This article examines the power of composing images as students construct identities and shape their own worlds. It illustrates student empowerment through agency, intellectual engagement, and community investment and suggests that composing with images forms a bridge back to alphabetic-centric composing.

Comics, Collage, and Other Things with Crayons: The Power of Composing with Image

As they construct their identities and shape their own realities.

Rediscovering the Power of Images

Alphabetic literacies have historically been privileged over visual literacies throughout the educational system. As Thomas Newkirk explains, “while we might admire the drawing of young children, we’re not terribly concerned (as a culture) when the interest in drawing gives way to an interest in print” (77). Standardized testing, typically focused on alphabetic literacies, has perpetuated the subordination of image to word, and as Chris Gilbert notes, in most classrooms, “the term literacy commonly refers only to reading and writing” (89). Despite this emphasis on words in the classroom, students already engage with images, regularly, and are doing so in (at least) two ways: consumption and production.

First, the overwhelming proliferation of images in the digital age ensures that students are visual consumers. Visual culture permeates students’ lives because they “interact more and more with totally constructed visual experiences” (Rose 4). Students routinely consume a plethora of images via social media, advertisements, and popular media. It might be assumed that students learn to successfully navigate visual culture because of its overwhelming presence in their lives, but it is negligent to ignore these images within the classroom walls (Gilbert 89). To expand an understanding of literacy and explore new options for engaging traditional...
literature, educators have implemented activities involving the consumption of the visual (Gilbert; Jacobs; Wang). For example, Dale Jacobs argues that “reading comics involves a complex, multimodal literacy” that “can help students develop as critical and engaged readers of multimodal texts” (19). Educators recognize the power of images in the social fabric and are beginning to address that power by reexamining the conception and practice of reading beyond solely alphabetic texts.

Second, the power of images goes beyond consumption. In their social lives, students not only read images but also produce them—covertly accessing Instagram and Snapchat on phones beneath desks. It makes sense to funnel the foundation of those communicative practices into the classroom. According to Elaine Wang, composing images provides “a fully participatory method for students to make sense of the world” that may be “otherwise inexpressible” (79). The affordances of the visual mode provide students with powerful—and additional—means for composing texts. As Gilbert explains, the pervasiveness of images in culture emphasizes the importance that “instructors teach visual literacy to students so they become better able to reveal and rewrite the narratives of race and class that are inscribed in the innumerable images they unquestionably consume” (89). Images have the power to construct students’ realities and identities, so it’s essential for students to develop strategies to “reveal and rewrite” with both images and words. Even so, production of images doesn’t directly translate from social to academic contexts. Students may experience difficulty in making meaning with images in a classroom setting because they have not been taught to do so. Emphasizing images in the classroom further empowers students to adapt their understanding of visual culture and broadens their composing practices.

Teaching with the Power of Images

To help students tap into the power of images—and ultimately empower them with words as well—I designed a course for an Upward Bound summer program that provided a gateway for composing with images in academic contexts. Nine students, ninth and tenth graders, completed the five-week course. They represented a range of experiences and identities: Latino to black to white; male and female; fluency in English, Spanish, and Karenic languages; a range of maturity levels and personalities. Despite differences, these students shared a background in lower- to lower-middle-class socioeconomic status and attended high schools in an urban public district. They balanced multiple factors that might risk their educational success: social distractions, economic challenges, violence in the community, and responsibilities at home. Their experiences outside of the classroom could not (and should not) be fully separated from their academic pursuits.

In addition to these challenges, the students also negotiated conflicted relationships with both visual and alphabetic literacies. They participated in an image-heavy culture in their personal lives, but visual literacies weren’t typically valued alongside alphabetic literacies in their classes. Although these students were college-bound, alphabetic composing wasn’t necessarily their strength. As a result, they expressed hesitation with producing compositions, regardless of mode. The summer course invited the visual culture of the students’ lives to permeate the classroom walls, providing a space for them to find power in and be empowered by images. The consumption and production of images promoted confidence in visual literacy, built a bridge back to alphabetic literacies, and supported new strategies to empower the students’ composing processes.

