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Visual literacy: Implications for corporate communications

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Visual literacy: Implications for corporate communications

Abstract

Visual literacy, the ability to encode and decode visual messages, is a relatively new concept. Most visual literacy efforts are directed toward school children; very little research and development addresses adults' visual literacy and the potential effects of visual literacy on corporate communications. This paper focuses on visual literacy for adult professional communicators. By examining the background and theory of visual literacy, and tracing the use of visual communication in modern business, a rationale will be established for visual literacy training in the corporate setting.

VISUAL LITERACY:

IMPLICATIONS FOR CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

A Research Paper

Submitted to

The Department of Curriculum and Instruction

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of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

Marion Hazzard

University of Northern Iowa

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Chapter I

Introduction

Visual literacy, the ability to encode and decode visual messages, is a relatively new concept. Most visual literacy efforts are directed toward school children; very little research and development addresses adults' visual literacy and the potential effects of visual literacy on corporate communications. This paper focuses on visual literacy for adult professional communicators. By examining the background and theory of visual literacy, and tracing the use of visual communication in modern business, a rationale will be established for visual literacy training in the corporate setting.

Advances in high technology are revolutionizing communication media, especially visual media. The analogy is often made that the invention of the printing press was to words as photography was to pictures; in both cases the technology facilitated mass production of communication. Recently, film and television further enhanced visual communication by introducing visuals involving motion. Advances in printing and copying technologies provided for the duplication of good quality visual images (Fransecky and Debes, 1972). Improvements in visual communications technology, and the resultant increased use of visual communication, have created a visual world and a new literacy.

John Debes, who founded the visual literacy movement in 1969, recognized the need for visual literacy. In his opening address to the First National Conference on Visual Literacy, Debes (1970) referred to the "...frustration of a child surrounded by verbal communication who has a tape over his mouth, unable to learn the language and syntax of the world around him" (p. 12). Today's children, according to Debes, have a similar problem because modern technology has surrounded them with visual communication and they are not being trained to "read" or "speak" the "language" they see.

To reinforce further his plea for visual literacy, Debes (1970) cited research indicating that good visual communication is faster, more efficient, and more effective than verbal communication. He concluded that children need to be taught how to use visual communication tools. Debes also noted the equally powerful effects of poor visual communication. Poorly designed visual messages, he said, are sometimes worse than no communication at all because of the strong impact of images on readers' perception.

In addition to their impressiveness, images also have retentive power. Research indicates that people remember approximately 80% of what they see, as opposed to 20% of what they hear (Dwyer, 1978). Therefore, if a visual image delivers an effective but unintended message, then the message must be retracted with another equally effective message. One could safely say that if it is hard to take

back words once they're spoken, then it is even more difficult to change a visual impression once it is embedded in the mind. Thus, visual communication demands a high degree of accuracy so that the correct impression is made the first time the message is sent.

Why should a corporate communicator be concerned with visual literacy? Assuming that, as Fransecky and Debes (1972) predicted, the electronic age has permeated every corner of our lives with visual stimuli, then the need for people in business and industry to interpret and create visual messages becomes apparent. However, not all professional people are skilled in visual communication; many could benefit from visual literacy training in order to increase their effectiveness as communicators in a highly visual environment.

This paper reviews literature from the visual literacy movement, highlights its history, and examines its theoretical context. The paper then reviews the literature on visual communication use in the modern corporate setting. Next, the development of visual literacy competencies is considered within the context of the visual literacy movement. Emphasis is placed on identifying those skills applicable to professional visual communicators in business and industry. Finally, an argument is presented that visual communication training is relevant and feasible in corporate communications today.

