

Learning to See Through Photography: Exploring the Development of Visual Thinking among Visual Arts Students

Renuka Kantilal Thange (Ph.D. Scholar)¹, Apeksha Pawar², Dr. Anupama Patil³, Aishwarya Rane⁴

- 1 .Research Scholar, Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan, India. Assistant Professor, School of Visual Arts, Bharati Vidyapeeth, Pune-Satara Road, Dhankawadi, Pune, India.
- 2 .Assistant Professor, College of Fine Arts, Bharati Vidyapeeth, Pune-Satara Road, Dhankawadi, Pune, India.
3. Professor, collage of fine Arts, Bharati Vidyapeeth, Pune-Satara Road, Dhankawadi, Pune, India.
4. Assistant Professor, School of Visual Arts, Bharati Vidyapeeth, Pune-Satara Road, Dhankawadi, Pune, India.

Abstract

Photography is not only a medium for recording reality but also a way of observing, interpreting and communicating the visual world. In Visual Arts education, students often learn photography through technical concepts such as camera operation, exposure, composition and lighting. However, developing technical skills alone may not necessarily develop the ability to critically observe and interpret visual information. This paper explores how photography can contribute to the development of visual thinking among Visual Arts students. Drawing on existing literature on visual literacy, photography education and visual analysis, the paper examines photography as a practice through which students learn to observe details, identify relationships, interpret visual information and make purposeful creative decisions. Classroom-oriented examples such as observing ordinary subjects, photographing one subject from different viewpoints and analyzing photographic images are discussed. The paper further proposes a six-stage **Visual Thinking through Photography Model** consisting of Observe, Notice, Analyses, Interpret, Create and Communicate. The model positions photography as an active process of seeing and thinking rather than simply capturing images. The paper argues that integrating photographic practice with visual analysis and discussion can support students in developing stronger observation, interpretation, critical thinking and visual communication skills. The study concludes that photography can play an important role in Visual Arts education by helping students move from simply looking at images towards understanding how images create meaning.

Keywords: Photography Education, Visual Thinking, Visual Literacy, Visual Arts Education, Observation, Visual Communication, Creative Learning

1. Introduction

We live in an increasingly image-oriented society. Photographs are used to communicate information, document experiences, construct identities and express ideas. Students encounter thousands of images through photography, social media, advertising, news and digital platforms. In such an environment, the ability to understand and critically interpret visual information has become an important educational skill.

Visual literacy is generally concerned with the ability to understand, interpret and create visual messages. Recent scholarship continues to describe visual literacy through interconnected areas such as visual interpretation, visual creation and critical engagement with visual culture. A 2026 systematic review found that visual literacy in education is commonly understood through these overlapping dimensions, while also noting that its application remains context-dependent.

Photography provides a particularly useful medium for developing these abilities because it requires students to make decisions about what they see and how they represent it. The camera does not simply record the world. The photographer selects a viewpoint, decides what enters the frame, chooses a moment and determines how visual elements are organized.

An early art-education project, *Through the Eye of the Camera: Learning to See and Seeing to Learn*, used photography to develop perceptual literacy among art-education students. The project emphasized how viewpoint, light, distance and intention can change the way shapes, colours, sizes and meanings are perceived.

Photography education therefore has the potential to develop a student's **way of seeing** rather than only their ability to operate a camera.

Research on visual pedagogy also supports this idea. Abas (2019) demonstrates how visual analysis can help higher-education students generate interpretations and translate visual information into meaning. Similarly, Thompson (2019) developed the Digital Image Guide approach to help students analyze, interpret and evaluate digital images critically.

The present paper explores the role of photography in developing visual thinking among Visual Arts students. It focuses particularly on how photographic activities can encourage students to **observe, notice, analyze, interpret, create and communicate**.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Visual Thinking and Visual Literacy

Visual thinking refers to the use of visual information for understanding, analysing, organising and communicating ideas. It is closely related to visual literacy but places particular emphasis on the thinking processes that occur when individuals work with images.

