

# Cultural Arts in the Library: Students as Consumers and Creators

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## Abstract

*The UNESCO Manifesto on the School Library states that the mission of the school library is to offer learning services and resources that enable all members of the school community to become critical thinkers and effective users of information in all formats and media. Throughout the world school librarians have explored ways to help their colleagues record, organize and share cultural arts. The generated websites can foster student multi-literacy and cultural competence, including producing cultural arts.*

**Key words:** School libraries, teacher librarians, culture, cultural arts, literacies

In the area of globalization, societies increasingly uses visual and performing arts to communicate and teach. Moreover, technology has put a new “spin” on these literacies. Libraries need to embrace cultural arts, both in terms of resources as well as instruction. This paper explains the role that cultural arts plays in helping students gain and apply information literacy. Furthermore, it discusses the universal and culturally-defined aspects of information literacy in light of cultural arts.

## Culture

When people form together into stable groups with sustained shared value and belief systems and act according to normative expectations, they comprise a culture. UNESCO (2002) defines culture as: “the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.” An individual may belong to several cultures: family, worksite, neighborhood, race, profession, social club, political party, country. Likewise, a group may belong to several cultures; students may be members of a school, a family, a club, a neighborhood, a religion, and a country. Some of these cultures may overlap or even contradict, in which case, the individual or group must either live with the disequilibrium or resolve the conflict (i.e., reject one or the other, reject both, or incorporate parts of each).

Cultural heritage has gained status throughout the world. Mexico and other Latin American countries, for instance, are realizing the need to maintain the languages and cultural identities of indigenous peoples before they become extinct. Populations of new Americans in the United States tend to join their first country counterparts who emigrated earlier, so, for instance, significant pockets of Khymer, Samoan and Hmong may be found in the Long Beach, Carson, and Fresno areas of California, respectively.

Groups and individuals perceive and respond to cultures at various levels, both intellectually and emotionally. Ideally, cultural competency consists of a congruent set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions about one’s own culture and others’ that enable people to work effectively in cross-cultural situations (Isaacs & Benjamin, 1991). Cross, *et al.* (1989) lists the

following criteria for cultural competency: 1) cultural self-assessment, 2) cultural knowledge, 3) valuing diversity, 4) management of the dynamics of different, 5) adaptation to cultural contexts. In response, teacher librarians need to demonstrate competence working with diverse populations, just as they need to inculcate cultural heritage awareness and sensitivity at their school site.

## **Cultural Arts**

Cultural arts consist of different art forms that reflect unique characteristics of specific cultures. They are original visual and performing arts that express a cultural world view, which may be the result of a single artist or a group. In any case, these creations demonstrate several literacies: visual, aural, and media.

### **Visual Arts**

Visual images were important at least as far back as 30,000 years ago, as demonstrated in the French caves of Chauvet-Pons-d'Arc and Lascaux. Even then, visual images were used to represent things and events, both to document same as well as to express a human consciousness. Lines on a stick were precursors to numbers; the first writing was pictographic. Still, pre-historic vessels were not only functional, but many were also decorative. Now the digital world enables visual artists to choose from a wide range of tools to express a variety of realities. One substantially new factor of digital images is the capacity to modify and repurpose them. Nevertheless, visual images continue to be both concrete and abstract, depending on the artist and the objective of the creative expression.

The most basic definition of visual literacy is "the ability to understand, create and use visual images." A more thorough definition was generated by consensus of visual literacy experts:

"A group of acquired competencies for interpreting and composing visible messages. A visually literate person is able to: (a) discriminate, and make sense of visible objects as part of a visual acuity, (b) create static and dynamic visible objects effectively in a defined space, (c) comprehend and appreciate the visual testaments of others, and (d) conjure objects in the mind's eye." (Brill, Kim, Brant, 2001)

The International Visual Literacy Association developed the following visual literacy indicators in 1996:

- Interpret, understand, appreciate meaning of visual messages
- Communicate more effectively by applying visual design principles
- Produce visual messages using technology
- Use visual thinking to conceptualize solutions to problems.

In any case, visual literacy is a learned set of skills and knowledges, not an innate ability. Interestingly, when teachers have students create visual images as part of a learning activity, they seldom evaluate the effectiveness of the visual image, and instead comment on the image's neatness. Such an attitude devalues visual literacy.

### **Aural Literacy**

As old as visual literacy, aural literacy enables people to make sense of the sounds around them, and to produce meaningful sound purposefully. One may further distinguish between oral literacy, referring to speech, and aural, which is more closely associated with listening. Auditory skills are usually associated with reading skills, although its elements are generalizable to non-linguistic sounds. These include: auditory awareness and attention, sound localization, auditory memory, and auditory closure (Project Slate, 2002). Musical literacy overlaps this definition since it also deals with non-aural elements of music notation. In contrast, aural literacy can exist independently of the visual world, although visual elements sometimes provide clues to a sound's meaning.

Halle and Stevens (1962) proposed a model based on active listening. Listeners bring their relevant predispositions, their past experiences, their knowledge about the sound's

perceived subject matter, and their knowledge of language to the sound event. Based on those factors, listeners make decisions and apply rules to derive meaning quickly. Isolated sounds are combined to form ideas that then constitute a message.

