

## POWERPOINT REFLECTION AND RE-VISIONING IN TEACHING COMPOSITION

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### **Introduction: the Raw Power of Visual Literacy**

Students in today's society are highly refined consumers and critics of visual culture, able to read images more fluently than text. When teaching freshman composition I am impressed by students' ability to glean complex concepts, themes, emotions, and ideas from popular cultural works as disparate as television dramas, reality shows and comedies, movies and music videos. Students' insights, ideas, and investment in the content of the class often seem more intense than their interest in their grades. They sometimes see their writing as a nuisance, an impediment to their enjoyment and exploration of the content. When I get their first written work, their ability to express the analysis that they share in class is often limited by skill-set shortcomings. Students often come in on the first day barely aware of argumentation, organization or analysis not to mention the rules of grammar. Compositional, organizational, and linguistic shortcomings often derail expression of students' intended meanings. However, this is not to say that they were not reading or thinking well; on the contrary, they proved sophisticated "readers" and cultural critics. It occurred to me that a substantial number of the better in-class comments were pop-culture related, mostly movie, television, or advertising analogies, all of which are, partly or wholly, visual media. This observation, plus my own interest in visual popular culture, made me look for a way to use this affinity to teach writing and critical thinking in the classroom. But, how can faculty leverage students' cultural and visual literacy to improve their insight, reflection, and composition skills?

Composition instructors have an uphill task reconciling text and images as modes of discourse and subjects to be "read." Critics such as Hill, Prensky, Gee and Carter debate whether students are visually literate or not. Are students, as Hill would have it, passive receptacles for visual culture, blindly accepting terabytes of content and barely conscious of the vocabulary, meaning or grammar of the visual maelstrom in which they're situated? Or are they Prensky's "digital natives," "students [who] think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors," and subtle consumers of what Gee calls the "multimodal texts?"<sup>1</sup> (Prensky, Gee 17-18). Charles Hill argues "most students who enter the university [are] unable to articulate how visual messages work" (126). I disagree; I think students, bombarded by images and media have a highly developed, *albeit inchoate*, understanding of visual and "multimodal texts." By simultaneously teaching visual literacy and composition, we can use these embedded skills to

improve writing. The “outline collage lesson” I developed enables freshman composition students to use their visual literacy to enhance their writing skills.

Illustrating reverse outlines allows students to use their visual literacy to critically improve their essays. The students attach one image to their title, thesis and each topic sentence –the accepted components of outlining and argumentation. With these inserted pictures, they double-check the reasoning and structure of their essays. The visual component forces them to examine their written line of thinking, ultimately improving their essays. Recasting their compositions into visual media, the *lingua franca* of popular culture, these students shift their ideas to a realm with which they are more familiar. And translating their own writing into images and critiquing those “multimodal texts” offers an opportunity to teach “principles about how visual messages work” (Hill 126). This article describes how I use visual literacy to help students improve their critical analysis and illustrates how this act of visual reflection enhances students’ writing skills. I also provide an example of the evolution of one student’s work and the possible outcomes of this exercise.

In our technologically and socially complex culture, we employ a wide array of critical skills simply to survive and navigate life. Students, in particular, bring to the act of composition highly refined skills and literacies that are rarely encouraged or rewarded in the classroom. They bring unrecognized literacies like class consciousness, consumer prowess, not to mention young adult sarcasm, irony, and competitive put-downs, all of which are assets in today’s world. Yet in order to navigate in an academic environment, students often have to leave at the door many of their sharpest critical thinking skills. Unglamorous as it may be, a significant portion of our society’s learning occurs in malls, at supermarkets, at our mother’s hip, playing dolls and computer games, watching TV, and reading signage. Students’ ability to understand signs, sense power, think critically, and control desire is not innate or natural. Much of it is learned in a series of basically nonverbal “languages.” Literacy or fluency in these languages is required for students to successfully decode the world around them.

