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*Proceedings of the Redesigning Pedagogy: Culture, Knowledge and Understanding  
Conference, Singapore, May 2007*

# **RE-DESIGNING EDUCATION IN THE VISUAL: RE-POSITIONING VISUAL ARTS EDUCATION FOR AN INCREASINGLY VISUAL WORLD**

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## **ABSTRACT**

As part of a National Review of Visual Education, commissioned by the Australian Government, research in Australia, informed by international research and scholarship, revealed that education in the visual is transforming.

This process of transformation is driven by changing contexts in technology, curriculum, social, economic and political forces and research itself. The process is changing what is

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<sup>1</sup> This paper reports on research commissioned by the Australian Government and undertaken by a team of researchers from the Centre for Learning Change and Development, School of Education, Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia.

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Australian Government.

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happening in Australian classrooms. Analyses of the process reveal a number of principles for a re-designed Education in the Visual. The process also presents implications for Visual Educators, curriculum designers, schools and teacher education programs.

## **KEYWORDS**

Visual Education, Visual Arts Education, The Arts in Education, Classroom practices in Arts Education

## **PART 1: DYNAMIC CONTEXTS ARE CHANGING VISUAL EDUCATION**

Education in the visual is among the most dynamic of the curriculum fields studied in schools. Boughton (1989) highlights a range of interrelated influences that shape both its content and practice: technological developments; ideological changes in education and the art world; social changes; economic imperatives; political pressures; and, research findings.

### **1.1 Technology is changing the nature of communication placing greater emphasis on the visual and changing visual practice**

Technology such as computers, mobile phones, and digital assistants is based on graphic-user interfaces (GUI) and visually-driven concepts such as icons. Prensky (2001) argues that regular use of image-based technology predisposes many young people to develop heightened visual abilities and consequently they have a heightened awareness of visual texts. As young people have increasing fluency with digital tools and use them differently, they can be thought of as digital ‘natives’ as opposed to older digital ‘immigrants’ (Prensky, 2001). Kress (2003) also argues that reading images, as opposed to reading written text, draws on a visual grammar and a different kind of logic. In a visually saturated world it is important that young people develop tools for understanding and critiquing images and texts that they are

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exposed to, so that they can have a critical disposition to understand underlying ideologies of what they see. Importantly, this can be developed early with Martello (2004) reporting that 7-year-olds are able to move from visual-literacy to critical-literacy when engaged in a multi-modal way. Age is also not a barrier to participation and the development of aesthetic awareness with Piscitelli and others (2003) reporting 4-6 year olds engaged and responding with heightened aesthetic sensibilities.

Changes in technology are changing the way people engage with and access information (Kress, 2003). As society changes, schooling follows. For example, in the recent UNESCO report *Towards Knowledge Societies* (Binde, 2005), there is acknowledgement that the 'third industrial revolution' has produced a new educational 'dynamic' where the "cultural conditions [of how knowledge is produced and applied] cannot be ignored". Likewise culture cannot be "neglectful of educational transmission and the new forms of knowledge" (Binde, 2005 p. 5). In addition, there is a global convergence between technical and aesthetic enterprise, and this is acknowledged in countries with diverse cultures such as Singapore (Chun, 1997), India (Fernandes, 2000) and China (McKinney, 2006). One consequence of this development is the generation of spontaneous momentum within traditional subject specialisations that is transforming their scope and focus internationally (Committee on Information Technology and Creativity Computer Science and Telecommunications Board Division on Engineering and Physical Sciences, 2003).

The Internet and digital technology has changed the nature of the arts and access to them. For example, artists can now create and distribute content to millions of people for minimal cost. Nielsen/NetRatings report that "user-generated content" comprise five out of the ten fastest growing Web brands in July 2006 (<http://www.prnewswire.com/cgi-bin/stories.pl?ACCT=104&STORY=/www/story/08-10-2006/0004414251&EDATE=> ).

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Consequently, the digital revolution both democratises and makes available, visually dominant creativity—both process and product—and it challenges traditional notions of ability, skill and aesthetics. This means that traditional boundaries between fields of knowledge and inquiry are blurred; conventional understandings of aesthetics—as a powerful organiser in the arts—are changing; and, opportunities for building and developing personal and cultural identity are transforming.

Many ‘new’ media artists identify themselves as interdisciplinary workers, and consider computers to be “collaborators instead of mere tools” (Middlebrooks, 2001 pp. 1-2). There is a view that “neither the fundamental notion of what art is nor the role of the artists in the creative enterprise” has changed. What has changed are the “tools, skills and processes by which art is made” (p. 2). Notions such as ‘save as’ and ‘undo’ enables artists to be able to ask a lot of “what ifs?” and to explore, and experiment in a free flowing environment. Consequently, with the quick turnover in technology there is a suggestion that “bodies of knowledge [do not] remain static enough for people to study and understand them” (Middlebrooks, 2001 p. 22).

This rapid change raises particular challenges for school curricula in general and visual education in particular. It raises questions about the relationships between physical materials and the virtual worlds along with standards and the value of web-based and digital art.