Before proceeding, a brief explanation of a few terms is in order. "Visual literacy" is the ability to encode and decode visual messages. "Visual communication" is the practice of sending and receiving visual messages. A "corporate communicator" refers to any person in business and industry (e.g., manager, trainer, public relations director) who regularly communicates using visual images. "Visual technology" refers to any and all hardware that produces, reproduces, and/or transmits images. These terms are used throughout the following literature review.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

The study of visual literacy is typically focused on children and the school's obligation to help them become literate in reading and writing visual messages. Research and literature on adult visual literacy is limited, suggesting that adults' abilities in these areas are either assumed or overlooked. Yet, the need to be an effective visual communicator is emerging as business and industry increase their use of visual communication. Advances in visual technology are creating a more visually oriented society, and bringing visual communication tools (e.g., video, computer graphics) into the corporate environment. Without appropriate visual communication skills, corporate managers risk losing their effectiveness as communicators in an environment where sales presentations and training sessions are competing with the highly sophisticated visual messages found in commercial television and print media.

A closer look at visual literacy's background and history, and visual communication's role in modern business and industry, provides a rationale for corporate training in visual communication skills. The first part of this literature review examines the events that contributed to the visual literacy movement and the subsequent development of two approaches to visual literacy. Next, several definitions

and conceptualizations of visual literacy are presented and discussed. The review then examines how and where visual communication is currently being used in business and industry. Finally, selected visual literacy skills are discussed, concentrating on those skills that are appropriate for corporate communications.

Beginnings of the Visual Literacy Movement

The simultaneous growth of advertising and mass communication in the 1940's increased educators' concerns about the importance of verbal literacy, especially critical reading and listening. The technology of cameras and photoduplication added a visual component to this educational concern, but it was not until television became part of everyday life that the need to be visually literate was recognized. As television became the major carrier of mass communication into the home, scholars began to look closely at the effects of television viewing on the audience.

In 1968 Debes criticized the inherent passive nature of television viewing, and the lack of visual choice that television imposed on the audience. Debes' concerns were echoed in 1984 by Robert Cialdini who contended that people, if given an opportunity, will replace thinking and analyzing with responding and reacting. Noting that the credibility of an idea is increased if people can easily picture it in their minds, Cialdini concluded that the communicative and persuasive power of television lies in its ability to inject

images directly into the minds of its audience, virtually bypassing all cognitive processing.

Lasser (1975) elaborated on the passive nature of television viewing when he discussed the effect of the immediacy in visual communication, particularly on those people who grew up with television. Lasser stated:

> Somehow the generation most responsive to forms of visual expression is also most susceptible to abstraction and banality, perhaps because they confuse the immediacy of the visual with the need for an accepting, uncritical, spontaneous response. Often such a response is also unformed, shallow, and illiterate. (p. 50)

In other words, because the perception of an image is instantaneous, television viewers tend to process and respond to a televised image with the same rapidity, thus limiting their full comprehension of the image's meaning.

Whereas Cialdini and Lasser saw the negative side of television's power and its tendency to elicit a passive response, Fransecky and Debes (1972) gave credit to television for raising its viewers' intellectual level. The television generation, they said, was better informed than their parents; furthermore, this generation's passive listening and watching experiences "can be utilized to develop the interactive skills of communication" (p. 5).

Thus, the critical look at television's effects, both desirable and undesirable, brought a heightened awareness of visual literacy's importance. Advocates in the visual literacy movement felt that children needed to be taught how to understand what they were viewing. Two major perspectives on teaching visual literacy are discussed below.

Teaching Visual Literacy

As technology made our environment more and more visually oriented, the concern for becoming visually literate grew in importance. Researchers looked at the concept of visual literacy from two perspectives: (a) being a literate interpreter of visual messages, and (b) being a literate creator of visual messages. The belief was that in order to be an effective communicator one had to be skilled in both message creation and interpretation; studying one body of knowledge automatically resulted in learning the other.

Several writers in the movement developed visual literacy curriculums based on the creation and/or interpretation perspectives. Hortin (1981) addressed both perspectives by designing a visual literacy program which included: (a) understanding the elements of visual language (e.g., composition, scale, color, movement); (b) understanding how images manipulate and influence our lives; (c) creating and designing visual information; and (d) visual thinking.

