"I have never been 'taught' how to do it. Just told to do it":
Teaching Critical Visual Literacy through Library instruction

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Session Flow

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Visual and critical visual literacy in academia and library instruction

02
Research Findings
Analyzing critical visual literacy skills of students

03
Opportunities
Incorporating critical visual literacy in library instruction

04
Challenges
Preparing for the challenges which come when teaching

01

Literature Review

Visual Literacy Defined

- "The group of **vision competencies** a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences" (Debes, 1969)

- "A set of abilities that enables an individual to **effectively find, interpret, evaluate, use, and create images and visual media**" (ACRL, 2011 and 2022)

- "The basic definition of visual literacy is the **ability to read, write and create visual images**." (Visual Literacy Today, n.d.)

Critical Visual Literacy Defined

- "an analysis seeking to uncover the social and political interests in the images' production and reception in relation to the **social effects of power and domination**..." (Newfield, 2011, p.92).

- The set of skills allowing one to "investigate the **sociocultural contexts of visual texts to illuminate power relations**" (Kim, H. Y., & Serrano, A., 2017, p.12)

- Is informed by **critical information literacy** (considers "the power structures and social issues at work" in broader systems) and **critical librarianship** (which "centers on issues of social justice") (Grimm, S. and Meeks, A., 2017, p.174)

Critical Visual Literacy in Practice

- "What critical visual literacy does is provide strategies for **making these [unconscious] workings conscious**." (Newfield, 2011, p.92)

- "Critical visual literacy involves uncovering, revealing, questioning, deconstructing and reading against texts to aid in the **reconstruction of texts through new understanding**" (Dunn, 2013, p.17)

02
Research Findings

Investigating the Critical Visual Literacy Skills of Elementary Teacher Candidates

Process for Participants (17 Elementary Education Sophomores)

Provide Answers

"Select and answer 3 questions from your list that you feel are most important to consider when critically analyzing the illustrations in the book""

Exit Survey

Used to collect demographic information, past experience with critical visual analysis, and more.

01 —— 02 —— 03 —— 04

Create Questions

"Carefully read Milo Imagines the World. Then write a list of questions you would ask yourself to critically analyze the illustrations in this book as an educator"

Self-Evaluation

"How successfully do you believe your questions critically analyzed the book's illustrations? Are there any questions that you wish you had included that would provide a more comprehensive critical visual analysis of the book? If so, what questions? And why do you think these questions would be necessary substitutions or additions?"

An Example: Milo and the Crew of Breakers

The spell is broken when a crew of breakers
bounds onto the train, announcing, "You all ready for a show?"
Several curious faces look up as the beat drops.
And now the girls are walking up walls,

they're whirling around poles,
they're backflipping over shopping bags.
When the train pulls into the next stop,
they collect a few dollars and scramble for another car.

What is Milo confronting in this moment?

Milo imagines them going from train to train, doing their act as everyone watches.

But even after the performances are over, faces still follow their every move. When they walk down the electronics aisle at the department store.

When they cross into the fancy neighborhood.

Milo doesn't really like this picture, so he puts away his pad and turns to his reflection in the window.

Questions Generated by Participants

Student D: "Why does Milo draw the dancers always being looked at?"

Student F: "Why does Milo not like his picture of the dancers on the train?"

Student G: "Why does the crew of breakers seem to be the only ones wearing vibrant colors & different patterned clothes/shoes?"

Questions Generated by Participants

Student D:
"Why does Milo draw the dancers always being looked at?"

Question Type:
Critical Visual Literacy
Question Focus:
Dancers

Student F:
"Why does Milo not like his picture of the dancers on the train?"

Question Type:
Critical Visual Literacy
Question Focus:
Dancers

Student G:
"Why does the crew of breakers seem to be the only ones wearing vibrant colors & different patterned clothes/shoes?"

