Teaching Style in Basic Writing through Remediating Photo Essays

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Basic writing students' photo essays demonstrate that the multimodal composition process affords opportunities to participate in engaging conversations about writing. The authors argue that the incorporation of multimodal assignments in the basic writing classroom promotes both digital and print literacies while fostering awareness of students' own writing processes.

> What our age needs is communicative intellect. For intellect to be communicative, it must be active, practical, engaged. In a culture of the simulacrum, the site of communicative engagement is electronic media.
>
> —Taylor and Saarinen, *Imagologies* 2

Basic writing students enter the composition classroom with a developed system of written English that often includes misunderstood rules of Standard English, embeds dialects from a variety of subcultures, and makes use of rhetorical tropes routinely devalued in academic discourse. Teachers regularly rely on traditional text-based descriptive, persuasive, argumentative, and research-based essays to "rectify" these deficiencies. But what if teachers used multimodal composing as a tool to segue into traditional academic discourse? As Dorothy Winsor encourages, "different kinds of text seem to be useful for different tasks and in different situations" (248). Would students play a more active and engaged role in their learning in such "natural" composing processes? Would students be able to transfer elements of good writing style from a more inclusive communicative intellect to a variety of writing situations?

Clearly, good writing involves getting an idea or "picture" from the writer's head to readers' heads effectively. In recent years, our uses of technology have been changing our

reading and writing experiences. For example, many young adults use Google as their default homepage, and they search for text and/or for images when teachers prompt them to get started writing, i.e., internet browsing involves brainstorming and inventing as well as researching. And here's the startling thing: according to Nielsen Internet ratings, YouTube totaled over 100 million unique users during the month that we wrote this essay, and the number of users and times-per-day students compose their identities or profile content on Facebook is equally staggering. Basic writers clearly inhabit these media-rich spaces and use them constantly. We argue that basic writing curricula can and should embrace the photo essay so that students can use their "natural" media reading experiences and visual rhetoric expertise to develop both technological literacy and academic discourse.

The Photo Essay as Genre

Gertrude Buck wrote "Recent Tendencies in the Teaching of English Composition" in *Educational Review* more than a century ago. She connects three values that still have deep implications for basic writing instruction today: (1) letting students get their writing subject matter from student experience, (2) using authentic audiences, and (3) focusing on informal critique. Specifically, she reasons that "if the student writes both better and more easily when he has a real occasion for writing than when he composes an exercise to exemplify some rule for composition previously enjoyed upon him, then let the teacher, so far as possible, replace this artificial situation by natural conditions for writing" (Buck, as quoted in Brereton 242). The genre of the academic essay is not widely used outside the academy. The problem is in sticking to "rhetorical laws" of the academic, text essay as the *only* or even as the *best* genre to teach

principles of rhetoric and style, especially when our students are clearly engaged in the use of other interactive media.

The photo essay can employ image to represent evocative associations or ideas students are having difficulty putting into words. A shadowed layering in the background of the first picture in a photo essay may really be foreshadowing that has great significance later, like a term quickly used in an introduction that is brought to light more directly in a body paragraph. There is a grammar and a syntax to imagery. Rudolph Arnheim writes, "Images can be used as pictures or as symbols; they can also be used as mere signs" (135). He goes on to explain in the following paragraph, "The three terms—picture, symbol, sign—do not stand for kinds of images. They rather describe three functions fulfilled by images" (135). Students can make use of these three functions in ways that enable them to visually design connections between unuttered or undiscovered ideas, what Wei and Wei call "uncovering hidden maps" (499). The images in the photo essay may function to create an abstract or concrete tone; point of view may suggest the author's persona and impact *ethos* positively or negatively; and colors may function to suggest diction. Indeed, as a text-based essay must carefully support a deliberate purpose, an image must be representative of its deliberate function. In this way, text is an image from a writer's head being broken down into a form that can be best conveyed to readers. A photo essay, thus, is a genre of composing that can both simplify and amplify core concepts we teach in basic writing courses.

