for researching, writing, and teaching with visual materials.

*Project Zero – Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA*

Established in 1967, Project Zero was founded to “study and improve education in the arts” (Harvard University, 2016a). Today, topics of interest include arts and aesthetics; assessment, evaluation, and documentation; civic engagement; cognition, thinking, and understanding; collaboration and group learning; digital life and learning; disciplinary and interdisciplinary studies; ethics at work; global and cultural understanding; humanities and liberal arts; leadership and organizational learning; learning environments; making and design; and science learning. Topics can be explored by level, such as early childhood, primary/elementary school, secondary/high school, higher education, and adult and lifelong learning. The organization also offers online courses for professional development which include “Creating Cultures of Thinking,” “Making Learning Visible,” “Multiple Intelligences,” “Teaching for Understanding,” “Thinking and Learning in the Maker-Centered Classroom,” and “Visible Thinking” (Harvard University, 2016b). With over eighty different projects and links to articles, books, tools, and videos, Project Zero has established itself as a valuable resource for exploring “the challenges facing education today and tomorrow” (Harvard University, 2016a).

**Museum and Education Partnerships**

*ARTSEDGE – The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, District of Columbia, USA*

Established in 1996, ARTSEDGE is the “educational media art” of the Kennedy Center which serves to reach out to schools, communities, individuals, and families with printed materials,
classroom support and internet technologies (Kennedy Center, 2018a). The website is divided into sections for “Educators,” “Families,” and “Students” as well as by “Collections” and “Media.” Lesson plans, audio stories, video clips, and interactive online modules are available to browse in addition to “how-to’s” and standards. The standards featured on the site are the 1994 version of the National Core Arts Standards. Although the website mentions that ARTSEDGE is “working to include the new standards along with existing standards during the transition period” (Kennedy Center, 2018b), since the “new standards” were updated four years ago, it is unclear if the site is actively being updated.

Organizations

Association for Visual Pedagogies

In 2016, the Video Journal of Education and Pedagogy (VJEP) was established. The Association for Visual Pedagogies (AVP) was subsequently created to support the VJEP and promote the emerging field of visual pedagogies. The VJEP is the first video journal in the field of education, and is open-access and peer-reviewed. Subjects include educational practices, teacher education, classroom teacher and child observation, and structured interviews with educators involved in studying visuality in education and society. According to their website “It aims also to provide a research forum for the production of video articles to facilitate video data collection, production and analysis. The journal aims to develop integrated visual approaches to educational research and practitioner knowledge in order to encourage innovation and to establish new research frontiers in education” (Association for Visual Pedagogies, n.d., para. 2). Founded in New Zealand, the association includes institutional members from Croatia, Denmark, New Zealand, Norway, Taiwan, and the United States.
College Art Association

Established in 1911, the College Art Association (CAA) “promotes these [visual] arts and their understanding through advocacy, intellectual engagement, and a commitment to the diversity of practices and practitioners” (College Art Association, 2018). The organization publishes professional practices guidelines, intellectual property guidelines, and diversity practices guidelines as well as two academic journals, The Art Bulletin and Art Journal, and two online publications, caareviews and Art Journal Open. The CAA also publishes an online directory of affiliated societies with over seventy organizations included. Several professional development opportunities exist such as the annual conference, awards, graduate student fellowships, publishing grants, and travel grants.

EDUCAUSE

According to their website, “EDUCAUSE is a nonprofit association whose mission is to advance higher education through the use of information technology” and membership is open to institutions of higher education, corporations serving the higher education information technology market, and other related associations and organizations (EDUCAUSE, 2018a, para. 1). Currently, members include 99,000 professionals from over 2,300 organizations in 45 countries (EDUCAUSE, 2018b). EDUCAUSE has five main focus areas: enterprise and infrastructure, policy and security, teaching and learning, the EDUCAUSE Center for Analysis and Research (ECAR), and the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI). ECAR publishes research on technology trends and practices in higher education while ELI provides professional development and online resources. The association also produces the EDUCAUSE Review, an open-access digital and bimonthly print publication. In 2018, EDUCAUSE acquired The New
Media Consortium (NMC), which was best known for its Horizon Report on the future of education technology (McKenzie, 2018).

**Graphic Communications Education Association**

According to their website, the Graphic Communications Education Association (GCEA) is “an association of educators in partnership with industry, dedicated to sharing theories, principles, techniques and processes relating to graphic communications and imaging technology” (Graphic Communications Education Association, 2018, para. 1). Established in 1922, the organization has published the *Visual Communications Journal* since 1997. The organization also hosts an annual conference which serves to connect educators from high schools, community colleges, and university with business representatives for workshops, demonstrations, and seminars in emerging areas of the graphic communications industry (Specialty Print Communications, 2017).

**International Association for Visual Culture**

Established in 2009, the International Association for Visual Culture (IAVC) is an international association of artists, curators, educators, museum professionals, and scholars who are “dedicated to the advancement of Visual Culture Studies in a transnational and contemporary framework” and who are “engaged in critical analyses of and interventions in visual culture” (International Association for Visual Culture [IVAC], 2018, para. 1). The association hosts biennial conferences; conference topics have included “Visual Pedagogies in London” (2018), “The Social in Boston” (2016), “Visual Activism in San Francisco” (2014), “Now! Visual Culture in New York” (2012), and the inaugural meeting in London (2010). The conferences are “designed to be points of gathering organized around politically expedient themes related to the contemporary moment and the host city” (IVAC, 2018, para 5).

