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Reading Images with a Critical Eye:

Teaching Strategies for Academic Librarians

Dana Statton Thompson and Stephanie Beene

Introduction

From childhood on, we are taught how to read words on a printed page or, increasingly, on a screen.¹ Reading text is also heavily reinforced across subjects throughout higher education. However, when it comes to instruction in visual information, such as charts, graphs, infographics, memes, or photographs, the same emphasis is not applied. (For the purposes of this chapter, we use the terms “visual information,” “images,” and “visual media” interchangeably to mean one or more of the various visual media with or without sound). By the time students enter college, they are underprepared to interpret images, let alone analyze, describe, and evaluate them.²

Helping students develop the dispositions necessary to thrive in an increasingly virtual environment is essential to librarianship in the twenty-first century. The field of librarianship has begun to acknowledge that equipping students to develop a critical lens is necessary for evaluating the information they encounter daily.³ Since the release of the 2016 *ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (Framework),⁴ librarians have also begun to integrate a metacognitive lens to information.⁵ Although the concept

of *critically reading images* may be unfamiliar, we apply the tenets of criticality developed by these and other theorists⁶ to argue that images deserve the same thoughtful, rigorous evaluation. Indeed, we have seen images, often digitally mediated, have the power to persuade voters,⁷ social media and memes can drive protests,⁸ and opinions are influenced through a variety of altered media, including images.⁹ Critical reading empowers learners to constructively critique texts to change their social milieu. This chapter outlines the importance of teaching students to read images critically and provides two different lesson plans for librarians to do so.

Critical Reading Connection

In this chapter, we focus on the skills of interpreting and evaluating visual information. Both interpretation and evaluation are critical components within the process of critical reading, as defined by Manarin et al.¹⁰ According to Manarin et al., the term “critical reading” derives from two different philosophical traditions: reading for academic purposes, stemming from a constructivist approach, and reading for social and civic engagement, from critical pedagogy.¹¹ Reading for academic purposes involves working with, understanding, or creating new knowledge within a discipline; it includes identifying patterns of textual elements, distinguishing between main and subordinate ideas, evaluating credibility, making judgments about how a text is argued, and making relevant inferences about the text.¹² In contrast, reading for social and civic engagement involves sifting through various forms of rhetoric, recognizing power relations, questioning assumptions, engaging with the world, and constructing new possibilities.¹³

Critically reading images incorporates elements from both of these reading traditions: evaluating credibility, making relevant inferences about the image, sifting through visual rhetoric, recognizing power relations, questioning assumptions, and engaging with the world. When it comes to images, critical reading can also be viewed through the prism of visual literacy. As defined by the ACRL *Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (Visual Literacy Standards):

Visual literacy is a set of abilities that enables an individual to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, use, and create images and visual media. Visual literacy skills equip a learner to understand and analyze the contextual, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, intellectual, and technical components involved in the production and use of visual materials. A visually literate individual is both a critical consumer of visual media and a competent contributor to a body of shared knowledge and culture.¹⁴

Just as critical pedagogy and earlier theorists focused primarily on texts, visual literacy centers on critically reading *visual media* as the “text” that is read.

In the strategies below, we facilitated critical reading activities for understanding visual information within a discipline as well as understanding images in order to create change. We hope that teaching this type of critical reading of visual media sparks

transformation within students, leading them to recognize images as content to be contextualized and understood beyond the surface level. In order to facilitate this type of reading, it is important to acknowledge the concept of slow looking and the idea of shallow and deep images. As defined by Tishman, slow looking is “taking the time to carefully observe more than meets the eye at first glance.”¹⁵ She writes that she “came to see it as a form of active cognition with an intrinsically rewarding feedback loop: the more you look, the more you see; the more you see, the more engaged you become.”¹⁶ Coupled with the idea of shallow and deep images,¹⁷ this process can have far-reaching implications for students’ understanding of visual information. Shallow images, usually found on social media, require little additional investigation and depict a stock-like image of travel destinations, pets, or humorous quotes.¹⁸ Deep images, however, can include news and advertising images that are created with various intentions, such as to inform, to mislead, to persuade, and/or to sell.¹⁹ These types of images require more investigation in order to critically understand the image. By using the process of slow looking and determining the extent of evaluation needed, students can learn to critically read images within their own discipline as well as utilize these skills in their professional and personal lives.

