

***Square One:
Establishing Visual Literacy in the Classroom***

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This curriculum unit is recommended for:
10th/11th/12th Grade Digital Arts Classes

Keywords: visual literacy, photography, anticipatory guide, cinquain, contemporary, transformative, critique, deconstruction, observation, digital design, aesthetic, differentiate, ownership, dialogue, collaboration, collage, photoshop, VSCO, Snapchat, consumption, portfolio, adaptation, intertextual, video podcast.

Teaching Standards: See [Appendix A](#) for teaching standards for this unit.

Synopsis: In this nine-week unit, students will become active participants in building dialogues together around visual literacy while creating visual artworks collaboratively. As a visual class it is essential that the community of the classroom establishes a strong foundation in reading and speaking to the two dimensional image. Through the course of the unit, the students will work through five lessons that build their visual literacy skills while transforming their visual image art making to be purposeful and articulate. Each lesson breaks down the following:

- Lesson #1 / How do we categorize images and begin to understand how they determine how we see?
- Lesson #2 / How are you applying your experience critically, aesthetically, and meaningfully to visual art making?
- Lesson #3 / Planning and research of how to be imitative and work towards becoming transformative.
- Lesson #4 / How do we fabricate and construct intertextual images of our own in a society that constantly judges and perceives through visual communication?
- Lesson #5 / Becoming reflective with video podcasting about how creative decisions were made through creating purposeful, transformative work.

I plan to teach this unit during the coming year to 43 students in 10th, 11th, and 12th grade honors Digital Photography.

I give permission for the Institute to publish my curriculum unit and synopsis in print and online. I understand that I will be credited as the author of my work.

Introduction

Through this seminar and deep dive into visual literacy, I was hoping to construct a better foundation for my digital arts curriculum. Even within an image based, digital art making class, students struggle to discuss images and what they can communicate personally and culturally. I believe this relates to the abundance of images that students interact with on a daily basis. This image overload results in little time for reaction and reflection. I wanted to create a unit that allowed myself and my students to sharpen our visual literacy skills together while highlighting how purposeful art making can be within the digital arts. This unit would kick off the year and plant the idea, and skillset, that any image can be read through the discussion of composition, aesthetics, and narrative.

The beginning of the unit asks students to reflect upon how they quickly categorize and judge images. As a student scrolls, likes (hearts), and collects, the class will question what aesthetic choices they are making and how that relates to the artist's constructed composition. With this reflection on how students are collecting and reading images the unit will shift to how students make decisions within their art making. As we move on to our art making the class will discuss what can make art imitative, rather than transformative. This discussion and study of Kirby Ferguson's philosophy that everything is a remix will aim to illuminate students to how the creative process builds upon pre-existing artworks and art movements.¹ Focusing on composition, aesthetics, and narrative students will be guided through how each decision contributes to how an image is assembled and received. Through a large shared folder, students will be remixing pieces and parts of each other's' images into composed collages.

Being reflective through a video format on this entire process of reading images and remixing peer imagery will hopefully lay a foundation for how the students critique and create throughout the year. Anxiety or ignorance about how to begin reading images will also ideally be relieved by the end of this unit. Students that can be able to speak to images with purpose and justification is the overarching goal.

Rationale

Seeing is our understanding or misunderstanding of any given moment. Living within a culture that floods our waking hours with images is challenging how much we perceive what we are consuming visually. With the importance of seeing now challenged by constant overseeing, students need a toolkit of skills that can help ground their visual learning. Without a foundation of visual literacy, students will continue to speak to the surface of context and narrative. Apathy feeds on ignorance and without the skills to approach the meaning and purpose of images students will fall behind in the areas of observation, analysis, and critical problem solving.² As students begin to apply visual literacy, they can develop a stronger self-awareness of their reactions and choices to consuming and producing visual information.

In our CTI seminar, *Cultivating Visual Literacy*, each class demonstrated that people define and categorize images at the surface. Visually deconstructing an image is a

skill that requires practice. The acceptance and understanding that all images, especially media images are constructed is the foundational concept that we must recognize.³

Demographics

I currently teach visual art in grades 9-12 at Hough High School located in Cornelius, North Carolina, a rural suburb of Charlotte. Hough is one of 30 high schools in the Charlotte Mecklenburg School system. For the 2017-2018 school year, William A. Hough High School has 2695 students in grades 9-12. Our demographics are as follows: White: 74%, African American: 9%, Asian: 2.8%, Hispanic: 11%, Multi-Racial: 2.6%, Other: 1%

Our school offers 25 AP courses as well as courses in Engineering as part of the Project Lead The Way (PLTW) program. This year, we are starting our AP Capstone program with sophomores and juniors. We have over 1000 students enrolled in one or more AP classes for a total enrollment of 2697. Last year, our AP pass rate was 63%. We also offer courses in visual arts, interior design, Spanish and French, and wide variety of elective courses. Last year, we had a 93.8% graduation rate with students earning over 12 million dollars' worth of scholarships which was \$3 million more than the previous year.

