

# Common Sense Assumptions About Intentional Representation in Student Artmaking and Exhibition in The Arts: Initial Advice Paper.

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## Abstract

*The Arts: Initial Advice Paper (ACARA, 2010) makes the common-sense assumption that the ubiquity of technology and photographic imagery make them easy for children to use and understand. While there is merit in the concept that familiarity improves understanding, without instruction and cognitive challenge, it can foster stereotypes and rigid thinking. This paper draws on recent research (Jones 2007), the work of Liben (2003), Karmiloff-Smith (1992), Berti and Freeman (1997), to show how constraints on children's pictorial reasoning affect pictorial representation at different cognitive developmental stages. Without reflection, the ubiquity of photographic imagery in young Australian's lives, inhibits development of the reflexive thinking required to use a digital camera to make innovative images, that also reflect their intention.*

The Arts: Initial Advice Paper (ACARA, 2010) makes scant reference to cognitive or representational development in relation to Visual Arts. It does however refer to the saturation of visual imagery in the contemporary landscape young Australians live and learn in. The common-sense assumption is that because it is there, it is understood.

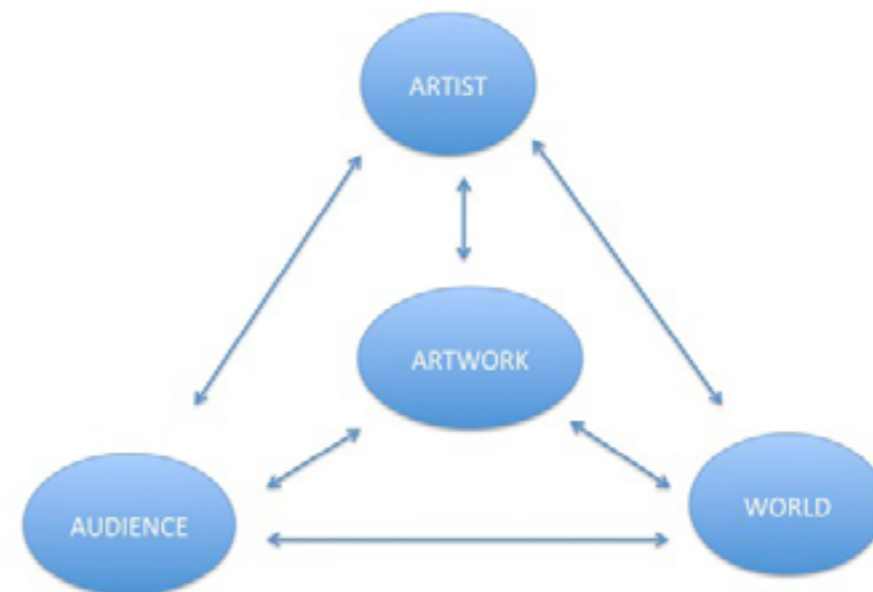
The underlying assumption seems to be that the prevalence of photographic imagery and easy access to technology means they are simple for children to use and understand. While there is merit in the concept that familiarity improves understanding; without instruction and cognitive challenge it can produce stereotypical and rigid thinking. Although, peppered throughout the document,

there are references to developing meaning, relationship to the world, context/ social and cultural milieu of the artist and audience, it does not acknowledge or address representational development when discussing any of the strands of the arts. A national curriculum should address these issues and provide a framework to equip young people with the tools to decode meaning and make artworks appropriate to their developmental understandings.

## How do we provide these tools

To know and understand, we need a theory (Wellman, 1990). We all have theories about everything; some naïve, some complex and reflexive. Freeman calls these framework theories; they help us to make meaning (Freeman & Sanger 1993). The conceptual framework in the NSW Visual Arts syllabus is one such framework. Naïve theories are simplistic and operate in a direct subject-to-object relationship or simple artist-to-artwork relations. Naïve theories are rigid (black and white) and support stereotypical views. Reflexive theories can include third, fourth, fifth or sixth elements or agencies into the reasoning network. In the NSW syllabus, the agency of the audience or beholder within the conceptual framework allows for complex understandings.

