

Bridges and barriers to developing visual literacy

Jacqui Bartram
University of Hull, UK

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Presentation abstract

As learning developers, we are generally confident supporting academics and students with developing criticality and academic writing skills. However, communication today is multimodal and increasingly visual so our support is expanding to include developing visual literacy, i.e. approaching visual sources critically and using visuals to communicate effectively.

Both the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (QAA, 2014) and many individual subject benchmark statements require students to be able to communicate ‘in a range of formats’ and to ‘non-specialist audiences’ – and yet not all students seem to have the opportunities to learn how to do so effectively, despite these national and disciplinary requirements. This presentation reported on the findings from research undertaken as part of an EdD that explored the extent of visual literacy development across an institution and what further enablers and obstacles exist that influence a student’s ability to develop the skills needed to effectively communicate in a visually rich landscape (see Bartram, 2021).

The research began with an institution-wide audit of 1,725 module specifications that categorised each module as explicitly, implicitly, potentially or not apparently developing visual literacy. This audit indicated that choice of degree is the first major bridge or barrier to developing visual literacy that a student may face. Only three subjects had the opportunity to develop both critical and creative visual literacy skills in a good proportion (>25%) of their modules (Film, Media and Digital Design; Engineering and Geography; Earth and Environmental Science), two more had a similar number of opportunities to develop only critical skills (History; American Studies) and likewise with creative skills (Biology and Environmental Science; English and Creative Writing) – but the majority had only modest or low numbers of modules with opportunities to develop any visual literacy skills. Interviews with academic staff teaching on modules representing all the above

categories then considered why visual literacy is or is not developed. Barriers were identified such as resistance to change, lack of staff experience/confidence in teaching and assessing visual communication, and student expectations of assessments. The research found many bridges, such as the increase in public communication assignments to improve employability and the need for more inclusive assessments. It concluded that most barriers could be minimised by providing a range of sample assessment rubrics which emphasise assessment of visual elements. The findings have implications for learning developers who may need to support both students and academics who are not confident developing a new set of academic skills that take them out of their logocentric comfort zone.

Community response

Jacqui Bartram's presentation was extremely well attended and received, with its impact evident both at the conference itself and in the written responses from the community. These engaged responses show the extent to which her research switched on a lightbulb for many learning developers, for some illuminating a gap in their practice and for others helping them see that they have been teaching visual literacy without realising it. The level of engagement, reflection, and resolutions to change practice evidences that visual literacy is a fertile area for learning development practitioners.

What did attendees learn from the presentation?

Jacqui's work raised awareness of the need for and the benefits of visual literacy, and its relevance to learning development. Several comments endorsed her argument that visual literacy is becoming more and more essential to the ways in which students learn, are assessed, and interact with the world:

"This session highlighted to me the importance of visual literacy to modern multimodal communication. Although I would argue that communication has always been multimodal, it has intensified and become more complex and layered. It was also argued that while students are seen as visually literate, this is an assumption and there is a lack of criticality about how true it is in practice. There are gaps in the perceived necessity for visual literacy education and in the confidence of students."

“This presentation made me realise just how important visual communications are, both to us and to our students. I use images frequently in my own teaching but never really reflect on why this is and how to convey the value to students. As Jacqui mentioned in her presentation, I think I am guilty of assuming that visual literacy is something that is developed organically and is particularly easy for our students who use social media frequently.”

“I was very interested to find out the published standards of visual literacy (ACRL, 2011) and I note the different levels of engagement with visual content (‘view’, ‘use’, ‘produce’); these can be very useful conceptual tools for the design of visual learning and assessment tasks, and for establishing links to other learning outcomes. I fully support that visual literacy encourages criticality and creativity, and that students would benefit from the opportunities it allows for authentic practice.”

“In all honesty I had not thought about module specifications and whether they addressed components of visual literacy before, but I did know that academic departments were becoming more inclined to throw assessments into modules which included creating posters and presentations without giving students the skills to complete them. It was interesting to see the numbers of module specifications which were mapped to the ACRL Standards of Visual Literacy that Jacqui used. I like the fact Jacqui is having the conversations within her institution and seeing some shift in the use of images and sparking discussions with colleagues.”

Jacqui responded by encouraging anyone looking to introduce visual literacy into their practice to start with reflection: “More thoughtfulness on the use of visuals is definitely the first step!” She picked up, too, on the importance of effective conversations in influencing others’ practice, observing:

“You are right to point out that one of the major benefits of my research is the conversations it has started with colleagues within my own institution – where I obviously have the most influence. This idea of leading through influencing others rather than by top-down authority reminds me of Carina Buckley’s conclusions in her ‘Leadership in Learning Development’ session at this conference [editor note: see corresponding article in this issue]. I hope that learning developers may

themselves have discussions about widening the literacies supported within their own institutions, drawing on the research evidence my study provides.”