Question Type:
Cusp Question
Question Focus:
Dancers

Answers Generated by Participants

Student G

"Why does the crew of breakers seem to be the only ones wearing vibrant colors & different patterned clothes/shoes?"

Answer: "I think this is to show how interesting these girls are and how they use dancing and clothing to express themselves. I also think it makes them stand out so everyone knows they are unique and embrace it."

Answer Quality: 1 (The intent behind the answer is unclear or the answer provides very minimal information. Information provided is wrong or is not directly related to a close reading of the text. Answer may be nonsensical, confusing, or uninformative.)

Milo doesn't really like this picture,
so he puts away his pad and turns
to his reflection in the window.

What do people imagine
about *his* face?

What do people imagine
about *his* face?

**Exactly one student made any mention of this page.
They did not choose the question to answer.**

Can they see him reciting
his volcano poem to the class?

Can they hear his mom's soothing voice
reading him a bedtime book
over the phone?

Can they smell the chile colorado
bubbling in a pot
in his auntie's apartment
near the cemetery?

Question Type Analysis

Question Type	Total Percentage	Total Count	Answered Percentage
Visual Literacy	70.6%	84	38.1%
Critical Visual Literacy	15.1%	18	50.0%
Cusp Question	6.7%	8	62.5%
Reading Comprehension	1.7%	2	50.0%
Background Information	2.5%	3	33.3%
Practical Application	0.8%	1	100.0%
Critical Literacy	1.7%	2	50.0%
Other	0.8%	1	100.0%

Student Reflections

Analyzing Personal Experience
- "In one of my classes last semester we read children books and analyzed the words & pictures. However, I have never been "taught" how to do it just told to do it.
- "...I don't have many questions because I feel like I don't know enough".

Introducing New Questions
- "I wish I would have asked more questions about how the illustrations portrayed Milo as the main character. What the drawings show about him? What do you think he is feeling? Etc."
- "What does race/ gender / age change about the illustrations and the overall feeling that you get looking at the pictures? It changes a book and your mood or opinions on what people the illustrator includes."

Key takeaways

- Self-reported prior experience did not lead to higher question OR answer quality scores.
- Students showed much more confidence asking questions tied to traditional visual literacy skills such as illustrator style/choice and materials/techniques than they did situating the images and story into its sociocultural context.
- Students seemed to be aware of more than they said, and answers appeared to dance around and avoid tough topics.
  - No student mentioned Milo's race directly.
  - "I feel like [the color brown] being used throughout the book to show like buildings or rooms can maybe show how much more the color brown needs to be more important. Even the skin color. It was used for a lot of things that could have been their actual color. But it also wasn't even used for hair. But I just think it is suppose to show the importance of the color brown." [Student C]

03

Opportunities for Instruction

"I have never been 'taught' how to do it. Just told to do it"

Reading the [ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education](#) for Critical Visual Literacy

- Authority is Constructed and Contextual
    - Learners who are developing their information literate abilities develop awareness of the importance of **assessing content** with a skeptical stance and with a **self-awareness of their own biases and worldview**
    - Learners who are developing their information literate abilities **question traditional notions of granting authority** and recognize the value of **diverse ideas and worldviews**
    - Learners who are developing their information literate abilities are conscious that **maintaining these attitudes and actions requires frequent self-evaluation**.
- Information Creation as a Process
- Information has Value
- Research as Inquiry
- Scholarship as Conversation
- Searching as Strategic Exploration

https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework

Reading the [ACRL Framework for Visual Literacy in Higher Education](#) for Critical Visual Literacy

Four themes, each with Knowledge Practices and Dispositions:

1. Learners participate in a changing visual information landscape
2. Learners perceive visuals as communicating information
3. Learners practice visual discernment and criticality
4. Learners pursue social justice through visual practice

Ex.) Knowledge Practices supporting "Authority is Constructed and Contextual"

Learners who are developing their visual literacy abilities...

