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Teaching students to critically read digital images:

A visual literacy approach using the DIG Method

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Abstract

This innovative teaching idea, the *Digital Image Guide* (DIG) Method, addresses the pressing need to develop visual pedagogies in the university classroom by providing a technique for students to use to critically read digital images. This article also introduces the concept of *shallow* and *deep images*. It then explains the difference between the two types of images and how to use the DIG Method to *dig* deeper in order to understand *deep images*. By utilizing the DIG Method, students can learn to analyze, interpret, evaluate, and comprehend images found on social media sites and around the web, increasing their visual literacy skills in the process.

Keywords: visual literacy, critical reading, higher education, pedagogy, digital images, DIG Method

Introduction

Since the first International Visual Literacy Association conference in 1968, fifty years ago, educators in diverse disciplines have advocated for the incorporation of visual literacy into education curricula. Within the past fifteen years, as communication has become increasingly visual in nature, the emergence of digital technologies and social media platforms has only accelerated educators' concern. With the emergence of fake news articles and "deepfake" videos on social media within the past two years, it is now imperative more than ever to incorporate techniques to teach students how to evaluate images into the classroom. By turning a critical eye towards these types of images and learning how to critically read digital images, students can increase their visual literacy skills and their critical thinking skills in tandem. Both of these sets of skills are necessary for students to become discerning citizens who understand the role images play in communication today.

Visual literacy skills are, in the broadest sense, understood as a set of competencies in reading, writing, and thinking visually. Pertaining to higher education specifically, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), a division of the American Libraries Association, defines visual literacy in their 2011 publication *ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* as:

> … 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. (ACRL, 2011, para. 2)

At its most basic level, this definition conveys that effective visual literacy skills equip learners to understand images. One approach to developing visual competencies and, thus, understanding images, is to practice reading images. However, a quick scan or cursory glance

is not enough to understand images that require deeper understanding. In order to become visually literate, students must learn how to *critically* read these types of images rather than rely on the type of surface-level understanding that is so prevalent in our daily internet and social media use.

According to a 2018 Pew Research Center report, the majority of Americans (77%) go online every day. However, 39% of eighteen to twenty-nine year olds (roughly the same age as college students) go online almost constantly (more than several times a day) compared to only 36% of thirty to forty-nine year olds, 17% of fifty to sixty-four year olds, and 8% of sixty-five year olds and older (Perrin and Jiang, 2018). Within this overall trend in internet usage, social media use in particular has become ubiquitous for people the same age as traditional college students; of 18 to 24 year olds, 94% use YouTube, 80% use Facebook, 78% use Snapchat, 71% use Instagram, and 45% use Twitter (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Many social media sites such as these rely on charts, graphs, photographs, and videos to entice users to engage with their content. Those media sites that did not originate as chiefly visual are transitioning their focus to become more visual by emphasizing the prominence and importance of visual content (Kane & Pear, 2016). Globally speaking, out of the 7.5 billion people in the world, 4 billion (53%) use the internet and 3.2 billion (42%) are active social media users (Kemp, 2018). Although a breakdown by age is unavailable, suffice it to say that American college students are not the only heavy users of social media nor the only ones to be increasingly exposed to visual images on social media sites.

Encountering more visuals is not necessarily a cause for concern in itself. The problem occurs when students treat what I call *shallow* and *deep images*, to be defined below, the same because they encounter them in the same spaces, on the same platforms. Indeed, most users of social media sites scroll past these types of images without recognizing that both *shallow* and *deep images* are nestled next to each other in their news feed. Social media

feeds have flattened out contextual clues that existed in different media such as magazines, newspapers, radio, and television. It is imperative, then, that students understand these images need to be treated differently, because, even though they are created and posted online with different functions and intentions, those intentions can be obscured on social media platforms.

The first type of images encountered on social media platforms, *shallow images,* are what we might think of as 'typical' internet images: GIFs of cats, memes of a celebrity overlaid with a humorous quote, and picture-perfect photographs of travel destinations (see Figure 1). *Shallow images* are mostly innocuous because they do not purport to do more than entertain. They do not require a critical eye to understand the meaning of the image and require no additional thought on the part of the viewer. There is, almost always, no deeper meaning to be found in these types of images; they can simply be enjoyed and scrolled past without further investigation to no ill effect and with no lasting consequences.