Composing with the Power of Images

Students in the summer course exercised power by composing image-heavy texts during units focused on collage, autography, and zines. Students read excerpts from What It Is (Barry), Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art (McCloud), Drawing Words and Writing Pictures: A Definitive Course from Concept to Comic in 15 Lessons (Abel and Madden), and several graphic memoirs. In addition to consumption, students produced their own images by completing three visually focused projects and filling composition notebooks with images, words, and found materials. Images did not replace words but were emphasized in the course to counteract the typical privileging of words in education. In essence, writing and drawing became naturally interconnected, both integral to the “woven fabric”
The power of composing images, alongside words, can be examined throughout the work of the students in three specific ways: agency, intellectual engagement, and community investment.

First, the power of composing images manifested in students’ discovery of agency in self as composition as well as self and composition. Development of agency was particularly important for these students because they were often faced with prescribed identities of race, class, and gender in their surrounding image culture. Analyzing representations of identity was productive, but composing new representations allowed students to make choices about how they identified themselves. Additionally, these students had well-developed visual literacies but did not see the relevance of composing with images in an environment that typically favored words. The summer course provided a space for students to more fully exert agency over their identities and learning processes through the composing of images.

Students discovered agency in self as composition during the two-minute avatar exercise, described in the introduction of this article. The daily task of creating a self-representation became a connection between class periods and provided an avenue for students to develop a stronger sense of identity. In Figure 1, a selection of avatars from two students is arranged in order from earliest attempt to final iteration of the two-minute avatar exercise. For each student, there is a gradual shift in the composition of the avatars. Darren slowly tried new shapes for his face, reflecting his sense of style that became more apparent throughout the summer. Renee found that the combination of image and word allowed her to express her sense of humor: an aspect of her identity that often went unnoticed under her serious and reserved demeanor. The students learned to craft themselves on the page, articulating self-concepts, individual thumbprints. They took pride and ownership in the task. The progression of these drawings demonstrates the gradual building of confidence, voice, and, ultimately, power of self-representation. Comparing the avatars between students also reveals an increasing sense of agency. The initial avatars from the class had strong similarities, a sense of fitting in. Students often work toward conformity (sometimes even while trying to individualize): appearance, apparel, language, gestures, and attitudes. The avatars from the final week of class reveal the opposite: a divergence rather than a convergence in how these students saw themselves and wanted others to see them. The redeveloped visual literacies—and confidence in composing images—clearly exerts itself in the progression of these avatars. The activity allowed students to explore “fragmented aspects of the self” and consider the “disputed frontier between self and not-self” (Whitek 228, 230). In the relatively simple exercise, students made complex discoveries about self-representation. Additionally, students practiced a form of signification “by establishing a code of economy, in which certain details are left out so that other details become all the more important” (Postema 3). They had the power to choose the aspects of self to make prominent, exerting agency over their representations of identity.

Students also discovered agency in self and composition. Beyond self-representation, they found new confidence in their unique practices of composing, especially in their composition notebooks where they...
Jessi Thomsen

recorded notes, brainstorming, journaling, and drawings (see Figure 2). In an end-of-course reflection, students overwhelmingly described the composition notebook as a key site for agency over their learning processes. One student said, “I could use this if I don’t understand my teacher’s notes. I can draw pictures to help me remember,” and another explained, “I was able to learn that I don’t only have to write or draw. I can use both.” These students came to understand Kristie S. Fleckenstein’s term *imageword*, which “reminds us of this inevitable linkage of image and word in meaning” (*Embodied Literacies* 5). By engaging with both image and word in their composition notebooks, students had more options available in their composing practices as they experimented with “different media, modes, and contexts of representation” (Fleckenstein, “Words Made Flesh” 615). Balancing image and word allowed students to consider the implications of their learning beyond the classroom. As another student observed: “Compose is not just drawing or just text. Both are made to compose. . . . I could continue to use text and image because in the world there is not only just text or image. There are both.” The students learned that “when the two are balanced, and image and text work together, the combination creates the possibility of bridging a gap, allowing for new forms of intricacy and nuance” (Postema 101). The students applied this balance to their own compositions, exerted agency and choice over the modes and materials of their learning, became stronger agents of their learning processes, and exercised ownership of their thoughts rather than regurgitating course content.