The faculty consists of 152 certified staff members, including the principal, four assistant principals, one dean of students, seven counselors, a media specialist, a career development coordinator, an instructional coordinator, an instructional accountability facilitator, a technology facilitator, and a psychologist. 44% of our faculty hold advanced degrees. Nearly 62% of our staff has more than 5 years of teaching experience.

Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools provides Art Education to all students in elementary schools, K-5, and in all weekly art education classes. In the sixth grade, students participate in an arts education rotation to further explore the various art forms. Additionally, students in middle school may elect to study more visual arts in specific visual arts courses. Students in Intermediate Visual Arts courses must have completed 8 years of visual arts education in CMS or a beginner level visual arts course in high school. Depending on their background, some students have had more experience with the close reading of artworks than others have.

All of our visual art courses are yearlong and meet every other day for 90 minutes. We offer beginner, intermediate, proficient, and advanced levels of visual art, contemporary craft and design, ceramics, and digital photography. Proficient and Advanced levels are honors courses and are usually combined. We also offer AP studio art: drawing, 2D design, digital 2D design, and 3D design. Most of our students have computer and internet access at home as well as a class set of Chromebooks for in class research and planning. I plan to begin this as the first unit of the year in September.

Objectives

This unit is taught according to the North Carolina Essential Standards for High School. The main objective of this unit is to build a foundation in visual literacy so that students may be more self-aware when adapting and transforming their own visual work. The following three essential questions are steering the focus of the unit:

1. In what ways do we personally judge images and begin to unpack and decode the purpose of an image?
2. How can we read each other through images based on critical, aesthetic, and narrative criteria?
3. Within our own manipulating, are we being transformative or imitative?

During the first quarter, the students will explore how visually literate they are as they deconstruct photographic compositions (critique). This focuses on standard I.V.1 through I.V.4, which outline that students will use art vocabulary to critique art while also analyzing images through the process of deconstruction. As students deconstruct images they will reflect on their culture and how the modern push to communicate visually is affecting their aesthetic decisions.⁴

Working into the end and beginning of the second quarter students will aim to create collage based photographic work that is transformative rather than imitative through the process of remixing. With this work, students will define “transformative” and reflect on how their process can be imitative. Students will define and discuss “intertextual” work and reflect on how they can adapt previous works. With this remixing and discussion of intertextual work students will work through standards P.CX.1.2 through P.CX.1.4. to build an understanding of how personal perspective and aesthetics are influenced by temporal contexts and culture.

Content Background Knowledge

The students involved in this unit (Intermediate and Proficient level) have all had the prerequisite of Beginning Digital Photography. Within that course students focused on building basic skill sets in photography, digital design, and editing. Critique is an element of the course but is kept to mostly discussing the skills used and the overall composition of any given work. As far as reading and building meaning and narrative from images, the students have little background. While their use of the image through communication is immense in terms of sheer daily numbers, their ability to understand image purpose and context needs to be cultivated.

Teaching Strategies: (See [Appendix B](#) for supplemental handouts)

- Cinquains (Five Liners)
- Anticipatory Guide
- Think- Pair-Share
- Elbow partners/Turn and Talks
- Analyzing visual literary elements
- Peer Editing
- Exit Ticket Reflections
- Write-Pair-Share, Write-Share-Revise
- Collaborative Portfolios

Students have all of their handouts and documents in their Google classroom, or within their process book sketchbook. All written work will also be recorded digitally so that everything can ultimately be kept in the digital portfolio.

Unit Outline:

Each class this unit is being presented to is on the Aday/Bday schedule.

