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The Visual Literacy Landscape

It is my pleasure to introduce and participate in this session, Visual Literacy: What, Why, How? In the next 90 minutes, we hope to outline the importance of visual literacy and offer ways you might begin to implement visual literacy strategies and exercises in your library and beyond. My name is Barbara Rockenbach and I will begin this session with a brief overview of the visual literacy landscape. I will be followed by Carole Ann Fabian, Planning, Outreach and Communication Officer at ARTstor. Carole Ann will discuss existing rubrics, such as the ACRL Information Literacy Competencies, that help inform Visual Literacy practices. Then Ian McDermott, Assistant Librarian at the Yale Center for British Art, will describe his efforts at Yale University to launch some visual literacy instructional tools.

Many of you will remember the session at last year's conference in Denver, "Visual Pedagogy: Do you See What I See." The session was a wonderful introduction to visual pedagogy and our hope, when putting this session together, was to build on the fine foundation of last year's session and look a bit deeper into how visual literacy is not only a desired outcome for our users but also an important way in which art librarians and visual resource curators can become involved in larger interdisciplinary campus initiatives. Carole Ann and Ian will be addressing the first aspect; the notion of visual literacy as a desired outcome for our users. I will be addressing the second idea; that visual literacy is a key tool that art information professionals can and should use to insert ourselves into the larger conversations on campus on topics such as the Digital Humanities, New Media, 21st c. literacies, Web 2.0, and the future of teaching and learning.

The title of my portion of this talk is Viewing the Visual Literacy Landscape. I had initially hoped to share with you descriptions of what art libraries and visual resources departments are doing in the area of visual literacy. I received only a handful of responses to an inquiry on ARLIS-L asking about visual literacy implementations, but I was able to find many other examples out on the web and in the literature. Most of the examples I found within the art information profession concentrated on visual literacy applications within the arts. This should not be surprising. Art Librarians and VR curators tend to concentrate on their community of art and architecture users. However, as I began to read more on visual literacy and literacy, I realized there is a whole literature outside the arts on these topics. It is a new literature, just a few years old, and disciplines outside the arts are just beginning to grapple with using images

and other visual artifacts beyond illustration and into the realm of evidence -something we have all done for year. This point was driven home last week during a panel on the Digital Humanities at Yale. The panel had representatives from English, American Studies, the rare book library, and instructional technology. There were no art historians on the panel, but the focus was on images, video, maps, and other visual materials. Just in the last decade, an abundance of visual materials have become available, that humanists and social scientists cannot help but integrate into their teaching and learning. Yet, most of these professors in these disciplines and their students do not have training in using the visual.

Can we play a role in this educational process? There are conversations all over campuses and across disciplines about competencies and life-long learning skills that students need that involve understanding the visual world in which they live. I would like to argue that visual literacy is a skill or set of skills that we are uniquely positioned to teach and that there are far broader applications on our campuses for visual literacy. I hope to situate Visual Literacy in a larger landscape, one that encompasses both new technologies and new student expectations about their involvement in the educational process - to make the case that visual literacy is a tool for us to prove our value and to become involved in some of these larger, exciting conversations about the future of student learning.

Let's start with a definition of Visual Literacy so we all are on the same page. You will see several definitions of visual literacy in this session, but for my part, I would like to establish visual literacy as a simple goal, "visually literate students can interpret, use, appreciate, and create images and video using both conventional and 21st century media in ways that advance thinking, decision-making, communication, and learning."

The key here is not just visual understanding but that students know how to employ that understanding in context and in ways that involve critical thinking skills. Questions about critical thinking skills, evaluation skills, and competencies are being discussed around campus as colleges and universities are grappling with how to teach students of this generation—highly technological, highly visual, and easily distracted by media. As faculty begin to consider new teaching methods to accommodate these students, it is helpful to have a sense of how the visual affects the "new student." In a study in 2005 called Generation M, or Media, a statistically representative sampling of 2,032 young people were asked about their media habits. 694 of the respondents were selected to keep a more detailed 7-day media diary. It was found that these students spent upwards of to 8.5 hours a day with media. That breaks down in the following ways: TV and DVD = 3.51 hours; music and mp3, cds radio = 1.44 hours; interactive media such as web surfing = 1.02 hours; and video games = 1.44 hours. Over half

the time spent is with visual media [tv/dvd, web interactive media, and video games]. Let's also remember that computers are intensely visual artifacts and the internet is primarily a visual medium. Conclusion: students arrive on our campus with many hours of visual media, but do they know how to take it a step further to interpret, evaluate, and even create that visual media.

