A Case for Visual Rhetoric in Two-Year College Composition

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New Voice

Using visual rhetoric as a mode of instruction in two-year college composition can have a positive and powerful impact on teaching and learning.

In her article “Visual Literacy in Teaching and Learning: A Literature Perspective” Suzanne Stokes boldly claims, “Students need to learn visually and teachers need to learn to teach visually” (1). For the past several years I have taken Stokes’s advice to heart and included a visual component in my two-year-college composition class because as she and the other scholars I reference throughout the article agree, it is the logical place to present this facet of rhetorical education. And while I have encountered a few challenges along the way, my combining the verbal and visual modes has been for me as extremely satisfying as digging and planting in my garden on a warm summer day and for my students as startling as their hearing the sound of a thunder clap out of the blue. Are they master critics and analysts of visual messages by the time they leave my classes? Not quite. However, their exposure to visual rhetoric certainly makes them more aware of visuals as an important mode of communication, and many of them tell me on their evaluations at the end of the semester that they definitely recognize the similarities between reading a visual and reading a written text. Quite frankly, for them and for me, seeing images dancing across a screen and talking about them is just a lot of fun.

My purpose, therefore, in this article is to discuss how I became involved with visual rhetoric, how it has evolved in my writing classes since its inauguration, how it has had an impact on my writing students, and how it has changed my way of thinking about teaching and learner success.

The Seed Is Planted

In 2009, a colleague of mine with whom I had collaborated on other writing projects asked me if I would be interested like her in using a visual rhetoric component in my composition class and somehow linking our sections. I stumbled around for an answer that would sound better than just “No,” and finally replied, “I’ve had no formal training in visual rhetoric, and I don’t know how I could make room for..."
it in my already full curriculum.” Rolling her eyes, she responded, “Do you know how to read?” We laughed, and she gave me a short bibliography and asked me to get back to her in a week. As I recall her approaching me with her proposal, I realize that her invitation presented me with an opportunity to reinvent my teaching methods and composition curriculum, which Eva R. Brumberger points out is an essential action we need to make as teachers in order to provide our students and ourselves with richer learning and teaching experiences (380). It is not that up to that point I had avoided making important changes in my writing pedagogy; I had just never implemented the kind of change that would demand a major learning curve for me, such as the one my colleague was inviting me to embrace. The more I thought about it over the next several hours, I realized that in my case letting go of the familiar and working in partnership with a colleague again would be the best for the students. Not only that, it would be a pretty significant turning point for me.

Interestingly enough, the other scholars I read on my colleague’s list touched on reasons for writing instructors’ reluctance to use visual literacy in their writing classes: overloaded curriculums, comp courses are for teaching traditional composition, comp instructors do not know how to teach document design, and just too much to do in first-year comp—some of the very same reasons that crossed my mind when my colleague posed the question. I reflected on their ideas, conducted more research, and four days later informed her that I would give this visual “thing” a shot. My immediate challenge was figuring out how to incorporate a visual component that would complement the verbal segment of my already designed course; if I did not think I could, I would have to revamp my curriculum. Because she had approached me with the idea early in the spring semester for a launch the following fall term, I knew I had time to design a syllabus with which I would be comfortable, that would appeal to the students, and that would provide us an opportunity to link our classes in some meaningful way. I started fresh, like a seed buried in the rich soil of learning and discovery.

Taking Root

I decided that I would assign a polemic as the major essay and that there would be three parts to the project, so I put myself to work designing a course trajectory. Part 1 included preparation, discussion, and students writing shorter, critical essays leading up to their writing the polemic. I assigned readings from the opinion pages of local newspapers—letters to the editor and guest columns on local, regional, and national topics by concerned members of the community. Readings also included op-eds and editorials from major newspapers like the Miami Herald, Washington Post, New York Times, and Chicago Tribune. I thought it important that students read the personal opinions of reputable journalists like Leonard Pitts, Kathleen Parker, Charles Krauthmohre, Maureen Dowd, and Frank Bruni on timely issues that we could also discuss and about which they could express their opinions in response essays. My hope was that their reading about, discussing, and responding to controversial issues might inspire them when it came time for their selecting topics for their polemics and ultimately their visual arguments. The more I thought about and researched
ideas for the design of my new course, the more convinced I became that I could make it appealing to students. We would use the first half of the semester to reflect on the many issues embedded in the assigned readings. I wanted them to think critically about authors’ views on the topics and more importantly realize that the many current social, political, and global events discussed in these readings affect their present and future lives. In part 2, students would transform their polemic claim into a visual argument, which, like other writing assignments in my classes, would include two in-class peer workshops. In addition, I would not limit them to computer-generated visuals. Over the years students’ visual arguments have ranged in media from colorful and detailed electronic diagrams, PowerPoint slide shows, and Photo Shop designs to hand-rendered visual arguments crafted from colored paper with craft knives and glue sticks to drawings made with colored pencils or markers by the more artistically inclined students. In part 3 of the unit, students would write an essay analyzing their visual arguments, paying close attention to how the four basic principles of design—contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity—typography, color, shape, line, and form contributed to the visual’s rhetorical power.

