

Putting Visual Literacy at the Heart of a Modern Curriculum

This paper argues for visual literacy to be recognised as a core competency alongside reading, writing and arithmetic.

By Alison Cole and Nathan Lloyd

Introduction

The government believes that every child should have meaningful access to the arts, not just as a 'nice to have' but as a vital gateway to opportunity and the social mobility that implies. However, too often the default setting in pressurised school settings is to treat the arts as creative exercises, rather than as subjects that are also rich in subject-specific language, theory, and historical, social and cultural context. Equally significantly, the arts are some of the best cross-disciplinary tools at a teacher's disposal. They can be as critical to our means of navigating the world, and our ability to flourish within it, as literacy and numeracy.

The visual arts are perhaps the least understood in this regard, and yet at the same time visual imagery dominates the lives of our children and young people.

We also need to recognise that the proliferation of visual artefacts via digital media is dissolving the boundaries of traditional knowledge formation. Images have become as vital as words and often serve as a substitute for them.

This policy therefore proposes that the teaching of visual literacy, taking art as its starting point and methodology, should be an essential part of an ambitious modernised school curriculum.

Visual Literacy and Online Safety

The teaching of visual literacy is now more vital than ever. The visual world that children encounter in their everyday lives has become dizzyingly sophisticated, with images made ever more accessible, immediate,

powerful, and often manipulated. For example, in our rapidly evolving digital society 1.81 trillion photos are currently taken every year; that is 5 billion 'constructed images' a day.

The value of visual literacy programmes in teaching children how to navigate and interrogate this visual world offline and online is beginning to be recognised in relation to their safety and well-being, and this government can lead the way in making the virtual world a safer space in which to flourish.

The revitalised curriculum (announced on 4 November 2025) will now teach primary children 'how to spot fake news and identify misinformation and disinformation, helping them develop the critical thinking needed to challenge what they see and protect them from online harms.'

Background

For the last decade, education's main drivers have been largely based on a knowledge-first, direct-instruction method of teaching, focused particularly on phonic-reading methods and maths mastery. This has garnered academic results but has also set up an unnecessary polarity between knowledge and skills-based learning, and between 'hard' and 'soft' subjects (with the arts in the latter category). It has also failed to recognise the power of cross-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary learning and that true creative learning often inhabits the spaces where arts and other disciplines meet: this is where new connections are forged.

To some extent, the situation is exacerbated by the framing of the visual arts primarily in terms of 'making', or matters of authorship and value, rather than promoting the impact of the visual image on critical thinking, perception and perspective. Visual literacy not only enables learners to

explore an artist's practice and discuss/interpret their intentions, but it also helps the viewer understand the visual image as a constructed artefact, and its subject matter as purpose. After reading, writing and arithmetic it should be regarded as the fourth essential competency.

A visual literacy programme is currently being rolled out in schools across the country: Art UK's flagship [*Superpower of Looking*](#) programme provides an evaluated approach to delivering visual literacy as part of the existing Key Stage 2 'Art and Design' curriculum (for children aged 7-11). Funded by the Freelands Foundation, it is already taught in 2856 schools, with 3,313 teachers and 900 trainee teachers using its specialist resources and toolkits. The Open University is also working with 'Superpower' as part of its enrichment programme, involving 1500 students across the four nations. The 'Expressive Arts' Curriculum for Wales, too, offers guidance that 'Expressive Arts disciplines can be used as a vehicle for learners to develop languages, literacy and communication including through visual literacy, creative thinking and creative writing...'. These foreground the role of visual arts and visual media in both knowledge and skills acquisition. Looking at art is now proven to provide the best apprenticeship for training the eye.

Visual literacy means being able to critically observe, understand, analyse, decode, question, and articulate what one sees and develop the language and oracy skills needed to communicate key visual information effectively. Images are the resources and can come from everywhere (such as film stills, photographs and posters), but a foundational training using 'great' (DfE) works of art delivers the Art and Design curriculum* while achieving much more besides

[* The current primary state-school curriculum stipulates that pupils should be able 'to evaluate and analyse creative works using the language of art, craft and design' as well as 'know about great artists, craft makers and designers, and understand the historical and cultural development of their

art forms.']

Visual literacy taught through art has also proven to be a great leveller – anyone who can look at an artefact can learn how to see purposefully and meaningfully: how to transform 'sight' into 'insight'. The methodology is highly effective for all children, inclusive of those with special needs and learning difficulties.

Professional Development

Post formal education, visual literacy can enhance careers by furnishing vital professional skills. American art historian and 'recovering lawyer' Amy Herman's practice offers a compelling case for the central importance of the skill of careful visual observation, and its application in a workplace context. Herman has taken the New York Police Department (NYPD) to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to look at paintings, with a training programme that helps them discover and communicate pertinent visual information more effectively, to notice things they may have missed or glossed over, and to recognise, as she puts it, the 'biases that impede decision making'. As a result, their crime-solving rate went up. Herman has since provided visual training to the FBI, NATO, CIA, executives at Microsoft and Google, and MI5.

In the same context, London's Imperial College has been taking trainee medics to look at the Victoria and Albert Museum's sculpture collection, so that they can learn to observe more acutely and avoid diagnoses based on cursory assumptions. 'When Art Meets Defence' is another interesting application: a groundbreaking Swedish study launched in Stockholm in early 2025, it argues for visual literacy as national security infrastructure in an era of AI-generated deep-fakes and algorithmically amplified disinformation: 'Just as we once built bomb shelters, we now need to arm

citizens with critical thinking,' states Magdalena Malm, General Secretary of Visual Arts, Sweden. Such initiatives, in the words of Malm, 'represent a paradigm shift', recognising 'what artists have always known: the ability to decode visual complexity – a skill cultivated through millennia of artistic practice – has perhaps become our most urgent civic competency in an age of weaponised imagery.'

Recommendation

The government should incorporate visual literacy into an ambitious modernised curriculum and help establish a solid academic methodology for its use in UK schools and programmes beyond primary education. Further research into how the guided observation and discussion of artworks in schools can support the development of visual literacy and oracy skills – also emphasised in the November 2025 curriculum review – is currently being conducted by [*Picture This: The Robson Orr Visual Literacy Research Initiative*](#), led by Oxford University in collaboration with The Government Art Collection, Oxford museums, and Art UK's 'Superpower of Looking' programme. The application of visual literacy in a career-specific context is something that should also be explored for young people and as 'continual professional development' programmes in the workplace.

Key Contacts

Please feel free to [Contact Us](#) with any questions

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Alison Cole is Director of The Cultural Policy Unit, having previously established the Arts and Creative Industries Policy Unit, hosted by the Fabian Society. She is the former Editor of The Art Newspaper and has worked as an Executive Director for some of the UK's leading cultural organisations, including Art Fund, where she led the VAT campaign to make all national UK museums free, London's Southbank Centre and Arts Council England. She served as a trustee of the Foundling Museum and is currently adviser to cultural education charity Art UK, originator of 'The Superpower of Looking' visual literacy programme, and a member of the Critics' Circle.

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As a writer, he has also contributed to Labour Together reports and published political commentary in The New European. He was trained as a playwright at the Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse, from which he has maintained a keen interest in policymaking within the arts and cultural sector.

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