

Visual Literacy Policy 2017

These are extracts from the School Plan which informs this policy:

Excellence through creativity
We believe that creativity is crucial for young people's development. We therefore offer an excellent educational experience based on creativity in all our disciplines. We want our young people to understand the world they inherit so that they can change it for the better. We are committed to specific habits of mind, to being inquisitive, collaborative, persistent, disciplined and imaginative. We work with passion, dignity and style and we value individuality, playfulness and innovation.
Excellence through engagement
We want everyone in our community to learn and develop together through authentic engagement and exceptional teaching. Our young people love learning because of our commitment to knowledge, our common creativity and cohesive community. We educate them to become independent thinkers, working with their individual talents to learn and achieve. We share high aspirations and expectations for ourselves and our school and we expect that learning continues well beyond lessons. We value participation, communication, praise, experience and empowerment.
Excellence through challenge
We take our responsibilities seriously and we scrutinise our progress carefully. Every year we set ourselves new challenges and review what we have achieved so that all the doors in the world are open to our young people when they leave us. We want to make our aims real for every member of our community, so we hold one another to account with intelligence and thoughtfulness. We actively resist dehumanising influences on education, but we value learning, performance, aspiration, risk and courage.

EDUCATION TO UNDERSTAND THE WORLD & CHANGE IT FOR THE BETTER

At Tallis we believe that literacy is a multimodal, social practice that encompasses a wide range of 'texts' and tools, both analogue and digital. Whilst we recognise our duty to teach all students to read, write and speak effectively (see our Literacy Policy¹), another important aptitude we help them develop is visual literacy. Tallis has a long and strong tradition of education in the arts and creative learning across the curriculum. Our commitment to developing visual literacy is consistent with this tradition.

What is Visual Literacy?

Visual literacy encompasses a number of related competencies that can be summarised as *a sensitivity to and critical understanding of visual forms of information*. Visual literacy is multidisciplinary and

¹ <http://www.thomastallischool.com/policies--guidelines.html>

interdisciplinary. It is certainly not the preserve of colleagues who teach art, craft or design subjects. All teachers are responsible for supporting the development of visual literacy.

A sensitivity to visual phenomena is not dependent on words. Artists, for example, often refer to the notion of visual intelligence, a pre-verbal responsiveness to images and objects that informs their relationship to the world.

"There's a kind of visual thinking that goes on that is without words and not just words spoken but not even words in one's head. Most people think thinking has to do with words, this little voice in your head, but there's a visual thinking that doesn't have that."

-- **Stephen Shore**²

We might have this experience when we feel that something looks right (or wrong) but can't verbalise why. This may be because we have absorbed certain aesthetic conventions but it is also the case that some people seem more sensitive to information presented in a visual form. However, we believe that everyone can develop this disposition with encouragement and deliberate practice.

"The message is clear; in our culture the purpose of vision is to name and to classify. That's where the 'money' is. What about the way light describes the dog's fur in the sun, in the shade; at night, with ghostlike moves in the hall? What of the shape of movement of the tail when happy or frightened, the tilt of the head, the messages that can be received through tiny body gestures that cannot be verbalised? How about the way the dog animates a room with its movements. And on and on. No rewards for any of this. The naming is what counts. Intelligence is measured in reading and math scores. When was the last scholarship given to someone for being receptive and observant?"

-- **Philip Perkis**³

Developing a sensitivity to the visual is important for wellbeing, creativity and human flourishing. It is a source of delight and pleasure.⁴

Visual literacy also refers to a set of cognitive skills that enable a viewer to critically interrogate a visual 'text' e.g. a painting, cartoon, advert, map, diagram etc. On a larger scale, these critical skills support the development of a more sophisticated view of the world: how we 'see' ourselves and those around us, how we understand the significance of the images purporting to represent our reality. This has more obvious relevance to subjects across the curriculum, since all teachers employ and critique information in visual forms. A great deal of educational emphasis is rightly placed on teaching children how to identify and read words and understand their meanings. We also need to learn to identify, read, and understand images in all their forms – to become literate in visual language. An awareness of the strategies used to visually persuade and coerce is a key competency and students should be explicitly taught how to recognise, evaluate and critique these techniques. This strengthens active citizenship.

We might therefore define visual literacy as: a sensitivity to visual phenomena; an aptitude for thinking visually; and an ability to read, comprehend, and write *visual* language.

Why is it important for students to become more visually literate?

Like words, images are special kinds of signs. We see a sequence of letters, interpret that it is a word and then we see the object to which it refers in our mind's eye. Also like words, images can be deceptive. We need to be able to read them accurately, interpret their contexts and make sensible decisions based on what we think they mean. We don't expect children to be able to teach themselves how to read words. Why should we expect them to be able to read images without some assistance?

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRM2X1GnNSQ>

³ <https://www.rit.edu/press/teaching-photography-notes-assembled>

⁴ A related aptitude might be *haptic* intelligence - a similarly pre-verbal sensitivity to three dimensional forms and the role of touch

We live in a world saturated with visual images which are multiplying at an exponential rate. We use these images to imagine the world in which we live, a world that is too big and too complex to 'see'. Images are also used to 'see' into the past and the future.

"Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognises before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we see the sun set. We know that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight."
-- **John Berger**, *Ways of Seeing*⁵

The way we understand aspects of our lives has been constructed by visual information. Our understanding of what the world looks like from space, for example, is not based on experience but on images beamed back to Earth from space stations and satellites. As early as 1930 one billion photographs were being taken annually worldwide. By 2014 this number had reached one trillion. Digital technology has forever altered our relationship to images. Most of the images we now make and consume are computational: faster to make; easier to manipulate. The Internet has made the potential for sharing images available to almost everyone. As Nicholas Mirzoeff has written, the visual culture of today is "confusing, anarchic, liberating and worrying all at once."⁶ From climate change to global cities, from warfare to poverty, the way we understand the world in which we live is often determined by how we 'see' it. Teachers and parents/carers have an important role in helping students:

- Make sense of visual information. How do we 'see'? What is the relationship between seeing with our eyes and seeing with our brains? How do we construct an understanding of the world?
- Analyse the strategies used by producers of visual information (especially those used in particular industries such as advertising, the media, politics and the military).
- Consider the cultural significance and meanings of visual information.
- Ask sceptical questions about the purposes of visual information.
- Understand the technologies that produce visual information.
- Create thoughtful, skilful and well-designed visual products of their own, experimenting with visual language, forms and conventions.

What is the relationship between Language Literacy and Visual Literacy?

Literacy usually refers to the ability to read and write. Like traditional language literacy, visual literacy encompasses more than one level of skill. The first level in reading is decoding words and sentences, but this leads to reading comprehension when teachers help students to both decode and make sense of what they read. That understanding requires a broad vocabulary, experience in a particular content area, and critical thought. The first level of visual literacy, too, is basic identification of the subject or elements in a photograph, work of art, or graphic. Understanding what we see and comprehending visual relationships are the next steps. These higher-level visual literacy skills require critical thinking, and they are essential to a student's success in any content area in which information is conveyed in visual forms. This is relevant to all subjects and is therefore not exclusive to the visual arts. Consequently, all teachers have a responsibility to help develop students' visual literacy.

What might a visually literate person be able to do?

Alan Howe⁷, writing on the subject of visual literacy with particular reference to art, design and craft education, suggests that a visually literate person, when experiencing something that is primarily visual, would be able to say:

- I am curious about this and I can learn something from examining this in a variety of ways.
- This relates to other things that I have seen. There are ways that I can describe and ways to classify this.

⁵ <http://waysofseeingwaysofseeing.com/ways-of-seeing-john-berger-5.7.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/196428/how-to-see-the-world/>

⁷ <http://ojs.lboro.ac.uk/ojs/index.php/JDTE/article/view/310/286>

- The artist/designer/maker seemed to have these intentions.
- The artist/designer/maker will have been working under certain constraints or influences. The artist/designer/maker has worked in these ways.
- I have a reasoned opinion on this - this is what I have found out and what I think.
- The visual can affect the way I feel - this is how I have been affected.
- What I have learnt can inform my own work. I could interrogate my own work in some similar ways.

In other words, visual literacy addresses several domains of learning (*knowledge and understanding, the affective domain, critical thinking*) and habits of mind (primarily *inquisitiveness - wondering and questioning, discipline - reflecting critically and imagination - making connections*). Visual literacy also supports our Tallis Character traits, particularly concerning ethical issues surrounding the creation, distribution and consumption of images.

How can we teach for Visual Literacy?

There are several ways in which we can support the development of students' visual literacy:

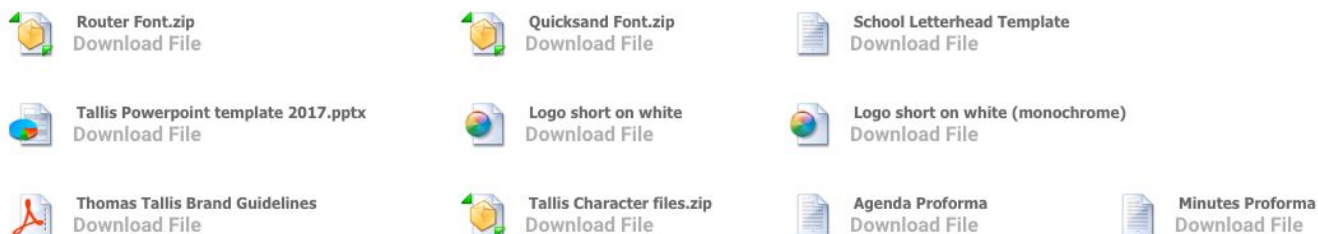
- Pay attention to the ways in which we present visual information to students (E.g. charts, maps, graphics, presentations, wall displays etc.)
- Refer to the [Displays for Learning policy](#) for guidance on the design and use of visual information in classroom and corridor displays.
- Model good design habits. Try to design for legibility, clarity, harmony, balance, brevity and impact. Try to avoid excessive text, confusing layouts, competing design elements, clashing colours, misaligned items etc.
- Use a range of strategies to develop students' abilities to decode visual 'texts'. Encourage students to consider issues such as production (who made it?), distribution (how is it shared?) composition (how is information arranged?), purpose (what is it for?), audience (who is it for?), medium (how was it made?), scale (how big is it?), emotional impact (how does it make me feel?) etc.
- Explore the conventions or 'rules' of visual presentation with students (E.g. The *visual elements* of line, shape, form, tone, texture, pattern, colour and the *principles of design* - harmony, balance, rhythm, hierarchy, scale, emphasis, movement, contrast⁸ etc.)
- Teach students how to critically evaluate visual 'texts'. How have they been influenced, moved, persuaded, coerced? etc.
- Celebrate students' sensitivity to visual phenomena - noticing, admiring, appreciating, responding etc.
- Encourage students to create their own visual 'texts', experimenting with a range of strategies, in order to understand their impact and effectiveness.

