

ARLIS 2019 presentation: Visual Literacy as a Pedagogical Tool: Photography and Beyond by Bridget Nowlin

Cornish College of the Arts is a visual and performing arts college in Seattle, WA. My students are dancers, artists, actors, musicians, designers, stage managers, costume designers and more. It is a place filled with energy and I adore working with my students, staff and faculty.

Several years ago I began working with the Theater History instructor John Wilson on the issues he and his students were having finding and using images in the classroom for their research and presentations. These issues included the students using images that had nothing to do about the topic (i.e., French renaissance paintings when presenting on Spain), using low-res poor quality images, using images as simple decoration rather than furthering their points, and the like. The semester-long assignment was to research a particular play in a particular time period and to share that research with their classmates. Questions like *why this play now?* and *why this play then?* Were among the driving questions for the students as they researched the time, place, culture, clothing, politics and the like for their projects.

In addition to their text-based research, John and I discussed the need for our students to utilize images in their final presentations; this later led to their needing to use what I call *images as information* in and of themselves. The images were not just things to decorate their presentations; rather, they had to serve multiple purposes in informing and directing their research as well as visually elucidating their findings to their classmates.

As we worked with students, it became apparent to me that further developing their *visual* literacy was necessary. Students did not spend much time contemplating their image use nor did they use the images to learn more about their topic. How to look at an image and be able to use it for its informative purposes requires that one is able to look closely and decipher and deconstruct what they see.

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I also worked with them on where to locate images using tools such as Artstor and searching for large images via Google image search as well as the technical side of image selection so their images would work well when projected across a room.

Prior to coming to Cornish College of the Arts, I worked in the education departments of both the Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego and of the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle. (Hence, my masters in museology as well as a masters in library and information science). While at MoPA, I trained with Tomoko Maruyama who brought in Philip Yenawine and his Visual Thinking Strategies methodology, which at that time was in its infancy. We used this method with all of our education programs and when I went to the Henry found it in practice there as well. I brought this experience and training to my visual literacy classes at Cornish and now *all* of the Theater and Performance Production students study with me several times in their sophomore year.

For those of you not familiar with VTS, “Visual Thinking Strategies” is the result of more than 20 years of collaboration between cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen, veteran museum educator Philip Yenawine, and their colleagues”.¹ The method is deceptively simple, and allows for in-depth exploration of images (and other visual entities - for example, I talk to my students on how they can use it when watching a play which is, of course, time-based).

At its core, it consists of 3 questions: *What’s going on here?*, *What do you see that makes you say that?*, and *What else can you find?* You also need something like a laser pointer to draw the students’ eyes around the visual plane, and finally it is

¹ <https://vtshome.org/opportunities/>

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important to link ideas to one another in order to build a conversation as a whole. You do not use judgement in any of your responses (you don't even say "good" when someone gives an answer) and neither is any information given unless asked. It's not about teaching the image itself initially, but about teaching how to look and discuss an image and via that process, learning about the work and its content.

I'm going to show a 5 minute video of excerpts of my teaching in the classroom. Please note that this is edited way down from a 1 hour, 20 minute discussion of only 2 images. It is in a dark room but I think you'll get the idea; to facilitate the editing down to a few minutes, there will be short times where you will notice us jumping through the conversation; finally, the image is blasted out, so I'm going to show a large version to you prior to viewing the video so you know what we are looking at (I have a smaller version alongside the video). Many of you will probably recognize the image.

(unable to share the video due to not having students' permission to show it beyond the conference)

As a result of this work, we have seen the research and presentations being done by students improve. They are approaching visual research with much the same vigor that they use when researching textual information. Their presentations are stronger for several reasons including their using images that further strengthen their points rather than simply being decorative. This method has proven to be so useful that the professor put himself through the formal VTS training so he could better support the work we are doing in the classroom.

I recently spoke with some of the students I had taught previously and when they heard that I was going to do this presentation for all of you, they wanted me to let you know how this has impacted their own work:

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One student stated that “It helps me to articulate my thoughts and to understand what I am seeing.”

Another said “It helps me be able to discuss and give feedback when we are critiquing (theater) scenes.”

And finally one let me know how much they “Enjoyed mind-blowing ways of interpreting work and delving deeper into work like that ladder piece (Martin Puryear’s *Ladder for Booker T. Washington*)” And while they did not recall the name of the piece nor of the artist, that was not important and was not the purpose of the class. The important thing was that they remembered that piece in detail and the impact it had on how they view and discuss other works in a multitude of media.

I look forward to discussing this work with you and to answering any questions during our Q&A period.

Thank you.

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Visual Literacy as a Pedagogical Tool: Photography and Beyond

In this series of presentations, the panelists will examine various ways in which librarians can use different strategies to highlight how photographs and images can be used to promote engagement with collections and instruction. Using various examples drawn from a wide variety of teaching environments, the panelists will delve deeper into the role of visual literacy in the larger framework of instruction.

Margaret Ericson, “Photography and Migration,” will discuss how scholars, librarians, students, curators, and community members at Colby College have come together to reflect upon the relationships between the medium of photography, migration and community.

Bridget Nowlin, “Using the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) method developed by Philip Yenawine and Abigail Housen in library instruction,” will share the process she uses with theater students to incorporate VTS and will discuss the results of a long-term collaboration with Theater History instructors.

Micki Harrington, “Embedded Literacies in an Art School Photography Program,” will share strategies for implementing an embedded information & visual literacy instruction program for photography majors.

Robert Gore, “Photo literacy and undergraduate students,” will describe some of the strategies employed over a ten-week credit class to encourage engagement with photographs through historical photobooks, contemporary photobooks, photo-based artists’ books, the work of individual photographers, and book making.

Learning Objective

- Provide examples of photography/images integrated into instruction