But this also begs the question...is it simply the technology leading the change in these students or is it something more? Certainly new technology introduces new modes of interaction between student and teacher...and librarian but are students cognitively different as well. Are they more hard-wired to be visual consumers than our generations were? I used to argue that technology was leading the change which led me to believe that if we focused on training students to use the new technologies, everything else would fall into place. In the course of reading about visual literacy, and literacy more broadly, I have changed my mind about what is leading us to need to rethink, along with faculty, the way we teach students about the visual. In a recent paper called *Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes*, Katherine Hayles, an English professor at UCLA, argues that students are in fact cognitively different than we are. By looking at neurological studies of students today, and in anecdotes about her own teaching and classroom, she puts forth the idea that students today excel at what she calls hyper-attention. This is opposed to deep attention, characterized by the image of reading a book under a tree for several hours. We may have done that...these students do not. As the Generation M study pointed out, students watch TV, listen to their iPod, surf the net, and work on homework. They are able to multitask and exhibit a sort of hyper-attention, moving from one thing to another. Hayles asserts that "children growing up in media-rich environments literally have brains wired differently from those of people who did not come to maturity under that condition."

What does this mean about the visual and visual literacy...Hayles also cites the fact that in 1960s it was common wisdom in the movie industry that an audience needed something like 20 seconds to recognize an image; today that figure is more like two or three seconds.

[Memento, Mulholland Drive, Time Code]

If indeed our students think differently and learn differently in this age, then it seems new literacies and pedagogical methods are required to prepare and engage students of today. 21st Century literacies include: digital, media, visual, multimodal literacies, hybrid forms, and even digital epistemology (concerned with the nature and scope of knowledge).

We, as art information professionals, have an opportunity to work with faculty and administrators on campus to help teach students about visual literacy in the context of these new literacies. By situating visual literacy into this landscape, we create a role for ourselves at the intersection of **collections, technology and pedagogy**. I will finish this talk by outlining how we can promote the value and relevance of the art library and VR collection in a larger context by partnering with faculty to educate our students on visual literacy.

Looking at the intersection of Collections, Technology and Pedagogy we have a unique role in terms of the visual.

First, we no doubt have the largest number of images in our collections anywhere on campus. Now, it is easy to argue that an even larger number of images exist on the internet, but why shouldn't we be seen as the conduit to the images found there as well. We need to stake out territory with images and develop the reputation as the image experts on a campus.

In terms of technology, chances are the people sitting in this room have thought more about the available technologies to create, organize, store, and share images than anyone else on campus. This too is a value we can bring to campus conversations about new literacies.

Finally, in the area of pedagogy, we don't often think of ourselves as pedagogical experts. However, how many of you have taught students or faculty how to find, use, and evaluate images? Images are the currency of art, art history, architecture and design, etc. We know how images are used to teach. They are used as illustrations and as evidence. We have all been engaged with how to teach with images in some degree, and we can bring that to the table as well.

Let me give you one example of how I was able to collaborate with an English professor at this intersection of collections, technology and pedagogy. Jessica Pressman began teaching a class on Digital Literature this year. The course concentrated on how technologies affect our understanding of literature, both in terms of aesthetics and reading practices. Her student's final assignment was to produce a work of digital literature. She asked me to work with her to prepare her students to use objects from our library collections, discover technologies to produce digital literature, and finally how to get her students to critically evaluate the media they are consuming. I led two class discussions on the Digital Library and the Digital Archive, showing students how to find digital content and how to evaluate it for use in their work. Partnered also with Instructional Technology to teach students Flash and other relevant technologies. We focused on the visual nature of digital information online and how the

aesthetics of digital objects communicate just as much at the content. Here is one example of the student's project...Visual Literacy definition: interpret, use, appreciate and create

This was a unique example because as we all know, we rarely are given that much class time for library focused pedagogy. However, it was eye-opening to me because here was an English professor grappling with all of the visual issues we do and she was thrilled that someone on campus was willing to work with her students on the topic of visual literacy, or as she called it, visual rhetoric.

Collaborative Assignments

Google Jockeying - while a speaker is making a presentation, participants search the web for appropriate visual content to display on screens in the classrooms.

Backchanneling - participants type in comments or submit media as the speaker talks, providing a running commentary on the material being presented.

Digital Storytelling - excellent examples of using flickr or creative commons to find a series of images to tell a story.

Facebook and identity - English course reading biographies encompassed an assignment where students had to critically look at someone's Facebook account to understand that person's identity. In large part, this assignment focused on the visual elements. What photos do people chose to represent themselves? What do the photos say about them? How do the ads on the page shape that identity even if the user themselves did not chose the ads?

Blogs- are increasingly being used as platforms for academic writing and projects. These tools enable students to submit work to a larger audience, their peers, rather than just their professors.

Call to Action!

Find out what different departments are teaching. Look at syllabi for courses engaged in literacies, new media, visual evidence, etc. Talk to folks on campus engaged in Digital Humanities or New Media initiatives. Introduce yourself to the Instructional technology staff and find out ways to partner with them. Chances are, they are having conversations with faculty all the time about courses, and they are not representing the rich collections and

instructional possibilities the library can provide. Meet the staff at the teaching and learning center to find out if you can also partner with them on faculty consultations.

We have a lot to bring to this conversations and the key may be in our firm understanding and ability to teach visual literacy concepts. I believe these campus partnerships, especially with the faculty, are the future of our profession.