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in an Increasingly Visually-Mediated World

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# Visual Education - Repositioning Visual Arts and Design: Educating for Expression and Participation in an Increasingly Visually-Mediated World

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*Abstract: Visual Education is emerging as a field of education driven by changing practice, contemporary society and technology. It recognises that today's students have an increasing need to be visually proficient within an understanding of aesthetic, artistic and cultural concepts, in order to effectively express themselves and communicate in the contemporary world. Visual Education essentially extends and repositions visual arts and design education with other traditional and emerging disciplines that are unified by the primacy of the visual. Since the educational field is emergent, the nature of Visual Education is powerfully revealed by attending to the practices, thoughts and ideas of those working in the area. In Australia, the team of researchers who conceived of Visual Education have assembled a suite of case studies that are based on classroom observations of pedagogical practices that were conducted across the country. In this paper, the concept of Visual Education is further developed and elucidated through case studies that reveal pedagogical practices used by exemplary visual educators who are committed to visually educating students across all years of compulsory schooling.*

Keywords: Visual Arts and Design, Visual Education, The Arts in Education, Pedagogical Practices in Arts Education, Learning in Visual Arts and Design, Classroom Practices in Visual Arts and Design, Contemporary Education Challenges

## Introduction

**T**HIS PAPER IS based on research conducted in Australia in 2005-2006 as part of the National Review of Education in Visual Arts, Craft, Design and Visual Communication.<sup>1</sup>

A team of practising arts educators and researchers, drawn from four Australian universities, conducted this research. The term 'Visual Education' emerged from the research as a new conceptualisation in education that is focused by the need for an approach to the development of visual proficiency for expression and communication in the contemporary world, within an understanding of aesthetic, artistic and cultural concepts.

## Outline of the Paper

In this paper we propose that Visual Education is emerging as a field of education because of changing practice, contemporary society and technology. The conceptualisation of Visual Education is grounded in 'learning by doing' or 'learning by making'. Though learning in Visual Education is both gener-

ative and critical, as well as culturally contextualised, the generative principle is considered paramount. In this respect, Visual Education has a history with its genesis in Dewey and notions of art as experience. Thus, as an emerging field, it is led theoretically and educationally by practice-based disciplines such as Visual Arts and Visual Design. These disciplines are not diminished but repositioned to allow for growth and continuing relevance.

The model of Visual Education, which was generated from the research, is well illustrated through practice originating in the Visual Arts and Visual Design fields. To elucidate the model, two case studies have been selected from the suite of studies conducted by the research team in classrooms across the country. They reveal the type of pedagogical practices used by exemplary visual educators who are committed to visually educating students across all years of compulsory schooling.

<sup>1</sup>



## Context of Changing Culture and Technology

New visual technologies and related multi-modal forms of expression and communication are transforming our society. There is a move from the text as the dominant mode of communication and expression to an increased use of the visual. As the nature of the (visual) world is transforming and enlarging, so are the opportunities and demand for skills that enable people to function within the mediated, graphic and performative environments (Druckery, 1996; National Standards for Arts Education, 1997). These technological shifts are coincident with the emphasis on the Knowledge Economy globally and locally (e.g. Prime Minister's Science Engineering and Innovation Council, 2005). There is increased attention to, and awareness of, the need for Australia to respond to shifting economic and social drivers by increased focus on creativity, innovation and imagination (Florida, 2002; National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education, 1999).

The Arts, and Visual Arts in particular, provide a place to start re-conceptualising education in the visual. Creativity and practice-based learning have long been defining features of The Arts and Arts Education (Eisner, 2002; Robinson, 2001) and recent research on the arts in schools has prompted renewed interest in the value and purpose of arts in society. Research has focused on both the instrumental and intrinsic benefits of the arts in schools (Aprill, Burnaford, & Weiss, 2001; Bamford, 2006; Deasy, 2002; Fiske, 2000; O'Farrell & Meban, 2004). The instrumental value of the arts focuses on benefits that accrue from helping individuals socialise better, learn better and make better contributions to society. The intrinsic value of the arts are seen as benefits that accrue to individuals, and, as some researchers argue, consequently generate public and other instrumental benefits too (McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaris, & Brooks, 2004). Thus, the arts are valued as a means of achieving learning and personal development as well as social and economic outcomes.