## **1.2 Changing concepts of curriculum placing greater emphasis on the arts and arts literacy and therefore education in the visual**

The research revealed that education in the visual in Australian schools reflects a cross-curricular role. It is evident in the Arts learning area; the Design and Technology (or equivalent) learning area; and the English learning area through the Viewing strand. In this

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paper, three elements are highlighted: the inclusion of aspects of Visual Education in a range of learning areas; a location of visual arts, craft and design within an arts learning area construct; and, opportunities and threats for Visual Education from shifts towards interdisciplinary curricular focus.

### ***Education in the visual in a range of learning areas***

Visual education has emerged in a number of learning areas in the contemporary curriculum, assuming greater importance and prominence.

The research undertaken indicated increased focus on aspects of the visual in contemporary English courses that include visually based texts such as films, television, graphic novels and posters. For example, in the New South Wales *Stage 6 (Years 11-12) Syllabi* aspects of visual education are included through a focus on *representing*, where representations are wide ranging textual constructions that give shape to ways of thinking about or acting in the world. Each State and Territory education system in Australia has courses for studies of the media (film, television, radio, print and advertising). Aspects of education emphasizing the visual are also found in other subjects such as Design, Graphics, Photography, Technology and Digital Technology. In the study of History there is analysis of visual sources such as photographs, cartoons and posters and similar attention given in a range of other school subjects such as Health.

This trend to a broadly inclusive visual education reflects an increasing awareness of the power of visual symbol systems. However, it also highlights that there is a range of approaches. English, for example, focuses on visual texts and semiotic knowledge as a way of assisting students to understand multi-literacies (New London Group, 1996). In such studies, including Media and History for example, students are expected from the earliest

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years, to understand that an image may have multiple-messages and meanings in communication and the representation of society. They are taught that these messages may be explicit or implicit, overt or covert. The emphasis placed on a visual education across the curriculum is sometimes complementary to that taken by “traditional” visual arts curriculum practice and sometimes at odds with it. In its research, the team found criticism from some visual art educators about the approaches taken in other learning areas. One Visual Educator who was interviewed, stated:

What happens in the ‘not being in the making’ is that you separate ‘the visual’ from the ‘meaning of the visual’ ... when you look at something it’s not just a matter of observing it and comprehending it, it’s a matter of understanding its expressive potential. ... That’s where an art training enhances the understanding of ‘the visual’. To really come to terms with the visual world, whether you are a scientist, a musician or a painter, you have to make that particular link and (for the non art-trained) that’s where the problem arises.

A broadly inclusive approach to an education in the visual in the curriculum is an opportunity for enhancing and raising its profile, status and quality. It is also perceived by some as a threat to the territory and autonomy of those who traditionally taught the visual in schools.

### ***Visual Education in the Arts learning area***

In Australian schools visual arts, craft and design, a key to an education in the visual, is currently usually taught in a combined Arts Learning Area context that was articulated, as one of eight key learning areas, by the *Hobart Declaration* (MYCEETYA Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 1988) and reiterated by the

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*Adelaide Declaration* (MCEETYA Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 1999). The rationale for the Arts is strengthened in the *Adelaide Declaration* when it recognises the role schooling plays in providing “a foundation for young Australians’ intellectual, physical, social, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development”.

The collaborative national development of *A Statement on the Arts for Australian Schools* (MCEETYA Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 1994a) and the associated document, *The Arts – a curriculum profile for Australian Schools* (MCEETYA Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 1994b) was undertaken at the direction of the Australian Education Council (AEC). These national documents defined the learning area of the Arts as comprising five art forms – dance, drama, media, music and visual arts (incorporating art, craft and design). They recognise the Arts as symbol systems, their aesthetic significance and associated social and cultural perspectives. Following a decision of the AEC in July 1994, the implementation of this nationally endorsed approach was agreed to be the prerogative of each State and Territory. Subsequently, States and Territories implemented either an adoption of the statement and profiles or the development of their own versions of these documents.

The development of the Arts learning area curriculum construct has contradictory impact on education in the visual. On the one hand, it provided visual arts, craft and design with recognition as well as opportunities for increased inter-disciplinarity evident in visual arts in the broader community. On the other hand, the researchers found perceptions of loss of status and “invisibility” as one of five art forms within a learning area. The Arts learning area construct, then, is an opportunity and a perceived threat but nonetheless impacts on visual education as a whole.

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*Continuing dynamic curriculum developments impacting on Visual Education*

A recent trend in Australian curriculum has been the emergence of an *Essential Learnings* curriculum construct that places increased attention on cross-curricular learning. For example, the *Victorian Essential Learnings Standards* (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2005) identifies “thinking, communicating, conceiving and realising ideas and information ... the capacity to design, create and evaluate processes as a way of developing creativity and innovation”. The *Tasmanian Essential Learnings Framework* (Tasmanian Education Department, 2004) explicitly includes being *arts literate* (alongside being literate; being numerate; being information literate) within *Communicating* as an essential learning:

Being arts literate (the student): Understands the purposes and uses of a range of arts forms – visual arts, media, dance, music, drama and literature, and how to make and share meaning from and through them. Uses with confidence and skill the codes and conventions of the art form best suited to their expressive needs.

The concept of arts literacy is found in other curriculum documents e.g. *The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum* (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2000) and the *Western Australian Curriculum Framework* (Curriculum Council of Western Australia, 1998) and *More Than Words Can Say* (NAAE National (Australian) Affiliation of Arts Educators, 1998; 2003 2nd Ed.).