- **Explore choices made** in the production of visual communications **to construct meaning or influence interpretation, especially with regard to representations** of gender, ethnicity, race, and other cultural or social identifiers.
- Evaluate how authorities establish **what is or is not included in the visual canon** of a field, elevating some voices and cultures while suppressing others.
- **Investigate personal positionality**, acknowledging how an individual's background, experiences, values, worldviews, biases, etc., can and do shape the reading of, interaction with, and research around visuals.

Ex.) Pope Francis in a Balenciaga Puffer Jacket

Critical Visual Literacy:

- How are images used to make me believe a certain narrative?

- How can images be used to reinforce existing power structures?

- **Problematizing the question of what is believable**.

Which of these images is real?

From the Visual Literacy Framework:
- Assess how emerging technologies such as deep fakes, facial recognition, and other applications of **artificial intelligence may impact visual perception, privacy, and trust**.

- Explore choices made in the production of visual communications to construct meaning or **influence interpretation**, especially with regard to **representations of gender, ethnicity, race, and other cultural or social identifiers.**

- Examine visuals for signs of alteration, such as cropping or use of digital filters, and consider the **intent and consequences of any changes** made.
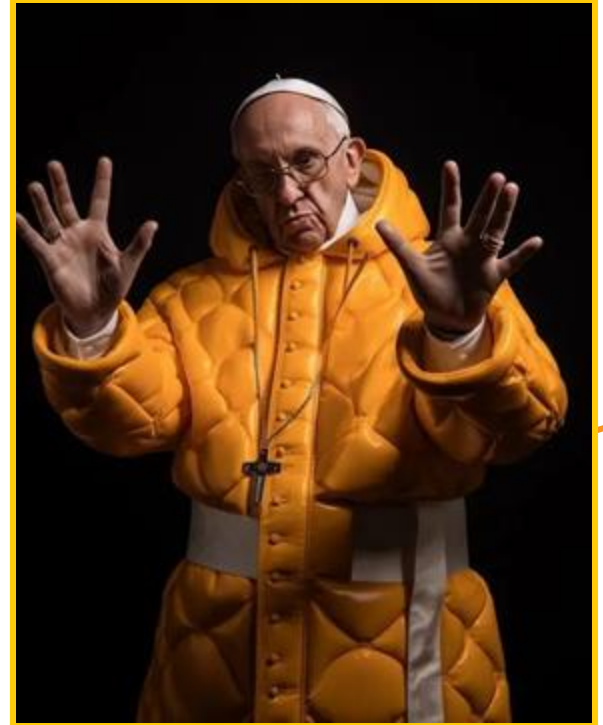
Ex.) Representations of Historical Figures

- What sociocultural factors shaped who created historical images and how they created them?
- What gave them the authority to create these?
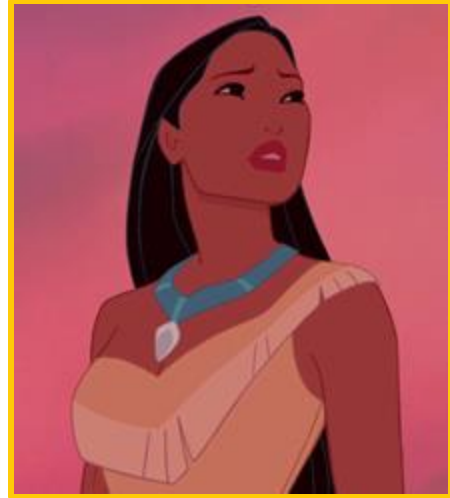- Were they those best suited to accurately represent Pocahontas?

| 1616 | After 1616 | 1870 | 1995 |

From the Visual Literacy Framework:
- Recognize that the **socio-cultural interpretation** of a visual **may change throughout its life cycle**

- Evaluate how **authorities establish** what is or is not included in the **visual canon of a field, elevating some voices and cultures while suppressing others**

- Question whether a visual could be considered **authoritative or credible in a particular contex**t, which can include comparing it to similar visuals, tracking it to its original source, analyzing its embedded metadata, and engaging in similar evaluative methods

- Value the ways that **different ways of knowing and being, including cultural, traditional and Indigenous knowledge**, may be represented in visuals.