Visual Education responds to changing arts practice, the technological revolution and the nature of today's society. It recognises that today's students have an increasing need to be visually proficient within an understanding of aesthetic, artistic and cultural concepts, in order to effectively express themselves and communicate in the contemporary world. Visual Education essentially extends and repositions Visual Arts and Design education with other traditional and emerging disciplines that are unified by the primacy of the visual. It is a creative and communicative practice that has the capacity to provide rich and complex learning opportunities and powerful practical developmental experiences that

foster cognitive, social and personal competencies in young people. Thus, it develops students' capacity to read the world, to make and do, to interact socially and to imagine (Boomer, 1999). In other words, it provides the opportunity for students to develop capacities that are required for them to successfully and actively participate in contemporary society.

This conceptualisation of Visual Education is not the same as Visual Literacy as it is defined within the multiliteracies debate (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Kalantzis & Cope, 2001). However, the fundamental intention underpinning the development of the Visual Literacy concept is acknowledged in the sense that, more than ever before, everyone needs to be proficient, at some level, to operate in a visually mediated world. There is little agreement on defining Visual Literacy (Avgerinou & Ericson, 1997) and a recent review of the uses of the term 'visual literacy' revealed a breadth of interpretations (Wright, 2006). Whilst these range from broad definitions to those that represent a narrow focus on responding to images, the concept overall is not well-aligned to current thinking and practices as presented in this paper. In particular, those conceptualisations of Visual Literacy that emphasise a reading of images in terms of signs and symbols have, in the past, resulted in a misrepresentation of the complexity and significance of Visual Arts - at least as presented in Australian State and Territory curricular documents. The conceptualisation of Visual Literacy is regarded as having contributed to the diminution of visual arts education in the past and today, to some extent, because the profound significance of the aesthetic, and of 'making' - learning and becoming by doing - was overlooked.

The term Visual Education is not new. It has been used in a limited way in the past in terms of the development of visual materials to aid learning and as an abbreviation for audiovisual education. However, few appear to have used the term in the way conceptualised in this paper. Messaris (2001) comes close in using the concept 'visual education' to go beyond visual literacy in working with students creating videos. He argues that students should learn to create visual meaning, not just consume it: "current efforts to teach visual literacy in the form of critical viewing skills are certainly valuable and worth continuing - but most young people need much more experience than they currently get in the use of visual images as means of expression, communication, and exploration" (Messaris, 2001, p.7).

## The Research

The paper reports one part of a large national multi-method research project. This included a scan of the relevant research literature and policy context, exam-

ination of all Australian State and Territory curricular documents pertaining to Visual Education, a questionnaire of teacher education in Visual Education in Australian universities, a survey of the provision of Visual Education in a stratified random sample of Australian schools, purposive sampling of sites of effective practice, as well as a series of focus groups and interviews with teachers, students and art professionals. These latter methods allowed some in-depth examination of perspectives and practice identified in the earlier broad-ranging methods.

The model of Visual Education presented here is based on analyses of current effective practice in seventeen exemplary sites around Australia and informed by focus group and individual interviews with a range of practitioners, including educators, policy makers, and artists.

### **Model of Visual Education**

The nature of Visual Education is powerfully revealed by attending to the practices, thoughts and ideas of those working in the area. The words of participants in the research were the basis for formulating the following description of Visual Education:

A pedagogical framework for the purposeful development of students' practical, aesthetic, creative and professional skills and knowledge to enable effective engagement with the visual in a multiplicity of ways within social and cultural contexts. At its core, Visual Education is about creative practices – learning by doing – using innovation, skill and imagination to make meaning.