As the Essential Learnings approach gathers momentum (and opposition to it is strengthening), an increased focus on cross-curricular and trans-disciplinary learning is further opportunity for visual education. But there are also concerns to be raised about loss of visibility and unique identity in an increasingly cross-curricular approach.



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### **1.3 Broad social, economic and political impact on visual education resulting from the emergence of the Knowledge Economy and a focus on Creativity and Innovation**

In common with other similar nations, Australia is re-shaping itself for a different future.

*Imagine Australia* (Prime Minister's Science Engineering and Innovation Council, 2005) is one example of significant policy statements that link economic development with a shifting focus to creative industries (including those that visual education progress). This Report notes:

To be globally competitive, Australia needs to formulate a comprehensive approach to fostering creativity (p. 5).

It explicitly promotes the need to implement the political, economic, social and technological infrastructure that facilitates relationships amongst creative industries sectors and between creative industries and other sectors. In order to create a culture of creativity, suggestions include the need to:

- Enhance innovation policy by the inclusion of design, creativity and creative industries;
- Review existing government programs for research and innovation to ensure that design and creative processes are not excluded;
- Facilitate a critical mass of activity through the Creative Innovation Fund; and,
- Facilitate greater cross-disciplinary and cross-sectoral research collaborations between Science, Engineering and Technology and Humanities, Arts and Social Science sectors.

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To progress this policy initiative, the Australia Council for the Arts has developed a *Creative Catalyst* strategy (Australia Council for the Arts, 2005) focusing on increasing networking and partnerships through support for : Arts and Education in Schools - *Creative Schools*; Cross-Disciplinary research - *Synapse* – Cross Disciplinary Research; creative leaders and international exchange – *Creative Leadership*; and, innovation and commercialisation of creative enterprises - *Create + Accelerate*

In the United Kingdom, the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education released its report *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education* (1998) calling for a national strategy for creative and cultural education in order for the UK to compete internationally economically and to ensure its future social cohesion. This report drew on and extended earlier work contained in *Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts* (Matarosso, 1997) where participation in the arts was linked with: personal development, social cohesion, community empowerment and self-determination, and the development of local image and identity; imagination and vision; and improved health and well-being of participants. These themes have been picked up and elaborated by Robinson (2001) in *Out of our Minds: Learning to be Creative* where he emphasizes that creativity can be ‘taught’, that the arts are at the centre of new forms of knowledge(s) and understandings that are emerging, and that the arts provide opportunities for synergistic holistic collaboration between key learning areas. Consequently, the arts and the natural affinity that children and young people have for them, have much to contribute to the transformation of education necessary for the workforce of the 21st Century.

Florida in *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) links 3-Ts: Talent, Technology, and Tolerance as key identifiers of Innovation and Creativity. While continuing to raise debate, the ideas around creativity and links to innovation are relevant to this research. In an

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Australian context, Cunningham (2006a) in *What Price a Creative Economy?* and, in the newspaper article titled *Rising Tide of Innovation* (2006b) highlights the policy implications for the fundamental shifts towards the Knowledge Economy: “the challenge of the creative industries is the challenge of a new form of economic understanding: they are not catching up with the serious, mainstream industries, they are setting the templates these industries will follow”.

This knowledge economy climate has profound potential impact on school design, curriculum and teacher education. As Caldwell (2005) points out, “school systems and schools face the challenge of creating and sustaining a powerful capacity for knowledge management”. He adds that there are “limitations of traditional approaches to building the capacity of the profession through pre-service education in universities and in-service education” and that this “is not simply an enhanced capacity for in-service training. It means ensuring that all teachers are at all times at the forefront of knowledge in professional practice”.

The research evidence quoted in this paper outlines the integral role that Visual Education plays in promoting the innovation, creativity and imagination envisaged by the Knowledge Economy.

#### **1.4 Research impacting on transforming conceptualisation of visual education**

Developments in scholarly theorising also provide some tools that help reveal visual education. Marshall (2004) argues, for example, from a postmodern position for the use of informational images (such as those from science and natural history) in the content of art education. She proposes that the primary purpose of education in visual culture include “the achievement of visual literacy and an understanding of the impact of all images, not just art” (p. 135). That “becoming visually literate (or learning) involves two fundamental processes:

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a) mining images to ascertain their many layers of meaning, and b) making connections between images to realize their interrelationships” (p. 151). This process also redefines aesthetic experience within visual culture.

Marshall (2005 p. 228) citing Clark, also makes the distinction between an integrated and interdisciplinary curriculum. “A truly integrated curriculum is organised to show the connectedness of things, while an interdisciplinary curriculum is organised in ways that reinforce the separate and discrete character of academic disciplines”. What this form of curriculum does is to reflect the referential world in which it exists and provides a research and scholarship perspective on issues identified earlier about curriculum approaches.

These four aspects outlined in this section of the paper provide background on the shaping contexts for a re-designed visual education.

## **PART 2: WHAT IS HAPPENING AS SCHOOLS RESPOND TO CHANGING CONTEXTS**

To gain a clearer idea of how education in the visual is in a process of transformation, this paper now turns to reporting on aspects of practice in two schools<sup>2</sup>. Both case stories show the impact of the dynamic contexts outlined in Part 1.