In *Representing MacBeth: A Case Study in Visual Rhetoric*, Hanno H. J. Ehses offers particular insight to how composing a photo essay can make students' style more effective, which is a strategy supported by media theorists and grammatologists:

It is a necessary condition for all figures of speech that they presuppose a basic

understanding of grammatical forms and lexical content from which the departure is

possible. Figurative variations cannot ignore the grammar of the language inasmuch as

any change for a greater effect must respect grammatical possibilities. Because the basic

understanding is determined by the grammar and rhetoric is built upon its fundamentals,

rhetorical procedure is also referred to as constituting a secondary grammar. (168)

This secondary grammar can also be seen as a type of negotiating style through secondary

orality. In basic writing curricula, for instance, style is often categorized as the C-B-S construct

Joseph Williams writes about in *Style: 10 Lessons in Clarity in Grace*. Clarity, brevity, and

sincerity, while useful, also have a tendency to oversimplify the role of rhetoric of style in

multimodal texts. Lanham brings light to the relationship between content and style (stuff and

fluff) by thinking of style as a way to create meaning based on an author's purpose or

communication goal. Lanham introduces *Analyzing Prose* this way: "No wonder we are confused

fundamentally by how we are taught to write. We are taught C-B-S theory for our own writing.

Yet when we come to study literature, which a rigorous C-B-S theory would have to revise out of

existence, we are taught opposite theory" (4). Worse yet, clarity and brevity and sincerity does

not necessarily translate to digital environments, such as Facebook or Twitter, where many

students write nearly every day, and where the rhetorical tool of immediacy and the

dimensionality of location play significant rolls. In these environments, C-B-S construction

seems more absent than influential, a type of secondary orality. For Walter J. Ong in *Orality and

Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, "secondary orality" is a type of orality dependent on

literate culture and the skill sets of post-literate societies.

Nevertheless, clarity, brevity, and sincerity remain the crux of what we teach students in writing courses, relying on the concepts almost like a stylistic safety net, rather than taking a more challenging route for understanding how style considerations shift for multimodal texts and how these same shifts can also inform style decisions in traditional writing. Lev Manovich uses the word "representation" in *The Language of New Media*, advocating for an agile language to explain aspects of new media "objects" that allow room for change, since that is the nature of technology—to evolve. Multimodal texts often rely on the user or reader to define how they will be used, and the role of style impacts that usage in clear ways.

Photo Essay as "Natural" Medium

Indeed, photos are visual representation of characteristics of secondary orality. Some writing teachers believe John Palfrey and Urs Gasser are correct when the media theorists write in *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* that students born after 1980 who have always already had access to social digital technologies tend to possess digital literacy and interactive working skills well versed in visual literacy. Palfrey and Gasser suggest that "digital settlers" who are not native to digital environments but can work in sophisticated ways to wield technologies, which might be a label to describe many writing instructors, must think through strategies to optimize digital natives' visual learning acuities. Students who are visual learners are often described as having "movies in their minds" of the content being reviewed, using visual-spatial skills such as sizes and shapes and textures and angles, paying close attention to body language and aesthetics, and often remembering content through presentations that use pictures and charts and diagrams.

In "Media Richness or Media Naturalness? The Evolution of Our Biological

Communication Apparatus and Its Influence on Our Behavior Toward E-Communication Tools," Ned Kock argues the more *natural* a communicative medium, the more likely an audience is to understand and respond appropriately to a message: "Human beings have been engineered by evolutionary forces to communicate primarily in a co-located and synchronous manner, as well as through facial expression, body language, and speech" (199). If the amount of cognitive effort it takes for a student to understand a communicative act is too great, the more likely the student and the receiver are to misunderstand a message, or disengage. When basic writing students are unfamiliar with the syntactical rules of Standard English and academic discourse, they stop paying attention. To rectify, we often ask our students to read their own writing aloud so as to hear what they can't see. This is a strategy of media naturalness that helps remove ambiguity in writing, that helps students see and hear aloud what they can not see or hear in their heads.

