GUIDELINES

AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE TEACHING OF CRITICAL VISUAL MEDIA LITERACY

CLIP
critical
visual
media
literacy and
empowerment

About CLIP

CLIP "Critical visual media literacy and empowerment" aims to strengthen digital capabilities of the Higher Education (HE) sector, and increase critical visual literacy competences, that is a fundamental component of the way European students and citizens are getting informed in the digital era.

The project is funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union and spans over 18 months (October 2022 – March 2024).

CLIP is implemented by:

- UNIMED - Mediterranean Universities Union
- IULM University
- Hellenic Open University
- ALL DIGITAL

More information on the Project can be found at: https://clipproject.eu/

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Introduction

The CLIP project

These guidelines were created by partners on the CLIP project, and edited by staff at ALL DIGITAL, with significant contributions made by experts that have been consulted throughout the project. These guidelines are part of CLIP "Critical visual media literacy and empowerment" project funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union. The project aimed to strengthen digital capabilities of the Higher Education sector, and to increase critical visual literacy competencies as a fundamental component of European students and citizens getting informed in a digital era. The project was delivered by a consortium made up of UNIMED, the Union of Mediterranean Universities, the Hellenic Open University, IULM University, and ALL DIGITAL, a pan-European network of digital competence development stakeholders.

The document is based on the project's work of creating a Report on Visual Media Literacy in European Higher Education and developing a Micro Learning Course on Critical Visual Media Literacy and Fluency. It in particular takes lessons learned from this course's piloting implementations as part of the project's course.

During its development, the recommendations and guidelines contained in this document have undergone a review and consultation process by relevant stakeholders, including major schools' networks, schools, VET organisations including non-formal digital competence centres both at the European level and at national level, and with representatives of other EU-initiatives.

Context and motivation

Misleading visual representation is often characterised by stereotypical media representations, usually formed on the basis of visual representations dominated by speculations and sensationalism, and it can generally promote an ideological agenda or manipulate the behaviours of the viewer. Through consuming stereotypical images, the dominant visual culture often represents migrants and refugees dismissing their historical, cultural, political, and human circumstances. Hostile visual culture and image bias have indeed implications on social and intercultural dialogue as well as on social inclusion. Nurturing students' self-awareness and making them aware of the politics of representation through visual media literacy is a fundamental element to help them develop critical thinking, social and intercultural competences, and communication skills essential for civic discourse. Universities are in a unique position to contribute to tackling disinformation and are the primary addressees of this document. Nevertheless, we believe that these guidelines – and the proposed micro course they are based on – are applicable in any educational setting and stage, and are therefore directed at educators, policymakers and stakeholders from higher education institutions, schools, VET and adult learning providers, NGOs and academic networks.

With these recommendations and guidelines the project partners seek to enable academic staff, senior management, and communication staff at universities, as well as trainers and educators in other learning settings, such as primary and secondary education, VET education and Adult Learning, among others, to develop sustainable strategies for integrating visual media literacy at all levels of course offering, thus contributing to enabling the fair and resilient digital transformation, tracking disinformation and bias in visual communication through education and training.

The aim of this document is to provide a scalable and transferable set of practical ideas and recommendations for the development of relevant visual media literacy initiatives in Europe, including operational tools for the promotion of non-biased visual communication, and guidelines for the teaching of visual media literacy, that will support the long-term adoption of a comprehensive approach to the matter of visual media literacy in Higher Education and in other learning environments ranging from secondary schools to informal and non-formal digital competence learning centres.

Goals for Visual Media Literacy Education

The key objective of Visual Media Literacy Education, and subsequently of the course and guidelines presented here, is to increase digital fluency and critical consciousness about visual media of European students, learners and citizens, and the learning institutions which educate them. This applies within communication studies communities, transversely across subjects, and ultimately in all contexts of civic participation. A (micro-learning) course in critical visual media literacy and fluency should equip participants with the necessary understanding about the importance of images in present societies, nourishing misinformation-resilient behaviours and providing practical skills to detect image bias as well as stereotypes in visual artefacts.