In communicating aurally, students need to use the tools of sound critically. They have to have a message or objective in mind, know the content, determine an effective aural delivery mechanism, locate or produce appropriate sounds (be it speech, music, or environmental), organize the components, and share the results (Ferrington, 1993).

Bhogal (1996) asserts that oral literacy, by necessity of communication channeling, is always contextualized in terms of real-life situations. Oral communication is also considered a public (or at least social) act. Additionally, orality may be considered an ephemeral, dynamic experience; recording of the same constitutes a way to preserve it but does not equal the original transition. Recording also decontextualizes the communication.

### **Media Literacy**

In the most narrow definition, media literacy is associated with mass media, with the implication that a corporate entity has an agenda to gain power or influence others. The Center for Media Literacy (2005) has developed core concepts relative to media messages:

- All media messages are constructed.
- Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.
- Different people experience the same message differently.
- Media have embedded values and points of view.
- Media messages are constructed to gain profit and/or power.

The critical features are the purposeful means and end of the production. In that respect, cultural arts are seldom media products even though they may be multi-media and mass media products. However, they may well try to be communicating cultural norms and values that they want to promote.

### **Libraries and Cultural Arts**

In 1999 IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations) and UNESCO approved a School Library Manifesto, which states that the mission of the school library is to “offer learning services, books and resources that enable all members of the school community to become critical thinkers and effective users of information in all formats and media” (p. 1).

UNESCO and other United Nation entities have developed initiatives and other documents that complement the school library manifesto and build on cultural heritages. In 1959, the UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which defines children’s rights to protection, education, health care, shelter, and good nutrition. “The Right to Education” is at the very heart of UNESCO’s mission and is an integral part of its constitutional mandate. UNESCO’s Constitution expresses the belief of its founders in full and equal opportunities for education for all [...], and to advance the ideal of equality of educational opportunity. UNESCO is making its expertise on modernizing and developing national legislation focused on the right to education available to all. UNESCO’s 2004 statement about “Art, Design and Technology” asserts that

If the **steam engine** was the corner stone of the industrial society, the **media-machine** is the corner stone of the information society. A Media-machine is a computer with (1) information and media processing ability, and (2) a network for communication, group work, sharing of resources as well as for information and media distribution.

This statement further emphasizes the need for multidisciplinary approaches and artistic creations: “We may adopt the existing cultural heritage, cultivate it and create something new out of it. Then we share our artefacts with others – contribute our artefacts to the pool of cultural heritage.”

## **Cultural Arts Resources**

Certainly school libraries are well positioned to provide resources that cross academic domains. The emphasis on the creative arts helps students appreciate and build on cultural arts. Again, cultural and social factors impact the implementation; in this case, cultural arts artifacts should be collected by school libraries.

### ***Supportive United Nations Programs***

The UN has helped libraries in terms of cultural arts. UNESCO's Memory of the World program (<http://www.unesco.org/webworld/mdm/>) was launched to guard against cultural memory extinction by preserving valuable archive holdings and library collections all over the world and ensuring their wide dissemination. In that archive are several collections of interest to K-12 students:

- 19<sup>th</sup> century Brazilian photographs and American Colonial music from several South American countries
- photos and audiofiles documenting Bushmen and African poems
- Persian illustrated manuscripts and Phoenician alphabet artifacts
- Images from the Qing dynasty and James Cook's diary
- Gothic architectural drawings and Jewish musical folklore.

In addition, the United Nations has supported several cultural heritage education programs that encourage people to produce cultural arts of their own.

- Cambodia: promote living cultures and artistic creativity through social services
- Guyana: support educational initiatives to revitalize traditional cultural events
- Jamaica: improve educational services, particularly for socially excluded and at-risk populations, to develop skills in creative industries
- Pakistan: revive and develop Pakistani cultural arts and crafts through cultural heritage and art education.

### ***Other Cultural Websites For School Library Literacy Efforts***

Throughout the world school librarians, library schools, and library associations have explored ways to help their colleagues record, organize, and share cultural arts. Here is a sampling of websites that can be used to foster literacy and cultural competence.

- University of Maryland's International Children's Digital Library ([www.icdlbooks.org/](http://www.icdlbooks.org/)) includes traditional and contemporary books from around the world in the original language. The many picture books provide visual cues to meaning; culture-specific details such as regional plants and traditional food help students learn vocabulary. Students can search for books by theme to ascertain cultural differences and universal ideas. Some of the books include audio, students can use that track to help them decode words.
- International Association of School Librarianship Children and Youth Adults SIG has created a WiggleIT project to collect children's cultural jokes and riddles ([www.iasl-online.org](http://www.iasl-online.org)). Jokes can motivate students to read and identify their humorous features, some of which do not translate well. Students can determine how cultural competency helps them "get" the joke or riddle. Students gain literacy skills by gathering jokes, critiquing them, and then recording or writing them down. Submitting their jokes to WiggleIT empowers students, giving them a global authentic audience.
- Taiwan's Digital Museum Project preserves their national collections, promotes Taiwan's cultural holdings, and encourages information sharing. This project was begun because educators found that millennials often did not know their own cultural heritage. The site links geography and artifacts, and provides a historical context. By seeing these realistic images, students can understand history more easily. Even

captioned images help students learn vocabulary. This project melds cultural facts and literature, so students can start with literal reading and then apply cultural background to understand more literacy expressions of culture.