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<sup>2</sup> The researchers visited 16 Visual Education sites identified through a nomination and consultation process with relevant jurisdictions and professional bodies. These sites were representative of Australian States and Territories; government/non-government schools and community sites; stage of schooling; and, included a range of models of Visual Education. The analysis of these sites revealed that when committed visual educators work within a framework of a supportive learning community, they can systematically and strategically achieve high quality Visual Education outcomes. The collection of these case stories was undertaken under the supervision of the Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). The participants have approved these case stories. While teachers at both sites have been named, pseudonyms have been given for any students quoted.

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## **2.1 Gilles Street Primary School: Visual Literacy, a whole -school commitment**

Gilles Street Primary School is the only R-7 (Reception-Year 7) government school in the Central Business District (CBD) of Adelaide. The school has two complementary streams: mainstream classes and a New Arrivals Program (NAP) that provides intensive language courses for students newly arrived in Australia. Approximately a third of students are in the New Arrivals Program, with the remainder of the students being drawn from within the local area or having parents who work in the area. At the time of the visit there were 330 students from over 40 different cultural groups.

This site was identified for a number of reasons: the strong, well-established visual arts program and leadership roles of the visual art specialist teacher; the ground-breaking work on introducing explicit attention to visual literacy within a multiliteracies context; and, the identified commitment of teachers to further studies in these areas. These reasons were strengthened when, during the site visit, a further dimension of the visual was identified: the use of Interactive Whiteboards.

### ***Commitment to the Arts in the school's complex context***

There has been a commitment to the Arts in Gilles Street Primary School for over ten years.

Principal, Lindy Brooke, notes:

We have a focus on the Arts because it's such a wonderful way to celebrate the diversity of our culture and to bring in rich traditions ... the Arts are a form of expression that transcend the barriers of language (Interview May 11, 2006)

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The leadership team of the school has a clear rationale for the Arts in the curriculum, based on three principles: *understanding ourselves and each other; enhancing student well-being by using the Arts as a vehicle for communication and self-expression; and, communicating with the community of Adelaide and them communicating with us.* (School brochure)

This approach has focused on the Arts being integrated into threads of school context and curriculum.

### ***Visual arts program for all students***

The strong visual arts program of the school is provided through a specialist teacher, Christine Lawrence, who works collaboratively with classroom teachers in the school to ensure clear links between the art program and the rest of the learning programs for students.

In common with other similarly strong programs there is a commitment to art-specific knowledge and understanding, skills and values being explicitly taught and learnt – a focus on aesthetic understanding. The program is carefully considered and developmentally based. There is a rich layering of interesting and stimulating ideas for students in the art room complemented by other visual stimuli throughout the school. There are specialist facilities that provide a wealth of opportunities for students. While these facilities have been created from “found” spaces in the school - through transforming and enclosing an undercroft area, for example - they are serviceable. The art room is equipped with standard visual art equipment including a kiln. There is a warmth and richness to the art room that makes it an enjoyable learning space for students.

While it is challenging for one teacher to work with all 330 students in the school each week, there is continuity and consistency in the program. The collaboration between specialist teacher and classroom teachers is a vital aspect of the success of the program. Of similar

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importance is the expertise and focus that the art specialist teacher brings to the program.

There was rigor and clear underpinning knowledge, skills and values.

The location of the school within the Adelaide CBD has provided students with many opportunities. For example, following observing Tibetan monks constructing sand mandalas, students constructed a range of their own mandala-based environmental art works.

One of the strengths of the program is that the art specialist teacher also maintains her own art practice as a landscape painter. This talent is immediately noticeable in the large playground mural that occupies the factory wall that bounds one of the playing areas. The mural project provided a learning opportunity over one and three quarter years for students to observe their art teacher working as an artist with parent volunteers assisting.

### *Explicit Visual Literacy programs*

Gilles Street Primary School explicitly teaches visual literacy programs. As Helen Grant, media teacher observes:

We always talk about literacy involving reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing and texts associated with those aspects. We talk about visual literacies as being literate with a huge range of visual texts which have structures, purposes and audiences. Being visually literate involves understanding those symbols in our lives including what comes to us through the Internet, icons, SMS and similar. (Interview 11 May 2006)

Students explicitly learn about film, video, still images, photography and sound. They work with mass media texts moving from relatively simple to more complex texts; they progress from still images (digital) to video where the layer of audio is added; and, they work with a

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range of different project briefs across the media. These media programs are dependent on what else is also happening in the school. Helen observed that if students are working on a theme like “working together” then they might be asked to consider ways that this concept could be represented visually.

Teachers make a connection between the language literacy needs of New Arrival Program students and the power of the visual. Helen observed that “working in ESL (English as a Second Language) we draw heavily on visual texts to support written learning”. But these visual literacy programs are not confined to New Arrivals students.

The importance placed on visual literacy throughout the programs at Gilles Street Primary School can be summed up by this comment from Helen:

When we are exploring the notions of what constitutes literacy, visual literacy is to us as important an area as other literacies.” (Interview 11 May 2006)

She goes on to reinforce this point of view.