Teaching Style by Remediating the Photo Essay

Like a traditional essay, a photo essay assignment prompt should stipulate a specific length, such as ten pictures, in order to encourage students to think about what messages they wish to convey purposefully, what the general scope of the composition is, what structure is important to employ, and how pictures should transition into one another. Each photo could be described as a paragraph. Paragraphs in photo essays, like text essays, might include an element like a topic sentence, one main idea per paragraph, a transition to the next main idea, and some connection back to the main thesis of the essay. Instructors can create class discussions about if the composition should include a title in text or image, and if text can appear in images and what purpose the juxtaposition of text and graphic could serve.

As students generate topics, they engage a sophisticated process of identifying the many options and structures a narrative might follow. By considering structure early in the writing process, students consider rhetorical and stylistic decisions as they compare and contrast meaning making with photo essays and traditional modes of composing. One student, for example, may argue that purpose is better served with a nonlinear, thesis-seeking organization to build tension from photo to photo, whereas another student might advocate for a more traditional approach that clarifies the purpose in the first picture. Should the thesis come in the first picture, the second picture, or perhaps the last picture of the essay? Of course, the same choices exist for written essays. Richard Lanham in *Analyzing Prose* discusses these important style decisions: "some styles, or parts of styles, are meant to be seen. Prose, that is, can be iconic as well as symbolic. This iconic element sometimes creates context and sometimes becomes content. In either case it can be extremely powerful" (79). Constructing a photograph to represent a paragraph of information allows for an understanding of style that can later be applied to many types of discourse. Regardless of genre, a writer must decide if the style should be seen or noticed, as a way to help clarify meaning. Or the reverse, as Lanham continues, can be "like a pair of eyeglasses, seen through and not noticed, but enabling us to see" (79). Photo essays help make the rhetoric of style a more prominent feature of the process of writing.

In the classroom, as students begin taking photos, the camera becomes a tool for composing and emphasizes the rhetoric of each picture. Students may use cell phones or inexpensive and readily available digital cameras. Composing a photo essay by taking pictures is much different than composing one by selecting and arranging them, because the idea of perspective and viewpoint can be discussed. Getting the right picture is a form of revision or re-envisioning. What is the difference between pictures taken in first or third person? What role

does perspective play in telling a story or in argumentation? There is more control in weeding out tangents in photos if the author is taking the picture. If something in the picture or paragraph is not adding to the message, it is distracting or taking away from it. And if there is a gap in between the images, because they are in a specific sequence with missing elements, there is more research or composition needed in the story or argument. The process is similar to writing sentences and words. Even in written essays, as meaning is negotiated, words are omitted, replaced, and ideas are revised. It is an unpredictable process because once an idea moves from the mind to the photograph or page, at first it often appears muddled, or just not right. Writers must also consider what effect their texts will have on readers. For Anne Wysocki, a visual text can communicate how to read it, and that we should "be teaching how the visual structures of a text are, in addition to being assertions about artists and art and collectors (for example), also assertions about what kinds of readers we should be" (231). Photo essays can, through rhetorical design and style, communicate how they are to be read. A traditional essay, of course, does the same.

As the student moves from taking pictures or using Google Image Search to practice exacting search terms, to editing (cropping, color alterations, and other tool based enhancement or de-emphasis), a combination of mood, tension, cohesion, and cohesiveness create a sense of style. Much like *noir* novels, such issues are important to framing the narrative in a dynamic manner that aids audience perception of the composition. Further, style becomes a method of creating voice and mannerism, controlling how such textual properties impact meaning through repetition, montage, and timing. For example, some students choose music as a backdrop to the photos to help identify important themes. Some use black and white pictures and others use sepia tones with color photos to produce other stylistic effects. The use of music, color, or tones to

enhance meaning is similar to what prose writers might refer to as voice, diction, showing and not telling, or using titles and subheadings. The use of music behind a photo essay compared to the use of subheadings in a written essay are both meant for rhetorical effect, to clarify meaning, and offer an organizing principle. The technologies used are common tools.

