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Making Meaning, Visibly: “Writing” and “Reading” Image Essays

In the quiet, darkened classroom, students and their teacher view a series of projected images. Andrew, standing, a remote in hand, glances from the screen to his classmates and back again to the projected images. As his brief slide show concludes, Andrew’s classmates look away from the screen and transfer their attention to iPads and paper handouts on their desks. They write short notes, stop to consider a thought or idea, look back at their iPads, and write again. After a few more silent moments Angela asks, “Can we talk yet?” and Andrew looks expectantly at the teacher. “No, not yet,” she responds, and they continue, heads bent, alternately writing and checking their iPads, as Andrew paces. Soon, though, another student breaks the silence: “It’s saying that . . .”

As longtime teachers of secondary English, we know that reading is active and requires both a reader and a text to create meaning. We’ve found that students, though, often come to English 10 believing one of two things: First, that reading—any kind of text—is about uncovering a single, correct meaning coded in the words on a page. Many students think that their role as readers is to discover that meaning, not contribute to or affect it. A smaller number of the students we’ve worked with—often some of our most avid readers—care passionately about the original meanings they make as they read. They want to defend those meanings just as passionately, even when there is little in the story, play, or poem to support them.

Yet as we study literary works in high school, we challenge students to give us their commentary, analysis, and interpretation. Sometimes we do so without adequately helping them understand that reading literary texts requires practices that differ from those they use when reading in other subject areas, and even differ from those they use when reading informational texts, such as reports, in English class. When we’ve asked for higher level, critical engagement with literary texts, many students have opted for a passive stance, waiting for the strongest readers in the class, the teacher, or a study aid to deliver the “deep” meaning they think we’re after. It seems, too, that commentary, analysis, and interpretation are especially challenging because these words imply the expression of a student’s ideas about a literary text that are authentically a student’s own. Often, though, the ideas our students believe are most valid are those that originated outside of their interpretations.

Recently we set ourselves the challenge of focusing our heterogeneously grouped tenth-grade students’ attention not only on the features embedded in a text but also on the transaction (Rosenblatt, Literature, The Reader) they make with a work when they actively read it. We wanted them to value and think about what happened “off the page” as they read as well as what was written on it. We aimed to help them see that the study of literature—an art form—includes exploring different perspectives, sensitivity to others’ interpretations, developing convincing arguments, and contributing to the understandings of others (Langer).

To model and practice this we did what might at first seem counterintuitive: For several lessons in each of several units over a semester, we removed the written texts from the transaction.

The authors challenged a group of mixed-ability tenth-grade students to use complex, evocative images and class discussion to “see” how readers make meaning with literary texts.
To focus students' attention on what happens “off the page,” we replaced the worded, linguistic texts with nonverbal texts, or images. This allowed us to use texts—in these cases, texts without words—that we could put on a stage, so to speak, in front of our students and, in a way, freeze the actors so we could look carefully at them, their characteristics, and their relationships to each other. Then we could discuss how, as individuals and as a class, we were transacting with these elements to make meaning with what we were seeing.

As we embarked on this journey, we asked ourselves whether this approach would take valuable time away from students’ reading of linguistic texts, particularly in light of the pressures of standardized, high-stakes testing. We believed, though, that using nonverbal texts would be a particularly effective teaching tool. As Marjorie Siegel states in “Rereading the Signs: Multimodal Transformations in the Field of Literacy Education,” “language arts education can no longer ignore the way that our social, cultural, and economic worlds now require facility with texts and practices involving the full range of representational modes” (65). Restricting our conception of texts for meaning-making in ELA to only linguistic texts seemed unnecessarily narrow and limiting. We agreed with Siegel’s observation that using visual texts as a tool can position even struggling readers as agents in the processes of making meaning with texts generally. We also considered the idea that “reading” visual texts is a critical component of literacy, consistent with the NCTE Resolution on Composing with Nonprint Media (NCTE). Finally, we felt strongly that nontraditional forms of media should not be seen as an “opposing force to the traditional goal and nature of the English classroom,” but rather that these different modes “allow students to examine life and learning through a different lens” (Gerber and Price 68). Comfortable that we were exploring defensible territory, we moved forward.