Another attendee took the time to reflect back on her own and her students’ experiences, and how more support for visual literacy would have helped them:

“This presentation triggered for me several reflections on the role and importance of developing visual literacy with our students. As a student of Archaeology (some time ago now), I frequently found myself needing to support my essay-style assignments with visuals. In addition, visual documentation of artefacts, excavation contexts etc. was a core part of my practical training and subsequent work, but never a skill I found explicitly taught or assessed in modules. Anecdotally, it may be relevant to add here that a key correction in my thesis was a request to make a set of figures more ‘user friendly’! So, looking back, I cannot help but wonder how more targeted development of my visual literacy might have affected the ways I choose to communicate.

“I then made a connection with questions we recently received from students during a series of dissertation-focused webinars: the questions had to do with presentation of results. Visual literacy in this context would involve making decisions on which graph is best, how to organise a table, how to represent a process in an infographic, selecting impactful images, and so on. As a bonus, it can save a lot of precious words within the word-count limits!”

Jacqui welcomed these “great examples” of students’ experiences and reflected that this “highlights that visual literacy is not something new, but something that just needs a more specific spotlight shining on”.

What examples have attendees shared from their own practice?

“I often use visual imagery (and spend a lot of time trying to find the right image) to get my point across both in synchronous and asynchronous resources development. Metaphor and threshold concepts can often help with students’ learning and visual literacy adds another layer to their development if these are well

represented. Jacqui's research supports how important this kind of literacy is and how to support students' multimodal communication skills."

A colleague from the University of Hull described how "immensely impactful" Jacqui's work has already been on her own practice, and how integral it now is to how they teach and support students:

"As demonstrated in her paper, visual literacy is a core component of our support offering, and at Hull we see it as an aspect of our role as learning developers. This is important as I feel we are beginning to see the death of the essay. Assessments are diversifying as a response to subject benchmark statements, emerging literacies, the 4th industrial revolution, the designing out of plagiarism/unfair means and the delivery of competency-based education. I believe that to stay relevant, learning developers need to be ready to respond to this. We cannot focus on support with writing alone."

Jacqui responded with further encouragement for the learning development community to take up this challenge:

"Thank you for highlighting the changing nature of assessment and the need for us, as learning developers, to ensure we are able to support students in less traditional assignment formats. I appreciate that this may be daunting to those of us who have come to this profession due to our expertise in the written word, but the underlying concepts of communication and criticality are the same with visual and textual communication. The language may be different - but it is one that we are all capable of mastering in my opinion."

What do attendees intend to do differently as a result of attending this session?

Jacqui provided colleagues with the inspiration, awareness, and some of the initial tools to start changing their practice:

"It seems to me that we ought to increase the visibility of visual communication in our resources and the support we offer for project work. After the presentation I

wanted to go back to resources I currently am working on and rethink how they can become a bit less text heavy!”

“I’ll be considering how to use images more thoughtfully in future and how to make visual literacy an explicit part of my teaching.”

“In terms of my own practice I will consider the use of visual literacy when constructing my teaching resources. I will also think about applying ideas about visual literacy when teaching presentations and poster skills. I will look for the ACRL [ACRL, 2022] and CILIP-endorsed resources [Brown et al., 2016].”

What potential next steps do attendees suggest?

There was a clear appetite for more learning and exchange on the subject of visual literacy within learning development, and a particular interest in how to both influence and learn from academic practice in different subject areas:

“In her presentation, Jacqui was able to identify the importance of visual literacy across many disciplines. There were also many opportunities for this to be developed further. The item that struck me the most surrounds those bridges and barriers. Support is always going to be an enabler of, or a ‘bridge’ to, student success. I think it raises questions for the role of learning development in this.”

“Jacqui spoke about the difference between a ‘deep-dive’ and a broad overview of her research. She gave us a broad overview. It would be fascinating to take a deep-dive into some of the areas she mentioned in her work, especially in relation to those subject areas and courses who were doing particularly well at supporting students’ visual literacy. I would like to know how educators can develop their own visual literacy and how disciplinary conventions may affect perceptions.”

One response took the reflections further, and started exploring ideas of how visual literacy is situated in cultural and historical contexts:

“I wondered if interpretations in meaning making in some instances could be conflictual? Similarly, what role does culture/language play in interpretation of

visually rich resources, assignments and communication? I wondered if there was anything we could learn from history where visual literacy was the primary form of communication for those who were illiterate (i.e. through religious iconography and symbolism).”

“Jacqui’s session reminded me of an article I read, ‘On an excursion through EC1: multimodality, ethnography and urban walking’ (Lamb, Gallagher & Knox, 2018) discussing the shifting nature of the urban environment. It made me wonder about the shifting nature of visual representations we use and how we perceive them.”