### **Re-visioning the Foundations of the Writing Classroom**

Alas, few of these nonverbal ways of learning are incorporated into the composition classroom. While teaching college writing, educators often privilege inherited interpretive and communication skills: the way things have always been done. Perhaps some of us were already better assimilated into the academic world when we learned to use these skills of critical thinking and cultural criticism for interpretive and argumentative papers. I was taught to teach in the way that I (as a successful student) learned to learn. I was not taught how to teach that other student, the unskilled or un-enthusiastic pupil. Our institutions reward students who replicate our own academic learning patterns, leaving uncultivated the popular-culture inspired skills of today’s writers. Yet the “Stanford Study of Writing” compiled by Andrea Lunsford and available on the Web suggests that students are more prolific in their recreational social writing than students of previous generations (Thompson). Their social writing is linked to their daily consumption of visual culture. Our task, as educators, is to teach people who write voluminously and are

sophisticated thinkers in their own right how to compose college papers in a style that the more slowly evolving academy understands.

Society and popular culture seem to be working at cross-purposes with the academic system. While school privileges reflection, thought, adjustment, and revision, popular culture, driven by stimulating technological platforms, encourages decisive spontaneity. Ironically, it is those students who shelve this nonacademic spontaneity who often thrive in school. But, as Steven Johnson has shown, the societal/academic divide is not a simple dichotomy. Johnson's claim is that modern "culture is getting more intellectually demanding, not less" (9). In fact, it is because of the very complexity of our society, economy, and technologies that "economics, narrative theory, social network analysis, [and] neuroscience" are put in service of the hierarchy-establishing gaming skills and protocols that shape social behavior and adult skill sets (Johnson 11). Johnson argues, and I agree, that "pop culture [has become] a kind of cognitive workout" that we, as teaching academics, would be remiss in not building upon (14). The car-stealing, alien-killing, domination/power-craving consumer-student, for example, negotiates this world using critical thinking skills that were unimaginable in the more hierarchical, rigid, moral "because I said so" world of previous generations. It could even be argued that the online consumer who can buy clothes and appliances using an iPhone – that was itself bought and accessorized online – is technologically and administratively more adept than a doctoral candidate had to be in the 1980s. Johnson charts how everything from *Sesame Street* to multi-player on-line role-playing games and back to situation comedies and TV dramas, all provide and demand increased cultural literacy when compared to the culture, media and even books of previous eras. Today's student writers (broadly defined and with large variations) are more adept because they are "culturally enmeshed" in a new society with more technology-inspired valences and complexities than previous societies (Prensky). The use of visual imagery for reflection, it turns out, draws on the full palette of student skills developed in dialogue with the commercial consumer disciplines of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to improve composition and learning.

That said, there are skills that are fundamental to a clear argumentative or expository essay that seem to escape today's "new pupil." The traditional structures for college essays that I cannot imagine forgoing are the thesis and outline. Since the academy, as constituted, "prefers" theses I feel obligated to try to teach this technique. Today's writers, used to a less formal Web 2.0 style of persuasion, argument and explication, can benefit by adopting the thesis-driven outline-intensive form of composition. For better or worse I usually look for the argument embedded – whether explicitly or implicitly – in a piece of writing. I was taught and I teach that the introduction should end on "a single sentence that formulates both ... topic and ... point of view" (Modern 42). A more baroque description of this main idea, or thesis, is found in *Keys for Writers*: a "statement of opinion, main idea, or message that unifies your piece of writing, makes a connection between you and the subject area, lets your reader know where you stand in relation to the topic, and responds to the question posed" (Raimes 19). While there are innumerable variations on the thesis-driven paper, college essays in the United States, for the most part, begin

with an argument and go on to support this thesis in any of a number of ways.<sup>2</sup> My goal in the classroom is to conscript the visual critical thinking skills of the “culturally enmeshed” writer in service of structured, argumentative, thesis/outline-driven papers.

### **Reverse Outline Collage and Essay Revision: Overview**

The following exercise taps into visually-acquired learning or expertise to help leverage the pre-existing abilities of student writers. The students take their papers, graded drafts, and strip them down to their argumentative components: title, thesis sentence, and topic sentences. The text of these reverse outlines are supplemented with their images that illustrate their position. By inserting images and making them co-equal in the text, students transform their written work into a document that is much more complex in form. As James Gee remarks in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*, “[i]n such *multimodal* texts (texts that mix words and images), ... the images often communicate different things from the words. Further, the combination of the two modes communicates in ways that neither of the modes does separately” (17-18). Students create a multimodal “collage document” of their reverse outline. With the layered and multiple-literacies work produced from this exercise, they can use the intellectual muscles strengthened by popular culture to sharpen their argumentation. The slide-show exercise augments and relies on writers’ critical eye or skills to critique popular culture and use a personal perspective to validate and reinforce their analytical skills. This exercise helps student writers to transfer their ideas onto the written page.