There seems to be tension in our community about what literacy actually is ... (many) stake-holders comments ... have nothing whatever to do with what we are doing now in schools; they seem dated and lagging behind where we are teaching and where we have been for quite some while. (Interview 11 May 2006)

This broader and more inclusive view of literacy - sometimes summed up as multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 1996) including visual literacy - highlights



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the need for better articulation of this concept for a general parent audience and for more effective communication with stake-holders about the need for and nature of visual literacy.

### ***Visual literacy through film and video***

One of the remarkable aspects of the program at Gilles Street Primary School is the amount of work done in film/video. An extra curricular Film Club meets twice a week and has been successful in producing a range of short films (videos). In this work there is a clear focus on purposeful short films. Helen spoke of projects such as *Cooking Afghani Style* which incorporated the experiences of recently arrived Afghani students and their culture but also draws on the long history in South Australia of Afghani camel drivers. Another successful project, underlining the commitment of the school to its CBD context, is a short eight minute video on *Hidden Treasures of Adelaide* as seen through the eyes of children.

Students in the Film Club observed during the visit were articulate, enthusiastic and collaborative. They were working on simple animation projects; planning and story-boarding ideas; and, enjoying the visual. The popularity of Film Club was evident. "I enjoy making films... it's fun." (male student, Brett). These views are balanced by a vocational and futures-oriented perspective: "When we're older we might do it as a job" (male student, Rad). "Without this we wouldn't have our eyes opened to different passageways in life." (female student, Ayesha)

Even with this enthusiasm, there was a focus on aesthetic understanding. The level of terminology and focus on purposeful communication reflects the level of deep learning about visual culture and language that is not often seen in primary schools.

Helen commented on the restrictions of equipment and resources, particularly the ways that they seemed to crash or break down at crucial moments in the process of working with

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students. But her philosophical take on these aspects is indicative of the success orientation adopted by the school.

We use what we can. We want to be successful so we do what we can, when we can. That means we work at lunch times and after school. What we do often doesn't fit into the curriculum time. But we do what we can.  
(Interview 11 May 2006)

### ***Multiliteracies in the classroom***

One interesting aspect of this visual literacy program is the explicit inclusion of the visual within a broad multiliteracies program for students. Classroom teacher Valarie Zogopoulos and her Year 4/5 students explicitly address visual learning within a multiliteracies framework as articulated by the New London Group (1996; Freebody & Luke 1990, 1999; (Kalantzis & Cope, 2001).

Their learning focuses on multimodal texts; they use and analyse visual information through defining, locating, selecting, organising, presenting and evaluating visual information. They explicitly use specific terminology about visual literacy including terms such as angles, focal point, foreground and background. They also developed technological literacy and terminology. They used the in-built software of the Interactive Whiteboard (see discussion below) as well as standard software programs such as Microsoft PowerPoint. For example, as part of a Commonwealth Games theme, students researched and then presented visually-based reports on participating countries and sports. These were available for other lessons. As part of this work students designed and created personal logos. Students analyse visual language and its impact, visuals in newspapers, portraits such as the Archibald Prize (an Australian portrait prize competition) winners and the globalised use of icons.

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Remarkable is the level of terminology and conceptual understanding showed by students in their conversations and work books. There were posters and other visual prompts used throughout the library and classrooms visited.

### *Use of Interactive Whiteboards to stimulate the visual*

One of the pleasant surprises of this site visit was the discovery of use of Interactive Whiteboards. An Interactive Whiteboard is directly connected to a computer through a data projector. Once the image is projected, the Interactive Whiteboard operates as a graphic user interface computer. Dragging and tapping fingers on the whiteboard, like a mouse pointer, enable teacher and students to open and close files, draw, highlight ideas, etc. There are electronic “pens” and “erasers” as you would also find on conventional whiteboards. Connected to the school’s server and to other input devices such as scanner, video, DVD, these Interactive Whiteboards operate like any other computer-based visual interface. They enable students to input information, to work with it on screen and to save their work. Students can use standard software programs such as Microsoft Word and PowerPoint on screen and can share and manipulate material they have created. Provided the server is connected to the Internet, students and teachers have access to a world beyond the immediate school.

Remarkable is the enthusiasm of teachers and students for this visually-based technology.

The Interactive Whiteboard has re-energised my teaching. I believe as teachers we need to keep up with technology. I find that hard and work at it but this is really easy. I could not teach without it. (Valarie Zogopoulos, Interview 11 May 2006)

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Student engagement in this technology is high. The integration of visually-based technology is clearly evident and accompanying this is the increased focus on visual literacy. The links to the visual and multiliteracies teaching and learning are immediate; they are not artificially forced but grow from and within the classroom teaching and learning program.

Valarie added:

(The Interactive Whiteboard is) the focal point of the classroom. This is the first thing I switch on, the last thing I switch off before I leave.... Whole class teaching and discussion usually doesn't work with today's generation, but now that I've got this, it's absolutely amazing. Everybody's engaged, they're focused on the visuals. (Interview 11 May 2006)

In her own research on teaching visual literacy through an Interactive Whiteboard (and other strategies), Valarie has noted the following student responses:

“Having the SMARTboard™ helps me to scan... helps me to learn.” (Sebu)

“Using the gallery from SMARTboard™, working from pictures and then adding labels, has increased my vocab. because the teacher asks for meanings not just words.” (Zander)

“I like the teacher showing and doing the activity with the whole class ...it helps me use words.” (Janet)

The combination of tactile and visual stimuli in learning warrants further investigation but the enthusiasm for the technology in use in the classroom is noteworthy. There are six Interactive Whiteboards in classrooms at Gilles Street Primary School and commitment to equipping more classrooms.