Essentially, the learning outcomes of a critical visual media literacy course can be summarised by the definition of the visually literate student elaborated in the ACA/ACRL Guidelines[1].

- The visually literate student determines the nature and extent of the visual materials needed.
- The visually literate student finds, and accesses needed images and visual media effectively and efficiently.
- The visually literate student interprets and analyses the meanings of images and visual media.
- The visually literate student evaluates images and their sources.
- The visually literate student uses images and visual media effectively.

[1] Association of College Research Libraries (Acrl), "ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education", American Library Association, October 27, 2011, http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/visualliteracy

- The visually literate student designs and creates meaningful images and visual media.
- The visually literate student understands many of the ethical, legal, social, and economic issues surrounding the creation and use of images and visual media, and accesses and uses visual materials ethically.

Definitions: What is Visual Media Literacy?

For the purpose of these guidelines we set out from a basic understanding of Visual Media Literacy, based on Wileman being quoted in Stokes (2002, 12)[2], as "the ability to read, interpret, and understand information presented in pictorial or graphic images" and as "a group of competencies that allows humans to discriminate and interpret the visible action, objects, and/or symbols, natural or constructed, that they encounter in the environment" following the European Research Infrastructure Consortium's (ERIC) definition of visual literacy.

However, these definitions fall short of a comprehensive view of Visual Media Literacy having an inherent active component in addition to the passive reception of visual media. Therefore, we put forward the following principle understanding of Visual Media Literacy:

> Visual Media Literacy involves not only consuming images but also actively participating in image creation, curation and analysis. It requires individuals to become proficient in visual communication, harnessing the power of images to convey ideas, advocate for causes, and engage in meaningful dialogues.

It is important to note that defining the understanding of what Visual Media Literacy and a Visual Artefact is, should be an initial part of any visual media literacy education course, and constitutes the core of the first module of the micro-course developed as part of the CLIP project, in which we recommend the use of *Critical visual literacy* (Sheng Kuan Chung, 2013[3]) as a primary text.

However, the appropriate definition and source material applied will vary depending on the learning setting of the course, the age of the learners the course is targeted at, and the context of the field the course is geared towards. All of these, and other factors, can necessitate a shift in which aspects of the concept of visual media literacy are highlighted

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[2] Stokes S., Visual Literacy in Teaching and Learning: A Literature Perspective, Journal for the Integration of Technology in Education, vol. 1, Issue 1, 2002, 10–19

[3] Sheng Kuan Chung, Critical Visual Literacy, The International Journal of Arts Education, vol. 11, Issue 2, 2013, 1-36

over others. For instance, a Visual Media Literacy course for Journalism students will use different types of visual artefacts, than one designed as part of a sociology or even a statistics degree programme, leading to a different notion on what being visual media literate means in the context of the field.

For a more detailed discussion of Visual Media Literacy and the context of the field's history, please refer to the Report on Visual Media Literacy in Europe[4] created by the CLIP project.

The CLIP Course

To facilitate the implementation of critical visual media literacy courses in a wide range of (higher) education institutions and learning settings, the CLIP project has developed a micro-course as a baseline recommendation, for either use directly, or adjust to the specific needs according to the learning setting's needs.

The course is structured in five modules, four of which form the core of the course, and an introductory module covering the most essential aspects of studying images and visual artefacts. Founded on the findings from the extensive research of CLIP project partners and thorough expert interviews, the course comprises the most significant elements to be taught, equipping students with the required comprehension and ability to consider them critically literate.

The course is as succinct as possible to make it viable to be integrated into as many existing course structures and curricula as possible. It uses concise video lectures combined with interactive learning activities and academic papers forming the backdrop for the covered topics. The materials are provided on the CLIP platform for ease of access[5].

The Modules

Module 1 - Introduction

The introductory module is designed to get students acquainted with both the key concepts the rest of the course is based on and the course platform, as well as the courses methodology and assessment structure.