Reverse outline slideshows work by drawing on the writers' own “vernacular literacies”<sup>3</sup> and skills in service of college writing. It is particularly aimed at helping students overcome their resistance to revision and reflection of preliminary drafts. Rather than traumatically returning them to the scene of the crime (their papers covered with red ink), this activity works instead to refocus their energy and asks them to think back to what matters: the development of their argument and analysis. Replacing the prose with images allows them to visualize their argument in a way that is more natural, since it isn’t written. The injection of visual content aside the written text destabilizes the traditional rules for reading, allowing multiple interpretations or wider readings of an essay. Modifying the medium of communication from “edited college English” to a mixture of words and images moves the essay's content onto a leveled playing field of hybrid popular culture where today’s students have more familiarity and confidence. The pop-culture vernacular, the language of the “digital everyman,” gives the student writer/editor a sense of expertise that can be used to effectively revise his/her essay.

### **Outline Collage “Slideshow” and Essay Revision: Social Practice in the Classroom**

Since “social practice” is essential to any kind of literacy, a useful phase of this lesson is group work and performance. It is important to remember that, as Brian V. Street has argued, “literacy

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2 One of my former students from China disputed this model, explaining that in China this method was seen as “vulgar;” the Chinese model, according to this student, laid out all of the “proofs” and evidence and “concluded with an irrefutable and elegant thesis.”

[...] is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill; that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles” (qtd. in Carter 2). Images, bonded with text, reviewed in class groups and presented before the class, create a social context in which groups of writers can better understand and discuss their content and argumentation. Shannon Carter discusses how the hierarchy of “literacies” that privileges “literacy-as-universal-standard model” ignores the “‘other,’ ‘vernacular,’ or ‘marginalized’ literacies” that students and writers have not been encouraged to understand and interpret critically because of these literacies’ pop-cultural status (16). By “translating” the text of students’ work into a visual language in which they are more fluent, the outline-collage or slide-show exercise enables critical reflection. As Carter would have it, replacing prose with images “challenge[s] the artificial binary between the ‘literate’ and the ‘non-literate’ [and the student] begins to understand literacy itself as an activity system” (19).

The use of photography, formatting, and word art in place of prose is in an attempt to move students’ presentation of ideas out of the realm of college composition and into the realm of visual popular culture. First, students create *Microsoft Word* versions of their outline-collage slideshows by replacing the prose of their papers with images: one sentence and one image per page. This step allows writers to explore their nontraditional and undervalued “literacies” –what Carter has called “rhetorical dexterities” or the ability to be culturally or semiotically multilingual (19). I ask them to review their outlines and representative images in groups or pairs. In almost all cases the peer suggestions modified the original student presentation and subsequent paper revision. The later student example reveals how composition collages can unmask hidden meaning and expose deeper understandings and intentions. The modifications suggested by classmates teach all concerned how to create and improve the “multimodal” compositions. In my experience, the ability of students to “show and tell” their ideas to a group far outperforms their skill at sitting alone at a computer and writing their ideas in conventional text. Thus a public, social and in-class component is useful, and perhaps essential.

The slide-show exercise uses students’ visual literacy and expertise to engage their pre-existing abilities in the act of composition. While often unarticulated and under-examined, students do have a sense of the visual rhetoric. Using and refining this skill, we can also teach students “the visual aspects [embedded in] written texts” through formatting, metaphor and simile, with which they can “develop an accurate understanding of the nature of rhetorical practice” in writing assignments (Hill 127). When they “show it” rather than “say it,” students have access to a critical sense that they often lack in exclusively written work. The “multimodal” texts they create resemble signs, billboards or advertisements which are a more familiar and common rhetorical form.