Once a photo essay is drafted, just as any text, it can be peer reviewed and revised. One such exercise asks students to print their photographs and bring them to class. In pairs, students exchange their work with each other and attempt to arrange the photos based only on what they see in each picture, and without any direction from the writer. After using this approach, a student remarked, "In the end, I like the re-arranged version much more as there is a much better flow of the work." The mystifying term flow, of course, is a style concern that, in this situation, peer review ultimately helped this student uncover. Further, "flow" clearly impacts meaning, which ultimately influences audience perception. Style can be recast as substance, which is also true for written essays. Essays that are not stylistically cohesive can be confusing, which can detract from the main point or argument. Students writing a traditional essay can rearrange paragraphs to create improved cohesion, just as simply as rearranging photographs. Another approach to teaching with photo essays enables teaching cohesion in another: provide the class 50 pictures, and ask each student to compose an essay of 10 photos. Study differences between students' compositions.

Finally, the medium and location used to relay or publish the photo essay is important. For instance, posting on a personal blog or Flikr is different than showing on a projected computer screen in a classroom in terms of audience and credibility. The Internet is a public place with a public audience, which attracts readers in new and unpredictable ways. Should a

photo essay be made a public text? Should it live only for a brief time in the classroom? Such considerations are important for instructors to regard. However, the same issues allow for interesting discussions about audience and delivering ideas. Written texts on the Internet are equally public as visual texts, of course.

Once students complete their photo essay, we ask them to reflect on the experience after writing a traditional essay. Consider this student reflection about how writing a photo essay is much like writing a rhetorical analysis:

> When I was holding my photo shoots, I would often think and visualize about the type of angle I wanted to take. Many questions revolved around my mind as I moved things around and positioned the camera in different places. What kind of setting should I use? What kind of mood do I ultimately want to achieve? Are there any specific things I must definitely show my audience? How exactly do I want to set this up? Are there any details that I've missed? After taking a whole set of photographs and revising them I would ask more questions in order to see what works, eliminate bad photographs (i.e. blurry photos), and taking note of what kind of shots needed to be added.

As the above reflection notes, blurry photos or blurry words can confuse an audience. Vague, incomplete pictures or paragraphs do affect meaning. Ineffective style usually does breed a poorly communicated message. It appears that the process of composing a photo essay is similar to composing an essay. It is in this way that instructors can begin to remediate a discourse that is natural to basic writers in order to teach academic text essay writing style and discourse.

Discovering Core Writing Concepts

Here are two extended examples. A basic writing student who is struggling to understand the importance of clarity of writing style in her writing for the course is given the opportunity to analyze a model photo essay. The essay demonstrates elements of effective writing, but also has some clear weaknesses. She annotates the photo essay this way, and in so doing later composes her own photo essay, and then puts the argument she has made in pictures into words in a traditional academic essay. She is analyzing the visual "prose" language of new media this way, having been asked to make connections from the visual to the textual. Her interpretation of her peer's photo essay, titled "Grey-Blue Eyes," demonstrates understanding:

I like how the student chose to use black and white throughout the photo essay. There's an aesthetic quality to it, like it's from literature. Actually, you know, this is a *Romeo and Juliet* story, isn't it, but on our campus? That's the English Department in the background. There's a student on a bench reading a paper. He looks good, like a sharp graduate student who is waiting to talk to someone, perhaps.

Yes, in the second photo, I can see how the first photo was like an introduction setting up what's to come. There's the sense that not everything you should do in college is read--no, just kidding. But, he puts down the newspaper and is interested in the girl. She's pretending to look away, and sits on the bench, but way on the other side. There's a lot happening here. A lot of info, but even just what kind of shoes they have.