## Framework theories



**What framework theories do students bring to the classroom?**

By asking children and adolescents a series of carefully structured questions, developed by Berti and Freeman (1997), it is possible to ascertain the complexity of the framework theories they are working with. When children are asked about painting (art), they show they have developed reflexive theory of art between the ages of 9 and 11 years. They are conscious of the audience and are beginning to understand intention and how context and function may change meaning (Freeman & Sanger,1993). When these same children were asked about photography, I found that their theory of photography remained rigid until 14 years (Jones, 2007.)

My research provides a baseline understanding of the photographic-theory frameworks underpinning untutored adolescents' causal reasoning, and the mental resources possessed when they enter the Visual Arts classroom in the middle years of schooling. It shows that untutored adolescents have a naïve theory of photography, despite having a reflexive theory of art. It would seem that, given the nature of photography, without the development of procedural understanding in school, their theory might well remain naïve for life.

When making artworks or photographs, we depend on the interaction of three factors: framework theories about what artworks or photographs are and how they represent meaning; external models and examples from the world; and the skills and procedural knowledge to use materials (Berti & Freeman,1997; Jones, 2007). Reflexive theories allow for innovation and problem solving when challenged. If we do not have a reflexive theory, when challenged, we rely on external models.

The self-perpetuating external model of vernacular photography pervades the visual world of nearly every Australian child (and in this study), to the degree that they are unable to spontaneously accommodate alternative models within their framework theory. A theory of photography can be tested when students are asked to make images for a novel task, in this case, to photograph a friend so they cannot be recognised. The social function overrides the ability to comprehend the photograph as an object. Neither their framework theory nor their procedural knowledge is sufficiently reflexive to successfully complete the task in an innovative

way. Despite participants' assurances that they were experienced and "knew" how to use a digital camera, their actual procedural understanding about how to use a digital camera was very limited and did not give them the flexibility to successfully complete the task (Jones, 2007). When given the procedural knowledge, they were able to make more innovative images, especially the younger participants, but they did not like them or choose them as being the "best" photographs they had taken for the study.

