
Seeing People with Alzheimer's: Challenges of Visual Literacy

Jon Wagner*¹

¹University of California, Davis (UC Davis) – 1 Shields Avenue, Davis, CA 95616, United States

Abstract

Visual literacy advocates frequently stress the importance of citizens who can critically interpret mass mediated culture, but I've recently identified visual literacy as a resource as well for communicating with people who have Alzheimer's. As a corollary, visual literacy in the first instance puts democratic institutions and civil discourse at risk. In the second, it diminishes empathic and rewarding connections between people with Alzheimer's and their own friends and family members.

In this presentation I will describe two visual literacy interventions from a multi-year, collaborative field project that focused on increasing social interaction for people with Alzheimer's. In the first intervention, photographs and videos were shared to increase trust, communication and comfort between people living with Alzheimer's and their families. In the second, "visually assisted conversations" helped family members sustain trust and intimacy with Alzheimer's residents who could no longer talk, write or purposefully remember.

These two examples illustrate how the situational exercise of visual literacy skills can lead care givers and family members to more rewarding interactions with people who have Alzheimer's. They also reveal specific visual literacy skills that can be useful to this process, including: making and reading photographs of social interaction; reading the physicality of people with Alzheimer's as information about otherwise unexpressed thoughts and feelings; and preparing texts and images that highlight the humanity of people living with Alzheimer's and sharing them with family members and friends who found it difficult to notice that humanity on their own.

Keywords: Alzheimer's, visual literacy, social intervention, assisted communication

*Speaker