Ah, a conversation ensues. She seems closer to him, open, interested. They're talking about something--I wish I knew what. Not the newspaper, because he's no longer looking there, but maybe "What's your major?" That sort of thing. This is like a story that has moved, subtly but quickly, to the next scene. I can see how there is a transition in between paragraphs or ideas here. Good essays do that--they keep you going. Flow.

You know, the tint of the photo has changed. Maybe that's like tension in the story. I really like this one though. You see, through his eyes, what's going on--some people, maybe her friends, taking her in to English class. She should have skipped. She looks back. She wants to be with him. You almost see it through both of their eyes. Perspective. Yeah, she wants to be with him, like Juliet taken away by her peeps.

Yeah, and here's the "boyfriend." They guy, on the phone not paying attention to her, the guy who is the type of guy her friends think she should go out with. She's clearly not interested. A lot can be told from focus and the little things that are in the picture, like his hat and cell. The lamp just over her head--she's thinking of something, or someone. Everything counts in this picture. That's something important in writing.

Oh, he's back, the guy in the introduction. She see him. He must be getting an MBA. That's the next building over. He's slumming it over in English. Their eyes meet across the yard. I guess that's sincerity. If I had to make a connection to writing here it'd be to say that sometimes there are competing interests, yeah, counter-arguments, and you have to transition and include both viewpoints carefully.

D'oh! Wow, straight to the bedroom. Dang. Yeah, there's a jump there in between photos. Not much transition. Need something else. Buy a girl dinner or something! I like the perspective, though. First you saw her being taken away through his eyes, now you see her coming back, in force, through her eyes. Yeah, typically dorm room. I like that this is believable. Details and, well, I guess, description, are realistic.

Ah, spooning. Don't necessarily need this. We get the picture, so to speak. TMI. He's kind of skinny, anyway. But, I can see how this is a little different--it's like in TV shows where there's a glimpse of people going at it and then they move to something else. They've done the deed in between this picture and the previous one, and we don't need the details. We can complete the thought in our own heads.
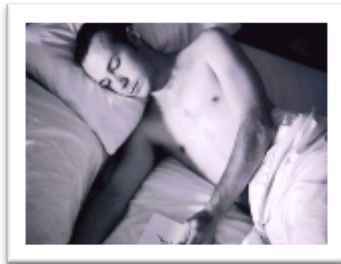
Not sure what's happening here. Oh, it's a note. She left! One-night stand, baby. No, probably said something about how she has a boyfriend, how she's an undergrad and he's a grad or of a different sort of group. Oh yeah, like Shakespearean. Cool shadow. Half, the half with the letter, is dark. Wonder if that's a symbol of something. Wonder what he's reading. Keeps me interested in the story. Keeps it moving. Again, flow.

Holy cow, there's a gun and drugs. Well, not too realistic. We don't have guns on campus like this. But, trying to be like *Romeo and Juliet.* This tells me a story. He was depressed and took drugs, she came back and was in a situation that she couldn't get out of, and used the gun. I see the point. I like how a lot can be read into the scene or the paragraph or whatever. There's a lot going on. Everything counts. Every "word" counts.

The student who composed the photo essay did indeed have *Romeo and Juliet* in mind, but tried to situate it in her school's context. She did not intend for undergraduates and graduates to be the different families in the story, and she did recognize later some of the gaps in between the pictures in terms of transitions that were a little too vague. As Taylor and Saarinen suggest in *Imagologies*, the quotation from the beginning of this essay, there is a *mythos* or mythology to every story and every image that can be thought about in terms of audience awareness, a sort of Aristotelian enthymeme. The syntax of text is embedded into the syllogistic reasoning of the photo essay, but is clearly there. What is foregrounded is a practice of communication rather than an unfamiliar grammatology. By foregrounding images as communicative structures, photo essays can attract students and invite them to consider core rhetorical and stylistic elements that may see more difficult time in a purely print-based essay.