Seeing How We Make Meaning

As we taught literary, linguistic texts throughout the semester, two criteria served as the foundation for the meaning-making practices we asked
students to employ: For a reading to be “valid,” we told students, the reader’s interpretation cannot be contradicted by any element of the text, and nothing can be asserted for which there is no basis in the text (Rosenblatt, The Reader 115). Beyond this, we told them, in our classes, meaning was theirs to make. Questions such as “What does this mean to you?” and “What, in the text, makes you say so?” guided our work with linguistic texts, and so we then asked the same questions throughout the semester about various images that we examined as texts as well.

For the image essay project, we asked the students not to read a visual text first, but to create one. We didn’t want them to forget, though, about the criteria we’d established for a valid reading (what the students began calling “Rosenblatt’s Rules”) or the transaction that develops when the perceiver and the text meet. In other words, we wanted the students to think about an audience and about how members of that audience might make meaning with what they wrote—or composed—with pictures.

We undertook this project in conjunction with our reading of The Kite Runner. With the image essay, we were not only seeking an innovative way to help students engage with the novel. The image essays provided us original, nonverbal texts that we could use to involve students in a process of interpretation—one that would take place in class, in “real time”—and that would be simultaneously visible to all in a way that isn’t possible with linguistic texts. To accomplish this, we first taught the novel in fairly traditional ways and then used it as a source of topics for students’ image essays. We then came to the focus of this article: We used those image essays as our texts for analysis. Students in the class became an audience and “read” their peers’ image essays together, employing “Rosenblatt’s Rules” as they shared their thoughts and built upon the thoughts of their classmates.

Creating the Texts

As the class examined the novel through familiar formats (quizzes, group discussions, quickwrites), we encouraged students to note parts of the novel that they found interesting from either a literary or a cultural perspective. A literary topic might include the use of a symbol or motif or the development of a theme or character. A cultural topic might pertain to the sport of kite running or life under foreign occupation or under the Taliban. As we completed the novel, students chose topics for their image essays. Then they considered the occurrences and the effects of a literary element they chose; or, in the case of a cultural topic, they researched that topic. When the students became more expert in their chosen topics, they developed their thesis statements.

After students arrived at their theses, they began composing their image essays. Each essay was to be comprised of ten slides, each containing an image or images—photos, artwork, clipart, and/or original artwork. Only the title slide could include words, and those words were to suggest the topic of the image essay but were not to state the creator’s thesis. We encouraged students to think of the image essay as a whole, emphasizing that the visuals could work together—that is, the order of the images or situating two particular images adjacent to each other could help their audience create meaning. In sum, we asked students to focus on the organization of their images, the qualities in and diversity of their images, and the clarity of their theses. These three areas helped guide students as they created their image essays. Later, these areas also gave audience members lenses through which to view and transact with the image essays, helping them to think about and comment on the essays presented to them.

The only “catch,” we explained to our skeptical tenth graders, was that during the presentations of their image essays the creators were not to speak; the image essays were to speak for themselves. In discussing this with students, we made the connection between this and the position authors are in when they write. The writing must speak for itself, without the author coaching the reader through the text. The presenting student would suggest his or her intended thesis to the audience via the essay’s title slide and through the images following it. The
collection of images, including the sequence their creator chose for them, would then serve as a text. Their classmates—their text’s audience—would engage with that text to make meaning. When we teach writing, much as we were doing here, we ask students, What decisions would you make differently if you need your work to stand for itself?

During the next several days of class we met in the computer lab, and students gathered images (including sources for attribution); discussed with each other possible interpretations of visuals they were considering for their essays; and agreed—without prompting from us—not to come too close to another classmate’s topic or to use the same images. As students developed their essays, our emphasis remained on the meaning-making process. The spotlight was not on their product (though we did remind them of the three criteria we wanted to guide them: organization of their images, the qualities in and diversity of their images, and the clarity of their theses). Rather, we wanted students to experience the process of trying to create a message through the use of visual images, keeping in mind an audience that would try to interpret it. The conversation that would take place as classmates considered the series of images before them, much more than the physical essay itself, was the “product” we were after.

Technical Support Provided by Google Docs and iPads

During each of the presentations and in the quiet moments immediately following, we wanted students to write their responses to the image essays. A technical assist was provided via the use of a class set of iPads. Prior to the presentation date, we had students upload their presentations on Google Docs. This was to facilitate the give-and-take among audience, text, and author during the presentations and discussions. In class, then, in addition to viewing the image essays projected in the front of the room, students could view the uploaded presentations at their desks with the iPads, moving between slides at their own pace, zooming in to observe details, and making connections swiftly between images as they wrote and then interacted with their classmates as they created meanings.