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## **2.2 Brighton Secondary School: Asserting and leading Visual Education in a secondary setting**

Brighton Secondary School is a large comprehensive secondary school of 1253 students in beach-side metropolitan Adelaide. It has a pleasant location, good facilities, air-conditioned classrooms and a well-established reputation for excellence. Parents and the community consider the school as highly desirable.

Visual Education is immediately obvious when you enter the school. The relatively recent refurbishment of the foyer integrates a small gallery space and is dominated by a large mural that is the result of a community artist-in-residence program that linked the school and its beach environment. Throughout the rest of the school, particularly in the wing where the Arts and English work together, there are exhibitions and displays of art. Year 12 students have a dedicated workshop space/studio where extended works in progress are developed and displayed.

### ***Asserting the place of visual education in the School***

Leadership for visual education emerged as one of the most important observations from this visit. Yasmin Patterson, the Head of the Arts is forthright in her approach.

“You’ve got to stand up and be assertive and not be undermined. And have the confidence to believe in what you’re doing and dismiss those bygone attitudes that are entrenched in ignorance. ... There are so many arguments to support the Arts now. I have adopted the attitude that I don’t tolerate attitude from others. I feel that this is a great time.” (Focus Group)

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This typifies her assertive approach to leading visual education. She has engaged the community to carve out the niche for the Arts in general and for visual education in particular. Pro-actively developing exhibitions, showcasing student art, mentoring and performance managing teachers, and generally raising the profile of the area has been evident since Yasmin's appointment to her leadership role. The Principal reported increased celebration of students' work through the Arts Show, Exhibitions that "put it out there, provided an Arts face for the school" (Principal interview).

This leadership is further evident in Yasmin's capacity to articulate a rationale for Visual Education, to work effectively with members of the visual education team and to work towards clearly articulated goals for education in the visual. The Principal also noted additional qualities of "thoughtful, creative, reflective leadership". Yasmin summed it up by saying:

"It's not what you do but how you do it. So my emphasis is to get down into the core of how you teach art: how do you teach students how to think for themselves ... getting them to take responsibility, finding their own expression and seeing satisfaction through their own learning." (Focus Group)

This leadership is evident not just within the Arts but also across the school. Yasmin is taking a change leadership role about teaching and learning across the school, sharing the pedagogies she uses successfully in the Visual Arts classroom/studio with other learning areas. Olivia O'Neill, Principal observed:

Yasmin has a good headset for teaching and learning, for pedagogy across the board ... and because she has implemented it so well in her own

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program, she is a good role model for staff in other learning areas.

(Interview)

The Principal highlighted the significant role for professional development.

“PD is a major focus of any successful program. One of the helping factors here at Brighton Secondary School is that Yasmin has taken up many PD opportunities which are then reflected back on her staff and on the Inquiry Process approach that we are taking across the whole school.”

*A creative, interesting multi-layered learning environment linked to the local community and with a distinctive learning and teaching style*

One of the strong features of Visual Education at Brighton Secondary School was the part that rich, varied, creative teaching and learning environments played in the program. The visual education rooms are visually rich; they are intellectually challenging; they have a “lived-in” feel to them that has been personalised by each teacher and the students who have engaged with learning there. There was layer on layer of images, ideas and opportunities for students. There were examples of students’ art works, teachers’ own art work, models and reminders of key teaching points, principles, concepts and terminology. Yasmin’s art room was a multi-layered environment. While some could see it as cluttered and over-stimulating, students reported finding it exciting, interesting and positive. This richness and diversity is a contrast and a challenge to the relative sterility of so many other school classrooms. There was a clear sense of a studio-based environment where there was a hands-on workshop based model of learning.

This multi-layering of information finds its parallels in the multi-modal worlds of young people who are often multi-tasking by working on a computer at the same time as listening to

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music and/or watching television and/or holding conversations with friends via SMS and/or I-Chat reflecting the contemporary nature of young people.

A direct outgrowth of the teaching environment is the focus on identity and personality. Each of the teachers in the program seems to have created learning environments where their own personalities shine through. This in turn, is reflected in the personal voice and agency that students in the program expressed. There is a sense that the visual education program at Brighton Secondary School has been built over time. Relationships with community and artists in the community as well as the local environment are the product of careful development. Much of the art undertaken by students showed influences of the local environment as well as their own points-of view and personal interests.

### *Diversity of opportunity through ICT and availability of materials and forms*

The programs at Brighton Secondary School are taught in well-equipped rooms with a wide range of ICT and other technologies as well as diverse opportunities for students to engage with different materials and forms of Visual Education.