After this first reflective activity, students finalize their work by transferring it to their *PowerPoint* slideshows, determining how to order and reorder text and images in different sequences. The advantage of the *PowerPoint* is that it is an “on-screen” media that ‘moves’ before their eyes replicating the media they consume in their daily lives. They learn, using “animation” sequencing in the slideshow, how the implied meaning can change radically

depending on whether the image precedes the text or vice versa. An image of a tranquil ocean horizon before the words, “Keira, who moved from China, is worse off,” takes much of the foreboding away from that sentence, whereas, reversed, it heightens the anxiety. There are also numerous digital embellishments that can be used to modify, nuance, or reverse meaning without changing the content. As Gee points out, often a “multimodal text ... will contain information not fully explicated in the words of the text itself” (17). Thus, student writers deepen their composition in a familiar language that will eventually reappear in the form of edited college English. As students experiment with style and sequencing, they begin to understand the importance of organization and order of topic sentences as it relates to the overall argument of an essay.

In summary, this exercise adapts student writers' culturally and socially supported visual and popular culture strengths in service of teaching the traditional norms of composition argumentation. Students today are primed by culture to respond in surprisingly complex ways to the stimuli and demands of our society. The job of a college essay, as inherited, is to enlist a critical response in service of an academic investigation that parses, analyzes, and comments upon the phenomena or culture in a fashion that synchronizes, jibes, or meshes with established college discourse. The aim of this exercise is to expand this compositional form allowing students to keep their native “colors,” or critical thinking skills, vibrant in the “industrial washing machine” of contemporary society or popular culture. While at the same time, the students’ papers remain true to the inherited structures of the college essay: thesis and topic sentences. By drawing upon students’ “vernacular literacies” to replace the rhetorical weaknesses evident in their preliminary drafts, this exercise boosts student engagement, confidence, and competence.

### **PowerPoint and Essay Revision: Reflection and the Transformation of Identity**

Other benefits of this exercise are suggested by the surprising epiphany that one of my students achieved when he illustrated his outline. His paper, when transformed and peer edited, yielded this slideshow outline:

#### **Main Idea [with original text in brackets]**

“The Lives of Immigrants: Keira, who moved from China is worse off than the family and friends and friends she left back in China because she loses her core essence in exchange for financial opportunities.”

[Originally “Keira, who moved from China, is worse off.”]

#### **Image**



(The Way of Life in China)  
 “Keira enjoys her country’s life-style, but going to America causes her to lose her heritage”



“Her Core Essence is Lost: Keira feels like a domesticated animal moving to America, therefore she is going into something unfamiliar causing her to lose her Chinese essence.”  
 [Originally: “Her Core Essence is Lost: Keira feels like a domesticated Animal”]



The act of revising these three sentences (which actually collapse the title and thesis onto one page) not only improved upon the original paper, but also clarified the anxiety that the student felt as the images he chose suggested that he himself was not happy with his life in the United States. Though his presentation was ostensibly about a friend, reflecting upon the images he chose, made this student aware of his own hidden feelings. He came to understand that he now felt like an exotic ornament in America, similar to the Western celebrities in the posters in the second slide. Although he had originally chosen the image from the Internet after being struck by the odd juxtaposition of a person in a monk’s robe with western sports stars and a basketball, this student came to realize that his thesis was actually more profound and personal than he had originally imagined. “The Way of Life in China,” which was a title added to explain the image, began the line of reasoning that led him to his epiphany about himself. Thus, the use of and reflection upon the images moved the “semiotic domain” out of the world of college assignments and into the student’s inner world. As Prensky puts it in “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants,” many of our students are “‘native speakers’ of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet” and as such are often “literate” in a language we “digital immigrants” are learning (Prensky). By reflecting on the images he had chosen, this student was able to understand his thesis in a more complex manner and fully develop his thoughts. The revised draft of his paper, its “re-visioning,” was more thoughtful and vastly improved conceptually.

This student’s first body paragraph was originally a description of the conditions of his friend’s life in America:

Keira, who moved from China is worst off than the family and friends she left back in China because she cannot speak Chinese and she is made fun of at movie theater she works at. Her manager makes her say “hurry” and then laughs at her when she say “hully.” Keira does not like this but she needs the job for money.

When he added it to the picture and spoke about it, he modified it because he began to understand that Keira's English skills were a symptom of a bigger problem. While she does need the money, and the treatment is humiliating, the real issue surfaced in the revised slide-show I have included: "'The Lives of Immigrants[:]' Keira, who moved from China is worse off than the family and friends and friends she left back in China because she loses her core essence in exchange for financial opportunities." The act of revision and reflection also corrected some grammatical mistakes, but I think re-reading would have also caught these. The conceptual leap came when he examined his prose in contrast to, or reflected in, the internet images that he selected.