We also provided handouts to help guide their responses (see Figure 1). Rather than asking

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**FIGURE 1. The Kite Runner Image Essay:**

**Peer Review Notes**

Directions: For each presentation, as you view the slides and then listen to and participate in the discussion, make notes in one area on this sheet (image qualities, organization, or thesis). You will switch concentration areas for each presentation. Then add general notes after you have heard the creator’s explanation. These notes will help you give concrete and constructive feedback to your peers when you leave comments for them about their presentation on the site tonight.

NAME of PRESENTER:

MY THOUGHTS ON PRESENTATION:

MY COMMENTS ON ORGANIZATION:

Notes taken after hearing from presenter:

NAME of PRESENTER:

THOUGHTS ON PRESENTATION:

COMMENTS ON QUALITIES IN AND DIVERSITY OF THE IMAGES:

Notes taken after hearing from presenter:

NAME of PRESENTER:

THOUGHTS ON PRESENTATION:

COMMENTS ON CLARITY OF THESIS:

Notes taken after hearing from presenter:

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every student to look at all three criteria for each essay, students were asked to focus on only one at a time. So, for the first presentation, Tony might focus on qualities in the images, while Mariana looked particularly at the sequence, and Will paid special attention to the thesis. While these criteria all worked together as students engaged with the essays, students were given leeway to focus on only one at a time for their comments.

The final piece of tech support, also provided by Google Docs, involved an opportunity for further feedback from the “readers” to the creator of the image essay. In previous units involving images as texts, we’d had wonderfully satisfying discussions
around other student-created texts—discussions
that lasted far longer than we’d anticipated! The
richness of the students’ texts and the possibilities
they allowed for interpretation, happily, resulted
in using more class time for discussion than we’d
planned. So, to save class time during the image
essay project, we included a component in which
“readers” of the image essays would take the notes
they made on handouts in class and, after our
(shorter than in the past) class discussions, could
add additional commentary on the Google site that
evening; this provided an opportunity to write lon-
ger responses than schedules allowed in class and
an additional opportunity, outside of class, for stu-
dents to write and to engage with each other and
the texts.

“Reading” the Image Essays: Making
Meaning Visibly
Andrew’s image essay was comprised of photo-
graphs of daily life in an Afghan village, with as-
pects of war increasingly evident in each slide. One
image showed a marketplace where people were
buying bread and eggs with armed men stand-
ing stolidly nearby; another showed a home with
the effects of shooting or explosions on its exterior
walls as children played alongside. Several slides
were in color, though most were black and white.
This image essay was designed to demonstrate An-
drew’s thesis: The war in Afghanistan became a part
of everyday life for the people living through it. A
secondary idea he wanted to suggest was that our
Western view of the happenings in Afghanistan
was hazy, though it would be starkly clear to those
involved.

The following paraphrase of Andrew’s presen-
tation and the ensuing discussion shows several of
the students making meaning with Andrew’s essay.
Although the students “got” the thesis quickly
(the title slide certainly helped!), they were more
interested in discussing—much like they would
for a literary text—how elements of the image
essay created both the thesis and meaning for them
generally:

The room is silent and dark as Andrew begins the
slideshow; students are focused and waiting.
Recall that no one, not even Andrew, is to talk
during the slide presentation.

Andrew's title slide: “The War Embedded”

Ethan: What does embedded mean?

Other students: Shh.

About a minute passes as students quietly view
Andrew’s image essay on the whiteboard. They
look calm and attentive; they view the slide show
and then write; several use their iPads to refer
back to the slides. Eventually the teacher indicates
they can begin the discussion.

Nick: Your thesis, is it about how war
became a way of life?

Andrew: Yeah.

Teacher: Shh. (Andrew, as the creator, still is not
supposed to speak)

Nick: I was looking at it, and it wasn’t like
there was just one thing going on. There
were children, war, civilians, and soldiers,
and all these different aspects of daily life. So
I was thinking your thesis was: War became
a part of daily life.

Daniel: Exactly like Nick said. In every
picture, there was something to do with war.
So every aspect of life has now been
overtaken by war.

Liz (looking at her iPad): In slides seven and
eight there are kids, and then it goes to a
tank with a coffin. It's interesting how you
mix children and death; it makes death seem
really sudden and out of place.

Mary: It's interesting how you transition
from black and white to color.