### **2.3 Overview of key observations from these site visits**

The two sites included in this paper (coincidentally both from South Australia) provide a picture of emerging trends in Australian schools that model exemplary visual education practice. Both show how factors from the dynamic context for Australian education impact on practice. In the first, Gilles Street Primary School, the rising importance of the visual is identified and explicitly addressed. The need for a greater emphasis on the visual, particularly in the context of multiliteracies, is recognised. Visual education is provided for in a variety of ways and by a range of teachers yet the key role of the trained visual arts teacher is clearly embedded. Students' education in the visual is actively engaged with Technology



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(particularly emerging visually-based technologies such as Interactive Whiteboards and video). Further, teachers at Gilles Street Primary School build their practice on research and scholarship as well as their own, grounded practice.

The Brighton Secondary School case story shows how significant the leadership role of a visual arts educator can be in the development of students' education in the visual. In the secondary setting, the role of the Arts as a curriculum organiser in developing an education in the visual is highlighted. In both stories, there is recognition of the importance of practical hands-on learning that has students working directly with the materials and ideas simultaneously. Allied with this is the value of creating studio-based learning environments where strong and trusting relationship between teachers and students support effective learning in the visual.

These two case stories (along with the others undertaken by the researchers) paint a picture of changing Visual Education practice. Table 1 summarises key aspects of Visual Education in these two sites. These key aspects lay a foundation for the principles for re-designed education in the visual outlined in the next section of this paper.

	Gilles Street Primary School	Brighton Secondary School
Prominent and immediately obvious place for Visual Education in the school	√	√
Leadership and an explicit, articulated rationale for Visual Education	√	√
Support for visual education	√	√
Whole-school approach including partnerships with parents and community	√	√
Specialist and other teachers working collaboratively	√	√
Integration of visual education across the curriculum	√	

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Visually stimulating and multi-layered/multi-modal learning environment	√	√
Distinctive teaching style – the personality and identity of teachers	√	√
Empowerment of students – personality and identity of students	√	√
Focus on aesthetic	√	√
Active inclusion of ICT (e.g. Interactive whiteboards)	√	√

**Table 1 Overview of key observations from sites described**

In these examples, visual education is across the whole school and not confined to one section of it. There is proactive leadership from the Principal. Visual education is led by, but not “owned” by a visual arts teacher. Teaching and learning environments are stimulating, interesting and aesthetic. The learning is active, practical and hands on. There is a direct connection with materials and making meaning through materials such as paint, images and clay. Teaching and learning is built on trust and mutual respect with a focus on empowering students’ ideas and identity. At the heart of the learning is aesthetic learning.

### **PART 3: EMERGENT PRINCIPLES FOR RE-DESIGNING EDUCATION IN THE VISUAL**

The research undertaken led the team to answer the question: *are there emerging principles of re-designing Visual Education?*

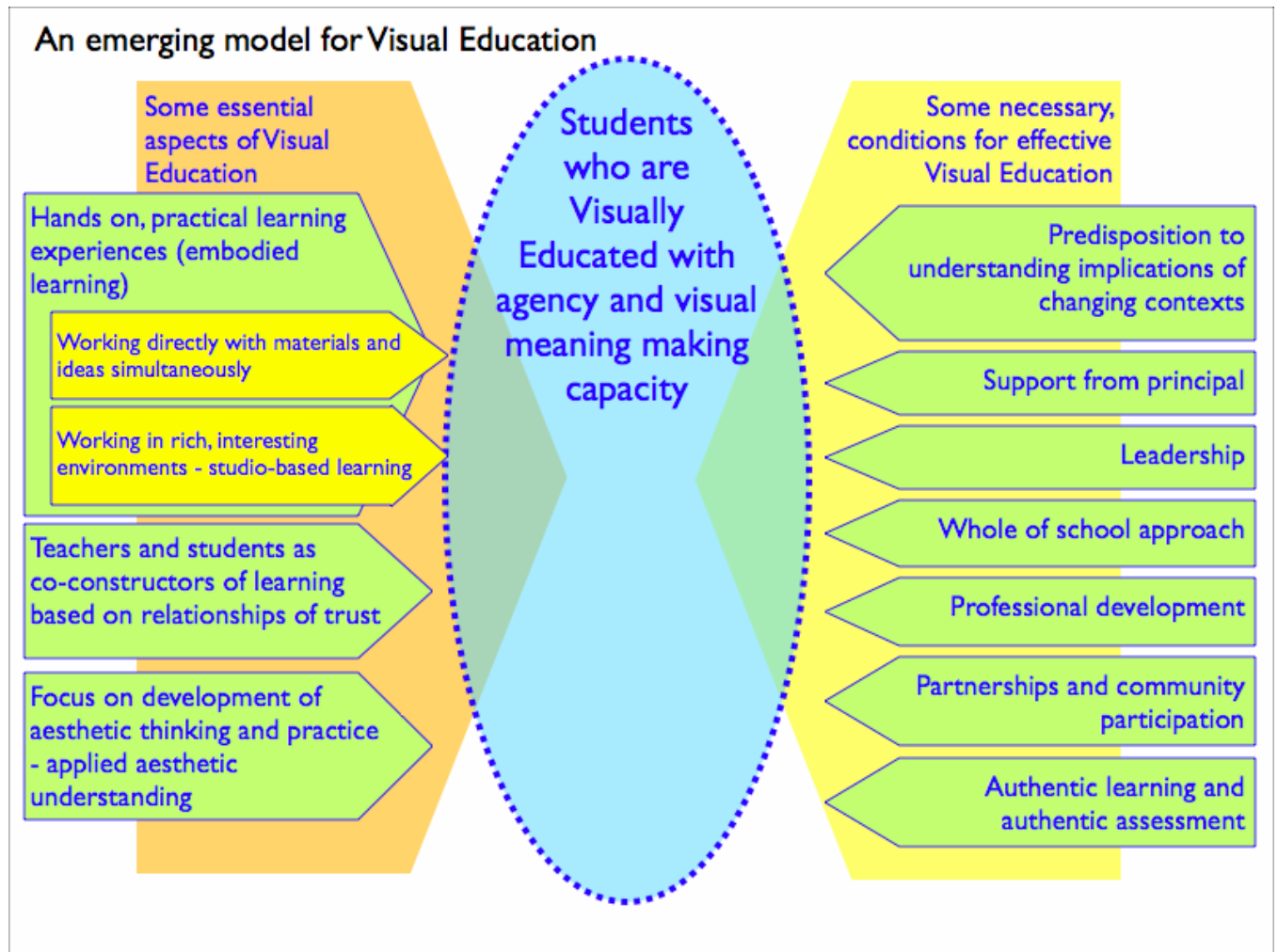
An emerging model for an education in the visual – a Visual Education – takes account of the dynamic social, political and economic contexts for contemporary education in Australia. It builds on and extends effective contemporary practice indicating trends for all schools to follow. Some features of this emerging model include:

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- Focus on students' meaning making and articulating their own identity through the visual (agency and personal, cultural and social identity)
- Value of hands-on, practical learning experiences (embodied learning) through
  - Working directly with materials and ideas simultaneously
  - Working in rich, interesting environments – studio-based learning
- Teachers and students as co-constructors of learning based on relationships of trust.
- A focus on the development of aesthetic thinking and practice (applied aesthetic understanding)

Some conditions apply to the effective implementation of this emerging model. For example,

- Principals, teachers and school communities need to show a pre-disposition to understanding implications of changing social, political, economic and technological changes in society particularly those that place increasing emphasis on the visual.
- Support from Principals is critically important and leadership is needed particularly from those currently teaching visual arts in schools.
- A whole school approach to effective visual education is necessary. Visual education is a cross curricular issue though there is a particular role for those with knowledge about the visual and about teaching it.
- Engagement with technology, particularly visually powerful technologies, is essential.



**Figure 1: An emerging model for Visual Education**

In addition, this research identified that teachers need professional development – both in pre-service and in-service education programs – to support this emerging model; partnerships and community participation enhance effective visual education and there are implications for assessment of authentic learning in the visual. There are additional conditions not included in this paper.

This emerging model is developed in a further paper by the authors (*A Model of Visual Education*, unpublished).

#### **PART 4: IMPLICATIONS FOR VISUAL EDUCATION PRACTICE**

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There are significant implications for Visual Education practice from this research but this paper focuses on factors impacting on teaching and learning and, consequently, on teacher education.

Firstly, there is a need for curriculum thinkers and planners, school principals and leaders and teachers themselves to recognise changing contexts and that Visual Education is in the process of transformation: a re-designed Visual Education is emerging.

If Visual Education in Australian schools is to provide the critical creative agency necessary for an increasingly visual contemporary society, it will require attention to matters of effective teaching and learning outlined in this research that has identified the need for increasing explicit attention to Visual Education; to extending teachers' professional knowledge and competence in Visual Education; to extending partnerships with artists, galleries and industry to support Visual Education; and, to productive use of technology linked with creativity and innovation. The crucial leadership role for Principals is highlighted.

In response to the Australian Government Department of Education Science and Training: Review of Teaching and Teacher Education (2003), the National Association of Arts Educators (NAAE) asserted that "the 21st Century is fundamentally about the productivity of the mind and teacher education needs to take serious account of the meta-cognitive nature of learning and contemporary brain research that continues to reinforce the integral part the arts play in developing action for schools" (National Affiliation of Arts Educators (NAAE), 2003 p. 3). Consequently, teacher education also has a role to play in valuing Visual Education so that it can become fundamental to developing innovative capacity goals for any community. Teacher education also has a role to play in valuing Visual Education to ensure teachers have confidence, passion and willingness to 'fly' with their students and create effective visual

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learning environments. It is essential for strong schooling to ensure that all teachers and students acquire and apply levels of visual proficiency themselves.

Effective Visual Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will require sufficient time, expertise and resources in order to develop visual proficiency in all students. Most importantly, students need to develop an understanding of how the unique visual, material and performative practices of Visual Education play a role in developing culture, enriching our living environment, and communicating ideas across society. To develop visual agency in all students we need effective visual educators.

“Visual arts is actually the space where you imagine whole other worlds – it is being human” (Art gallery education officer).

### *Acknowledgements*

In the writing of this paper, the authors acknowledge the input of all involved with the National Review of Visual Education, particularly those from Giles Street Primary School (Lindy Brooke, Principal, Helen Grant, Christine Lawrence, and Valarie Zogopoulos) and Brighton Secondary School (Olivia O’Neill, Principal, Yasmin Patterson, Coordinator) both in South Australia.

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