My continued reading and investigation aroused my curiosity regarding another facet of visual rhetoric, document design. “Wow! That would really be pushing the envelope for me. Allowing students to ‘decorate’ their essay documents?” Then I ran across Stephen Bernhardt’s urgent proposal that first-year composition instructors “must teach [their] students . . . document design” (qtd. in Brizee). Bernhardt’s remark prompted me to recall the days when I’d read some student essays embellished with decorative titles, interesting and various font styles, and even colorful captions to which, as I look back on it now, I had unfairly and ignorantly responded, “Keep the document in standard college academic format.” Needless to say, I decided after a couple semesters to accompany assigned readings and essays during the first half of the term and leading up to their designing a visual argument with an introduction to document design that I now stress to my composition students as an important but often unidentified feature of effective rhetoric. As H. Allen Brizee makes clear, student readers rarely give much thought as to how headings, white space, charts, graphic images, and font style provide in his words “rhetorical signals” to the text’s meaning (19). Quite honestly, before my close relationship with visual rhetoric, I had rarely given much thought to those “rhetorical signals” either, in terms of introducing them to my students to use on their essay documents. To reinforce the importance of these visual cues, then, I flashed newspaper opinion pages on the screen during those first eleven weeks of the course. These images enabled students to take a close look at and analyze how the various visual components on the page—even the cartoons—send important messages to readers, helping them understand how all its visual features contribute rhetorically to the various opinions expressed by the writers published in that section of the newspaper.

By the time I had redesigned a new composition curriculum, I was fairly confident that my colleague and I could come up with a plan that would enable us to link our composition sections to provide an interactive experience for the
students. At the outset, we decided we would still teach our writing classes independently. When we met to update each other on our progress, she informed me that she was designing her composition class around the theme of corn and the health hazards of humans eating meat butchered from corn-fed versus grass-fed cattle; otherwise, her plan was similar to mine. We also decided that we would meet regularly to share our observations of student reactions, brainstorm ways to remove any obstacles, and explore avenues for heightening their multimodal experiences. We stayed with that initial plan; however, when we met in late summer, we decided that in addition to our own in-class peer-review activities, we’d link our visual rhetoric units by having the students electronically peer-review the visual arguments and in my case their polemic and analysis essays. That I felt like a freshly planted seed taking root in a new season of teaching and learning going into the fall semester should come as no surprise.

In Full Bloom

The first year I treaded water exploring and discovering different ways to approach presenting the material. There were times when I felt a little overwhelmed by the questionable vibes I picked up from some of the students when they discovered Comp I was “going to include pictures.” Charles Hill makes the point, and he’s right, that “[w]hen students are at first faced with the task of interpreting and analyzing images in the classroom, they resist, at the least face some uncomfortable dissonance, perhaps confusion, when asked to treat images as another kind of text” (141). Students still inquire from time to time, “Why are we learning about graphics in a writing class?” Or, “I wasn’t expecting a writing class to teach font styles and word arrangement on paper that looked different from how I was taught writing in high school.” Or, “Is this like an art class and writing class combined? I didn’t know a class like this existed, Professor Ernster; wish the catalog would have made this clear to me because I would have taken a different class.” But then it occurred to me that my students and I were really on the same page with this whole visual thing, experiencing the same “uncomfortable dissonance,” and I started letting go of some of my anxieties.