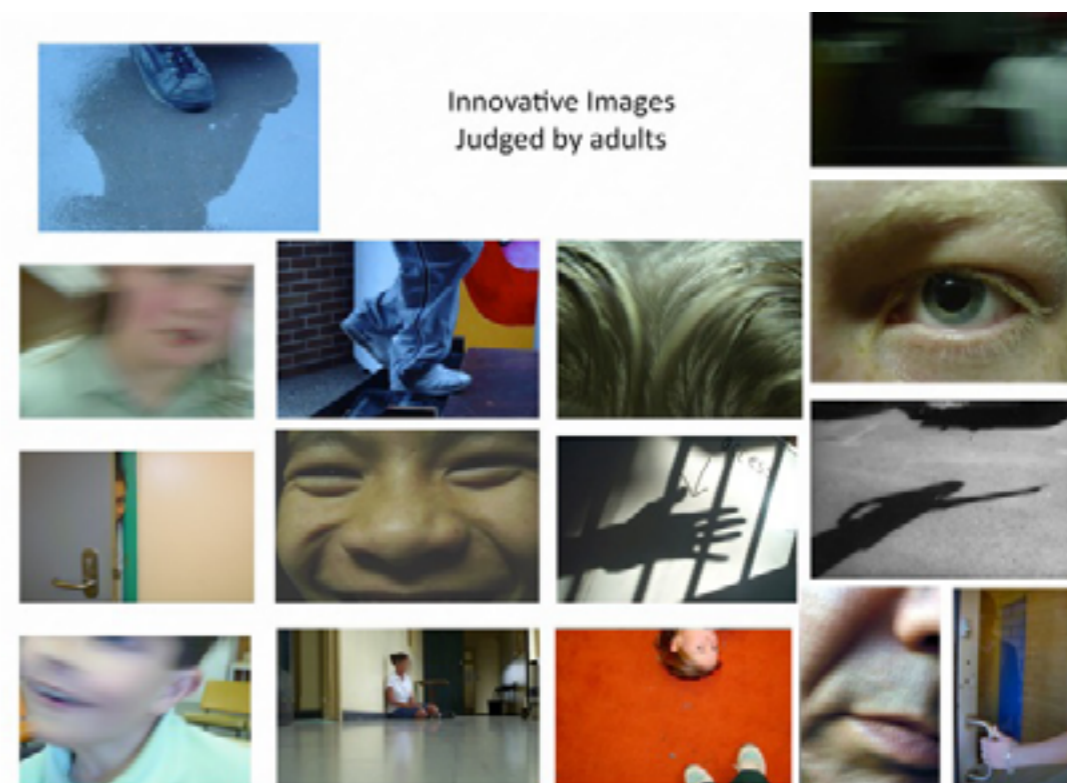
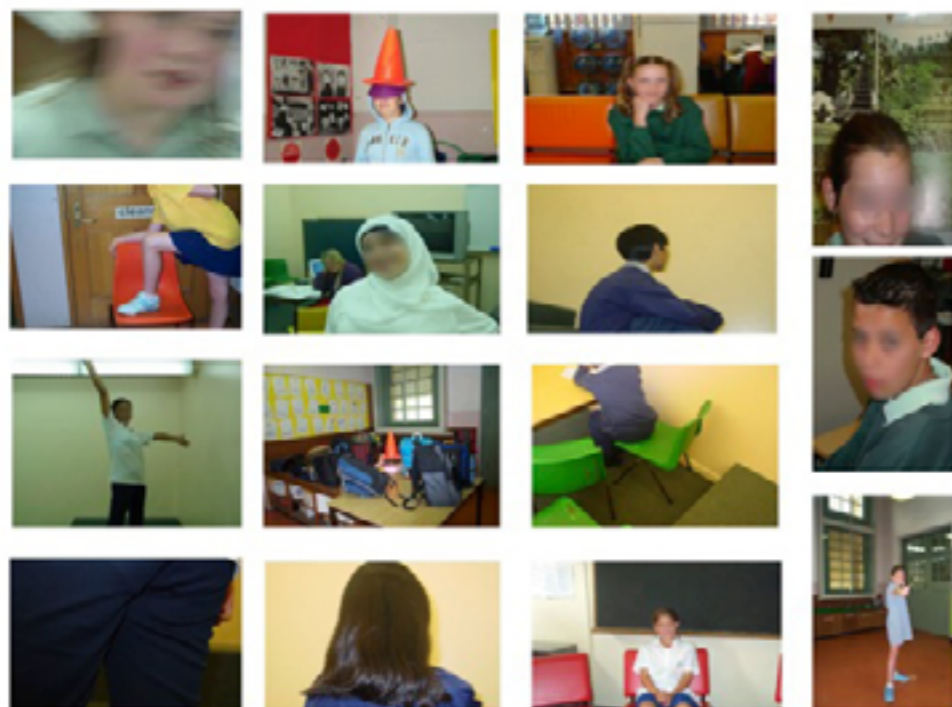
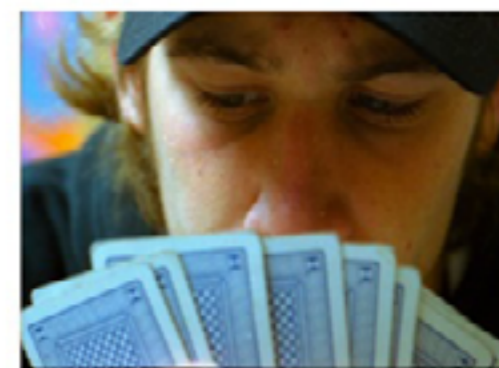
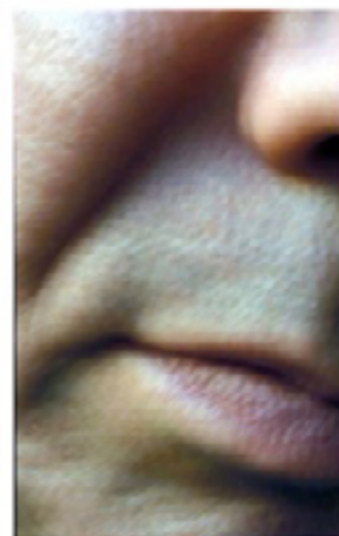


Figure 2 is a selection of images by the research participants : judged as innovative by an adult photographer, a curator of photography and a photography teacher .

