



## Looking and Learning: Visual Literacy across the Disciplines (New Directions for Teaching and Learning, Number 141)

Little, Deandra; Felten, Peter; and Berry, Chad, eds.  
Wiley, 2015

Book Review

Tags: teaching methods | teaching with the arts | visual literacy

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The editors of *Looking and Learning* argue that institutions of higher education have required textual literacy for centuries, but now are facing a problem: they have not cultivated visual literacy in an age when visual input has risen exponentially in volume, pace, and cultural significance. Little, Felten, and Berry propose to address this problem pedagogically throughout academic curricula. Eight contributing authors bring disciplinary-based tools to the conversation, discussing pedagogical approaches and outcomes for students' development of visual literacy as a means of depth-learning.

One of the most valuable features of this volume is the introduction of the Association of Colleges and Research Libraries' (ACRL) definition, promotion, and list of observable performance standards with outcomes for visual literacy (3, 8). *Looking and Learning* then details particular courses and pedagogical approaches by professors who claim that visual learning significantly enhances student perceptions of data and experience, deepens engagement with course material, and sharpens critical thinking skills - all important outcomes for effective education.

Chapter one, for example, focuses on visually-based pedagogical approaches for learning astronomy. A pedagogical shift came to Anthony Crider when he began to emphasize visual and information literacy skills rather than content delivery in his courses (16). He found that as a result, his students learned to think through problems more deeply and effectively. Now, close observations of the objects and phenomena in space are required, followed by deductive thinking to frame arguments for hypotheses and proofs.

Chapter two provides pedagogical tools that move students from subjective reactions to critical responses when encountering a visual input. In this chapter, like Crider, Michael Palmer focuses on developing the critical skills for visual literacy, rather than content-based learning. Likewise, chapter three shows how Katherine Hyde uses photography to cultivate sociological mindfulness and social identity (31). Cedar Riener teaches about visual perception in chapter four, using pictorial illusion to demonstrate that perception is not always accurate. Chapters five and six speak to “deep learning” through work with visual media including historical paintings (Steven S. Volk), and film-making (Alison J. Murray-Levine). The intent is to slow visual inputs so there is actual engagement and analysis of the subject matter as a visual story and language. Chapter seven introduces the process and structure of critique in the area of visual arts (Phillip Motley). The volume concludes in chapter eight with Deandra Little providing suggestions and strategies for teaching visual literacy throughout a curriculum (87).

For those who are visually impaired or have difficulty interpreting visual cues and yet are able to hear, there is little aid in this volume. One exception occurs in chapter five where historian Steven S. Volk helpfully introduces students’ auditory input for a person who is not sighted, discovering that learning is enhanced for everyone. Perhaps auditive literacy is the next logical educational contribution for learning by senses. Data and experience come through many senses; pedagogical approaches are likely to have to address these different avenues of learning as attention to differing abilities expands both culturally and legally.

Ultimately, the editors and contributors call for all teachers and students to “learn to look and look to learn” (5). Such a challenge seems obvious, achievable, and pedagogically meaningful (for the sighted) as an effective educational focus for literacy – literacy for a visual age.

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