A Case Study of Visual Literacy Among Library and Information Science Students

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It is widely acknowledged that we live in an increasingly visual world and yet knowledge concerning visual information continues to lag behind that of the printed or spoken word among the general population. This new visual paradigm, driven in large part by technological developments enabling the easy exchange and display of images, has brought into sharper focus the lack of knowledge and training concerning visual information. As access to visual information is largely dependent on the descriptive information associated with an image, there is a critical need to perform this work well. This study examines the development of visual literacy skills among library and information science students. Their progress is traced through a series of exercises and learning tools developed to increase their understanding of visual information and the unique challenges of producing descriptive metadata for images. The findings of the study point to several general patterns of visual literacy development as well as revealing the high degree of frustration experienced by the students in their attempts to perform the work.

Joan Beaudoin is an Assistant Professor in the School of Library and Information Science at Wayne State University. Prior to her position at Wayne State University she was a Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Fellow at the School of Information Science and Technology at Drexel University. At Drexel University she undertook several research projects that examined the description of images. Her dissertation “An investigation of image users across professions: A model of image needs, retrieval and use,” expanded upon these earlier projects and examined the image behaviors of archaeologists, architects, art historians and artists. Her current research focuses on metadata, visual information and digital preservation.