**International Communication Association – Visual Communication Studies Division**
In 1993, the precursor to the Visual Communication Studies Division, the “Visual Communication Interest Group,” was founded at the annual International Communication Association conference; the current moniker was adopted in 2009 (Visual Communication Studies, 2015a). According to their mission statement, the division “seeks to enhance the understanding of the visual in all its forms – moving and still images, displays in television, video and film, art and design, and print and digital media” (Visual Communication Studies, 2015b). Research topics include but are not limited to “investigating the interaction of the visual with public policy and law, mass communication processes, corporate image and organization, technology and human interaction, elite and popular culture, philosophy of communication, education and the social sphere” (Visual Communication Studies, 2015b, para. 2).

*International Society for Education through Art*

Established in 1954 and officially becoming a nonprofit organization in 2009, the International Society for Education through Art (InSEA) is an official partner of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). According to their website, the organization includes “1,000 professional and organizational members in 74 countries from the following fields of interest: advocacy, art education, arts, education, cultural diversity, cultural education, cultural mediation, culture, curriculum development, environmental education, inclusive education, interdisciplinary, museum education, peace education, peace education, environmental education, and teacher training” (International Society for Education through Art [InSEA], 2018a, para. 4). The association publishes two peer-reviewed journals. The first journal, *International Journal of Education through Art* (IJETA), is a scholarly journal publishing on topics such as art, craft, and design education; formal and informal education contexts; and visual communication and culture. The second journal, *IMAG*, is a visual journal
featuring articles and visual essays that “provide an alternative, experimental and artistic mode of presenting research and praxis” (InSEA, 2018b, para. 1).

*National Art Education Association*

According to their website, the National Art Education Association (NAEA) is “the leading professional membership organization exclusively for visual arts educators” (National Art Education Association [NAEA], 2018, para. 1). Members include elementary, middle, and high school visual arts educators; college and university professors; university students preparing to become art educators; researchers and scholars; teaching artists; administrators and supervisors; and art museum educators (NAEA, 2018, para. 2). The organization, established in 1947, produces and circulates its national goals and checklists for quality art education to its stakeholders and provides expertise, training, and tools such as workshops, publications, and supporting resources. NAEA officials also regularly meet to discuss issues in arts education with the U.S. Department of Education, National School Boards Association, National Endowment for the Arts, National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, American Council for the Arts, Arts Education Partnership, Alliance for Arts Education, National Association of Secondary School Principals, and other education organizations who are actively concerned with the quality of art education in the schools (NAEA, n.d.).

*International Visual Sociology Association*

The International Visual Sociology Association (IVSA) is a “nonprofit, democratic, and academically-oriented professional organization devoted to the visual study of society, culture, and social relationships” with members comprised of the following disciplines: sociology, anthropology, education, visual communication, photography, filmmaking, art, and journalism.
The International Visual Sociology Association (IVSA, n.d.) was established in 1981 and encourages:

- documentary studies of everyday life in contemporary communities
- the interpretive analysis of art and popular visual representations of society
- studies about the social impact of advertising and the commercial use of images
- the analysis of archival images as sources of data on society and culture
- the study of the purpose and the meaning of image-making practices like recreational and family photography. (IVSA, n.d)

The association publishes the journal *Visual Studies*, which was known as *Visual Sociology* from 1986 to 2002.

**Society for Photographic Education**

The Society for Photographic Education (SPE) held its first annual conference in 1963 and the organization was officially incorporated the following year. According to their website, “SPE is the leading forum for fostering understanding of photography in all its forms and related media” (Society for Photographic Education [SPE], 2018a, para. 1) and was originally organized to address the emerging academic field of photographic education which, in the 1960s, was moving from journalism departments to art departments. Members are comprised of artists, critics, curators, educators, fine art photographers, historians, and students (SPE, 2018a). The organization’s journal, *Exposure*, has been published since 1970 and is “devoted to the analysis and understanding of photography through scholarly insight, historical perspectives, critical dialogue, educational issues, and reviews of contemporary photographic publications” (SPE, 2018b, para. 1).

**Visual Resources Association**

Established in 1982 after “almost a decade of informal gatherings,” the Visual Resources Association is “a multi-disciplinary organization dedicated to furthering research and education
in the field of image and media management within the educational, cultural heritage, and commercial environments” (Visual Resources Association, 2018a). Members include academic technologists, architectural firms; art historians; art, architecture, film, video, metadata, and digital librarians; artists; digital image specialists; galleries; information specialists; museum professionals; photographers; publishers; rights and reproductions officials; scientists; slide, photograph, microfilm, and digital archivists; and vendors (Visual Resources Association, 2018a). Topics of interest to the organization include:

- preservation of and access to media documenting visual culture;
- cataloging and classification standards and practices;
- integration of technology-based instruction and research;
- digital humanities;
- intellectual property policy;
- visual literacy and other topics of interest to the field (Visual Resources Association, 2018b)

The VRA offers data standards, metadata standards, resources on intellectual property rights and copyright, and other resources for members including a list of affiliated and related organizations on their website.

**Conclusion**

This review highlights current visual literacy initiatives and related visual arts education initiatives in K-12 education, higher education, museums, national and international organizations, and the occupational safety industry. By examining these initiatives, it is possible to understand the state of visual literacy today.
Reference List


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