The relationship between visual thinking, visual learning and visual communication has been identified as an important component of visual literacy. The 2026 systematic review by Procter-Legg et al. highlights visual thinking as one of the established dimensions through which visual literacy is understood, alongside visual learning and visual communication.

For Visual Arts students, visual thinking is particularly significant because artistic practice requires continuous decisions about form, space, colour, composition, scale and meaning.

Photography can provide students with a practical environment in which these decisions become visible.

2.2 Photography as a Tool for Learning to See

Photography can change the way students observe familiar surroundings. When students are asked to photograph a subject, they often begin to notice details that were previously ignored.

For example, a student may see an ordinary classroom wall as simply part of the environment. Through photography, the same wall may become a study of texture, shadow, colour, ageing or geometric form.

Photography education literature supports the importance of moving beyond technical instruction. Khoza and Tshuma argue that photography education needs to balance visual literacy, visual communication and technical proficiency rather than concentrating only on technical and practical skills.

This suggests that photography can function as a bridge between **seeing and thinking**.

2.3 Visual Analysis and Interpretation

Learning to see also involves learning to ask questions about images.

Abas (2019) presents visual analysis as a way of developing students' ability to interpret visual material and translate visual observations into verbal meaning.

Similarly, Thompson's (2019) DIG method encourages students to move beyond a surface reading of digital images towards deeper analysis and interpretation.

Photography students can apply similar processes to their own work. Instead of asking only whether a photograph is “good,” they can ask:

- What do I notice first?
- Why does my eye move towards that area?
- How has the photographer used light?
- What is included or excluded?
- What feeling does the image create?
- What might the image communicate?

Such questions encourage students to move from **looking** to **analysing**.

2.4 Photography and Critical Visual Thinking

Photography can also encourage students to question the relationship between images and reality. A photograph may appear objective, but choices of framing, timing, viewpoint and editing influence what the viewer sees.

Recent research involving photography students has shown that visual analysis can support critical thinking by encouraging learners to examine context, intention, hierarchy, power, values, feelings and emotions within visual materials.

This is especially relevant to contemporary Visual Arts education, where students encounter manipulated, edited and digitally constructed images every day.

Photography education can therefore help students understand that **images are constructed forms of communication**, not simply neutral records of reality.

3. Research Gap

Existing research establishes strong connections between photography, visual literacy, observation and critical thinking. Photography has been used to support visual analysis, personal meaning, creative learning and visual communication.

However, there is scope for a more focused classroom-oriented framework that specifically explains **how photographic practice can develop visual thinking step by step among Visual Arts students**.

Much photography education focuses on technical competencies such as camera operation, exposure and composition, while visual-literacy research often focuses on analysing already-existing images. A useful pedagogical connection can be created by bringing these two processes together: students can **analyze photographs and simultaneously learn to think through the process of making photographs**.

This paper therefore proposes a practical model in which photography becomes a cycle of:

Observe → Notice → analyze → Interpret → Create → Communicate

The purpose of the model is to connect photographic practice with visual thinking in Visual Arts education.

4. Research Objectives

The objectives of this paper are:

1. To examine the role of photography in developing visual thinking among Visual Arts students.
2. To explore how photographic activities can strengthen students' observation and visual analysis skills.
3. To examine how photography can encourage interpretation and critical visual thinking.
4. To explore the relationship between photographic practice and visual communication.
5. To propose a classroom-oriented model for developing visual thinking through photography.

5. Research Questions

The paper addresses the following questions:

1. How can photography contribute to the development of visual thinking among Visual Arts students?
2. How can photographic activities improve students' observation and visual analysis?
3. How can photography encourage students to interpret and question visual information?
4. How does photographic practice support visual communication?
5. What classroom approach can help students develop visual thinking through photography?

6. Methodological Approach

This paper adopts a **qualitative, conceptual and practice-oriented approach** based on a review of literature related to visual literacy, visual thinking, photography education and visual pedagogy.

The paper does not claim findings from a formal student survey or experimental study. Instead, it connects existing literature with classroom-oriented photographic activities to develop a practical framework for Visual Arts education.