Photographs chosen by untutored 10-13 year olds as being suitable for an art exhibition



Typical photographs 17 + year olds chose as their best photographs



Typical photographs untutored 14-16 year olds chose as their best photographs

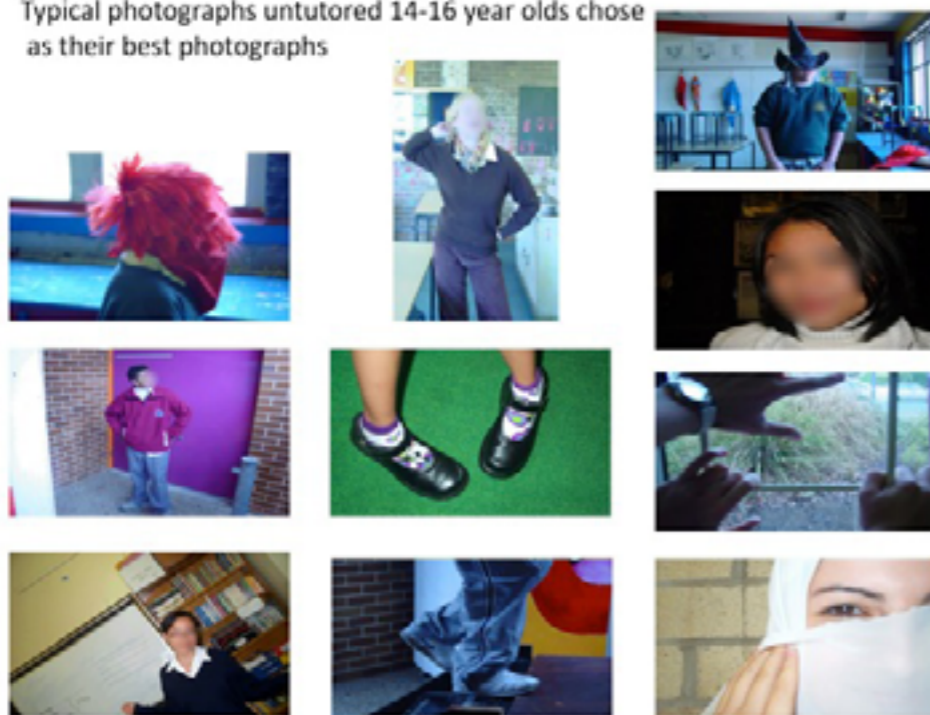


Figure 3,4,5 is a selection of representative images by age group, selected by the same research participants as being their “best” photographs.

When American Piagetian psychologist Liben used a camera to assess children’s understanding of spatial relations, she was surprised their preferred images “seemed pedestrian (or worse), and...photographs we found to be aesthetically pleasing were often ignored and not selected” (2003, p31).

Without understanding the underlying cognitive processes involved in creating photographic images, we remain puzzled by the images children present as “good”.

**What is happening?**

Children and adolescents using a camera bring to the photographic origination process reasoning that is constrained by their theory of photography, together with their social understanding of its function in their lives and the culture within which they live. The impact of the social function evidenced by vernacular photography

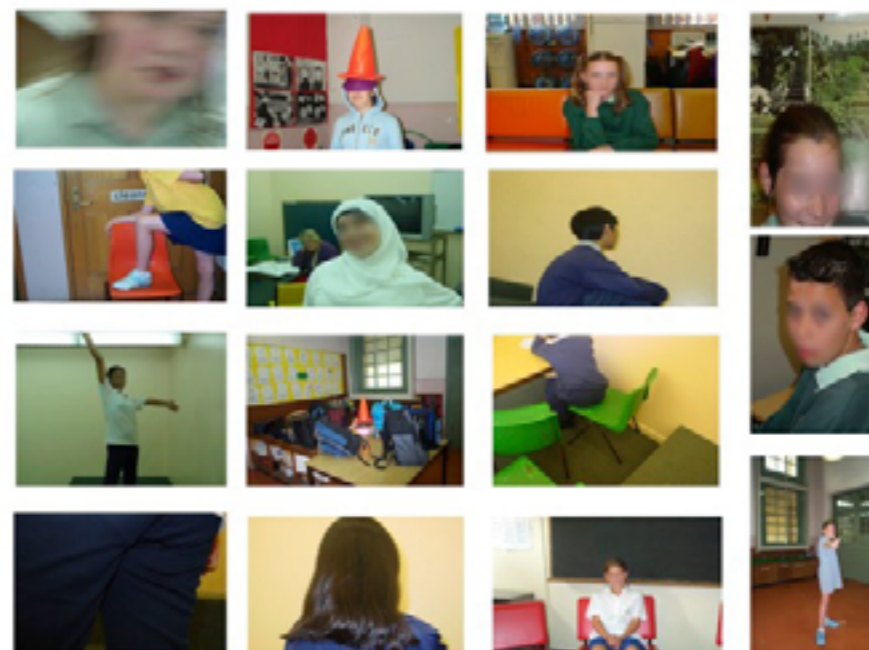
as an external model cannot be underestimated. Vernacular photography provides teenagers with a procession of images against which to model their photographs. This, together with the popular perception that digital photography is so easy, it requires limited procedural understanding, and the adolescent developmental focus on social relations and identity, impacts enormously on their ability to use photography as a creative or innovative medium.