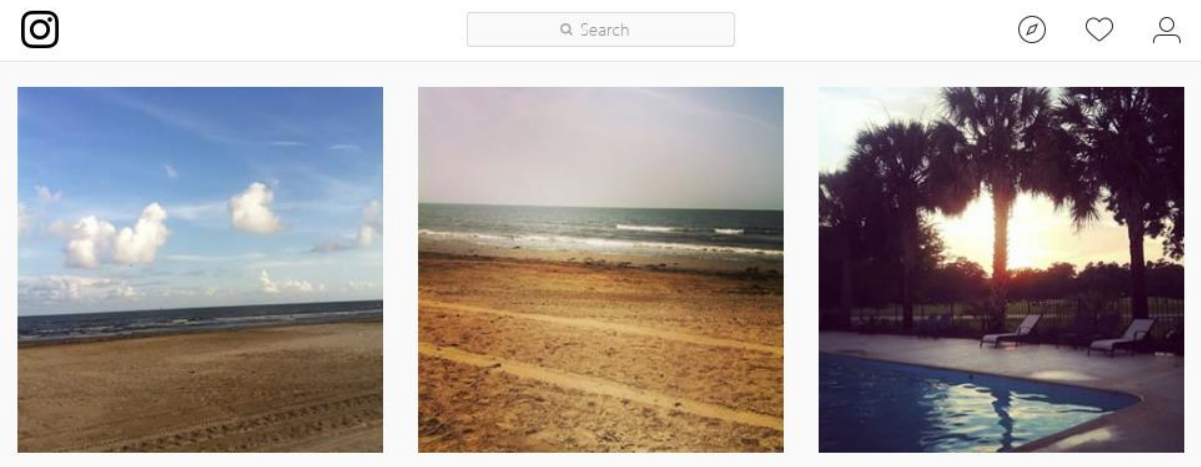

Figure 1. Example of a *shallow image*. Copyright 2014 by D. S. Thompson. Reprinted with permission.

The second type of images, *deep images,* include news and advertising photographs (see Figure 2) and may include other images such as memes that accompany articles found on social media sites and websites like Reddit and 4chan. *Deep images* require more

interrogation because they are created and posted online to perform different roles and fulfil different intentions: to inform, to mislead, to persuade, and/or to sell. Because of these differing roles and intents, these images should not be read at the surface-level. Students need to learn how to unpack these images for their content, context, and purpose in order to fully understand the meaning of the image. Unpacking *deep images* is important because, if we do not, then it is possible to be misinformed, misled, or otherwise manipulated. Students who use visual literacy and critical thinking skills to determine the intent of images are able to sidestep this manipulation and become discerning citizens.

Figure 2. Example of a *deep image*. Asylum seekers protesting against detention at Villawood Immigration Detention Centre on 22 April 2011. Copyright 2011 by Adam J.W.C.. Reprinted with permission.

The goals, learning objectives, and justification of using the DIG Method

The goals of this activity are to improve students' knowledge about *shallow* and *deep images* and to introduce the *Digital Image Guide* Method (hereafter referred to as the DIG Method) as a resource for cultivating critical reading habits of digital images. The learning objectives for this lesson are as follows: (1) after instruction, students will be able to identify the different types of images (*shallow* and *deep*) encountered on the internet and social media platforms and (2) after instruction, students will be able to utilize the DIG Method to critically read *deep images*. Educators should use the DIG Method because it provides students with the opportunity to engage with images at a deeper level. By using the DIG

Method, students examine, review, and interrogate images for deeper meaning – and the method reminds them that in order to critically read digital images, they will need to *dig* into *deep images* in order to understand them.

The DIG Method

Multiple methods for evaluating information already exist within the field of information literacy. One of the most used by academic librarians in the United States is the CRAAP Test. This acronym stands for Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, and Purpose (California State University – Chico, 2010). Although the list of questions in the CRAAP test help college students evaluate textual information, the test does not adequately address how to evaluate *visual* information. This specific teaching idea, the DIG Method, was developed to address this gap. This teaching idea was also developed to address how students read *shallow* and *deep images*, and impress upon them the importance of critically reading *deep images*.

In creating the DIG Method, I first adapted a series of questions found in an online research guide about how to evaluate digital images (University of California–Irvine Libraries, n.d.) developed circa 2010. I also referenced questions found in the article "The Visual Literacy White Paper" (Bamford, 2003, p. 6-7) and the book *Visual Literacy for Libraries: A Practical, Standards-Based Guide* (Brown, Bussert, Hattwig, & Medaille, 2016, p. 20). The questions I created from this assimilation were then organized according to the steps of critical reading: analyzing, interpreting, evaluating, and comprehending (Manarin, Carey, Rathburn, & Ryland, 2015). Finally, after several additional rounds of revisions, I codified the resulting schema as the "DIG Method" (See Table 1).

