The Teacher Standards are being reviewed.

Visual thinking cannot remain implicit.

Students are learning in a world of images, symbols, graphs and generated media. Our national description of teacher expertise should say so.

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Access is not literacy. Use is not understanding. A polished output is not evidence that learning has occurred.

A REVIEW FIFTEEN YEARS IN THE MAKING

For the first time in fifteen years, the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers are under review. They were written before generative AI. They were written before a synthetic photograph could be produced in seconds, and before a student could ask a machine to interpret a painting, a graph or a news image on their behalf.

AITSL has said the review will test whether the Standards remain relevant, evidence-informed and aligned with effective practice (AITSL, n.d.-b). A discussion paper and second round of consultation are scheduled for November 2026 (AITSL, n.d.-b). This is the moment to ask a simple question: where, in our national definition of teacher expertise, is the capacity to teach students how to see?

EXPOSURE IS NOT LITERACY

We often assume students understand images because they are surrounded by them. They are not the same thing.

The Australian Curriculum already recognises this. Literacy includes reading and viewing (ACARA, n.d.-c), and English and The Arts share responsibility for developing visual literacy (ACARA, n.d.-b). In practice, though, viewing is easily treated as something students absorb on their own, or as an optional extra left to the Arts teacher down the corridor.

A 2026 systematic review of visual literacy in school-age education describes three connected strands: interpreting visuals, creating and communicating through them, and critically examining the power and ideology they carry (Procter-Legg et al., 2026). That is a substantial body of expertise, and it deserves to be named.

THIS IS NOT ONLY AN ARTS ARGUMENT

Look at Mathematics. Version 9.0 asks students to move between symbolic, graphical and numerical representations, to visualise through diagrams, maps and models, and to question whether a representation is accurate and a claim is valid (ACARA, n.d.-d). That is visual and symbolic reasoning at the heart of a core discipline.

Research on learning with multiple representations adds an important caution. A meta-analysis of 132 effect sizes in STEM education found that adding further representations produced only small performance gains overall, and that effects varied with the conditions of learning. Instructional support mattered, including help for students to interpret, compare and translate between forms (Rexigel et al., 2024). More diagrams, graphs or images are not automatically better.

Visuals do not teach. Teachers do.

So I am not arguing that every teacher should become an art specialist. I am arguing that every teacher needs an explicit baseline in visual, symbolic and multimodal literacy, taught through the concepts and conventions of their own discipline.

AI RAISES THE STAKES

The 2025 NAP ICT Literacy results found proficiency at its lowest level since the assessment began. Only half of Year 6 students and two thirds of Year 10 students reported learning at school how to judge whether AI-produced information is accurate (Friedman et al., 2026).

	YEAR 6	YEAR 10
Met the proficient standard in ICT literacy	50% of students	37% of students
Reported learning at school how to judge whether AI information is accurate	50% of students	66% of students

Source: Friedman et al. (2026), National Assessment Program: ICT literacy 2025. Public report

AITSL's stated renewal priorities already include strengthening the safe, effective and ethical use of digital technologies (AITSL, n.d.-c). The question is whether the Standards will also make explicit the visual and symbolic literacy needed to judge what those tools produce.

The encouraging news is that critical evaluation can be taught. Research on media literacy suggests that explicit instruction improves resilience to misinformation, and that multi-session approaches outperform single sessions (Huang et al., 2026). The Standards should therefore define AI capability through human judgement: verifying claims, protecting authorship, reasoning ethically, and knowing when a tool should not be used. That includes recognising that an AI model is not a cultural authority, and that First Nations knowledges, stories and images carry obligations of permission and protocol (ACARA, n.d.-a).

EXPERTISE IS DISCIPLINARY

Generic tool training cannot replace subject knowledge. Teachers need to know how meaning, evidence and authority are constructed in the discipline they teach, which misconceptions are likely, and what progress genuinely looks like. A meta-analysis of mathematics and science interventions found that those targeting pedagogical content knowledge produced stronger gains than those targeting content knowledge alone (Fukaya et al., 2024). The current Standards already recognise content knowledge and inquiry processes (AITSL, n.d.-d). The review should strengthen that foundation, not allow new priorities to sit on top of it as generic additions.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING MUST CHANGE PRACTICE

Participation is not impact. A synthesis of 35 methodologically rigorous studies identified the features of effective professional development: a focus on content, active learning, collaboration, models of effective practice, coaching and expert support, feedback and reflection, and sustained duration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). A later systematic review of studies measuring student outcomes points the same way, with ongoing coaching, collaborative learning and frequent learning over a longer period appearing most promising (Ventista & Brown, 2023).

AITSL's own Charter describes effective professional learning as relevant, collaborative and future-focused (AITSL, 2012), and its guidance asks that professional learning be evaluated by its impact on practice (AITSL, n.d.-a). Hours logged record an opportunity to learn. They do not show that teaching has changed.

WHAT I WILL BE ASKING FOR

Four asks for the second consultation

Name visual, symbolic, media and multimodal literacy explicitly within teachers' professional knowledge and practice.

Retain and strengthen discipline-specific knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge at every career stage.

Define AI capability as critical, creative, ethical and evidence-based judgement before, during and after tool use.

Judge professional learning by its design quality and its effect on practice, not attendance or completion.

WHAT THIS CAN LOOK LIKE IN A CLASSROOM

In my own work I use The SEEU™ Method: four connected filters called Spot, Examine, Explore and Understand. They are not steps. A student might Spot a symbol in a graph or a generated image, Examine how it has been constructed, Explore its context and alternatives, then Understand by bringing the evidence together to explain what it means. New understanding can send them back through any filter.

Spot	Directs attention: what does the graph, image or output show or claim?
Examine	Reveals choices: how has it been constructed, and what conventions, symbols or omissions shape it?
Explore	Opens context and possibility: whose perspective, what alternatives, where did it come from?
Understand	Brings the evidence together: what can be justified, and what was accepted, rejected or revised?

Four connected filters, not steps. New understanding can return the learner to any filter.

Applied to AI, the principle is simple: SEEU™ before prompt, SEEU™ after output. Students establish their own noticing and interpretation first, question what the tool produces second, and finish with an independent judgement they can justify.

It is one approach among many. The larger point is that visual thinking must be visible, teachable and assessable, and our Standards should expect it.

HAVE YOUR SAY

When the discussion paper is released, read it with a few questions in mind.

Where does it place visual and multimodal literacy, and is the expectation explicit?

Does it protect disciplinary expertise and pedagogical content knowledge?

Does AI capability centre human judgement, or mainly tool use and compliance?

Then respond, whether through the survey or a written submission.

Students must learn to see before they prompt, and to see again before they believe.

I would love to hear from teachers across every learning area: where does visual or symbolic thinking show up in your subject, and is it taught explicitly?

FURTHER LOOKING

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About the author

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