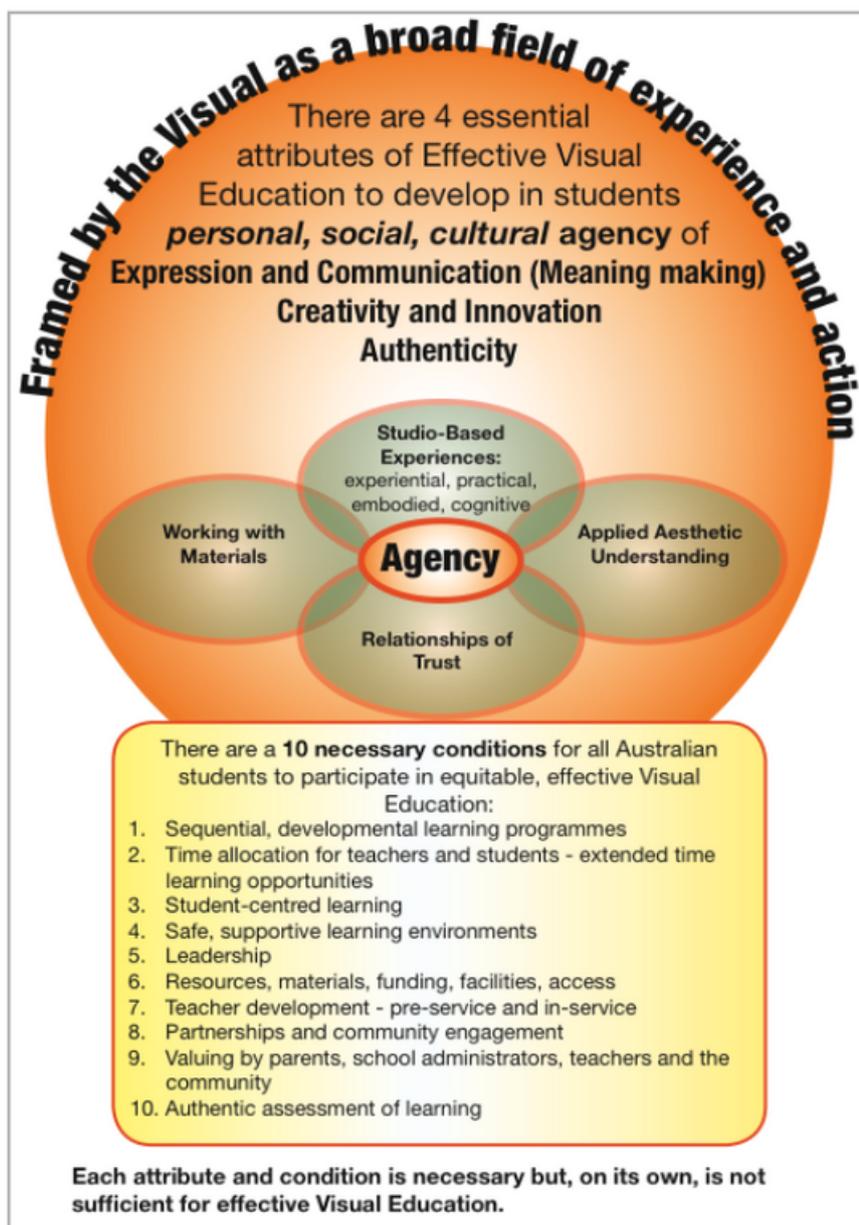
Conceiving of Visual Education involves a repositioning of traditional visual arts education in an arena with other traditional and emerging disciplines that are unified by the primacy of the visual. In this, Visual Education recognises

established disciplines but also creates space for emergent practices including those that are trans-disciplinary in nature. In this sense, Visual Education is supported by various and interconnected forms of inquiry and ways of knowing.

Visual Education includes aesthetic understandings and artistic sensibilities; generation of visual and spatial ideas; development and application of skills, techniques and processes; responding to, reflecting on and making informed judgments; and, understanding personal, social, cultural, spiritual, historical and economic significance. It engages with traditional knowledge and processes associated with different media, art, craft and design forms, 2D, 3D formats, time-based art and a wide range of genres from different times, places and cultures, as well as the multi-modalities of emerging technologies and the evolving nature of artistic practice.

