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# Assignments are getting more visual:  introducing strategies for developing visual literacy in our students

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## *Presentation abstract*

For decades (even centuries), university has been dominated by text-based assessments. However, things are changing. With the massive increase in visual communication in society, and with an acknowledgement that diverse assessments allow a more diverse student body to thrive, there is a gradual, but noticeable, increase in visually-rich assessment types being set. Whilst traditional academic presentations and posters have the potential to develop some basic visual communication skills, assessments such as infographics, blogs, magazine articles, and posters aimed at the general public require higher levels of visual literacy. This means learning developers may need to improve their own strategies for supporting students with such assignments and ensure that our practices allow all students, especially those who struggle with text-based assessments, to shine (see Bartram, 2021).

Following on from calls at the last conference for practical ways to develop visual literacy, this workshop has been designed to introduce some tried and tested learning development activities that can support the development of the practices and approaches needed when undertaking visually-rich assignments. The activities consider the Framework for Visual Literacy (ACRL, 2022), specifically helping students to:

- be aware that they are participating in a changing visual environment,
- understand how images can communicate information both effectively and affectively,
- approach images with criticality,
- work with images sensitively and ethically.

The workshop provided opportunities for more experienced participants to share ideas and activities that they have already used that develop any of the knowledge practices and dispositions from the Framework. In addition, we brainstormed new ways that these can be incorporated into our general learning development practices. Both participants who are new to developing visual literacy and those who are already involved in this area were able therefore to take away new ideas to try in their own context.

**Keywords:** visual literacy; assignments; visuals.

## Community response

Following #ALDcon2022 the author reflected that "*In conversations following the session it became clear that people really wanted ideas about how to develop visual literacy in their students (not to mention themselves) so I am planning a more interactive workshop looking at this for the next ALDinHE conference*" and it was a pleasure to see the author back at the conference delivering the promised interactive session.

I took away from this session a renewed sense of how important visual literacy is for students. The need to understand the role that visuals play in the everyday messaging that they see and generate.

As well as some practical ideas for developing visual literacy with students, I took away a renewed sense of how important this is as a facet of learning development and how we can support learners through their studies within our teaching, support sessions and assessment design.

The session helped me to reflect on how I already use visual activities within my teaching and how I can develop these in future. I'm excited to try some new things and move out of my own comfort zone!

## *Author's reflection*

I really wanted to highlight the increasing importance of developing visual literacy alongside other academic literacies, and give colleagues who are less confident in this area some indication that it really is not that hard to get students to think and communicate visually. I shared some simple, but tried and tested, ways of getting students to consider visuals when they are communicating information (and to do so ethically). While attendance was lower than I would have liked, I think those who were there enjoyed the activities. The small numbers meant we were not able to tap into wider LD experiences in this area when sharing practice. However, we did still get some great ideas:

Reflection:
- Choose an image to signify experience/feelings and another to show how/what you might change next time.
- Drawing reflective cycles

Academic reading:
- Focus on analysing the graphs and figures in an article
- Use visual note-making when reading
- Graphic organisers - what is the 'shape' of the text?

Referencing and source use:
- Referencing images
- Evaluating the reliability of images (AI and Deep Fake!)

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Academic writing:

- For concise and logical writing, deconstruct paragraphs visually: take sentences/paragraphs apart into phrases for each idea and put them on different parts of an empty sheet of paper/online whiteboard. Draw and write in the connections and then reformulate.
- Lego serious play
- Draw and explain the shape of an essay.

Source evaluation:

- Get students to choose from a selection of images - e.g., what is the best example of X and why?
- Graphic organisers - synthesis matrices
- Literature reviews as maps, mapping the territory

Note-making:

- Sketch-noting
- Graphic organisers
- Artpads
- Mind maps

## *Acknowledgments*

## *References*

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## Author details

Dr Jacqui Bartram has worked in staff and student support at the University of Hull for over 30 years. With a background in supporting ICT, she is currently employed as an Academic and Library Specialist within the institution's Skills Team. Whilst her official specialism is visual literacy, she supports all academic literacies. Her EdD thesis looked at the bridges and barriers to developing visual literacy within her institution and she has a keen interest in anything that promotes multimodal and visual communication skills. She is a Steering Group member for ALDinHE and an enthusiastic cartoonist.

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