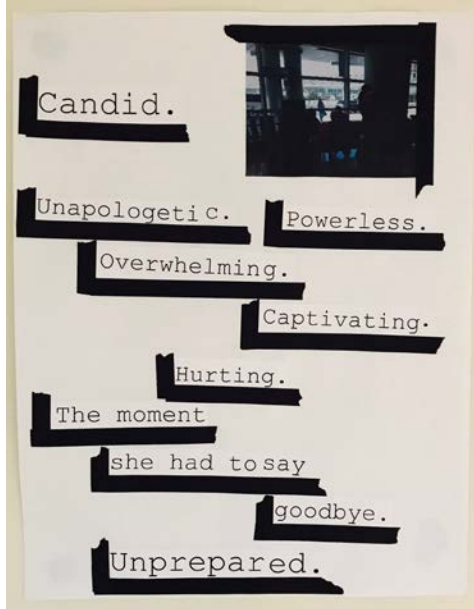
Week 1: Lesson 1 /

Students will be presented with a group of images (contemporary images from the art world, photographs taken from social media - See [Appendix B](#)) and be instructed to write out categories for each image with an explanation of they settled upon the category. This will be independent work where they will sketch each image in their process book and list descriptors and a chosen/created category for each image. When they are finished with the images chosen, they will add one image of their own in order to create a new category that was not established by the previous six images (students will place their images in a group Google Slides Presentation so that each student can observe what other students are contributing).

Through class discussion, we will pare down the categories and their meanings. The images will be hung around the room and each student will label them with a sticky note that reveals their created categories. As a group, we will then compare and contrast the designated categories and discuss how many ways an image can be consumed. With our chosen categories, students will create visual “CINQUAINS” (Five liners) posters

around the room using an image from their photography. Students will then create a reflection statement on how they begin to perceive images. They will reflect on the exercise directly by scrolling through their camera roll to investigate what categories dominate the “ownership” of the images in their phone. As a group, we will dialogue about what constitutes ownership over an image. **Standards:** (P.V.1.3, P.CX.1.2)

Student Work (Student Cinquain):



Week 2: Lesson 2 /

VISUAL LITERACY ANTICIPATORY GUIDE

Our second exercise will focus as a pretest of sorts to see where students are at in terms of reading images (with a focus on differentiating between personal aesthetics, objective critical responses, and developing a narrative). Looking at three different types of images (Images- [CTI ANTICIPATORY SLIDES](#) -includes image from The Learning Lab⁵) the students will record their aesthetic and critical response to each with supporting evidence. From the critical and aesthetic evidence, we will discuss possible narratives using the following line of questioning:

1. What possible narrative are you reading based on the choices you have written down regarding composition and aesthetics?
2. How would a different compositional edit (balance, cropping) have changed the narrative?
3. What did you miss that your peers brought up in our dialogue about the work? Why do you think you missed those elements?

When finished the class will digitally turn in their anticipatory guide and share their overall reactions to the process. This will lead into watching the [Toledo Museum's video on Visual Literacy](#). With our discussion of visual literacy, we will watch a Vice news piece on photographer Bruce Gilden ([Vice](#)) critiquing pieces and discuss his approach.

Standards: (I.V.1.1, I.V.1.4, P.CR.1.1)

Student Work (Responding to Toledo Museum’s video on Visual Literacy):

The screenshot shows a list of student comments in a classroom discussion interface. Each comment is preceded by a blue circular profile icon and a timestamp. The comments are as follows:

- 8:24 AM: 90% of information we gain, we receive visually
- 8:24 AM: Us as people need to start to notice communication through a visual stand point.
- 8:24 AM: the ability to make judgements makes you focus and study the image
- 8:24 AM: reading an image is reading a text, reading a text is reading an image
- 8:25 AM: 90% of information we gain is received visually... but where does the other 10% come from??
- 8:32 AM: In this digital age, textual and computer literacy is judged to be more important then sensory literacy.
- 8:39 AM: We neglect more sensory literacy in education now.

At the bottom of the thread, there is a text input field labeled "Add class comment..." and a circular button with a plus sign (+).