We reserved the visual component for the last six weeks of the semester, and I spent the first week of the six launching the project: defining visual rhetoric, explaining its connection to the verbal elements of writing, having them read and respond to critical questions from Andrea Lunsford’s chapter 14, “Visual Arguments,” from Everything’s an Argument followed by a seminar on that material. So students could engage in critique and analysis, our discussion was followed by my flashing onto the screen images as richly and colorfully variegated as the flowers and plants in my garden. I posed questions like these for them to ponder: How does the visual’s use of color symbolically contribute to its meaning and power? Why might photographs be more effective than stylized images, and how do the differences between the two affect a visual’s tone or enhance its argumentative purpose and rhetorical appeal? And how does the use of shape and line help create movement within the visual composition that directs the viewer’s eye more
meaningfully through it and to its meaning? Even today, four years later, students usually shower these discussions with their engaging questions and creative interpretations that are as refreshing and pleasing to listen to as a gentle spring rain. At the end of these discussions I always make it a point to emphasize that if students did not give critical thought and reflection to how they would make use of these important elements and principles before they actually started crafting their visual arguments, they would experience a good deal of difficulty writing an analysis of it. I stressed this over and over.

I made several observations during these weeks of introduction: first, once students got into their comfort zones, they became more actively engaged in the visual segment than they had been during the first part of the semester. I was very pleased by this. They were eager to view and analyze as many visuals as possible, enjoyed our discussions of them, and posed pertinent questions regarding the visuals’ argumentative powers. It was almost as if these viewing/discussion sessions provided rest for their brains from the heavy writing they did during the first part of the semester, much in the same way contrasting white space on a document provides rest for the eyes before readers move on to the next block of text. Second, there were fewer absences during the last six weeks—the majority of students who had been lax with attendance the first part of the semester surprisingly showed up for every class the last six weeks. I will use Rich as a case study here.

During the first part of the semester, Rich’s attendance was sporadic, his writing was marginal only because he was stingy with effort, and when he was in class, he was disengaged. That all changed, though, and drastically, during the last half of the semester when our focus turned to visual rhetoric and its accompanying technology. For those of us who teach our composition classes in a computer lab, it doesn’t take us long to identify those with advanced computer skills. Therefore, I invited interested students like Rich to give tutorials on the basics of PowerPoint, Photo Shop, and Paint Shop for those students who felt less comfortable or were less familiar with the technology. While there are always a few students more artistically inclined who still prefer producing hand-rendered visual arguments, the tutorials have worked remarkably well in helping build a stronger community of learners and practitioners. They leave my classes with a deeper sense of self-confidence in their abilities and their potential as successful learners, and most let me know this on their written end-of-course evaluations. Rich was one of these students. Not only did he provide an extremely impressive tutorial, but his visual argument for recycling—the claim he developed in his polemic and designed in Paint Shop—was powerful, and he wrote an even more stunning analysis of it. The visual component of the class seemed to have snapped him out of what I had observed earlier in the semester as an academic malaise, which for him was like a lull before a major academic storm in his college experience. He ended up giving a gold star performance during the last six weeks: he was present for every class, engaged in every activity, participated actively, and shared his technological skills and creative ideas enthusiastically. His visual argument and analysis essay are still among the more sophisticated student samples I use in my composition sections.
today. And there have been other students who have made a similar turn-around in my writing classes because of the visual component.

Another observation I made during the first weeks of the visual rhetoric unit was that during both the electronic workshops (students were required to provide my colleague and me with copies of their responses to their peer partners’ visual drafts) and my in-class workshops, students were gradually beginning to make important rhetorical connections between the visual and verbal modes—as if a soft flash of lightning had suddenly struck their senses and intuitive powers. I remember one student’s critique of another’s visual argument during an in-class workshop. Tyler’s classmate had divided her visual composition into four image-filled frames embodying her argument’s claim that states should lower the legal drinking age to eighteen, an often-used argument in my composition classes. After we listened to a brief explanation of her visual argument, Tyler read from his written comments: “As I’m looking at the frames with the images, they seem out of order which creates a problem for me making sense of the claim; it’s like reading an essay with confusing ideas because the ordering of the paragraphs is awkward and makes the claim hard to get. I would suggest you rearrange the frames in the visual so your message is clearer to the viewer.” His comment here indicated he was reading her visual as if he were reading an essay with loose organization, and I couldn’t help but recognize his “ambidexterity of thought,” which Brumberger describes as an essential way of thinking in the modern workplace (376). And his final comment indicated his sense of artistic taste: “You also might want to rethink your choice of background color, so it complements the color of the captions and the outlines around the frames. This change would make your visual more appealing to my eye.” His comments, for which she expressed appreciation, told me that he was beginning to get this connection between the verbal and visual, even though he may not have been aware of it.