Debes (1968) advocated training in how to create meaningful visual statements as an interactive response to what is seen, thus emphasizing production of visual messages as a first step toward learning visual literacy. Considine (1985), on the other hand, took the interpretive approach to visual literacy and saw this as a way to teach that seeing is not believing, despite what the traditional platitude dictates. Considine spoke of an "ideology of power" in visual communication which, in his words, was "...a message imbedded in the image that we often perceive without being fully aware of" (p. 3). Such messages are disguised in all media ranging from children's book illustrations, to films and television, to album covers, and involve the use of such elements as point of view, proportion, and position.

Visual Literacy Definitions

Several definitions of visual literacy emerged out of the early literature from the movement. Three common definitions are presented below and examined in terms of each definition's applicability to professional communicators in a corporate setting.

The original visual literacy definition (Debes, 1969) stated in part: "Visual literacy refers to a group of vision competencies a human being can develop by seeing at the same time he has and integrates other sensory experiences" (p. 14). Such vision competencies facilitate the discrimination

and interpretation of visible actions, objects, and symbols in the environment.

Moving from Debes' conceptual basis, those in the visual literacy field steered more toward an applied definition, such as one developed by Ausburn and Ausburn (1978) which described visual literacy as "... a group of skills that enables an individual to understand and use visuals for intentionally communicating with others" (p. 291).

An even more specific definition was offered by Braden and Hortin in 1981: "Visual literacy is the ability to understand and use images, including the ability to think, learn, and express oneself in terms of images" (p. 11). This definition attempts to clarify what understanding and using visuals means; that is, using the language of images to think, learn, and communicate.

Given the importance of application in adult training (Knowles, 1984), it follows that a definition of visual literacy will be more appropriate for use in a corporate visual skills training program if the definition is more application oriented. Using images for purposeful communication, expressing oneself visually, and making meaningful visual statements are all application oriented processes supporting the relevancy of visual literacy to corporate communication. Thus, while Debes was the founder of the visual literacy movement, his definition of visual literacy is likely to be considered too theoretical for use

in corporate communications. More application oriented
definitions, such as those offered by Ausburn and Ausburn or
Braden and Hortin, are more useful as a foundation for
corporate visual literacy. The importance of an application
oriented definition of visual literacy will be expanded later
in this paper.

Use of Visual Communication in Business and Industry

The literature reviewed in this section examines the
prevalence of visual communication in today's corporate
setting. The sources used were selected to give an overview
of the many different functions that visual communication
performs in business and industry today. Specific examples
provide a glimpse of the scope and extent to which visual
technology is influencing corporate communications.

Research on visual perception (Fleming and Levie, 1978)
and visual thinking (Arnheim, 1969) suggests that visual
images are more effective than words in terms of message
impact and message retention. This premise supports the
value of visual communication as a tool in business and
industry, an environment where complex ideas need to be
communicated with a maximum degree of accuracy in a minimum
amount of time.

Visuals are preferred in business communication when
speed and effectiveness are required. As Factor (1984)
stated, when pace dictates brevity in communicating, visuals
bring concepts to life more quickly and effectively than

words. Media producers for public relations firms capitalize on visuals' life-like quality with such projects as documentary sound/slide shows (Mack, 1984). Public relations experts feel that the experience of seeing real people and things, as well as hearing real people talking on a non-scripted sound track, is far more effective than receiving the same messages verbally.

The field of industrial technology was one of the earliest users of visual communication in business and industry. In his book, <u>Visual Art for Industry,</u> Magnan (1961) noted the trend toward specialization among such industrial divisions as quality control, engineering, personnel, production control, and sales. Each of these groups, he observed, was accumulating large bodies of specialized knowledge, as well as generating their own jargon for their particular functions. As complexity increased, so also did the probability for communication breakdowns in such a diverse and specialized environment. Magnan saw a potential in visual communication as a means for providing a vitally needed service: to overcome industry's language barriers. He saw the "...universal language of pictures, symbols, and graphic design..." being used with increasing effectiveness in industry's future (p. 16).

The field of real estate sales has turned to multi-image (i.e., multiple screen slide presentations) as an effective visual tool for promotion and training ("Multi-image", 1984).