The DIG Method
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 point of views 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?

Table 1. The DIG Method

The questions in the **analyzing** section of the DIG Method ask the student to review and describe the image, review the textual information included in the image (if any), and describe their initial reaction to the image. In the next section, **interpreting**, the questions ask the student to determine the source and the message, as well as search the internet for the image to provide context. The third section, **evaluating**, asks the student to evaluate how their feelings might impact how they view the image, as well as evaluating whether or not the image has been manipulated or misrepresented. The next question in the evaluating section

asks the student whether the image is reliable and accurate and asks them to provide reasoning for their response. The final section of questions addresses **comprehension**. This set of questions asks the student for their own judgement of the image based off of the information they have accumulated thus far, then, to assess that judgement in regards to their biases and, finally, to determine the purpose of the image.

The DIG Method is appropriate for college students in any lower-level or upper-level course in which it would be beneficial to critically examine an image (see Table 2 for a lesson outline incorporating the DIG Method). The lesson works best with groups from ten to forty students. It is possible to conduct the lesson with less students; in that case, more time can be spent on discussion. If there are more than forty students, more time can be spent on the lecture or the recap at the end of the lesson.

Time	Activity
5 minutes	<u>Introduction</u> • Introduce the lesson and define visual literacy ○ Feel free to explore one of more of the *ACRL Visual Literacy Standards*; 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) are particularly relevant to this activity.

15 minutes	<u>Mini-lecture on the concept of *shallow* and *deep images*</u>
	
	• Explain the differences between *shallow* and *deep images*
	• Ask the students to provide some examples
	  ○ Project examples overhead for the students to evaluate.
	• Show your own examples of *shallow* and *deep images*
	  ○ Walk the students through the differences between these images, asking for the students' input about which classification they would assign to each of the images.

25 minutes	<u>Using the DIG Method</u> • Project the *deep image* you have selected or allow the students to use their own example

	• Allow students to complete the worksheet, checking students' progress periodically. • After they have worked independently, have the students confer with a partner for five minutes or so, discussing the similarities and differences in their answers.
15 minutes	<u>Reporting back, closing discussion, and recap</u> • Bring the group back together and ask a few pairs of students to share so the class can see other examples/applications ○ Allow time for discussion here, if possible • Recap the lesson, reiterating the differences between *shallow* and *deep images* and the importance of critically reading *deep images*

Table 2. Lesson outline incorporating the DIG Method

In terms of materials, each student needs a copy of the DIG Method, an internet connected device, and a writing utensil and paper for recording responses. Once the activity has been completed, the instructor can assess the students' responses to the DIG Method to determine whether or not students critically read the presented image; and if not, determine at what point did that critical reading break down. Most students should, with enough explanation, be able to finish answering the questions included in the DIG Method in approximately twenty minutes. If it takes longer, there may be a breakdown in communication regarding the instructions for the activity or a problem in moving onto the next steps in the critical reading process. The process – from analyzing to interpreting to evaluating to comprehending – should start linearly but become iterative as the student investigates the image further, questioning their initial assumptions and preconceived ideas. The assessment can be as rigorous or flexible as the course requires

Using the DIG Method

I first utilized the DIG Method for a library instruction session with a journalism course in the spring of 2018, incorporating this sixty minute lesson within the larger seventy-five minute class session. The image that I selected for this lesson is a well-known image

from American history, now known as *Migrant Mother* (see Figure 3), which I assumed the students would have some familiarity with and therefore they would also have some preconceived ideas about the image as well. Dorothea Lange took this photograph in 1936 for the Farm Security Administration during the Great Depression; it features Florence Owens Thompson and her children in Nipomo, California. I presented the image without any accompanying textual information and then, as the DIG Method called for it, instructed the students to search for the image online.