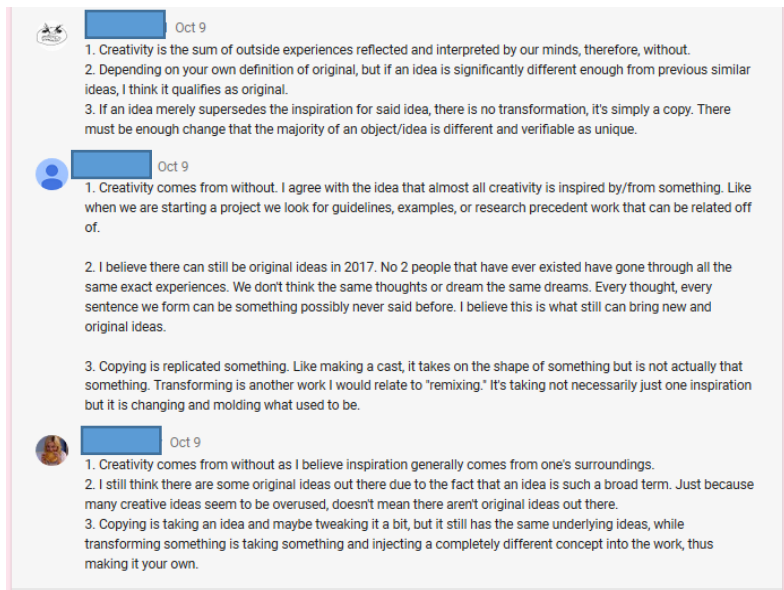
Week 3: Lesson 3 /

The class will watch and discuss *Everything is a Remix*. With our discussion, we will explore the following questions:

1. Does creativity come from within or without?
2. Are there still original ideas in 2017? Please explain your point of view.
3. What is the difference between copying and transforming?

From our dialogue, we will discuss the importance of being honest creatively as we examine how original our ideas are when creating artwork as a student. The class will also take time to listen to and discuss the ROOKIE podcast⁶. From these discussions, we will discuss our formal art-making project. Students will begin collecting remix “parts” and “scenes” into a collective shared Google Folder. We also discuss the phrase “*Faking it until you make it.*” Focus will be on how we claim ownership of “faking it.” Each student will attempt to rewrite the sentence using word variations/synonyms on large sticky notes around the room. We will close by looking at Nan Goldin and the Ben Davis article in art news and discussing “social art collaboration.” **Standards:** (P.CX.1.2, P.CX.1.4)

Student Work (Responding to questions from *Everything is a Remix*)



The screenshot shows a discussion board with three posts. Each post is dated Oct 9 and contains three numbered points. The first post discusses the definition of originality and transformation. The second post compares original ideas to experiences and copying to replication. The third post discusses inspiration from surroundings and the concept of remixing as injecting new concepts.

Post 1:

1. Creativity is the sum of outside experiences reflected and interpreted by our minds, therefore, without.
2. Depending on your own definition of original, but if an idea is significantly different enough from previous similar ideas, I think it qualifies as original.
3. If an idea merely supersedes the inspiration for said idea, there is no transformation, it's simply a copy. There must be enough change that the majority of an object/idea is different and verifiable as unique.

Post 2:

1. Creativity comes from without. I agree with the idea that almost all creativity is inspired by/from something. Like when we are starting a project we look for guidelines, examples, or research precedent work that can be related off of.
2. I believe there can still be original ideas in 2017. No 2 people that have ever existed have gone through all the same exact experiences. We don't think the same thoughts or dream the same dreams. Every thought, every sentence we form can be something possibly never said before. I believe this is what still can bring new and original ideas.
3. Copying is replicated something. Like making a cast, it takes on the shape of something but is not actually that something. Transforming is another work I would relate to "remixing." It's taking not necessarily just one inspiration but it is changing and molding what used to be.

Post 3:

1. Creativity comes from without as I believe inspiration generally comes from one's surroundings.
2. I still think there are some original ideas out there due to the fact that an idea is such a broad term. Just because many creative ideas seem to be overused, doesn't mean there aren't original ideas out there.
3. Copying is taking an idea and maybe tweaking it a bit, but it still has the same underlying ideas, while transforming something is taking something and injecting a completely different concept into the work, thus making it your own.

Week 4 & 5: Lesson 4 /

The Mr. / Mrs. Potato Head Activity

We will begin the class by deconstructing *Picture of Spatial Growths - Picture of Two Small Dogs* by Kurt Schwitters. Working from the questions used in lesson 2 we will focus on working up to narrative through the dissection of composition and aesthetics. We will also consider the following:

1. What similarities or differences do you share in what you create digitally with your phone (VSCO, SnapChat) and what Dadaists' created with their collages?
2. What sets Dadaist collage apart from other collage work that you have seen?
3. How does Dadaist collage composition relate to the ties in which they were living?