In one real estate application, sales prospects were exposed
to seven hundred images in less that ten minutes using a
multi-image show, thus saving countless hours of sales
generating time. Another realtor converted multi-image slide
shows to videotape which he then gave to potential buyers to
take home and view at their leisure. This kind of visual
support is extremely effective, realtors claim, in
reinforcing buyers' decisions.

The fields of sales and marketing have recognized the
power of visual communication, not only as a supplement to
verbal messages, but often as the primary information source
in print advertisements, packaging, and poster art.
Professional salespeople, aware of their audience's visual
sophistication, design their sales presentations with heavy
reliance on visual media. Sales trainers recognize the
impact of visual messages and are training their clients to
use the latest visual technology. Taylor (1984), for
example, interviewed one manager who was training her sales
force in the design and production of computer generated
slides for use in their product promotions.

Management consultants are encouraging the use of
visual support in their clients' presentations. Consultant
John McMaster (1984) detected an underlying sense of
inadequacy among speakers about using visual aids, causing
speakers to slight the use of media and consequently, to
overlook very effective presentation tools. McMaster

suggested that combining oral communication with graphics could serve three purposes: (a) to increase understanding of abstract and unfamiliar concepts, (b) to emphasize comparisons, and (c) to highlight main or subtopics, or summarize an entire presentation.

Anderson (1983), in another article on presentation development, also emphasized the effectiveness of visual aids in conveying complex ideas and numerical data. Not only do visual aids increase understanding, they also ensure better retention, since it has been established that visual memory is longer than verbal memory (Dwyer, 1978). By illustrating comparisons and relationships of quantifiable data, a presenter stands a much better chance of successfully communicating his or her ideas.

Customer education is another business area using visual communication (Zemke, 1985). Customers, clients, and prospects are taught how to use products and services. Typically, customer education seminars are conducted by instructional presentation specialists relying heavily on visual communication techniques.

Video is currently one of the most popular visual communication tools in business. As the cost of video equipment decreases, its use in training and promotion increases. "Electronic retailing" (Harris, 1985) utilizes video terminals in supermarkets and hardware stores to present visual catalogs that help reduce customers' shopping

time. Large corporations, such as AT&T and International Paper, are putting their annual reports on videotape for shareholders' viewing rather than reading ("Shareholders", 1984). In the publishing industry, agents are using "videobooks" to promote authors and books via broadcast television and closed circuit television in book stores (Chambers and Asher, 1984). The videobooks present visual book reviews that show book elements ranging from costumes and location scenes to exercise routines and diet plans, thus immediately relating the book to the viewer. Taped interviews allow authors to discuss their books in more depth, rather than spending their limited air-time establishing the book's subject.

In corporate training, video presentations are among the most popular instructional media currently in use. Gates (1985) pointed out that an important advantage of videotaped dramatizations in training is the realistic models to which trainees can compare their own performance. The advantages of video are especially apparent in sales training where salespeople's interactions with customers are dramatized. The video presentations are more effective and less time-consuming than traditional training sessions.

The above discussion exemplified some of the myriad of visual communication applications found in business and industry. The discussion now shifts to an examination of the

visual literacy skills that are involved in visual communications.

Visual Literacy Skills

Visual literacy researchers have identified several visual literacy skills considered important to the visual communicator. This section presents an overview of these skills. The first set of skills reviewed are perceptually oriented; the second are more educational activity-based; the third are applicable to adult communicators. Taken collectively, the skills provide a curricular framework for integrating visual literacy skills into a corporate visual communication training program.

Debes' (1969) "Hierarchy of Visual Skills" listed virtually every visual perception skill humans can develop. These skills included interpreting body language, sequencing and grouping visuals, and using color, size, shape, perspective, and motion to express and idea. Debes believed that to be visually literate one must refine these innate abilities.

Debes addressed the interpretive and creative approaches to visual literacy. He listed each interpretation skill together with its related creative skill. An example of such a skill would be:

"Read" a sequence of objects and/or body language arranged in chronological order and arranged by process. Compose an utterance as above. (Debes, 1970, p. 12)

Debes further expanded the skills by listing the attributes
of a visually literate person (e.g., a familiarization with
the tools of visual literacy and their use, an appreciation
for the masterworks of visual literacy, and an ability to
translate from visual to verbal language and vice versa).