It is not sufficient to give students cameras and, after minimal instruction, expect them to make photographs that reflect their ideas or understandings of the world. Teaching camera skills is not enough. Instruction has to work in tandem with contextual and conceptual exploration. These need to be explored with the work of expert photographers and artists who use the medium in a creative manner provide external models for adolescents as they develop their photographic understandings. Selecting photographs for publication or exhibition involves the viewer reasoning within their theory of photography. An adult selector may misconstrue what a young person might like or be interested in. The meaning the adult viewer, with a more reflexive theory of photography, constructs may be very different from the one the child or adolescent photographer intends. This makes problematic the catch cry that children's photographs allow the viewer to "see the world through the child's eye". This claim is probably valid if the children themselves curate the exhibition, and I suspect we would not be then so wowed by their 'vision'.

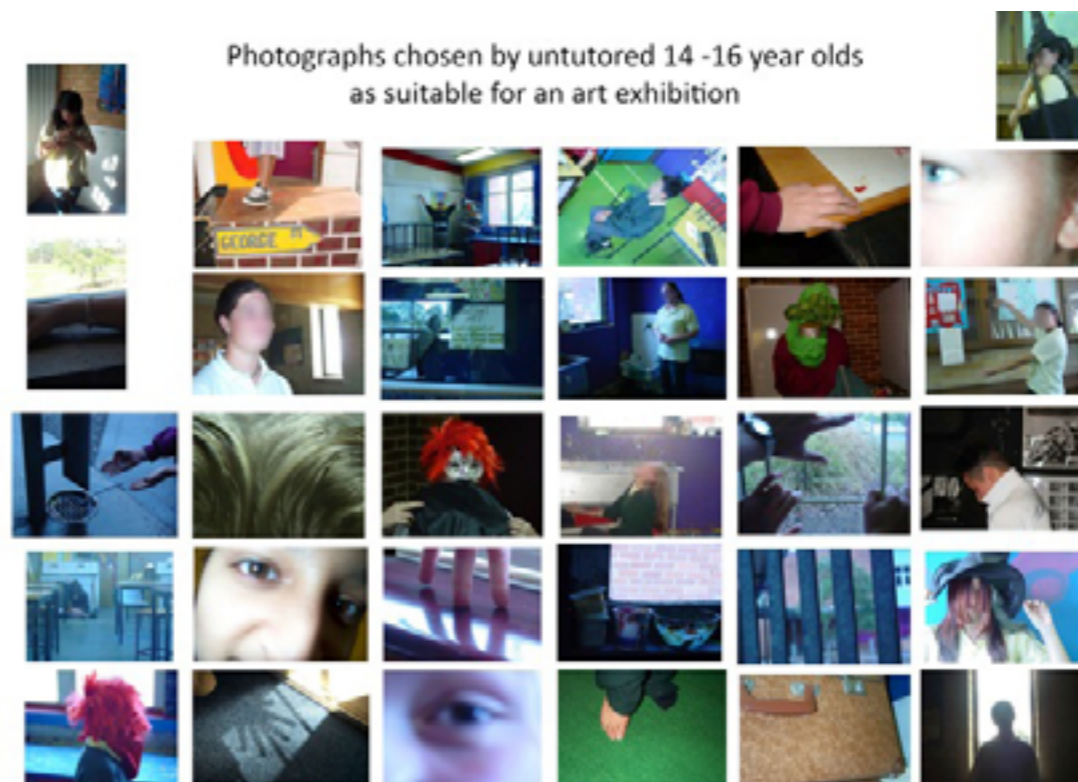
Figure 6,7 : a selection of images by age group, selected and made by the same research participants as being suitable for an art exhibition.