For Jacqui, these thoughtful ideas connected back to reflections on how to start conversations about visual literacy when working with academics:

“Meaning making from and with visuals is indeed cultural and potentially conflicting – which is all the more reason to address this issue so that students are aware of potential misleading messages. What a good idea to frame this in terms of ‘the shifting nature’ of communication and the move to visual representations. I think it could be a better starting point to some conversations than ‘you are not doing enough’. Academics who are comfortable with their logocentric world may be more open to change if it is framed as something that is inevitable but nevertheless acknowledges the text-dominated starting point of the shift.”

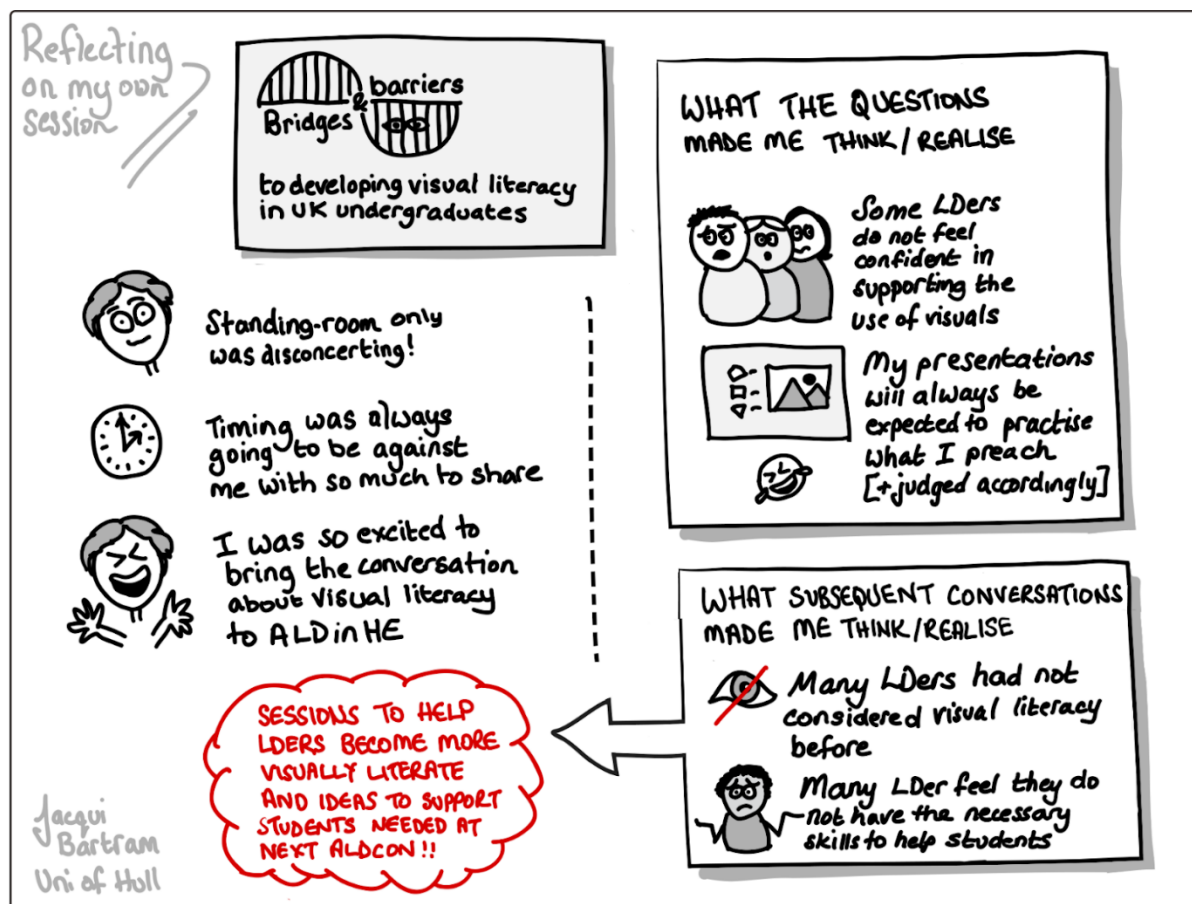
It is rewarding to see this community dialogue emerging around a topic which looks set to become a greater focus for learning developers. In Jacqui’s final reflections, as well as summarising her own takeaways from these discussions, she goes on to set out her own intended next steps.

Author’s reflections

Fittingly, I have created a visual reflection on my session. I will say here, though, that I had some fantastic conversations with attendees following the session and really appreciated the feedback. Many of you had not considered the visual literacy of your students and, having heard my presentation, could see how important it is. I wish I had had longer to talk

about my research and realise I had tried to fit too much into the time allocated. Always a cardinal sin!

Figure 1. Author's reflections on own session.



Next steps

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 – thanks for the ideas, folks!

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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.