With Dadaist collage as a foundation students will be instructed choose from photographs provided by the entire class (including the teacher) to the community (Potato Head) folder. Students will make purposeful choices in selecting images from the folder. Considering a desired aesthetic, students will work towards a composition that supports a narrative. This activity will be done by hand first, and then a second digital collage will be completed as well with access to Photoshop and Editing Apps (VSCO, SNAPCHAT). We will look at how the two creations differ and how digital design/manipulation affects our creative communication. **Standards:** (I.V.2.2, I.CX.2.4) (I.V.2.2)

Week 6: Lesson 5 /

Students will create project reflections in a video podcast format. They may work in groups or individually, depending on how many similar ideas were shared through our writing and collages. Within the podcast, students should display writings, cinquains, and final work. Before beginning the reflection, the class will watch Kleon's TED Talk on how many artists develop similar ideas unknowingly and how essential it is to define adaptation and intertextuality within the creative world. The following questions must also be reflected upon and discussed within the podcast:

1. What did you learn about yourself in terms of how you quickly judge or categorize images?
2. What does your cinquain say about how you respond to and create art?
3. How did you feel about your anticipatory guide? Did you see more or less than your peers? Why do you think that is? Do you spend more or less time with images now after the exercise? Please explain.
4. Compare and contrast your critique style to Bruce Gilden. How similar or different are your methods?
5. Within a purposeful piece of art what is most important to you: composition, aesthetics, or narrative. Please explain your choice(s).
6. Discuss and critique your final works. Take the viewer through the process of creation and your focus on aesthetics, composition, and narrative.
7. How is your final work intertextual? Would you call it an adaptation? Why or why not? Please speak to inspirational work here.

The class will share links to each other's video podcasts and be given time to watch and comment on each. Those comments will be collected and added as mini-posters around the classroom to keep in sight what was considered and understood.

APPENDIX A:

NC Essential Standards in High School Visual Art:

- I.V.1.1 Use art vocabulary to critique art
- I.V.1.4 Analyze images through the process of deconstruction (the components of the image and its meaning) (visual literacy).
- I.V.2.2 Use experiences and observations to create content for art.
- I.CX.2.4 Analyze how digital design affects communication in art.
- P.V.1.3 Recognize contemporary styles, themes, and genres in art.
- P.CX.1.2 Understand how personal perspective is influenced by temporal context.
- P.CX.1.4 Understand how personal aesthetic responses to art are influenced by culture
- P.CR.1.1 Differentiate between personal aesthetic response and objective critical response to art.

National Standards:

- Anchor standard #7 - Perceive and analyze artistic work.
- Anchor standard #8 - Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
- Anchor standard #9 - Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

APPENDIX B:

CINQUAIN Example:

<p style="text-align: center;">TRANSFORMATIVE</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Converted, Metamorphosis</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Changing, Converting, Blending</p> <p style="text-align: center;">The old combining into the new.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Shift</p>
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ANTICIPATORY GUIDE ([LINK](#))

SINGLE POINT RUBRIC ([LINK](#))

APPENDIX C:



Maggie Shannon

Thunderbirds

2017

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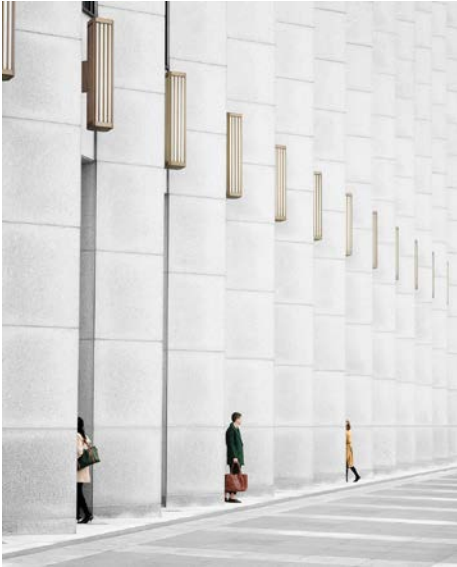


Matthew Brooks

Scenes From An Untitled Film

2017

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Clarissa Bonet

City Space

2017

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Nadia Sablin

Lodeynoye Pole

2017

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Kurt Schwitters
Picture of Spatial Growths - Picture of Two Small Dogs
1920–39
For educational use only. Do not reproduce.



John Maclean
John Baldessari, National City, California
2016
For educational use only. Do not reproduce.

Annotated Bibliography

Baker, Frank W. *Media Literacy in the K-12 Classroom*. Portland, OR: ISTE, 2016. Discussion on core concepts of media literacy and visual literacy. Teachers can build techniques and approaches for the classroom in terms of understanding media images, moving images, and advertising.

Davis, Ben. "Social Media Art In the Expanded Field." Artnet. 2017. Accessed May 20, 2017. <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/reviews/davis/art-and-social-media8-4-10.asp>. An article written about artwork created through and with social media. This work discusses how one can become truly collaborative within a social media space. The author frames social media art as a new movement within the art world.