- MIT developed a curriculum that visualizes culture (<http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/home/index.html>). This rich website has several lessons that help students become visual historians.
- ECAI has developed a global digital cultural atlas that records cultural artifacts.
- The U.S. Library of Congress's American Memory digital collections ([www.loc.gov/ammem/](http://www.loc.gov/ammem/)) enable students to explore U.S. history using primary sources. The collections can be searched along several dimensions: theme, date, location, and format. Young students can "read" visual resources such as historic photographs and documents. Students can read captions, using visual cues. More sophisticated readers can compare different writing genres (e.g., diaries, letters, lyrics, laws, propaganda), and critique writing patterns over time (e.g., typical writing style during the Colonial Period in contrast to contemporary letter-writing or instant messaging).
- Global Memory Net, supported by the U.S. National Science Foundation, is intended to be a model global digital library of cultural, historical, and heritage image collections.

### **Literacy Strategies**

In an instructional mode, school librarians should also provide opportunities for student to create their own cultural arts expressions. High-quality websites about cultural heritages can provide a student-friendly way to get more comfortable about using technology to get information, to communicate, and to create and share cultural products. A good starting exercise is to "read" 19th century Japanese woodblock prints, an exercise found at <http://academic.csuohio.edu/makelaa/lectures/index.html>. The website author then provides textual cultural information for each print, and invites the viewer to analyze the same prints in light of the added information. Using this strategy, students learn the power of dual coding: gaining cultural understanding through image *and* text.

As students understand the basic concepts of culture, they can begin to identify unique characteristics of different cultures. With that knowledge base, they can view examples of cultural arts, and distinguish between cultural expressions. Cultural arts exploration can address several questions.

- What cultural patterns cross formats?
- What cultural skills are endemic to a specific culture, such as modes of singing, dance, ceramics, or weaving?
- How do different cultures express beliefs and values, such as love and death?
- How have cultural arts reflected historical and social events?
- What cultural messages are conveyed in the arts?

As students view digital collections of cultural arts, they can also curate their own virtual collections. That process can incorporate research, just as curators provide background information about the exhibitions they produce. In addition, students can generate their own cultural creations based on the cultural patterns they have identified. They might also examine contemporary cultures to which they belong, and identify unique artistic elements that can be combined to generate emerging cultures. That process is evident particularly in recent fashion statements such as Goth, Punk, and cosplay.

Of particular importance is students' self-awareness about their own cultural backgrounds. In some cases, they may have limited knowledge of family history because of adoption, blended family configurations, or family attitudes about culture. Many students have a mixed cultural background, which may raise sensitive questions about cultural identity and affinity,

especially for teens who experience peer attitudes about culture. Even today, cultural prejudices and cross-cultural conflict can impact students' attitudes and behaviors. These issues need to be treated with care, but at the same time they do give students opportunities to gain cultural competence. The cultural arts provide a positive opportunity to experience and appreciate creative expressions that affirm each culture.

Links to projects that support students' involvement in cultural arts broadens their perspectives and empowers them to appreciate their own cultural identity as well as to work with other cultures. Teacher librarians should also alert their colleagues about these sites, and develop learning activities that use these websites. Not only should school libraries include such sites on their web portals, but teacher librarians can "push" technology by sharing these sites to appropriate classroom teachers in a timely fashion. Teacher librarians can encourage students to locate, evaluate, organize, and post these web sites on classroom or school portals. As students assume control for web content, they model literacy competency and influence.

## Conclusion

Teacher librarians can contribute significantly to the well-being of the school community through incorporating cultural arts into the curriculum. More than ever before, teacher librarians can leverage students' interest in technology to help them access cultural artifacts from around the world. Building on academic subject matter benefits, incorporating cultural aspects facilitates the transfer of skills and knowledge across cultural settings. Cultural arts as content matter helps learners understand the values and belief systems that drive expectations and behaviors of people of different cultures. This knowledge aids in communicating effectively and working together for mutual goals. At the same time, cultural arts can affirm each person's identity and empower him or her to feel more comfortable about tackling new experiences, and expressing their own cultures.

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Professor **Lesley Farmer** coordinates the Librarianship program at California State University Long Beach. She earned her MLS at UNC Chapel Hill and her doctorate at Temple University. In 2011 Dr. Farmer won ALA's Phi Beta Mu Award for library education. Dr. Farmer has worked in school, public, special and academic libraries. She serves as IASL VP Association Relations, IFLA School Libraries Section Editor, and Special Libraries Association Education Division Chair. A frequent presenter and writer for the profession, Dr. Farmer's research interests include digital citizenship, information literacy, assessment, collaboration, and educational technology.