Module 2 - Critical Looking

In this first content module students are taught about images' artificial nature, which applies in the context of both their creation and reception. The key take away transmitted in the module is that images are not direct representations of reality, which is a point that needs particular reinforcement in the light of the impact photography and cinema have had on this understanding. Intriguingly, more recent developments in the potential to alter such types of visual media are underlining the nature of images as ultimately artificial products.

[4]   Pezzano, S. (2023). Report on Visual Media Literacy in Europe. Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10021764
[5]   https://clipproject.eu/results/micro-learning-course/

Module 3 - Rethink Your Eye

This module has a focus on raising awareness of visual artefacts carrying embedded messages informed by creators' values, beliefs and views, and informing the recipient about these. In the other direction, students learn that viewers' interpretations and responses when engaging with images are shaped by their own cultural, ethical, and aesthetic backgrounds.

Module 4 - Decoding Visual Meaning

The third content module conveys to the students the significance of the contextual framework in which images are viewed, and the transformation they can undergo when this framework changes. Not only are students exposed to the effect accompanying texts and discourses can alter an image's interpretation, but are also invited to reflect on how wider historical, social and cultural contexts affect this reception.

Module 5 - Preserving the Past

In the final module of the microcourse, the students are sensibilised to the importance of images as visual witnesses which are to be collected and preserved in visual archives. The module also equips the students with effective strategies to use such archives, including image searching strategies using keywords and text-based queries.

Learning outcomes

The course seeks to develop critical visual media literacy competences in the students taking it. A key achievement of the course is to enable students to interpret images in their context, to detect image distortion and stereotypes in visual artefacts, and to be aware of visual culture fundamentals. Furthermore, the course delivers an advanced understanding of cultural prejudices and stereotypes influencing the reception of images beyond an initial objective and neutral appearance, and presents students with the latest best practices in visual communication.

After finishing the micro-learning course, we expect that students will possess the capabilities of a visually literate individual. These include the ability to identify the nature and extent of the visual materials required and to interpret and critically analyse images and visual media. Additionally, students will efficiently locate and access pictures, evaluating the reliability of archival sources and recognizing how to use pictures ethically and competently.

Guidelines for Virtual Media Literacy Courses

The following guidelines and recommendations outline elements to be taken into account in the planning, implementation and evaluation of Visual Media Literacy Courses in Higher Education. They are structured in section covering considerations relevant before, during or after the learning activity takes place.

Before the learning activity: Planning a Visual Media Literacy Course

Any course seeking to educate students on Visual Media Literacy should be prepared with the following principles in mind:

Curricular context

Determine the context of the course. Consider if the course is addressed to students of a specialised programme or offered as a transversal cross-curricular tool open to students from all fields of study. Whether the course is a required part of the degree, an elective, or additional offering will determine the make-up of the learner group, as well as their potential interest and engagement levels. Furthermore, curricular context impacts the time and study effort available for the course and sets boundaries for the intensity of the training provided. The micro-course developed by the CLIP project takes into account a potentially limited scope for such a course within the curriculum, and thus keeps the time and effort requirements to a minimum.

Digital tools as a regular element in learning

As the importance of digital media keeps expanding in virtually all aspects of our lives, so does the importance of developing critical virtual media literacy in a digital context. This also extends to the application of digital tools in education itself, and should be integrated as a regular, if not even a default, element in the learning activity. Nonetheless, the role of non-digital learning tools should not be underestimated, as concrete, manual exercises can provide a unique learning experience.

Interactive methods: collaborative and cooperative

In line with the notion that Visual Media Literacy incorporates a significant active component, the course aiming to equip students with visual media literacy should take on participative, active forms of learning, and pure lecturing time should be kept to a minimum.

Involve students

Applying interactive learning methodologies not only enables students to contribute their own perspectives and experiences, they require them to be successful. For this, respecting the students' views, and encouraging them to feed their own background into the learning process are essential, and their contributions must be taken seriously.