In meeting the needs of all students, Visual Education serves a range of instrumental and intrinsic purposes such as the development of key skills for vocational and social engagement, as well as personal creative spaces and styles.

The model of Visual Education developed from the research reveals that effective teaching and learning in Visual Education has four essential attributes. These attributes and the interactions between them support the development of students' visual facility and thinking dispositions. While each of these attributes is presented as discrete, each is necessary but not sufficient for effective Visual Education. In addition, it is the intersections and relationships between them that are important. The research also revealed how the relative importance of different attributes changes in different phases of schooling.



### Four Essential Attributes of Effective Visual Education

#### 1) Studio-based experiences

Effective visual educators offer studio-based experiences that are experiential, practical, embodied and cognitive. This studio 'culture' nurtures learning through practical exploration and is both performative and student-centred. It requires a physical learning environment that has open spaces, is efficiently multi-functional, and provides a wide range of material and technological experiences. Students are actively engaged in exploring their own ideas and seeking ways to visually and effectively manifest them and communicate them to others. It is this process that is the basis for the assessment of authen-

tic learning tasks. These studio-based learning environments develop across the phases of schooling in ways that continue to strengthen the practical and cognitive skills of students and thereby help prepare them for working life.

Visual Education as a performative student-centred practice requires a learning environment that can shift according to the needs of the student or the group. This practice is characterised by: fluid instructional interplays between demonstration-lecture; students-at-work and critique; informal and formal peer discussions that occur in a relaxed and supporting practical learning environment. Students are also nurtured towards an expressive, reflective and critical disposition. They are encouraged to share ideas, allow others to critique, and to display their work. These activities teach students that the resolution of

works is informed by feedback from either an audience or a consumer. In the words of one Arts and Education consultant: “A critical ‘visuality’ is essential in helping children to learn to think and create”.

#### 2) Working with materials (materiality)

Without the material experiences “that link viewing and making, [it] is like learning to swim by writing an essay about it” (visual artist).

Visual Education requires that students engage in meaning-making through material experiences. These connect them intimately to the experiences of seeing, feeling and forming materials through technologies to express ideas. The nature of the material or the medium (video projection, paint, installation) is integral to the creation and resolution of work as well as the nature of what and how the work communicates to others.

#### 3) Relationships of trust

Effective Visual Education is characterised by relationships of trust. These relationships have a number of dimensions. First, a social environment that nurtures teacher and student as co-constructors of the learning. Teachers report how they get to “know their students very well and [use] their understandings of the students’ feelings, thoughts, and life situations outside of school to guide classroom interactions”. This pedagogical practice sees the learning interactively tailored to meet students’ needs. What art teachers report is that students in this context: “find their own voice”. And that “what art offers [to] the student is [also a] connection to themselves. Art teachers work at this intimate level of communication”. Students express this as “teachers working at a more personal level”, enabling them to “look at yourself a lot more, finding what you want to express”. This learning to ‘trust oneself’ is a second dimension of these relationships and reflects a student’s confidence to express him or herself. The third dimension underpins the second, and is students’ ‘trust’ of the materials that they work with, and their own capacity to employ these to successfully communicate. Evidence from focus groups, site visits, and interviews suggest that *‘relationships of trust’* are a critical precursor to high quality work.

#### 4) Applied aesthetic understanding

Effective pedagogical practices in Visual Education support the development of aesthetic and ethical thinking through expressive, interpretive and reflective behaviours in material-based practices. The artistic cycle - which involves generating arts ideas, applying arts skills and processes as part of engaging in ‘authentic’ arts learning tasks, critically reflecting on the work and analysing the work of others - is central to Visual Education. This leads to opportunities for students to present their work to others, through individual or collaborative performance or

exhibition and to learn to respond critically to the visual.