In the second photo essay below, a basic writing student again annotates a peer's photo essay as a method of later developing his own text essay. As he unpacks each photograph, he realizes that the photo essay is using tension to build toward a larger conclusion. The photo essay, titled "The LGBT Community," takes a less direct approach, which causes the peer reviewer some confusion as he annotates. While the student decides the stylistic approach is effective and satisfying at the end of the annotation, some questions remain unanswered. He guesses about the role of the narrator in some of the pictures, and demonstrates other areas of confusion that requires re-envisioning:

Mysterious color and tint. Almost veiled. The angle suggests we are getting an different view—I like the risk. There's a chair, a glass table, and some books stacked on each other. We can read the title of only one of the books. It says *Transgender Child: A Handbook for Families and Professionals*. I'm curious what the essay will be about. I have a feeling that I'm on a journey suddenly. This is clearly an introduction of sorts.

Now we have a mystery figure sitting down at the table. Interesting use of symbolism so far, like a story. We can assume this character is going to be quite important based on where they are sitting in the scene, which still hasn't changed. The cool angle is still around. Tension is building. Tension engages the audience and helps make for an effective arguable thesis statement. I also like that the colors are muted, like tan or something.

Ah, movement! And a picture of our character—sort of. Still building the tension. Makes me wonder, does what our character look like matter? A folder is being opened that says DASH on it. I am not sure what DASH is? I bet that I'm about to find out! I can't read the other letters and signs on the binder/folder, but wish I could. Is that a peace sign? Either way, I can see that we are transitioning toward some point.

I immediately start reading "the certificate of completion for a 7 hour continuing ed conference on clinical practices with gender variant youth and their families." I assume it is the author's name on the certificate. Okay, so our author is trying to show us how all these details fit together. Slowly making connections between paragraphs to get to the bigger picture. Building ethos here.

Aha! DASH-GSA: Gay Straight Alliance. A flash of color! Now we are on to something here. Look at the placement of all the details on the table. So, is this person a member of DASH? A transgender counselor or youth or member of a family? Interesting dialectic stuff. By answering some questions, more are raised and so we keep reading to discover the answers to our new question. Excellent use of tension—still!

Another color picture. Someone clearly assisting someone else. Building on details from previous photos. Lots of essay-ish stuff happening here. I'm starting to see that there is a point. The color photos represent DASH, which are a light in an otherwise dark world. Hoping the author makes their point clearer by the end of the essay.

These people look care free—happy. So we have happiness against a sad background. We see the author's hands as they look over the picture. We see a title on the picture to further solidify the point. Is our author in this picture? This shot is closer up, so I'm thinking so. Another moment of ethos—or perhaps a moment of pathos? The red hat looks suspicious to me.

Back to a wide shot. Another small color photo against the muted color of the large photo. Sort of lighthearted, though. I smiled when I first saw the picture. These people don't look upset—they look happy. Carefree. The wide shot makes me think the author hopes to take a wide view on their sexuality? The author must be struggling

with something, as I'm detecting a pattern. Repetition means pay attention—this is important.
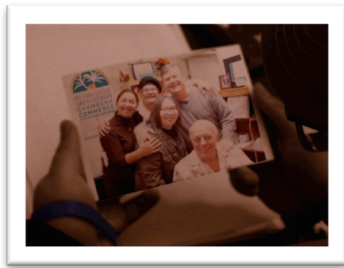
Hmm . . . looks like a family portrait! No more wide view. I'm sure that's on purpose to make us see that this people support each other and are happy—like family. Look at the HOPE bracelet. The smaller color photograph is overtaking the color of the larger photo, as if a decision is now made. The bracelet is like an exclamation point.
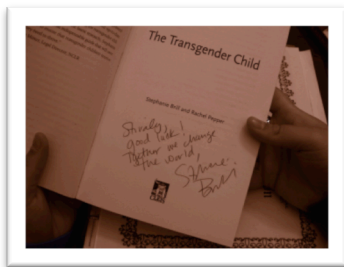
A wish of good luck. The author is looking at these materials for inspiration. I think they are about to go and make some sort of decision maybe? Or have, and are trying to support someone else. Is the author transgender?