Toward the end of his article Hill suggests that teachers who decide to incorporate visual rhetoric in their writing classes refer to Robin Williams’s *The Non-Designer’s Design Book* and warm students up to visual argument by exposing them to document design. The first chapter in her book, “The Joshua Tree Epiphany,” provides a very readable and visual explanation of the four basic principles of design. I incorporated this segment into my class the semester after Rich took the course, for obvious reasons. Early in the semester, I have students read this gem of a chapter, and then we discuss it, so they can grasp the rhetorical value of visually enhanced text and apply elements of design to their polemics particularly and to other shorter essays optionally during the first half of the semester. During one of the electronic workshops, one of my colleague’s students provided written comment on one of my student’s third-draft polemics with document design. His essay developed a firm but not an overly aggressive opinion that the United States needed to withdraw from the war and bring home the troops for good. A very soft-spoken young man having served two deployments in Iraq, he had formatted his text in columns, added a photo, and included his title across the top of the document in the extremely loud and aggressive Gill Sans Ultra Bold font style. My colleague’s
student critic praised Manuel’s work but wrote: “It seems to me the font style he has chosen for his title does not complement the calm tone I’m hearing as I read the case he makes for his position. He needs to select a softer font style for his title so as not to mislead the reader right off the bat who might very likely think he is angry, based on the ‘angry’ look of the font.” As Hill points out, the visual components of a text oftentimes speak louder than do the ideas within sentences. Manuel’s student critic was right; I applauded her remarks in my brief response back, realizing that this visual rhetoric “thing” was beginning to impact students in ways I never dreamed it could. My colleague agreed. These are just two of many examples of our two-year composition students making important visual and verbal connections. And in reflecting on each of these two instances, I am reminded of a point Diana George makes that as writing instructors our primary task is to nurture our students’ abilities to critically differentiate between what is highly appealing and what is less appealing in visual and verbal texts (17). Without a doubt, the student critics’ comments highlighted above demonstrate these qualities.

The Wilting Plants

But what about those students who struggle making these connections or those who trail behind in producing visual arguments, which finds them stumbling through part 3 of the project? We all have students who experience difficulty getting with the program, and for any number of reasons; my personal mission, nonetheless, is always to work with these students as best I can to encourage them, inspire them, and nurture them back to academic life. I want my students to know there are always resources available to them, and I am one of those resources. Where some of these students fall short, though, is not thinking critically enough from a visual standpoint at the time they are designing their visual arguments. According to the assignment guidelines for the analysis essay, they are expected, first, to explain how they manipulated the principles and elements of design in the visual so it would appeal to their target audience; second, to account for using those same principles to make certain the visual supports the claim, and third, to thoughtfully write about which of Aristotle’s modes of appeal is most predominant in the visual and how the visual’s various elements of design convey that logos, ethos, or pathos. By the way, it was Aristotle who once wrote “without images, words are meaningless” (qtd. in Stokes). Thus, the purpose for the considerable time spent with preliminary activities in part 1 is to expose them to the visual features of advertisements, brochures, fliers, posters, and so forth, all of which I flash onto the screen for viewing and analysis. While we’re looking at these visuals, I have them determine the purpose of the argument, the kind of argument, and which of Aristotle’s modes is most predominant in them. It’s important they grasp these concepts because these are the very aspects of argumentation they’ll have to incorporate into their own polemics. It’s also my way of getting them to think visually and verbally. Now, if their polemics were successful and conveyed argumentative purpose, kind, and appeal, it is very likely that some of those students will have few if any problems transferring these
argumentative features into a visual design and writing a visual analysis of it with relative ease. However, when it comes time to craft their visual arguments—even for those students who may have produced successful polemics—if they go to the computer and spend ten or fifteen thoughtless minutes cutting and pasting images into a PowerPoint slide and say to themselves, “Voilà! I’m finished,” they have not only missed the point of the project, but they will run into difficulty while trying to write the analysis.

Last semester during the first in-class workshop for the students’ visual arguments and at which one of my colleagues was observing, one student had missed the shared feedback to three students’ visuals prior to his late arrival. It was obvious he came without a visual draft, so he sat at his computer station while we pressed on with our viewings and critiques, and very quickly cut and pasted photographic images onto a PowerPoint slide. The only reason I know this is because my colleague was sitting at the computer station behind him and observed his dashing off a visual argument so he could receive feedback. Though a tad disappointed, I still appreciated his wanting to participate in the workshop and his desiring student response to his visual—last minute or not. My colleague’s comment to me: “Based on what I was hearing about the complexity of this project during your workshop, I predict he will struggle big time when he begins to write his analysis.”

