

Kuhio Walters

Review: *ix:visualizingcomposition*

Review of an On-line Student Resource:

Ball, Cheryl E. and Kristin L. Arola. *ix: visualizing composition*. 2nd edition. Bedford/St.

Martin's Press, 2011. Web. 26 April 2011.

<http://ix.bedfordstmartins.com/>

ix: visualizing composition 2.0 (or just *ix*, as Bedford/St. Martin's often refers to it), by Cheryl Ball and Kristin Arola, is an online student resource that serves as a practical, interactive guide to multimodal composing, focusing especially on the ways video, sound, still images, and alphabetic literacy combine meaningfully in hypertext environments.

The main page of *ix* (the first page students see after logging on to the publisher's website) has a refreshingly clear, minimalist look. Centered on a blue background is a white rectangular frame, and within that frame are thirteen squares, spaced evenly from each other in three rows. Each of these squares is a cropped image from within the tutorials themselves. There is very little writing on the main page other than the caption beneath each image-square. These one-word captions represent the thirteen fundamental concepts addressed by *ix*: **Alignment, Audience, Color, Context, Contrast, Element, Emphasis, Framing, Organization, Proximity, Purpose, Sequence, and Text**. (Side-note: the first version of *ix* had, as you might have guessed, only nine tutorials, but the Roman numeral has persisted in the title. It was originally named *ix visual exercises*.) Though these thirteen concepts are presented alphabetically and in

rows, suggesting a kind of hierarchy or linearity, the actual order in which you might click any of them is fairly open and undetermined. The user is asked to “Select a tutorial below,” but when you first visit the page you will probably start moving according to whim, as I quickly did, to the tutorials that seem most interesting.

Inside any given tutorial, however, there is a more guided movement through the information, since each of the thirteen tutorials is broken into three steps: Define, Analyze, and Respond. Thus, in order to fully engage the final step (“Respond,” which is the equivalent of an end-of-chapter assignment), the definitions and analytical strategies established earlier need to be understood. There is still room for free movement (there are links for the three steps at the top of each page, so moving back and forth between them is simple and apparently encouraged), but there is also the distinct feeling, not unlike that sensed in a traditional, “paper-born” textbook chapter, that each tutorial has a linear trajectory—you encounter the definition of the concept, see it used in an expert way, then practice using it yourself. Students can even email their written and visually-designed responses to their teacher at the end of each section.

This multi-tiered organizational scheme—the free mobility of the main page and the increased structure within the tutorials—offers enough guidance to make using *ix* a meaningful learning experience, and enough freedom of choice to make navigating the site a fresh approach to knowledge making. Of course, this is one of the unique affordances of hypertext technologies, as the authors discuss in their “Proximity” tutorial. One of the sample texts analyzed there is Ball’s solely digital, edited collection *The New Work of Composing*. The focus is the book’s cover, on how its various colors and lines interact visually with each other, but especially on the fact that there are two ways to see the book’s Table of Contents (TOC): Stacked or Scattered. Either can be clicked

by the user. The stacked TOC “presents the book's chapters in a linear, sequential format, from top to bottom on the screen. Each chapter is positioned with equal visual spacing above it, so that all chapters appear related to each other,” whereas the scattered TOC “presents the book's chapters in an interactive, non-sequential format. It allows readers to choose the organization of the book based on themes”

(<http://ix.bedfordstmartins.com/proximity/A5.htm>). The designers/authors of *ix* have taken great care to weave a variety of paths through it, so that the user can participate in constructing the meaning of the learning experience, even as she learns what the media and technology are capable of.

These formal, multi-mediated features of *ix* truly defamiliarize, in the best sense of that term, the work and materials of the writing classroom. They each pose a playful but serious challenge to conventional understandings of how and where meaning takes shape. But the formal activities of *ix* would be little more than technical exercises if not for the content of each lesson. Each of *ix*'s thirteen lessons comments on, both implicitly and explicitly, social problems that exist within, and because of, our society's forms of mass media and communication.

The lesson titled “Organization,” for instance, shows us a sequence of photographs, taken from Lauren Greenfield's photo essay *Girl Culture* (excerpted from *Time* magazine), which demonstrates the inseparable link between form and content. On one hand, the designers of *ix* walk us through the photo series to provide a clear sense of how its formal organization creates a visual argument. On the other hand, these images are of real girls dealing with very real anxieties about femininity and the body in society, social problems that are palpable in the series. As one of the captions for the images states, Greenfield's series “tells a story about how girls are socialized to

think, look, and act—and what the consequences might be for those girls.” In other words, the form of the photo essay, how it is edited and organized, produces a visual argument about girlhood in America—these images draw out into the open, question, and criticize the “sexualized identity” that young women and girls are encouraged to passively adopt in our society. When the authors of *ix* challenge the user to “flip through the images [and] ask yourself whether putting these images in a different order would make a different argument,” they suggest that the formal properties of the scene have been mediated by not always benevolent social forces, and that the social content of our lives requires sophisticated formal, technological, and multimodal strategies of engagement. It is here, where it encourages the user to navigate the blurry space between form and content, and between aesthetics and politics, that I think *ix* does its most important work.

I have two concerns that don’t decrease *ix*’s value for writing teachers but that merit attention. First, considering that both Ball and Arola are deeply involved with innovative theorizations and uses of new media (e.g., Ball is editor of *Kairos*), I had expected a wider range of sample texts. A number of images, videos, and one audio file are repeated between tutorials. However, it can be argued that this repetition serves the function of demonstrating how one text has multiple formal features and can accommodate a variety of critical approaches. (Furthermore, securing royalty-free images can be a challenge for a text like *ix*, as the cost per image for electronic media can be exorbitant.) It also might be the case, of course, that my desire to be shown more images, to see more that is new and innovative in the universe of multimedia design, is misplaced. Only so much can be asked of a single textbook, after all.

My second concern—I suppose it is more of a veiled hope—is about the role of

digital books like *ix* on the overall scene of course design. Bedford/St. Martin's markets *ix* as a premium online item to be either packaged free with one of its (paper-copy) composition textbooks or purchased directly from the publisher's website. This suggests, at least implicitly, that it is designed to be supplemental. What reading through the thirteen tutorials makes me hope for, though, is a moment when our field can see texts like *ix* as fundamental for teaching writing and perhaps even curricular design—that is, as key forms of cultural engagement, analysis, and design in our writing programs. It wouldn't be out of place, for example, for *ix* to include a formal approach to assigning multimedia texts, or to suggest explicit criteria for assessing and evaluating them.

I hope that these concerns cast into relief the timeliness and necessity of *ix*. Its exercises utilize the affordances of numerous media technologies, unpacking the diverse field of play that is contemporary communication. I see it as a powerful tool for undergraduate courses in composition, either to accompany a paper text (*ix* can be packaged cost-free with most of the publisher's titles) or, for around twelve dollars, as a standalone guide to multimodal analysis and design.

Kuhio Walters

Kuhio Walters is an Assistant Professor of English at West Chester University.