And now the author is off. Repetition of the angle again. Makes sense. We see the whole picture now. Each pic shows a step in the process. The world may not understand, but there are people in the world who do this kind of

thing. I don't feel bad for the person or

anything… I'm happy for them. I think that's

what's going on.

Two chairs, HOPE bracelet, two lenses, two

ways of being. Like 2 together as one. The

reflection on the table is a nice touch. Makes me

think that a person doesn't change because they

are transgender. I feel like this was meant to

open my mind somehow. The first slide there is

only one chair, but in the last there are two. This

essay was meant to convince me that transgender

is normal—I get it. I'm a convert.

The main point of the photo essay, according to the student author, is to include actual people in the

discussion of an issue that often reduces people to labels. It seems the student offering peer response

understood most of that point in his annotation, but he struggled to understand the author's role in the

process. Is the author transgender? Does it matter if the author is transgender? The experimentation with

cohesion did seem, however, to make the student engage rather than disengage. From a naturalness

standpoint, it seemed the annotation was more devoted to figuring it all out, rather than simply moving

on. Rightfully so. There seems to be a sense of relief at the end of the annotation. In this way, it seems

clear that using familiar or "natural" media to engage students in the writing process and segue into

academic modes of discourse creates deeper engagement and understanding of rhetoric and style in an

authentic manner.

Conclusion

For instructors teaching rhetoric and style in basic writing composition, exploring multimodal assignments such as photo essays alongside traditional academic discourse is an effective teaching method, and doing so has the potential to prepare students with an agile writing skill set that will prepare them better for the workplace. After all, students composing traditional texts must engage in the same process as students composing multimodal texts, although the latter must also employ a rhetorical view of technological literacy. Using photo essays to teach these skills is one such method to make our students thoughtful producers of many types of discourse.

For instructors teaching rhetoric and style in basic writing composition, assigning multimodal such as photo essays alongside traditional ones is an effective teaching method, and doing so has the potential to prepare students with an agile writing skill set that will prepare them for skills required in the workplace. After all, students composing traditional texts must engage in the same process as students composing multimodal texts, although the latter must employ a rhetorical view of using technology as well, another type of important literacy. Using photo essays to teach these skills is one such method to make our students thoughtful producers of many types of discourse. At the same time, learning to write in traditional genres and styles is still considered a bedrock principle of basic writing instruction. Truly, converging instruction models to teach rhetoric and style includes assigning different texts for different tasks in different situations.

As we continue to develop basic writing curriculum to include more natural media, we must also remain mindful of what Renee Hobbs recently expresses in "Digital and Media Literacy: A Plan of Action," a white paper recommendation report on behalf of the Knight Commission on the Information

Needs of Communities in a Democracy. Hobbs writes about five competencies that empower and support active participation in lifelong learning processes—act, access, analyze and evaluate, create, and reflect (18). The report calls for embedding new media and digital literacy learning *as* learning or *what we embrace* rather than as technology. Photo essays involve some technological literacies, to be sure, but more importantly, they are a literacy practice. What students are doing when they use computers is beyond entertainment, but they need our help to see that. As the report cautions:

> Although children and young people are using digital media, they are not necessarily becoming either smarter or more digitally literate. Novel forms of digital technologies may actually widen the achievement gap by offering potent time-consuming distractions that interfere with homework and other activities. We must not confuse just owning technology, playing video games, or using online social networks with having the habits of mind, knowledge, skills and competencies needed to be successful in the 21st century. As the Duke University study showed, computers at home are used primarily as an entertainment device unless an active, learning-oriented approach is cultivated. (51)

An active learning environment, such as one produced by composing a photo essay, allows for development of digital and written literacies, not for mere novel gain. Rather, the photo essay can serve as a form of engagement, a call for active learning, and a lens for studying rhetoric and style that can shape a course for an entire semester.

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