Who are your students?

Subjectivity plays a major role in the interpretation and analysis of visual artefacts, and this subjectivity is informed by and reflected in the background and identity of the students attending the course, impacting the selection of (age-)appropriate and relevant materials and examples used in the course.

Bring out diversity

Learner groups will be homogenous in the rarest of cases, and diversity among students is an asset for educating on visual media literacy. Analysing and enabling the pool of diverse identities among the target learning group will further the success of the learning activity and strengthen its positive learning outcomes for all learners.

Peer learning strategies

To make the most of the potential brought into classrooms through students' own experiences, backgrounds and prior knowledge, peer learning strategies may be employed. This will also increase the level of participation, make students feel involved and transmit that their contributions are valued. Nonetheless, peer learning strategies require guidance by the educator.

Visual Media Habits

Students, particularly in a higher education setting, will arrive to the course with established and pre-formed habits towards their visual media literacy. Unlearning these can become a required part of the learning process, and educators should note that this unlearning becomes more difficult the more formed these habits already are. This applies throughout all learning stages, including earlier education settings, as learners engage with (digital) visual media throughout their lives and during their activities outside the learning institution.

Motivation through local current events

The course on visual media literacy thrives through learners connecting and relating to the examples used to illustrate the principles of visual media literacy. While there is additional effort required to identify and prepare appropriate materials with a local connection, the benefits of facilitating engagement and emphasising the relevance of the course are worth the investment.

What works for one group does not work for another

As heterogeneous any learner group is in itself, so are learner groups heterogeneous between each other. A developed course ideally can be reused in multiple settings and for multiple learner groups. Yet, this requires adaptation of the existing material to the specific needs of the respective targeted learner group. Fostering ownership of the learning process by the learner group through student involvement can serve to ease this adaptation.

Knowledge and practice sharing in educator communities

Engaging with colleagues, learning from other educators' experiences and validating and sharing own experiences enables the continued development and improvement of course. This can be particularly valuable across faculties and departments within a specialised field between different higher education institutions in the same country or abroad.

Involvement of external actors

It can be useful to invite external actors to provide hands-on expertise on the subject matter, both in terms of visual media literacy studies as well as a subject-specific representative. These interactions facilitate network building, can underline the course's relevance, and create excitement and novelty, thus boosting engagement for participating students. However, there are potential administrative and other costs to be taken into account, as well as possibly introducing a risk of bias or the promotion of commercial or political interests, which have to be weighed against the benefits.

During the learning activity: Creating Visual Media Literacy Learning Environments

General principles

- While teaching critical visual media literacy, it is of importance to keep monitoring the developing social classroom dynamics, particularly in the framework of discussing potentially controversial or sensitive examples and topics. The impact of classroom internal social dynamics will increase with the degree of student involvement in the shaping of the teaching process.

- In order to adequately evaluate the applied methodology, it is necessary to record the students' reactions and responses to the occurrences during the learning activity. This serves the purpose to evaluate the use of the methodology for the specific group with its specific characteristics, and assessing the methodology in general.

- Discussing the topics that may constitute relevant examples for a course on critical visual media literacy may require striking a balance between the classroom as an open climate and as a safe space. Students should feel encouraged to share their views and opinions, even if contradictory to others. On the other hand, this openness should not enable discrimination or exclusion of fellow participants.

After the learning activity: Follow-up, feedback cycle, and evaluation

Following the conclusion of each learning activity, and the course as a whole, the educator must consider several aspects regarding the assessment and evaluation of the preceding activities.

Assessment

As with all education processes the educator reflects on the outcomes of conducted learning activity firstly from their own point of view. This involves mostly a comparison of the course plan with how it played out when implemented, but also includes transforming any points of interest and notes taken into actionable material feeding in to the planning of future courses as well as possible revisions of the current one.