From the Information Literacy Standards:
Scholarship as Conversation: Understand how and why some individuals or groups of individuals may be **underrepresented or systematically marginalized within the systems that produce and disseminate information**

Ex.) *How to be a Hero* by Florence Parry Heide

"Once upon a time, there was a nice boy, and his name was Gideon.

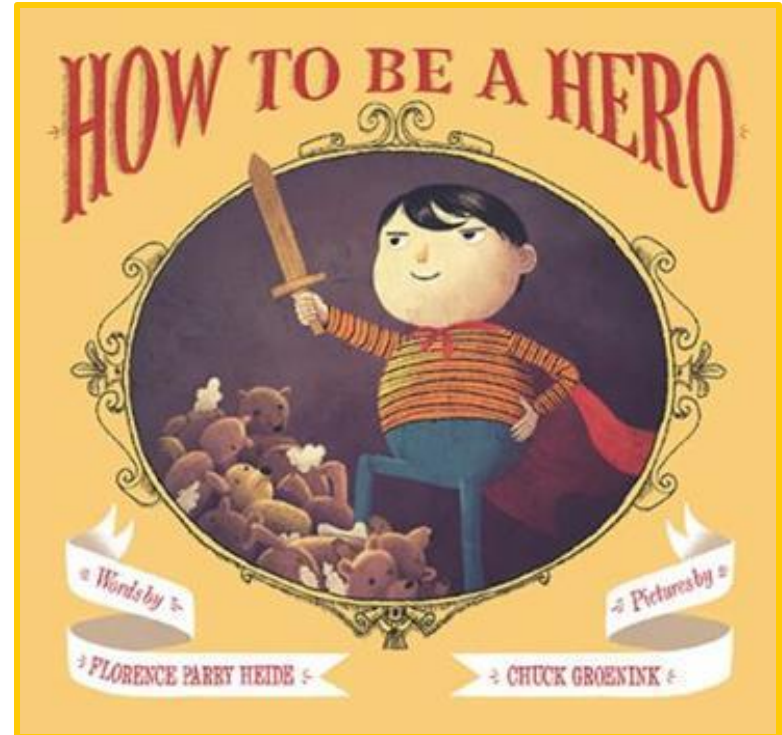He lived in a nice house, and he had nice parents and lots of toys.

But Gideon wasn't satisfied. He wanted to be a hero.

You know, a hero, with his name on the front page of the newspaper. That sort of thing.

So how does anyone get to be a hero, anyway? Heroes have to be strong. Heroes have to be brave. Heroes have to be clever.
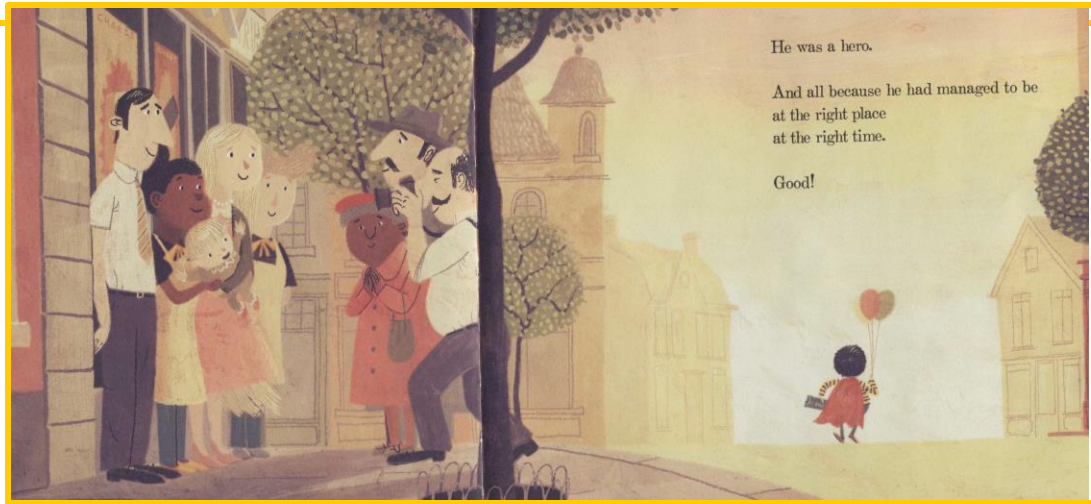
Don't they?"