Jody: I thought maybe the transition from
black and white to color was intentional,
getting more real? Or to show the way it
really happened?

Andrew: Am I allowed to answer?

Teacher: Not yet, about 30 more seconds of
the class.

Ethan: Was the transition to color to show a
more modern-day Afghanistan?

Andrew (finally, in response): The answer is yes,
that was my thesis. War has become a daily
part of life in this culture, and foreigners are
part of everyday life in Afghanistan. . .
As for the colored pictures, that’s interesting.
I actually wanted to make it all in black and white, but I couldn't find the pictures I wanted. I wanted it to have a hazy feel, because for us civilians it's all very hazy, but for the civilians there, it's now old. I think now I can see that having some pictures in color show more emotion and the emotions show better in color.

His classmates understood Andrew's thesis immediately. They referred to elements in the nonverbal text before them—consistent with "Rosenblatt's Rules"—to make meaning. They spoke about the routine, human, and natural activities they saw in the images juxtaposed with the violence of war and occupation. This discussion was a chance for students to see, in real time, how their own interpretations of a text vary from others' interpretations and how sharing their perspective could change or add to the meanings their classmates were creating through the text.

The give-and-take among students also helped Andrew see ways meanings were developing as his audience "read" his work. His classmates spoke of specific details they saw in the images—largely the content in the images—along with qualities or characteristics present in the images, such as color versus black and white, or contrasting or foregrounded elements. They also noted qualities in the organization of the slides, like juxtaposition, the building of intensity as the slide show progressed, and the telling of a story. Further, they were attuned to what others noticed, and readily built upon the communal trove of observations and developing meanings.

We saw in the essay presentations that, often, the audience made meaning from the images that corresponded with the original intentions of the author. In addition, though, the class extended the original meaning in ways that the student authors embraced. For example, when the class engaged with Mary's image essay and then each other, they articulated meanings that Mary acknowledged she hadn't seen yet. What the class saw wasn't different than what Mary intended; it was more. After listening to their discussion, Mary told her classmates, "You found what I wanted to say with the pictures. You brought it up. While you were talking, I thought: Wow, it's even deeper than I thought it was!"

Concluding Thoughts

With the "reading" of classmates' image essays we sought to give students focused and guided practice in transacting with texts. We asked students to exercise the same discipline in reading the images that we required of linguistic texts (the reader's or viewer's interpretation cannot be contradicted by any element of the text, and nothing can be asserted for which there is no basis in the text). We also urged them to make meaning themselves and with each other for each text, rather than looking for a correct answer from us; from study aids; or from established, avid readers in the class. Further, when students took the role of composers of image essays, we asked them to think as authors, and to become aware of how the texts they create may be perceived by audience members.

Using images offered all of us the ability to take in a complete text almost immediately and simultaneously, and to physically point to aspects of it that were affecting our meaning-making processes. This shared, immediate access and the simultaneity of our transactions also allowed us to take in and respond to each other's observations and insights. Like reading linguistic texts, the meanings we constructed consisted of the elements in the text and the perceptions, contributions, experiences, and contexts of the "readers." Another important benefit was that none of the students was held back in these processes because of any limitations in their ability to decode linguistic texts.

Through this process—the composing of their own and then the "reading" of others' image essays—students demonstrated their increasing understanding that our shared aim was not to transmit or to uncover a "right" answer about a thesis, but to consider how they, as active participants, made meanings. These meanings are both intended by the creator and made by the audience members as they transact with a text. Showing students the value of their participation in the active process of reading was our goal from the outset.

Works Cited


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Old Words When There Are No Others

Thirty Tibetan students
ring a room
around a picture of a dead boy,
sixteen,
traffic accident.
Smile on his face,
dog in his arms,
skateboarding,
a fun-loving rapper
like Pemba,
who told me,
“He used to ride my bike.”

“Is there any prayer you say when someone dies?”
The principal is floundering for words.
“Oh, yes, but we don’t know it.”

Then a minute later,
“Mr.,”
iPhone in hand.
“We got it on the Internet.”
Ten masculine voices,
reedy,
chant through 20 verses and
murmured choruses,
the ancient words,
the deep tones of the
Himalayas.

My new classroom
Seems an unworthy vessel.
Yet here it is
just built,
dusty with flakes of gypsum,
ceiling leaking because they have not yet
finished the roof,
reverberating.

—R. M. Chase
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