Feedback

It is worth considering in what way the participants of the course can be involved in its evaluation. Many learning institutions have centralised or established feedback and evaluation protocols which can be used to this effect. However, these may be too generalised or focus on aspects of lesser interest to the educator in terms of evaluation of their specific methodology. It should be kept in mind that a feedback process, either conducted through the institution or by the educator directly, is not burden-free for the participants. This should, however, not discourage the implementation of a feedback process, but inform the nature and extent of the exercise.

Transferability

The assessment and evaluation of the current course implementation bears relevance towards the adjustment and (re)use of the elements of the course in future iterations as well as in different learning settings. It is through this lens of the evaluation process that an educator can turn their course plan into a good practice to be shared with colleagues.

Learning outcomes

A key consideration in the evaluation of a course is whether the targeted learning outcomes have been achieved by the participants. It is only through this assessment, that participants can be issued with credentials for the course, and the success of the course can ultimately be determined.

Recommendations

For educators

- Any approach to educating students on critical visual media literacy should be **learner-centred**, taking into account their individual backgrounds and promoting the principles of **inclusion, respect, and flexibility**.

- Educators should seek out and **interact with their colleagues**, both within their own education institutions and within their field across Europe and beyond. Engaging with networks is an excellent way to **exchange good practices**, **gain inspiration** and keep up to date, as well as refining one's own good practices by **sharing** them with others. One such network is the European Digital Education Hub.

- Critical visual media literacy is a **developing and dynamic** field, meaning that educators should keep **assessing, evaluating and evolving** the methodologies they use in their courses.

For learning institutions

- Educators are the **key drivers of innovation and education success**.To fully realise their abundance of motivation, enthusiasm and initiative, they require the support of their learning institutions, **enabling their full potential** towards the best learning outcomes for their students and trainees.

- In light of the need for continuous development of educators' and wider staff of learning institutions, it is paramount to provide them with **adequate opportunities to access training**. This includes, if necessary and not otherwise available, **providing the training offers directly**.

- Critical visual media literacy should be **considered a key competence** every student should acquire during their education. This means that higher education institutions should **integrate critical visual media literacy courses throughout their programmes** beyond those which would traditionally incorporate such courses, like journalism or media studies. While the specific focus of the course may need to vary for specific fields, the learning institution should seek to **harmonise their approach to critical visual media literacy across all its departments** as much as possible to ensure consistency and effectiveness of the critical visual media literacy education.

- Critical visual media literacy includes the active and creative aspects of interactions with visual artefacts. As a consequence, education institutions should **adopt and foster a critical visual literacy culture**, which embraces the principles taught in courses such as the CLIP course, and applies these to the materials they produce throughout their activities.

For policy makers

- The relevance and need of equipping learners with critical visual media literacy competences must be recognised and addressed accordingly in policy initiatives, promoting the provision of education in this area. Avenues to underline the recognition of this relevance are the **adoption and promotion of competence frameworks**, their inclusion in the **design and update of curricula** and **supporting learning institutions providing adequate, quality education offers across the entire education system**.

- In order for (higher) education institutions to be able to provide the required courses, they must be issued with adequate funding to effectively and sustainably fulfil their teaching obligations. **Adequate funding is required to sustain appropriate facilities, equipment and staffing**, including their maintenance and continuous development through **timely upgrades and training**.

- Authorities and policy makers should **adopt an all-of-government approach** in their initiatives towards education in general and towards critical visual media literacy specifically. Success of these much needed initiatives relies on the support of all levels of government, both vertically, **from a European down to a local level**, and horizontally **across all departments** recognising the importance of education for all of society and the economy.

- Ensuring the adherence to quality education targets can feel contradictory to affording the providers of education, the learning institutions, with the needed flexibility and ability to adapt to specific local needs. **Promoting the use of harmonised frameworks and common standards** bridges this apparent gap. Furthemore, the production and distribution of guidelines for practitioners helps to s**upport them finding individual solutions** to these challenges, **enabling their creativity and initiative**, while maintaining the overall goals, developing critical visual media literacy, are being achieved.