Three illustrative activities are used to demonstrate how photography can support visual thinking.

6.1 Looking Closely

Students select an ordinary object and observe it without immediately photographing it. They identify its shape, texture, colour, shadow, pattern and relationship with surrounding space.

They then produce a photograph based on one specific visual quality.

6.2 One Subject, Many Views

Students photograph the same subject from several viewpoints.

For example, a chair can be photographed from:

- above,
- below,
- close distance,
- far distance, and
- Side view.

Students compare the images and discuss how the meaning and visual impact change with viewpoint.

6.3 Reading a Photograph

Students select one photograph and analyze it using a simple sequence:

What do I see? → What do I notice? → How is it constructed? → What might it mean? → What evidence supports my interpretation?

This activity connects observation with interpretation and critical thinking.

7. Classroom-Based Student Observations

Classroom-oriented observations can provide useful pedagogical insight into how students develop visual awareness through photographic practice.

At the beginning of photography activities, students may often focus primarily on whether an image is attractive, sharp or technically correct. With guided observation and discussion, attention can gradually shift towards questions of composition, visual relationships, intention and meaning.

Three areas are particularly important.

First, students can become more attentive to **visual details** when they are asked to observe before photographing. They begin to notice light, texture, patterns, negative space and relationships between objects.

Second, students can develop **analytical thinking** by comparing photographs of the same subject. They begin to recognize how viewpoint, framing and timing influence visual meaning.

Third, students can develop **visual communication** by explaining why they made particular photographic choices. This encourages them to connect what they see with what they want the viewer to understand.

These observations are presented as **pedagogical insights rather than statistically generalizable findings**. A future empirical study involving student interviews, questionnaires, reflective journals or photographic analysis could provide measurable evidence of these developments.

8. Proposed Visual Thinking through Photography Model

Based on the literature and classroom-oriented examples, this paper proposes a six-stage **Visual Thinking through Photography Model**.

1. OBSERVE

Students look carefully at their surroundings before taking a photograph. The focus is on seeing details rather than immediately producing an image.

2. NOTICE

Students identify specific visual elements such as shape, colour, texture, light, shadow, space and movement.

3. ANALYSE

Students examine relationships between these elements and consider how they influence the appearance of the subject.

4. INTERPRET

Students ask what the photograph or subject might communicate. They consider possible emotions, ideas, cultural meanings and contexts.

5. CREATE

Students use photographic decisions such as viewpoint, framing, lighting and composition to communicate their interpretation.

6. COMMUNICATE

Students present and explain their photographs. They discuss their visual decisions and consider how viewers may interpret the image.

The process can be represented as:

OBSERVE → NOTICE → ANALYSE → INTERPRET → CREATE → COMMUNICATE

The process is not strictly linear. After receiving feedback, students may return to observation or analysis and create a revised image.

The model therefore positions photography as a **thinking process as well as an image-making process**.

9. Discussion

The proposed model demonstrates that photography can support several dimensions of visual thinking.

9.1 From Looking to Observing

Looking is often immediate and passive, while observation requires attention. Photography can encourage students to slow down and examine visual details before making an image.

This distinction is important because strong photographic practice depends on the ability to recognize possibilities within ordinary surroundings.

9.2 From Observation to Analysis

Once students notice visual elements, they can begin to analyze relationships between them. For example, a student may recognize that a strong shadow changes the balance of a composition or that empty space creates a particular visual effect.

Through repeated practice, students can become more conscious of how photographs are constructed.

9.3 From Analysis to Interpretation

Visual thinking is not limited to identifying formal elements. Students also need to consider meaning.

A photograph of an empty classroom, for example, may be interpreted as peaceful, lonely, abandoned or transitional. Different interpretations can emerge from the same visual information.

Classroom discussion allows students to recognize that images can have multiple meanings and that interpretations should be supported by visual evidence.

9.4 From Interpretation to Creation

The most important connection in photography education is the movement from analyzing images to creating images.

Students who understand how framing, viewpoint, light and composition influence meaning can apply that understanding to their own photographs.