Given the number of Powerpoint presentations now used in lessons, we should be mindful of the way teachers model visual literacy in lessons with the design of their presentations. Comedian Don McMillan's [Life and Death by Powerpoint](#) is a famous example of this phenomena with some useful tips on what NOT to do. For example:

- *DON'T* use more than 6 bullet points on any one slide.
- *DON'T* use lots of animation effects.
- *DON'T* include lots of text. Avoid writing everything you intend to say on each slide. Put the text you want to speak into the presenter notes and summarise in as few words as possible on the slide.
- *DON'T* use a complex graphic background on your slide.
- *DON'T* use lots of different fonts. One for titles and one for body text is sufficient.
- *DO* consider using an official school template. These can be found for download on the Staff page of the school website. A Google Slides version of the presentation template can be [found here](#). Remember to *Make a copy* before you edit it.

⁸ <http://www.oberlin.edu/amam/asia/sculpture/documents/vocabulary.pdf>

Stationery & Logos:



- *DO* ensure that your type sizes are legible from the back of the classroom.
- *DO* use a key image wherever possible. Pictures can represent complex ideas, making it more memorable for the student and reducing the need for excessive amounts of text.
- *DO* use more slides rather than packing too much information into fewer slides.
- *DO* use a limited palette of (complementary, rather than clashing) colours.
- *DO* attempt to achieve a balanced composition of text and/or images on each slide.

What is the relationship between Visual Literacy, Media Literacy and Digital Literacy?

Media literacy is closely related to visual literacy. It can be defined as: *the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and create a range of media - the press, radio, television, films etc. in both analogue and digital forms.*

Media literacy skills can help young people and adults to:

- Develop critical thinking skills
- Understand how media messages shape culture and society
- Identify marketing strategies
- Recognise what the media maker wants the consumer to believe or do
- Name the techniques of persuasion used
- Recognise bias, spin, misinformation, and lies
- Discover the parts of the story that are not being told
- Evaluate media messages based on experiences, skills, beliefs, and values
- Create and distribute media messages

Digital literacy is another closely related set of competencies, since many of the images and texts to which we are exposed are now created with digital technologies and transmitted through digital platforms. As Doug Belshaw⁹ has written:

“There can never be a single ‘literacy’ to rule them all. The common-sense literacy to which we refer would be better described as ‘traditional print literacy’ as it depends upon the technology of the printing press. As new tools for communication have been introduced - for example, email, social networking, video-sharing sites - so new forms of literacy are needed to understand them.”

He goes on to characterise the essential elements of digital literacy as:

1. *Cultural* - understanding the digital environments in which people are immersed
2. *Cognitive* - the fluency with which people understand and use digital tools
3. *Constructive* - understanding the protocols governing the making of digital content
4. *Communicative* - the particular purposes for which digital content is constructed
5. *Confident* - the ability to solve problems and manage one’s own learning in a digital environment
6. *Creative* - the making of new and valuable digital content
7. *Critical* - the ability to analyse digital power structures
8. *Civic* - the use of digital tools and content to help develop a civil society¹⁰

⁹ <http://doughelshaw.com/blog/2016/06/27/ebook-now-free/>

¹⁰ I have attempted to summarise the author’s more detailed definitions of these elements.

As with visual literacy, the development of media and digital literacies is the responsibility of all members of staff. Clearly some colleagues have specialist skills and understanding in each of these areas but our programme of professional development is designed to enable all Tallis teachers to feel confident in helping our students develop their visual, media and digital literacies. Any member of staff who feels that they need support in developing their own understanding of these three areas of literacy should access it in the following ways:

- From their line leader (who may be able to offer assistance themselves or recommend another colleague).
- From a timetabled CPD session run from within or beyond their curriculum area.
- Informally, from colleagues with particular skill sets (E.g. Visual, Media and Performing Arts, Design Technology, Computer Science etc.)
- Through various sources online (E.g. professional bodies, special interest teacher groups, research blogs and websites).
- By asking the Director for Arts and Creativity.

Jon Nicholls, Director of Arts and Creativity

February 2017