### Agency Developed through Visual Education

Taken together, the presence of these four attributes in educational settings enable students to develop their own personal, social and cultural agency. This is their capacity to express and communicate their own identities; to establish connection to themselves and their sense of place; to have purpose and value in society and culture; to create and innovate; and to work with authenticity for real purposes and audiences. Agency is action or choice and it is through this personal, social and cultural agency that students are able to actively participate in contemporary society. This conceptualisation of agency draws on the critique of the work of Judith Butler, as it is through action that we construct self, with actions past and present and future intentions impacting on subjectivity (McNay, 1999; Salih, 2002). It also fits with notions of critical and aesthetic education and production of emancipatory discourses (Denzin, 2005).

The four essential attributes and interconnections for effective Visual Education, that help develop students’ personal, social and cultural agency, are explained through the case studies conducted as part of the research. For this paper, two schools in Brisbane, Australia are used as exemplars: Holy Family Primary School and Kelvin Grove State College.

### The Case Studies

#### *Holy Family Primary School*

Holy Family School is a Catholic Parish School located in a Brisbane riverside suburb. It is a co-educational school from Preschool to Year 7 with an enrolment of around 400 students. In keeping with the motto of Strength and Gentleness, Holy Family offers extensive curriculum opportunities for all aspects of educational learning. There are nine additional teachers, including Visual Art and Performing Art specialists, who support the work of the classroom teachers. Core aspects of Visual Education at this school are the ARK space and the evident commitment to working with a range of materials to create, develop personal and aesthetic understanding, and build relationships.

*The ARK space.* Visual art is taught in a specially designed new art room, the ARK, Art Room for Kids. The use of metaphor pervades the work and projects surrounding the ARK. On the walls are children’s paintings of ‘the ark’. One project is to make tiles around the door of the ARK so that students going into the ARK are going into the future. At the time of the visit each class was working on part of a

school project to adorn the concrete pillars in front of the ARK. These will include ceramic leaves as part of a vine that portrays a journey of growth and development through the primary school years.

*Working with materials.* The pedagogy in the ARK is child-centred, linking experience with knowledge and skills. The teacher explains that the skill in the art is “the thinking processes to create work... it is not about doing something and that’s it”. For example, “if working with crayon, [students are] thinking about the colour, thinking ahead, being open for other things as well”. He also maintains, “you don’t come to an art lesson without making something, without engaging with materials”. In one lesson observed by the researchers, the students were making their leaves for the vine outside the ARK. The lesson included brief explanations by the teacher, exploratory questions on the mat, the teacher supporting five to six students at a time as they worked on their leaves and students creating leaves at their tables with animated exchange about technique and ‘what if I did this’. At the end of the lesson, there was a whole class discussion on the mat of the outcomes and an examination of leaves made by other classes to identify some of the techniques they had used. The discussion on this occasion covered materials, colour, underglaze processes, tools and techniques.

*Relationships of trust.* The art teacher believes that everyone can learn the skills to engage in art, “everyone can use their hands and minds to create something of value... it enables them to articulate themselves”. A recent focus for Year 7 was self portraiture, with the students designing masks which they took off to reveal themselves. The teacher has strong expectations for the students, but even then is amazed by what children do achieve. This belief is born out in the work produced by the school students.

The teacher is willing and able to work with generalist classroom teachers so that the work he does with students in the ARK develops their visual skills, and complements and extends the curriculum in other areas. He meets other teachers at the end or beginning of each term to explore ways to integrate the classroom content with art. For example, one class was working on the water cycle in science, so he integrated the water theme in art projects that would also enhance their learning across the curriculum. He tries to show that art is not just about drawing a picture and putting it on a wall. It is about each student’s personal development, uniqueness, well-being and resilience. What is evident at this school is an approach to art that is pervasive and sophisticated.

*Applied aesthetic understanding.* Artwork is featured throughout the school and, as one teacher de-

scribed it, “art is celebrated around this school”. It is in the school office area, corridors, walkways and playground. There are ceramic portraits above the bubblers, the creation story following a path, personalised love hearts surrounding an old tree in the school grounds, a snake in the grass, along with masks on a wall and in the stairwell. The principal and art teacher agreed “children get a great buzz from seeing their work”. They observed that students have ownership of collaborative work and are connected with it. “Art projects are a communal thing, it connects with culture and with the personal”. In the integrated curriculum in Catholic schools, the spiritual dimension has a strong presence in the arts – expressive, ritual, symbol, action, visual, meaning and images - and this comes through strongly in many of the collaborative projects.