Thus, visual analysis becomes a practical creative skill.

9.5 From Creation to Communication

The final stage is communication. Students explain their visual decisions and consider the viewer's response.

This develops confidence in discussing artwork and helps students understand that successful photography involves both **making an image and communicating an idea**.

Recent higher-education research using photography and Photovoice has similarly linked photographic practice with observational awareness, visual thinking, communication and visual literacy.

10. Implications for Visual Arts Education

The proposed approach has several implications for Visual Arts educators.

First, photography assignments can be designed to assess **visual thinking as well as technical skill**. Students can be evaluated on observation, analysis, interpretation, creative decision-making and communication.

Second, educators can introduce short visual-analysis discussions before practical photography exercises. This can help students understand how images communicate before they attempt to create their own.

Third, students can be encouraged to photograph the same subject multiple times. Comparing different versions can make the relationship between visual decisions and meaning more visible.

Fourth, reflective questions can become part of assessment. Questions such as *“What did you notice?”*, *“Why did you choose this viewpoint?”* and *“What do you want the viewer to understand?”* can help students articulate their visual thinking.

Finally, photography education can become a bridge between technical and conceptual learning. Rather than teaching camera skills separately from visual theory, educators can demonstrate how technical decisions contribute directly to visual meaning.

11. Conclusion

Photography can play an important role in developing visual thinking among Visual Arts students. It provides students with a practical means of observing, analysing, interpreting and communicating visual information.

The central argument of this paper is that learning photography should not be limited to learning **how to operate a camera**. Students should also learn **how to look, what to notice, how to interpret what they see and how to communicate their understanding through images**.

The proposed Visual Thinking through Photography Model—**Observe, Notice, analyze, Interpret, Create and Communicate**—provides a simple classroom framework for connecting photographic practice with visual thinking.

Through repeated photographic activities, students can learn that the meaning of an image is influenced by choices of viewpoint, framing, light, timing, context and intention. They can also learn that the same subject can produce different meanings when approached from different perspectives.

Photography therefore becomes more than a method of recording reality. It becomes a way of **thinking visually**.

Future empirical research can test this proposed model with Visual Arts students through interviews, visual-analysis tasks, reflective journals and comparative analysis of student photographs. Such research could provide further evidence about the development of observation, interpretation, critical thinking and visual communication through photography education.

12. References

- Abas, S. (2019). Reading the world – teaching visual analysis in higher education. *Journal of Visual Literacy*, 38(1–2), 100–109. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1051144X.2019.1574120>
- Chai, C.-L. (2019). Enhancing visual literacy of students through photo elicitation. *Journal of Visual Literacy*, 38(1–2), 120–129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1051144X.2019.1567071>
- Cruz, B. C., & Ellerbrock, C. R. (2015). Developing visual literacy: Historical and manipulated photography in the social studies classroom. *The Social Studies*, 106(6), 274–280. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00377996.2015.1083932>
- Khoza, B. J., & Tshuma, N. (2022). Photography education in resource-constrained contexts: Exploring the potential of mushfaking. *International Journal of Mobile and Blended Learning*, 14(3). <https://doi.org/10.4018/IJMBL.313974>
- Procter-Legg, T., Klassen, R. M., Snell, R. J. S., Stevenson, N., & Thompson, I. (2026). Conceptions of visual literacy in school-age education: A systematic review. *Journal of Visual Literacy*, 45(2), 137–175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1051144X.2026.2680316>
- Thompson, D. S. (2019). Teaching students to critically read digital images: A visual literacy approach using the DIG method. *Journal of Visual Literacy*, 38(1–2), 110–119. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1051144X.2018.1564604>
- [Author(s)]. (2025). Photovoice for reflection-based learning of creativity and innovation. *Journal of Visual Literacy*, 44(2). <https://doi.org/10.1080/1051144X.2025.2514887>
- [Author(s)]. (2026). Developing visual critical thinking through the use and creation of multimedia resources. *Journal of Visual Literacy*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1051144X.2026.2627846>