

Trish O'Donnell  
ARE6933  
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Globalization and Me

## *Bridging the Gap: Promoting Awareness of Globalization and Cultural Identity through Visual Literacy*

The ability to read is universally accepted as one of the most important skills to develop in order to ensure individual success in our increasingly competitive global society. In an age where young people are inundated with visual images all day long, it is essential that educators teach skills of visual literacy as well. Learning and knowing how to read and interpret verbal language is no longer comprehensive; students must also have the skills to read and understand the meanings constructed behind visual images. My research explores the impact of globalization on the awareness of individual's cultural identities. Through exposure to images and artworks that embody contemporary global society, educators can facilitate discussions regarding visual culture and the meanings that are implied. As borders, boundaries and cultural distinctions continue to blur due the effects of globalization, visual literacy skills can provide ways to define and maintain cultural identities.

In her chapter, "Beyond Visual Literacy Competencies: Teaching and Learning Art with Technology in the Global Age," from the book, *Globalization, Art & Education*, author Ching-Chiu Lin (2009) asks the question, "What skills do students need in order to be *literate*?" (p. 198). Today's learners must develop and master various communication skills including linguistic, visual, social, cultural, and computer in order to be competent in contemporary society (Lin, 2009). Visual literacy refers to, "student comprehension of works of art and other visual forms of expression and related cultural productions, as well as student ability to express and communicate ideas and experiences through various visual forms, including but not limited to new electronic media" (p.199). As our collective identity continues to be molded by the effects of globalization, it is essential that as educators, we promote awareness of the changes that are occurring and the importance of preserving, protecting, and being active participants in the development of our individual cultural identities. Artists across the world are exploring their cultural identities and the effects of globalization in their artwork. By exposing students to a

variety of artwork and image sources, art educators can promote awareness of the power of images, the impact of visual culture on society, and the importance of being visually literate.

As I was performing my research, I came across a fellow art educator also interested in issues surrounding visual culture and visual literacy. Amy Ballett is an artist and art educator at Stamford Collegiate High School in Niagra, Ontario, Canada. In her video, “Visual Literacy Across the Curriculum,” she reaches out to educators of all subjects and grade levels to consider the importance of visual literacy as a skill to develop in school curriculum. Her video provides questions, based from education theorist, Elliot Eisner, that educators can ask students in order to develop comprehension of visual culture. These questions are: *How does the image affect the viewer? How is the image composed? How do the symbols that appear in the image affect the meaning? How does the subject matter affect the viewer’s response? How do the materials used affect the meaning of the image? How does the cultural context affect the production and understanding of the image?* (Ballett, 2009). Through the showing of images and artworks and by asking the aforementioned questions, educators can provide students with skills to think critically about the visual information they are overwhelmed with daily and know how to evaluate and utilize this information.

There are so many contemporary artists and art pieces that can aid in teaching visual literacy. Some of the artists I have recently been exposing my students to and engaging them in constructive dialogue about are Chris Jordan, Aaron Koblin, street artists JR and Banksy, Lorie Hogin, Ai Weiwei, Hung Liu, and Mariko Kosumoto, to name a few. Artist Chris Jordan creates large scale visualizations of what Western culture looks like based on statistics that are nearly impossible to comprehend, like the astonishing number of paper cups we use every single day. Through showing students Jordan's artwork and asking relevant questions, we explored our cultural identities and the impact of globalization. After sharing the work of artist, Aaron Koblin, we discussed ways in which technology brings people from all over the world together. We also watched a TEDtalk lecture given by street artist JR, who asks the question, “Can art change the world?” (JR, 2011). The students’ overwhelming response was, “Yes.” Artworks created by artists Banksy, Lorie Hogin, Ai Weiwei, Hung Liu, and Mariko

Kosumoto have provided compelling conversations about various cultural identities being explored in artwork as a result of globalization. All of these artists work in different media and explore different subject matter, but they are all interested in the same questions; *who am I, Who are you, and what is causing us to be this way?* Psychologist and technology analyst, Sherry Turkle (2012) discusses in her recent TEDtalk, “Alone Together,” how as a society we are more engaged in the relationships provided through our phones than in having real relationships and conversations face to face. Her lecture provides a discussion on how technology and globalization affects our cultural identities as well as visual literacy. We are always plugged in and according to Turkle, prefer it that way. It is important that, as educators, we engage our students in asking the same questions that contemporary artists are asking in their artwork to better understand who we are as a collective identity and what is influencing and impacting us to be this way.

As I continue to show my students artworks and engage them in discussion regarding cultural identity, I am increasingly aware of the lack of skills and knowledge students have interpreting visual images and visual culture. Teaching visual literacy falls on the shoulders of all educators, not just art educators. As Elliott Eisner said, “Our language abilities do not define the limits of our cognition.” Educators need to consider the question of what it means to be literate in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and make changes to our curriculum to ensure we are providing the skills for individual success in our increasingly competitive global society. By teaching visual literacy skills we can also promote awareness of the power of images, the impact of visual culture on society and being active in the defining and maintaining of one’s cultural identity.

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