This student's visual illustration and representation of his paper was key to his ability to successfully learn the skills of college composition. Students' self-selection of images foregrounds and validates their "semiotic domains." Inclusion of nonstandard, non-college literacies validates students as people with abilities and proficiencies that traditional pedagogy can sometimes overlook. In turn, this validation encourages the students to confidently reaffirm their commitment to their studies. Gee has observed, and my experience supports, that

all deep learning—that is, active, critical learning—is inextricably caught up with identity in a variety of ways. People cannot learn in a deep way within a semiotic domain if they are not willing to commit themselves fully to the learning in terms of time, effort, and active engagement. Such a commitment requires that they are willing to see themselves in terms of a new identity, that is, to see themselves as the *kind of person* who can learn, use, and value the new semiotic domain. In turn, they need to believe that, if they are successful learners in the domain, they will be valued and accepted by others committed to that domain. (54)

The student who wrote about "Keira" was no longer the struggling student. He had jettisoned the "identity" of the English language learner and become the critical thinker who could comment on his former identities in a college course. This is not to say that he suddenly wrote an A paper, but the insights gained from this exercise translated into a stronger composition piece. He imported the abilities from his personal/cultural and more familiar visual environment and transferred them into the composition classroom and started to see himself, his papers, and his projects as "able." He adopted the identity of a critical thinker, cultural critic, and college writer by integrating the *PowerPoint* assignment into his own "semiotic domain." This epiphany or transition would not have been possible had the class not validated and investigated his "non-standard," "vernacular" or "marginalized" literacy.

### **Conclusion: "Re-visioned" Writing, Deepened Thinking**

In my experience most students do not know how to revise papers, they merely correct the grammar. They do not know how to check their papers' line of argument or sense of unity and coherence. However, this exercise, the students' use of images to hybridize text in a preliminary draft, has them revise their work in a new way and strengthens their final compositions. The students' active engagement in "re-visioning" their papers, rather than the usual "copy edit," deepens student thinking. This enhancement occurs on three levels. First, it improves the



understanding of the components of a college essay. When the topic sentence is separated out and coupled with the image, its function in the structure of both the paper and the paragraph become clearer. Second, the very act of retrofitting the thesis and topics as signs, as well as changing the font, format and orientation and looking at it as a consumer might – has students consider audience, message and aim. Third, replacing confused prose with images helps writers better understand the particular arguments of their paper. Reflecting upon the images they select and considering the order of image and text, helps them realize if they have left some idea unarticulated. Pairing the topic sentences with an image generally clarifies the intended meaning of the paragraphs and thus the paper. And, sometimes, as the case with the student of the aforementioned paper, it discloses hidden meaning. Thus, this act of “re-visioning” student prose into images produces better student writing.

A more important outcome of this exercise is improved student insight and understanding of the reason for college papers in the first place. Beyond the promotion of written communication skills, college composition is a tool that has an additional dual function: to facilitate learning and to assess it. The structured review of the ideas in a paper and the transmission of these ideas through images provides insights regarding the creative process. Student writers thus begin to see themselves as scholars who create new meaning in the college classroom. By taking a step back, away from the “literacy-as-universal-standard model” (edited college English), and valuing their “vernacular [visual] literacies” students improve their critical thinking and compositional skills (Carter 16). The student who wrote about his friend, “Keira,” exemplifies the noticeable increase in student engagement, critical thinking, and improved fluency of student writing that this exercise provides. This exercise facilitates the most important goal: the integration of composition, critical-thinking, and academic skills into a common project that unites the domains of the academy and popular culture, to transform students into scholars. Supplementing the written word with visual images enables students to not only deepen their thinking and writing skills, but also gives them a language, a literacy, to successfully navigate the academic world.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> James Paul Gee remarks in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*, “[i]n such *multimodal* texts (texts that mix words and images), ... the images often communicate different things from the words. Further, the combination of the two modes communicates in ways that neither of the modes does separately” (17-18).

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<sup>3</sup> Shannon Carter discusses how the hierarchy of “literacies” that privileges “literacy-as-universal-standard model” ignores the “‘other,’ ‘vernacular,’ or ‘marginalized’ literacies” that students and writers have not been encouraged to understand and interpret critically because of these literacies’ pop-cultural status (16).

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