[Description from publisher]

Who is the hero of this story?

Reading Picture Books with a Critical Visual Literacy Lens

From the Visual Literacy Framework:
- Examine visuals slowly and deeply in order to develop and refine **critical observation skills**.
- Explore choices made in the production of visual communications to construct meaning or influence interpretation, especially with regard to **representations of gender, ethnicity, race, and other cultural or social identifiers**
- Investigate personal positionality, acknowledging how an **individual's background, experiences, values, worldviews, biases, etc., can and do shape the reading of, interaction with, and research around visuals**

Ex.) Critical Self-Reflection to Enhance Creative Practice

Guiding goals:
- Reflect on what 'research' uniquely entails in a creative studio context
- Validate students' existing research strengths as emerging artists
- Help students identify ways to go beyond their comfort zone with research; reflect in order to grow as artists
- Draws on C.R.E.A.T.E. tool (Meeks, et. al., 2017)

Which areas of creative research practice do you feel most comfortable with? In which areas do you need to push yourself further? In both cases, provide examples of what that practice looks like for you.

Conversation:
- Providing attribution
- Building on others' practices
- Contributing to a broader discourse

Thoughtfulness:
- Considering every angle
- Challenging own biases, assumptions
- Synthesizing

Authority:
- Claiming one's own authority
- Acknowledging different types of authority
- Critically evaluating authority

Ex.) Critical Self-Reflection to Enhance Creative Practice

From the Visual Literacy Framework:
- Investigate **personal positionality**, acknowledging how… background, experiences, values, worldviews, biases, etc., can and do shape interaction with visuals
- Explore choices made to construct meaning or influence interpretation, **especially with regard to cultural or social identifiers**
- Seek out and **participate in a range of creative, social, and scholarly communities** in order to create, produce, and disseminate visuals.

Which areas of creative research practice do you feel most comfortable with? In which areas do you need to push yourself further? In both cases, provide examples of what that practice looks like for you.

Conversation:
- Providing attribution
- Building on others' practices
- Contributing to a broader discourse

Thoughtfulness:
- Considering every angle
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Authority:
- Claiming one's own authority
- Acknowledging different types of authority
- Critically evaluating authority

04

Challenges

Challenges with Instruction

- Freedom and confidence as a librarian to moderate and lead potentially challenging conversations

- Faculty willingness to engage with critical visual literacy, especially scaffolding or preparing students ahead of time

- Buy-in and bravery from students who are afraid of saying the wrong thing

- Continued support for students in building CVL skills, so that they have ongoing opportunities to practice and grow

Included Images

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An AI-Generated Image of Pope Frances in a Balenciaga Jacket with a True Image. From "This viral 'photo' of the pope in a puffer jacket fooled the internet. How can we spot AI deepfakes?," by K. Jiang, 2023, March 28, Toronto Star.

14 AI-generated images collected from around Reddit. From "Pope Francis's Day Out," by roaming-buffalo, 2023, April 27, r/CatholicMemes.

One of Pablo Xavier's other AI-generated images of the Pope. From "We Spoke To The Guy Who Created The Viral AI Image Of The Pope That Fooled The World," by C. Stokel-Walker, 2023, March 27, Buzzfeed News.

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Visual Literacy Today. https://visualliteracytoday.org/

Thank you!
What questions do you have?

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