From Debes' theoretical base several visual literacy
programs for elementary, secondary, and adult levels evolved.
Examples can be seen in a study compiled by the International
Visual Literacy Association Task Force on Curriculum (1982).
Programs ranged from "A Visual Kindergarten" to a
"Phototherapy" course for improving adults' self-concept and
expression (Dake, 1982).

The Milford Communications Project was one of the
pioneering visual literacy programs in schools (Fransecky and
Ferguson, 1973). The Milford program was based on the
philosophy that visual literacy is part of an expanded
approach to language and literacy, and therefore necessitated
a change in school curriculums to accommodate the expansion.
The Milford program was divided into four stages implemented
throughout the K-12 grades. The first phase taught students
to perceive the various "forms" in their environment and
understand that form, itself, often implies meaning. For
example, the shape of a cross on a church has a different
meaning from the symbol used by the Red Cross organization.
In the second phase, students discovered and communicated
more complex perceptual elements such as perspective,

distance, and sequence. Here students learned such techniques as showing a subject from an angle looking up so that the subject appears more powerful. The third phase introduced the perceptual relationship between sound and image; that is, keeping the intensity of sound commensurate with its accompanying image. For example, the voice of a person standing far away from the viewer should not sound close and intimate, or it will be mistaken for someone else's voice. In the fourth phase students learned to operate the tools of visual communication including media hardware and software.

The Milford project was an activity-oriented approach to visual literacy that provided direct experience with visual communication techniques. Students in the program made their own films, arranged sequences of photographs, and compared written and illustrated descriptions of the same object or situation. There was no effort made to measure the project's effectiveness since qualitative analysis of learning effectiveness was, and still is, a difficult and unreliable process.

Another set of visual literacy skills was developed for use in designing a visual communication training program for corporate communicators (Hazzard, Wedman, & Brooks, 1985). The skills were selected from existing curriculums and were compiled based on their applicability to corporate communication needs. Although some fall within the realm of

a training or production specialist who has access to more sophisticated media hardware, others can be learned by any professional who needs to improve his or her visual communication knowledge and skills. For a closer look at this list, the reader can refer to the Appendix.

In summary, the preceding literature review covered three areas. The first examined the background, theory base, and definitions of visual literacy. The second looked at the various ways in which visual communication is being used in the business and industry setting. Finally, some visual literacy skills were considered.

The literature on visual literacy consistently focused on the education of children K-12; little attention has been given to visual literacy for adults. The research indicates a rapid increase in visual communication usage among business and industry professionals, especially in the areas of training and promotional presentations. This increase in use is consistent with predictions about an increasingly visual society. Yet the curriculums and instructional strategies proposed by visual literacy advocates typically overlook the large numbers of adults who did not grow up with visual literacy training, and therefore may not be adequately equipped to function effectively in our visual world. The final chapter of this paper presents an analysis and summary of the information learned in the literature review.

Chapter III

Analysis and Summary

The concept of visual literacy was conceived, and its
accompanying intellectual movement started, over fifteen
years ago. Yet its implications for communication are more
apparent today than ever before. One reason is the
tremendous growth in communications technology, particularly
in visual technology. The range of visual media now
available for use by the public and private sector is wider,
more accessible, and more powerful than ever before.
Evidence of visual communication's power can be seen in the
recent charitable fund-raising program, "Live Aid", which was
broadcast live via satellite television to a worldwide
audience. The program raised approximately 70 million
dollars in a period of seventeen hours, results that would
have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, with any
other form of communication.