That is not to say that some adolescents and children do not make spectacular photographs. However, if we want them to make the very best photographs, they require instruction on using a camera and its possibilities. They also need discussion and suggestions about representing their ideas. If we want to truly see the world through their eyes, adolescents and children should curate their exhibitions as, as we have seen, even when they make exciting and innovative photographs, they do not necessarily like them.

Photographs chosen by untutored 10-13 year olds as being suitable for an art exhibition



Photographs chosen by untutored 14 -16 year olds as suitable for an art exhibition



### **Representational change**

Representational change as evidenced by innovation in photography is a gradual process over many years in childhood and adolescence. It is also subject to exposure to practical opportunity. Representational change doesn't happen in photography without instruction and procedural input. Freeman (1997) and Karmiloff-Smith (1992) both claim that when the theory is flexible enough, the procedural understanding will shift. In photography, this may not be the case, given the strength of the external vernacular models and their important social functions. Bourdieu et al (1965) say many adults never develop their photographic understanding beyond the stage of naïve realism. Zaitchik (1990) says there is an inhibitory affect on conceptual development by photography.

Within the contemporary visual art classroom, a reflexive understanding of photography is required to appreciate the subtleties of contemporary art and photographic practice (Burgin, 1982). To appreciate a photograph in a sophisticated manner, that is, to explore its metaphoric potential or to investigate the innovative representational possibilities of the processes of photography, rather than the representation of its purely documentary and recording capabilities, requires a degree of reflexive understanding on the part of audiences. A reflexive understanding of photography requires that information from various cognitive domains be accessed. Photographs look deceptively like the real thing; they trick our brains. To appreciate a photograph, we have to override this "function" and engage with a meta-analysis of the photograph. Meta-analysis requires reflexive thinking, which comes with representational development.

In the visual arts classroom, the challenge for teachers is to override the impact of external models created by the plethora of vernacular imagery because, with a naïve theory of photography and limited procedural skills, the fallback position is always the external model. In some ways, the early adolescent's photographs are akin to a young child's paintings. They can talk incessantly about what is in the photograph and are very specific about what their images mean, but it takes some time to represent their intention in an easily-understood manner. Transference of knowledge to a camera entails a special understanding.

The Arts: Initial Advice Paper (ACARA, 2010) presents a simplistic, personal subject-to-object way of understanding the arts. It privileges a subject-to-object relation up to Year 8, which is a naïve framework and is not conducive to complex understandings. By equating the use of digital cameras in Kindergarten in Media Arts, with scribbling in Kindergarten in Visual Arts, I am concerned the paper's authors have fallen into the trap of the common-sense assumption that, because the world is saturated with imagery, and technology provides an ease of access to digital imaging, therefore contemporary children and adolescents can naturally use and understand the medium of digital photography. Camera manufacturers have sold us a set of false assumptions since the first 'box brownie': that making photographs is easy. On one hand it is: the box brownie's impact cannot be overlooked in the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, nor can the ease with which contemporary cameras can be used. The compact camera's position as a straight-forward recording device in vernacular photography is not contested, but assuming using them is easy when making intentional images to express ideas and to create artworks is. Just like the humble pencil, the ease of use and accessibility belies its representational complexity.

Understanding children's representational development raises many issues of pedagogical practice and serious implications for curriculum development.

Let us not fall into the naïve position of thinking that, because it is seemingly easy to use digital photography, it can be used in a range of contexts in the arts to represent students' ideas innovatively. We should pause for thought about the long-term implications of the failure to address this popular assumption.

Visual Arts and photography syllabi are excellent contexts in which to develop reflexive understandings of imagery. An understanding of the causal reasoning implicit in adolescents' photographic origination opens the way for curriculum development which explores ways to enhance young people's photographic skills, whilst providing opportunities to develop critical thinking skills, to which reflexive thinking skills are essential. This, then, will enable them to intelligently negotiate the pitfalls of the photograph-saturated world in which they live.

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