### **Kelvin Grove State College**

Kelvin Grove State College (KGSC) is part of a unique educational precinct in inner city Brisbane. It adjoins the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) campus and is located near the new developing Kelvin Grove Urban Village. Its strategic role in this community is clear. Kelvin Grove has the unique structure of Prep School, Junior School Campus, Middle School and Senior College. Visual education outcomes are visibly present on all campuses.

The Junior, Middle School and Senior College are exceptional models of innovation, resourcing and design in Visual Education facilities. The department has strong leadership and is a dynamic team working with the immediate local school and parent community as well as developing special university curriculum initiatives – creating a hub for regional, state and private schools. The programs and learning opportunities provided at the school and college allow students to achieve excellence in visual education learning - from early start programs and formal schooling to work experience opportunities that feed to university and vocational colleges.

*A dynamic open-planned visual learning environment and gallery.* Architecturally designed in close consultation with the visual art teachers and school executive, the secondary visual education complex offers an exceptional model of an innovative design and student-centred learning facility. The spaces accommodate middle and senior school. They operate as lecture spaces for theory and criticism, are efficient art classrooms and create studio spaces for the senior college. Complementing these spaces are photography darkrooms and a multi-media classroom that students have access to. The complex also houses an open-plan staffroom and gallery space.

*Extensive opportunities for personal development through contemporary Visual Art education.* The

faculty has designed a broad curriculum that provides a wide range of visual education learning opportunities. The curriculum innovatively maximises every potential pathway for the students who wish to pursue a career pathway in either the visual arts or related creative industries. This outcome is facilitated by the implementation of a curriculum continuum that extends from early childhood to the senior years.

Senior studies in Visual Arts offers distinctive but interlocking course options in Foundation Art (Year 10), senior art and three Creative Industry strands that are all QSA registered (Queensland State Authority registered subjects). These strands include Visual Art Studies, Design, Media Studies and Multimedia Studies. Students can choose to study more than one subject or strand (such as Visual Art and Media Studies or Visual Art and Design or Visual Art and Multimedia (including new imaging, graphics and web graphics). In 2007 it is proposed to extend these options to include film and television. Recent observations by the specialist Visual Art teacher at the Junior school indicate that parents are increasingly seeking visual and material experiences for their children and visual education is gaining in strength.

*Design presented as a unique discipline of study for our sustainable future.* At KGSC, Design is presented as a strong discipline of study within the Creative Arts strand and is complementary to studies in Visual Art. Design at KGSC is grounded in the field of architecture, urban planning and object design. It adopts a very strong conceptual and aesthetic orientation that requires students to use an authentic design brief model. The program articulates to students, parents and the wider community the essential role of an aesthetic education and an appreciation of the way in which a visual education is an aspect of our sustainable urban future and communicative practices. This is exemplified by the 'Living City project' an outstanding example of an innovative design learning project facilitated by KGSC and supported by funding from the Queensland Government, QUT, Brisbane City, KGSC and Verge Urban Landscape Architecture. The project involves students 16 years of age from 12 different schools (both public and private) who come together to respond and create design solutions for Brisbane City contemporary urban developments.

*The Middle School curriculum focus.* To have students 'learning ready' for such an extensive senior visual education program, teachers in the Middle School have to work in innovative interdisciplinary ways to ensure that visual education is experienced at every opportunity within the middle years focus on addressing the Queensland New Basics Elements. In Year 8 they have embarked on a very adventurous program which sees all the 200 students in Year 8 working for three full days on a built environment

task which brings together the Industrial Arts department and the Home Economics department, Students in the Years 6-8 are still exposed to the foundational areas of visual education and it is during these years that the teachers, with practical classes of up to 30 students, work to ensure core practical skills and understandings are obtained. In the elective Year 9 students wishing to continue their visual education experience a deeper foundational course which has a primary focus on 'making', underpinned by the development of aesthetic, critical and reflective thinking in a wide variety of media.