Second, producing images—and engaging directly with the power of the image—contributed to students’ intellectual engagement with course materials. From the beginning, the students weren’t shy about asking, “What is it supposed to look like?” and “Is this good enough?” and “How many words do we need?” and “How many images?” and finally, “Why can’t you just tell me what to do?” For better or worse, their preconceptions of academe seemed to include constraints, rules, stipulations, and quantifiable expectations. They generally expressed their desire to receive good grades and described learning as a byproduct of being in class. They were also aware that they represented a minority of college-bound students, based on race and socioeconomic status. Academic success became the key to postsecondary education even if the traditional classroom environment didn’t always match their learning styles and literacies. Academic success became the key to postsecondary education even if the traditional classroom environment didn’t always match their learning styles and literacies.
looking for the right answer and seeking shortcuts to a final product. However, as the summer course progressed, students became more open to composing images as a means of taking risks, engaging in process, and seeking new levels of intellectual engagement.

The collage assignment illustrates students’ intellectual engagement particularly well because “art invites the formation of complex ideas and the internalization and personalization of learning” (Wang 79). Renee carried a bag of colored pencils with her at all times so she could always add to her composition notebook. In her collage, she used the pencils to depict a feeling between dream and nightmare (see Figure 3). Her construction of the collage was a deliberately slow process; details emerged as she added layers of complexity. Even though much of the collage is created in pencil drawings, the images are layered in a way that reflects a dream-state. Her handwritten text mirrors Lynda Barry’s call to perform the creation of shapes beyond the “tap, tap, tap” on the keyboard (108). As Barry explains, “Tapping a finger is not as complicated as making an original line in the shape of an ‘s.’ Different parts of the brain are used when we make an ‘s’ by hand and more of the body than a finger tap and images seem to come from this kind of being in motion” (108). Renee engaged in composing the shape of the letters, capturing an emotion, a moment, and a movement. In essence, “handwriting is an image left by a living being in motion it cannot be duplicated in time or space” (Barry 108). Instead of continuing to ask if she was “doing it right,” Renee thought deeply about the feeling she wanted to compose and, through intellectual engagement, took time and intention to produce a living, thriving, powerful composition.

Leah also focused her collage on emotion (see Figure 4). In her original draft, she shaded blues and purples with crayon but then articulated her dissatisfaction with the results. After trying colored pencils, she eventually settled on magazine cutouts to form the background of her collage. Her process demonstrated risk taking and revision—a willingness to examine results and determine a new direction. She wanted to create a sense of guilt, frustration, and confusion because, as she explained, these feelings still surface in response to a memory of powerlessness while witnessing an act of violence. Leah’s emotions came through the images of her composition, conscientiously and thoughtfully. Her collage and engagement with process embody Barry’s term “bumpiness” (qtd. in Chute 110). Hilary L. Chute, expanding on the term, says, “Barry creates the textural unevenness as a way of slowing down the experience of reading” (111). Leah has accomplished this “slowing down” by merging various materials—magazine paper, construction paper, marker, glue, a bullet—into a complex composition.

In contrast to focusing on emotions, Lucas captures a moment by re-creating a contradiction between an inspirational speech and the weight of fitting in with peers (see Figure 5). The collage hints at a narrative and experience but allows the viewer to fill in the gaps. Lucas spent much of his time sketching possibilities for his collage. He wanted to use the images in his composition to portray the moment without simply telling the audience what to see. He worked to balance images and words in such a way that a viewer would need to interpret the narrative but not be completely
confused by the collage. He engaged intellectually in the dynamics between composer and viewer, image and word, and interpretation and explanation. The collages from Lucas, Renee, and Leah emerged as they cut, assembled, glued, and colored, and they “recognized that colors, textures, placement, and other design elements played an important role” (Wang 80). Composing with images from various materials guided them deeper into their memories, their stories, their questions, and, ultimately, their intellectual engagement with course concepts.