Teaching our eyes to read and write visual messages has
progressed from being a curricular recommendation for schools
to being what some see as a training need in many
professions. Rudolf Arnheim (1969), one of the first to note
the pervasive, interdisciplinary nature of visual
communication, wrote:

> The discipline of intelligent vision cannot be confined
> to the art studio; it can succeed only if the visual
> sense is not blunted and confused in other areas of the

curriculum. To try to establish an island of visual
literacy in an ocean of blindness is ultimately
self-defeating. Visual thinking is indivisible. (p.
307)

Lamenting the tendency to separate and confine art education
to fine and applied art categories, Arnheim went on to say:

The lack of visual training in the sciences and
technology on the one hand and the artist's neglect of,
or even contempt for, the beautiful and vital task of
making the world of facts visible to the inquiring mind,
strikes me...as a ... serious ailment of our
civilization. (p. 307)

This paper proposes extending visual literacy beyond the
school classroom and including it in corporate training
programs. Such programs are appropriate for any business or
industry that regularly practices sales promotion, public
relations, job engineering (e.g., designing job aids),
presentation development, customer education, internal
communications, and employee training. The literature
reveals widespread use of visual communication in business
and industry and therefore suggests a need for training in
the use of visual tools, not just for corporate media
specialists but for all professionals.

It appears from the literature that the original concern
for visual literacy in the schools has diminished in
intensity. One reason is the requirement for additional

coursework, staff, and funding required for program support.
Another reason is the lack of measurable research data
collected from the various visual literacy programs that were
implemented. People often lose interest in promoting an idea
whose effectiveness cannot be supported with data.
Contemporary writers in the visual literacy movement (e.g.,
Braden & Hortin, 1981) stress the integration of visual
literacy training into already existing school curriculums,
thus cutting additional costs. Somewhat ironically, as
visual literacy concerns have decreased, visual technology
developments have increased.

In view of the rapid growth of visual technology and its
consequent heavy usage in non-educational settings today, it
seems reasonable to redirect the focus of visual literacy
onto training and professional development in business and
industry. Some corporations have developed their own reading
and health improvement programs to compensate for the
sometimes inadequate job done by public education. Similar
developments are appropriate and likely in the area of visual
literacy training. The skills identified fifteen years ago
still apply and need only minor modifications to become
corporate training objectives.

This discussion of visual literacy points out some areas
for further research in the field of visual communication.
One area is the development of more effective measurement
techniques for testing the effects of visual literacy

training. This problem was partially addressed by Dehn, Ragan, and Greb (1977); however, more research is badly needed.

Another area needing further research is the effects of visual communication. For example, several writers in visual perception have discussed the indelible nature of imagery. Burgin (1983) talked of the instantaneous and irreversible impression that an image makes on our minds the moment we look at it. The image becomes integrated into our cognitive structure, there to remain forever unchanged, although another view of the same image may join but never replace the original. If Burgin is correct, then how can a visual impression be changed by visual communication so that the preferred impression overrides the original? The instantaneous and irreversible nature of visual impressions points out the need for accuracy in visual message design, thus underscoring the need for visual literacy training.

Another area for further research is visual context. Kincaid (1980), in his discussion on promotion and the communication process, stated that verbal messages are much more susceptible to distortion because of word connotation. According to Kincaid, symbols and other forms of visual communication convey their message more clearly since they don't use words as language. Since the goal of communication is to establish common meaning, then Kincaid concludes that visuals are a consistently more effective communication

device because their meaning is universal and free of contextual influence. Research has shown, however, that this assumption is false, that visuals are not always the best choice as a communication channel (Dwyer, 1978). Researchers need to consider the effects of context on an image, and how context can be controlled and accounted for by a visual designer.

In closing, this paper brought attention to the concept of visual literacy and its potential as a training need for professional communicators in a business and industry setting. Using the information discussed herein, corporate trainers and management developers can design training in visual literacy skills, thus increasing the quality and effectiveness of corporate communications.

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Appendix

Visual Literacy Skills
for Corporate Communicators

Objective: to understand and effectively use in visual messages:

-the relationship of color and shape to perception of meaning

-principles of composition and visual style

-motion picture and video camera techniques of angle, distance, and movement

-using sequence to make statements, show relationships, or a process

-techniques of visual editing

-combining visuals with words so that each supports the other

-techniques of visual transition

-selecting media that most effectively communicate a visual message