Ferguson, Kirby. *Everything is a Remix*. TED Talk, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zd-dqUuvLk4>. This video explores how much art works, which here discuss music and film, can copy or adapt from previous cultural works.

Gevinson, Tavi. *Ask a Grown*. ROOKIE podcast, (June 6th 2017 Ep w/ St. Vincent). Podcast series in which female icons give advice and share stories about their journey through creativity and career building.

Herman, Amy E. *Visual Intelligence*. New York, NY: Eamon Dolan Books, 2016. This book investigates our skills in seeing and communicating. Being observant of our world and reflective of one's self is an essential skill set. This book discusses how to see and consider how seeing defines who we are and how we contribute to society.

Kleon, Austin. *Steal Like an Artist*. TEDxKC, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oww7oB9rjgw>. This local Ted Talk discusses how many artists develop similar ideas unknowingly and how essential it is to define adaptation and intertextuality within the creative world.

McDermon, Daniel. "Nan Goldin Wants You to Know She Didn't Invent Instagram." NY Times. August 15, 2016. Accessed June 02, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/16/arts/design/nan-goldin-wants-you-to-know-she-didnt-invent-instagram.html?_r=0. An interview with Nan Goldin about her work and its relationship to social media photography (Instagram). Also interviewed are the curators of her show "The Ballad of Sexual Dependency" as well as visitors to the exhibit. Each visitor compares and contrasts Goldin's work to how we photograph and share in the digital age.

Schulten, Katherine., and Gonchar, Michael. The Learning Lab. *The New York Times*. <https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/?s=what+is+going+on+in+this+picture>

A educational website that provides daily resources for teaching and learning with The New York Times, including lesson plans, questions for writing and discussion, quizzes, monthly contests and more. You can join the conversation by commenting on any post. The section titled “What’s Going On in This Picture?” focuses on weekly images that are discussed by viewers until specific information is released on the image days later. A great tool to allow students to practice their observation skills while socially constructing narratives.

Thurn, Benjamin James. *The Language of Movies: Using Film to Teach Visual Literacy in the EFL Classroom*. School of Education Student Capstones and Dissertations, 2016. Films are an authentic resource and can teach critical 21st century skills such as visual literacy. A series of content-based lessons have been designed to promote critical thinking skills while simultaneously developing film and media literacy. This five-unit curriculum contains a series of edited film clips, PowerPoint slides, and supporting documents for EFL professionals who are looking to incorporate new literacies into their classrooms.

Toledo Museum of Art. Visual Literacy. 2013.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O39niAzuapc>

Video on what Visual Literacy is and how it is essential to our skillset in the 21st century. Breaks down how one can go about dissecting images in order to better understand their composition and intention.

Zmikly, Jon. Remix: “How to Use Snapchat in the Classroom.” Mediashift. September 08, 2016. Accessed June 01, 2017.

<http://mediashift.org/2016/09/remix-snapchat-classroom/> Discusses various ways to use Snapchat in the classroom with students. Gives great tips about expectations, possible uses, and possible pitfalls.

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- ¹ Everything Is A Remix. TED Talk by Kirby Ferguson. Youtube. 2012. Accessed August 1, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zd-dqUuvLk4>. Focusing in on the discussion of how art and music are intertextual and can either imitative or transformative.
- ² Herman, Amy E. *Visual Intelligence*. New York, NY: Eamon Dolan Books, 2016. Looking at visual literacy as building skills in the areas of observation, analysis, and critical problem solving.
- ³ Baker, Frank W. *Media Literacy in the K-12 Classroom*. Portland, OR. ISTE, 2016. Working through how meaning and message is constructed in a media image.
- ⁴ Zmikly, Jon. Remix: "How to Use Snapchat in the Classroom." Mediashift. September 08, 2016. Accessed June 01, 2017. <http://mediashift.org/2016/09/remix-snapchat-classroom/>. Referring to how the constant check in with your friends develops a visual culture that drives aesthetic decisions.
- ⁵ Schulten, Katherine., and Gonchar, Michael. The Learning Lab. *The New York Times*. <https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/?s=what+is+going+on+in+this+picture>. Working from images provided by the NY Times Learning Lab series that provides images to visually read and discuss.
- ⁶ Gevinson, Tavi. *Ask a Grown*. ROOKIE podcast, (June 6th 2017 Ep w/ St. Vincent). Focusing on the discussion of "faking it until you make it."