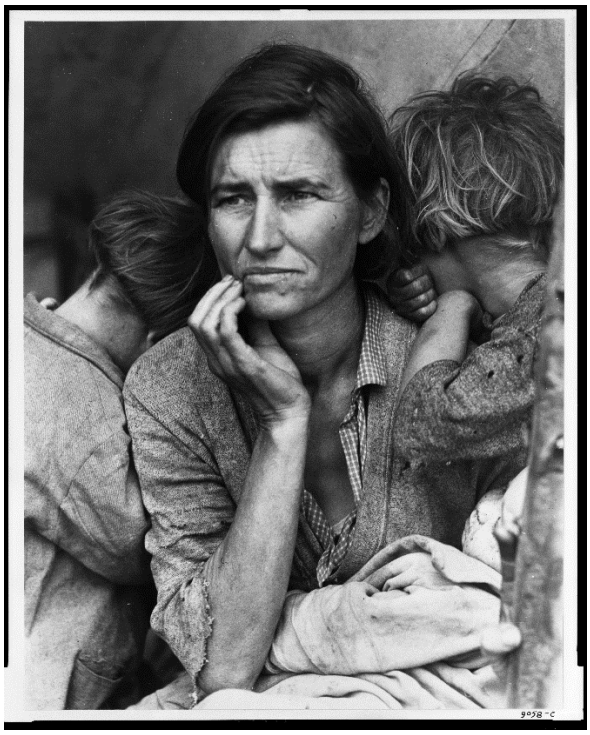

Figure 3. Migrant Mother. Copyright 1936 by D. Lange. Reprinted with permission.

We then discussed the image as a class. Although most of the students had seen the image before, they could not remember where they had seen it or mentioned that they had seen it in a history class or on Facebook. This led to a conversation about context since I had purposefully left off identifying information when I initially presented the image. Once the students began searching for the image, I revealed the image's title, the date, and the photographer's name. This information gave the students additional context for the social,

economic, and historical conditions in which the photograph was taken, leading to a more meaningful understanding of the image. The web searches then shed light on how the image has been used in the intervening years. We then discussed how that use influences our understanding of the image today.

We then deliberated about why this type of image falls into the *deep image* category and what makes it worthy of further investigation. At the surface-level, this is an image of a woman and her children. Indeed, students' comments reflected this when answering the first question of the DIG Method, "Who, what, when, and where do you see **represented** in the image?" Students wrote:

- "There are 3 people in this image. A mother and her 2 children. I'm not sure where they are. There is definitely a hardened exterior to the woman."
- "A woman holding her children, looking worried during the Great Depression in the U.S. (probably California)."
- "A mother and her children, during the 30s or 40s, I believe in the Midwest."
- "It looks like homeless people sitting outside somewhere, maybe a tent."
- "I see what appears to be an impoverished woman, struggling with her 2 boys clutched near."
- "Woman and children being sad during the Great Depression in America."
- "A woman with two boys in a third world country during the Great Depression in California."
- "I see a woman holding her children. She looks dirty and worried."
- "A woman during the Great Depression in the 1920's in New York."
- "I see a woman and two children."

By answering the rest of the questions in the DIG Method, the students were able to contextualize what they were seeing. This became especially apparent when answering the last question of the DIG Method, "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?" Students wrote:

- "The purpose of the image was to showcase life in 1936. It's a popular image used for education and to showcase history."
- "To inform."
- "To inform readers of the effects of the Great Depression."
- "I think it's to inform people of the misfortune that many Americans were enduring at that time."
- "I think that the purpose of this image was to inform the world of the troubles accompanied with the Great Depression."

- "The purpose is to inform the public of the poor side of the population during the Great Depression."
- "To explain."
- "Taken during the Great Depression to bring attention to those struggling. It's a powerful image designed to provoke emotion."
- "To inform, entertain."
- "To inform."

By completing the DIG Method, students contextualized the image and were able to accurately determine the purpose of the image.

Limitations

One unanticipated limitation of this lesson was that some students did not answer every question individually. Although some students did answer every question thoroughly, other students answered the questions as a whole, i.e. for the analyzing section, they summarized their answers for each question into one response. While this did not necessarily hinder the assessment, it may be beneficial to be explicit with the instructions and to instruct students to answer each question individually, depending on how rigorous the assessment will be.

Possibilities and potential applications in other fields of study

Teaching students how to critically read an image provides a great pathway to deeper discussions of an issue in a lesson or module. Grounding a lesson or module with visuals reinforces the idea that since communication is now more visually oriented, especially within the context of new digital technologies and social media platforms, the same critical sensibility that we routinely apply to text-based communications can, and should be, applied to visual mediums. This lesson was particularly successful for journalism students, but it could easily be utilized in any discipline. By utilizing the DIG Method, students are taught the importance of critically reading images and how to investigate digital images at a deeper level, a crucial step for students to become discerning citizens who understand the role images play in communication today.

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