Teaching Strategies

Suitable for faculty, first-year students, or graduate students, regardless of discipline, the following activities have been adapted by the authors in multiple settings over an extended period, and we encourage librarians to adapt these lessons to their particular contexts. Students learn how to cultivate critical reading habits for images during these activities—examining, reviewing, and interrogating images for deeper meaning.

Slow Looking for Comprehension

Co-author Stephanie Beene developed this activity over ten years for teaching faculty, staff, undergraduate, and graduate students how to critically read images. Critical reading can facilitate analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and comprehension in order to integrate prior knowledge and experience. This type of reading is often framed as reading for social engagement. It also requires connections between your own knowledge of civic engagement or between what you read and personal experience. This activity is based on the Visual Literacy Standards,²⁰ Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS),²¹ *The New York Times*’ exercise, “What’s Going on in this Picture?,”²² and the Library of Congress’ Visual Literacy Exercise for Photographs and Prints²³ and is highly adaptable. In a scaffolded slow looking exercise (see figure 38.1), participants flex their visual analysis muscles, learning to articulate and critically reflect upon their perceptions, evaluate and analyze components of images, contextualize them, and, finally, comprehend them through embedded think-pair-share activities. The activities are group-oriented and playful so that participants can engage with critical evaluation in a low-stakes environment.

Looking
Look at this image for a full minute. Write down your first impressions.
Analyzing
Take the next 2 minutes to answer the following questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you see? • What do you think is happening? • Name everything you see in the image, then look again and name the underlying emotion, communications, contexts. • Write a brief narrative caption based on these impressions.
Articulating
Turn to your neighbor and share the answers to your questions. Be ready to share with the class. [The librarian facilitates a discussion about the image, careful not to give anything away.] (5–7 mins.)
Evaluating
Reveal the caption of the image and ask the class to compare their initial impressions and answers to the caption, considering the following (2 mins.): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the caption impact how you view the image? • Do you see anything you initially did not? • Does your stance toward the image change?
Articulating
Turn to your neighbor and share the answers to your questions. Be ready to share with the class. [The librarian facilitates a discussion about the image, careful to not give anything away.] (5–7 mins.)
Contextualizing
[The librarian provides more context about the image, such as a narrative that accompanied the making of the image, the photographer’s recollection of capturing the image, and/or its lifecycle as an image (e.g., reception, provenance, history).] (2 mins.)
Comprehending
Discuss as a class. (2–3 mins.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did your opinion or reaction to the image change as context was added? • What, if anything, about the added context would lead to further investigation (of the image, other resources, etc.)? • How does evaluating an image compare or contrast with evaluating a text?

Figure 38.1

Slow Looking for Comprehension activity

Preparing for this activity involves locating a suitable image for this activity. The image should have enough information about it to scaffold into three parts: it should have a caption, identifiable context regarding its subjects, history, creation, reception, and/or

lifecycle, and be able to hold enough intrigue that students can look at it for two or three minutes. Images can be identified through widely available tools. Some suggestions are Artstor, Wikimedia Commons, the Library of Congress digital collections, Flickr Commons, the Digital Public Library of America, or Europeana.

Although I am giving an example of a singular image activity here, librarians may choose to adapt this exercise to repeat up to two more times, depending on flexibility. This particular activity takes roughly twenty to thirty minutes, leaving five minutes in the beginning for participants to arrive and settle in and for a quick introduction to the activity. Repeat the activity with two more images if time allows. Repetition improves skill sets, much like riding the proverbial bike.

Finally, librarians should facilitate discussion following best practices and guidelines. Loosely based upon the VTS²⁴ and *The New York Times'* exercise, "What's Going on in this Picture?"²⁵ (which derives from the VTS), the moderated discussion begins with a three-question format framed around an image stripped of its caption or other identifying information:

- What is going on in this image?
- What makes you say that?
- What more can you find?