Third, composing images provided powerful ways for students to collaborate and invest in the classroom community. The students in the Upward Bound program attend classes, events, and study sessions together throughout their secondary education. The nine students in my class were clearly part of this community and enacted their social relationships before, after, and occasionally during class (at both productive and not-so-productive moments). However, they were not nearly so adept at working together in academic relationships. Collaboration in the classroom does not automatically develop out of social interaction, so students were provided with modeling and prompts for giving and receiving feedback during workshops. The presence of images in their work allowed for dynamic conversations because the projects required different interpretation and analysis than alphabetic-centric compositions. The images provided a platform for discussion, and the students became more invested in the projects of their peers. Eventually, students were just as likely to talk about their academic work as they were to interact socially throughout a class period.

The students’ sense of community especially manifested itself in a collaborative zine. The front cover and sample page in Figure 6 illustrate the students’ collective effort to determine the content for the zine as they tapped into the important concepts of the course, their own struggles, and their own learning. Each student chose a topic and composed two pages, combining image and word. During class, drafts were displayed on the screen, and the whole class offered feedback for the composer to consider during revision. The students’ excitement and investment increased when I brought in copies of the revised pages to compile into finished zines.
Knowing their zines would be distributed to other students in the Upward Bound program provided additional meaning within both the classroom community and the broader community of the program. To assemble the zines, the students scooted desks into a circle and assigned tasks. Some organized pages, others folded them, and some stapled the binding. Once the pages were made into booklets, the students began personalizing them with color. The students made zines for each other and their friends, pointing out images they had composed, admiring work from their peers, and reinforcing the classroom community.

**Picking Up the Crayon**

A piece of copy paper was slowly circulating around the classroom. Each student handled it with care, taking a moment to think before putting pencil to work. By the end of class, the paper became a canvas for the students’ avatars, distinctly crafted, to serve as the back cover of the class zine (see Figure 7). Their self-representations—textured hairdos,
shapely heads, and ears of every size—portrayed the sense of identity and empowerment that they had constructed throughout the five weeks. The students in the Upward Bound program took risks in class by composing with images instead of privileging words. They found new paths to agency in their identities and learning styles, despite stereotypic representations in image culture and expectations of traditional classroom environments. They more fully engaged in the course through their visual literacies. Ultimately, they established a sense of community beyond social interaction and invested themselves in each other’s work.

Integrating images into the classroom provides another method of composition that empowers students in both academic and social contexts. The Upward Bound summer course provides a small-scale account of how students enact power by composing with images, but the exercises and projects can be adapted to other classrooms, disrupting the privileging of words in education. By engaging with images as more than “simply an intermediary step to more complex word-based literacy, we can more effectively help students become active creators, rather than passive consumers, of meaning in their interactions with a wide variety of multimodal texts” (Jacobs 24). In fact, text and image coexist, whether we fully acknowledge it or not. By better recognizing images in the classroom and guiding students to compose with images, we “prepare students for better negotiating their worlds of meaning” (Jacobs 24). We benefit students when we pick up a crayon, when we have our students pick up crayons, and when we invite the power of images into the classroom, further empowering students in their ways of knowing, thinking, interacting, and composing. (2)

Notes

1. In this article, image refers to a visual/graphic image rather than figurative language or a mental picture.
2. The Upward Bound program supports first-generation college-bound students throughout their secondary education, guiding them through the college application process and preparing them for postsecondary coursework.

Works Cited


Jessi Thomsen, NCTE member since 2013, is pursuing her PhD in English with a specialization in rhetoric and composition at Florida State University, where her golden retriever supervises all of her scholarly endeavors and occasionally answers her emails: jessithomsen@gmail.com.

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Because of their diverse literacy needs, students need us to differentiate the product, process, and content of learning according to their learning style, interest, and readiness. Through the use and creation of multimodal texts, students have opportunities to use linguistic, visual, and audio modes to experience, conceptualize, analyze, and apply meaning. In this Strategy Guide, you’ll see how one lesson uses tiered texts and multiple modalities to meet the learning style needs of students. http://bit.ly/FnPAPM