*The Primary curriculum focus.* Kelvin Grove Primary school is essentially a small community school. It is only in the middle and senior years that students from outside the area come to the centres of excellence through an interview/audition process. In the Junior School there is a specialist visual education teacher who works across the school to embed a sequential and developmental art program from Prep to Year 5 and to integrate art activities into the rich tasks (interdisciplinary focus). This teacher is not specialist art trained but has acquired her skills over many years teaching and co-ordinating visual education; and through professional development undertaken independently or through the active professional association that operates in Queensland. Visual art is displayed in every corridor and in every classroom.

The site visit provided insight into a visual education faculty and the leadership of the school. There is a commitment to excellence and to being proactive about maximising every opportunity to provide extension activities for students, as well as 'de facto' professional development for the staff. The artist-in-residence programs work successfully to extend all teachers and to provide unique opportunities to dialogue and network with the broader arts community. The artworks located around the school, that were commissioned through some of the programs, are permanent signposts to the school and wider community that the visual arts are a vital component of school life and contribute significantly to the school community.

Most importantly, the students see the visual education programs as significant in developing them towards adulthood. It is an environment where the senior students, in particular, believe they are given freedom, trust and responsibility. They also believe that they are provided with a learning environment which allows them to raise and explore issues of personal significance or to pursue the skills required towards a future in the creative industries. Year 12 students' reflections on their learning environment - such as "[we are] encouraged to push ourselves" in an environment where "its relaxed.... and teachers are not authoritarian" - are common. In the words of

another Year 12 student, “in art you look at yourself a lot”. The importance of skills and techniques in building the capacity to be creative was also recognised: “It’s like growing up. You take on board all the stuff and the experience you have and more. You put yourself out on a canvas. To know what you want, to express [yourself] you have to study yourself”.

## Conclusion

The technological world has profoundly changed the way knowledge is constructed and accessed. There is a contemporary need for active, creative and critical workers who are ‘lifelong’ and ‘life wide’ learners. Visual Education can foster the practical, creative and critical reasoning required. Effective Visual Education provides personal, social and cultural agency as students are active participants in the process of communicating ideas and making new meanings. Through making, exhibiting and reflecting upon the impact of their works on themselves, their peers, their parents and the wider school community, students discover how to express who they are. They also discover the ways that others have actively shaped them through the transference of values and beliefs. Visual Education provides the depth of experiences that inform the ways that images contribute to cultural practices and shape identities - from art in galleries to symbol systems to popular culture.

Visual Education supports interdisciplinary inquiry and encourages students to experiment and explore - through a wide range of media and multi-modal practices - how knowledge can be actively encountered and creatively explored. Conceiving of Visual Education involves a repositioning of tradi-

tional visual arts and visual design education in an arena with other traditional and emerging disciplines that are unified by the primacy of the visual. In this, Visual Education recognises established disciplines but also creates space for emergent practices including those that are trans-disciplinary in nature. In this sense, Visual Education is supported by various and interconnected forms of inquiry and ways of knowing. It also positions a leadership role for visual art teachers with the support of school leaders.

The challenge with introducing any new conceptualisation is the way that the impress of past and existing conceptualisations on the beliefs and educational priorities of professionals in the field - will necessarily colour the understanding and reception of the new conceptualisation. Similarly, the fields of education that are being enveloped have different theoretical bases and teachers in these fields may have traditional territories to defend. However, it is important to note that the conceptualisation of Visual Education presented here, is not an imposition of a new ideology, but rather, a description of a movement that is emergent within practice in the field. The research collates nascent evidence of a groundswell response to changes in society. The shifting emphases of education, new technologies and forms of communication, along with a blurring of fields and boundaries in the arts themselves, signal a state of flux from which Visual Education emerges. It is our belief that practice will be a strong determining force for Visual Education and that practice will act as a force for change - with scholarly theorising typically following practice. As the field becomes more formalised, a common language, understanding and purpose will evolve.<sup>1</sup>

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