This technique allows students to explore the narrative, or storyline, behind images, the second question allows them to flex their perception and interpretation muscles, and the last question circles back to ask them to look again.²⁶

Inclusive pedagogy²⁷ aligns nicely with this method of question asking and calls for intentional course design to mindfully center diverse perspectives through classroom dialogue. The librarian-as-facilitator cares for each participant as well as the overall class atmosphere.²⁸ For example, this activity requires that every noticed/named thing is critically justified; so, if someone says, "Well, obviously, there is a woman in the diner," the librarian may ask two follow-up questions: "What makes you say that this is in a diner?" and "What leads you to believe that this is a woman?" In conducting this activity over the past ten years to multiple audiences spanning undergraduate students to faculty members, I have found that the large group discussion is the most fertile for critical growth. It is the area where participants learn to critically look, look again to evaluate and articulate, and then look again to justify their initial instincts to their fellow participants. Participants sometimes disagree on what they are perceiving. In these cases, librarians may nudge students toward empathy and acceptance of another's viewpoint through their responses, such as, "So, it may be X, or it may be Y. We're not sure." As more context is revealed, and finally the full details of the image, librarians may choose to return to these initial comments and impressions now that they have acquired new knowledge.

Digging Deeper into Images

This activity was developed by co-author Dana Statton Thompson. I originally developed this activity for a journalism class but have found it is highly adaptable to most disciplines. The Digital Image Guide (DIG) Method²⁹ is based upon three sources: (1) questions found in an online research guide about how to evaluate digital images,³⁰ (2) questions found

in “The Visual Literacy White Paper,”³¹ and (3) questions found in *Visual Literacy for Libraries: A Practical, Standards-Based Guide*.³² From these sources, I developed twelve new questions³³ and then organized those questions under the four categories of critical reading (comprehension, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation) as outlined by Manarin et al.,³⁴ naming the process the DIG Method (see figure 38.2).³⁵

Analyzing
1. Review and describe the image. Who, what, when, and where do you see represented in the image?
2. Review the text. What textual information is provided (caption, date, and/or headline)?
3. React to the image. How does the image make you feel ?
Interpreting
1. Determine the source (creator, publisher, and/or website) of the image. Who created the image? Who owns and/or published the image?
2. Determine the message of the image. What is the message? Who is the intended audience?
3. Search for other online sources that further contextualize the image. How does context (social, cultural, historical, and/or political) inform the image?
Evaluating
1. Think back to your first reaction to the image. How might your reaction impact how you view the image?
2. Refer back to the other websites that have published the image. Has the image been misrepresented or manipulated ?
3. Assess the reliability and accuracy of the image. Is the image reliable and accurate? Why or why not?
Comprehending
1. What judgments can you make about the image based on your evaluations above and the available information?
2. Do any of your biases or points of view impact how you view the image? If so, how?
3. What is the purpose of this image (to inform, to instruct, to sell, to entertain, to enjoy, and/or to persuade)? Why do you think so?

Figure 38.2

The DIG (Digital Image Guide) Method

At the beginning of the lesson, librarians should take about five minutes to introduce the topic, explain the activity, and define visual literacy for students either using the definition provided by the Visual Literacy Standards or providing their own. To keep it simple, I usually explain to students that visual literacy means cultivating an ability to evaluate images effectively (the equivalent to “reading” text) and use images ethically (the equivalent to “writing” or applying text).

Next, a mini-lecture on the concept of shallow and deep images frames the learning activity. I usually take about fifteen minutes for this step. First, I explain the difference between shallow and deep images. Then I ask the students for some examples, either by explaining an example they have seen or, if time permits, by asking them to send me images ahead of class so that the whole class can then examine them together. If time is limited, then I preselect some images to show the students, including examples of both shallow and deep images, and explain the differences between these types of images. I then ask for the students’ input about which classification they would assign to each of the example images (shallow or deep) and, if time allows, ask them to apply their classification to a different set of images for a low-stakes practice.

The heart of the activity lies in having the students use the DIG Method,³⁶ taking about twenty-five to thirty minutes to do so. Librarians should plan to project their preselected deep, discipline-specific image and then allow the students to complete a worksheet based on the DIG Method questions outlined above. Librarians should periodically check the students’ progress, checking for understanding and helping any students who may be struggling. Make sure to emphasize the importance of answering each question, since students may not want to spend the time necessary for this kind of unfamiliar, deep investigation of images. After the students have worked independently, have the students confer with a partner for five minutes or so to discuss the similarities and differences in their answers.

During the last part of the lesson, about fifteen to twenty minutes, librarians can have the students report back, have a closing discussion, and recap the main points of the lesson. Students should first come back together as a class, and then a few pairs of students can share their prior discussion so that the class can see how other students applied the DIG Method. This is the most important time for discussion so students can see connections and form important takeaways about the need to critically evaluate deep, discipline-specific images. In the last five minutes, recap the lesson and reiterate the differences between shallow and deep images, emphasizing the importance of critically reading images.

Discussion

Critically reading images incorporates elements from both reading traditions: reading for academic purposes and reading for social and civic engagement. Some challenging concepts involve whether visual media are faked, authentic, staged, or manipulated in some way. These concepts echo information literacy goals that parallel the academic purposes of reading such as evaluating credibility and making relevant inferences about

an image. Critically reading images also involves sifting through visual rhetoric, recognizing power relations, questioning assumptions, and engaging with the world, as in reading for social and civic engagement.

The “critical” nature of this process of reading images is particularly evident in the discussion portion of both of our activities. This section epitomizes what Sara Ahmed terms “sweaty concepts”³⁷ because of the challenges the participants encountered with describing their perceptions. There were some concepts that were difficult to name. Some of those concepts were what Ahmed calls “murky background assumptions,”³⁸ illustrated in the difficulty that comes with observing, reading, and describing that which “resists being fully comprehended.”³⁹ Such concepts are “sweaty” because of the intellectual labor they demand and, in Ahmed’s words, because “the task is to stay with the difficulty, to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty” despite the labor they demand, until the elusive concepts can be named.⁴⁰ Some of these concepts revolve around identity—race, gender, and age of depicted individuals. Further challenges included justifying perceptions and describing visual space, visual elements, and emotions inscribed in images. Each of these aspects of critical reading reinforces the acute need to teach students how to read images with a critical eye.

Good Practices and Recommendations

We both have had success with embedding these activities in a range of one-shot instruction sessions across various disciplines and age levels, including the arts, humanities, social sciences, and even the sciences. Either activity may occur at any time during a lesson plan, although we have both tended to include it earlier rather than later, for maximum flexibility. If the activity is taught as one component of a one-shot instruction session, the librarian should discuss it with the course instructor and share a course outline with them prior to the session. As a stand-alone workshop, these activities afford the most flexibility and the librarian may choose to give more information about visual literacy, information literacy, and the methods behind the activity.

Following either teaching strategy should require no more than an hour or two of preparation on the part of the librarian. Selecting an image will likely be the most time-intensive component of the activity. However, it is well worth it to select an appropriate image to investigate as the image is the main component of both teaching strategies. The selection will influence the conversation content as well as the discipline-specific needs of the students.

Librarians should develop this lesson plan through a method called backward design.⁴¹ Backward design is a method that ties instruction and its embedded learning activities directly to larger course learning outcomes. In our experience, when in a one-shot instruction session, this activity works best as a co-facilitated discussion with the course instructor, which ensures that the discussion aligns with course outcomes. We recommend starting with Standard Three, the visually literate student interprets and analyzes the meanings of images and visual media, and Standard Four, the visually literate student evaluates images and their sources of the Visual Literacy Standards, as they are the most relevant to this activity. These learning outcomes are easily adaptable for the librarian’s

particular teaching context and provide a great place to start outlining what exactly the librarian and the course instructor would like students to achieve during the session.

Independently and through trial and error, we have both found that images with human subjects have had the most success. Participants critically justify their perceptions of other components (e.g., buildings, time periods, narratives), so those that depict human subjects naturally allow participants to critically reflect upon portrayals of identity markers, such as gender, age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, nationality, and more. Through the larger class discussion, the librarian and the peer group facilitate reflection on social norms and *morés*. Participants question their initial assumptions and perceptions of others, critically reflecting upon how they may identify with those depicted. Additionally, it is important for students to fully answer each question for each activity in order to appropriately scaffold the learning components of the lesson. This is particularly true for students following The DIG Method, as students in the past have assumed they could either skip questions entirely or combine answers in the interest of time. Allowing for enough time for the activity should mitigate this potential issue.

Conclusion

We believe the ability to critically read images is an essential skill for students and will become even more valuable in our social media-saturated, technology-driven society. It is our hope that academic librarians can adapt the teaching resources we created to different contexts, disciplines, and practices for their instruction sessions, workshops, and classrooms. Ultimately, we hope that students will gain a better understanding of critically reading images across contexts and practices and in their personal, professional, and academic lives.

Additional Resources

For further reading and more information on critical reading and images, please see our Zotero Bibliography (<https://tinyurl.com/yxgopbtr>) of collected sources.

Notes

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