He did, and though he eventually met with some degree of success, his not taking time initially to think more critically about how he would manipulate the elements and principles of design to transform his verbal claim into a visual argument put him behind; in order to stay on track with deadlines, he had to work under pressure to make decisions for why he chose the particular images he did, why they were arranged in the composition in the order and manner they were, and how those and other important features of design in the visual contributed to its overall meaning and power. He deserves applause, though, as do several of his classmates with whom he consulted out of class in his effort to acquire additional feedback and suggestions for improving his initial draft. Before the second workshop, he asked me if I would look at it and offer suggestions, and of course I was more than happy to do that. The point here is that because this student independently seized opportunities for collaboration outside of class and realized how procrastination can oftentimes work against us in producing the desired outcome, he achieved a kind of success that will serve him well in the world of work and career. For certain, Joe is just one of many students who over the years of my teaching in this genre has wilted temporarily under the shade of confusion or distraction but has come back to bloom sturdily.

As I mentioned earlier, any anxieties I brought with me to making this change in my writing curriculum have waned considerably. For example, in the beginning I was concerned that using the visual genre, which would necessitate at least minimal computer skills, might intimidate and distance some students. Also, my college has a large population of International English Language Acquisition students (ELA) who transition into the core comp classes after fulfilling their ELA requirements. What about the cultural barriers, I thought. Will these students be
able to acclimate themselves to the visual/technological mode without serious academic complications? Will adding a visual component to my comp class impede in any way the building of a strong community of learners, which I highly value? These concerns were heavy on my mind through the first few semesters that my colleague and I (she is now retired and living in the Netherlands) combined the verbal and visual modes in our composition classes. However, each semester and regular conversations with her opened my mind to additions and deletions I needed to make on my syllabus for the next semester. We were also reminded that one of the more difficult challenges of teaching, and one we all face from time to time, or even maybe more often, is working through and figuring out solutions to obstacles. In addition to our conversations, having our students respond to an evaluation I designed regarding their experiences with the visual project has become a valuable tool in helping me improve how I teach visual rhetoric, not to mention how it has inspired my continuing research on the subject and my attending whenever I can the CCCC conventions and those sessions that focus on this genre.

**Fruition**

Teaching visual literacy has prompted me to think differently about teaching and the profession in general. First of all, we don’t need special certifications to incorporate certain modes of learning in our classrooms, but rather the desire to stretch our academic boundaries. Through relevant professional development activities that help us become more sensitive to students’ learning needs, shared discourse with colleagues, and strong commitment to innovation through research, we can make our classrooms, in the words of Kathleen Welch, the sites of more effective “articulation and power” (qtd. in Brizee).

That’s what happened in my composition classes. Using a multimodal approach to teaching writing has transformed the classroom into a community of learners who enjoy the challenge of having opportunities, as one student put it, for “strangely odd way[s] of thinking.” That students struggle at first trying to critique and analyze visual images and at the same time translate them into verbal formats does not alienate them from the activity. And they very much welcome what is for them a surprisingly rhetorical shift because, as one student, Marie, explained, “we’re not writing for once, and it’s kind of fun learning how to translate a wordless poster into words.” While I had to chuckle at her comment, I was more than happy to hear that her willingness to till the soil of visual rhetoric made her feel satisfied and at home in the class. Hers is another kind of learner success that often goes unacknowledged. It had nothing to do with a grade, but everything to do with her new way of thinking about communication. And had I not been willing to move beyond my familiar way of teaching writing at my colleague’s invitation, neither Marie nor I would have experienced that teaching moment.

Furthermore, combining the visual and verbal modes in my composition classes has made me realize that all students really do want to succeed, and they need to know that I am behind them all the way to the end, to see to it that they do succeed; and if they know this and genuinely feel it, they’re more than eager to
hang on. This means, though, that whatever I do to make my course better must always be for their benefit. As instructors, we all have preferences for the kinds of readings we prefer assigning to our students and the kinds of essays we assign them to write semester after semester. But these don’t always work well for a lot of students, and when we’re finally willing to realize that, it is time to implement some sort of change. That’s what I did. Being innovative can be a difficult and rigorous activity for us because the majority of the time it demands our taking on a load of work that necessitates our delving into unfamiliar territory in terms of research and preparation—this very same activity we ask our students to do can be exhausting as well as frustrating. Take it from me, I know. But I’m a better composition instructor and a far more successful learner for doing it. Since learning how to teach visually, I have become strongly committed to the fact that unless I am stretching my intellectual boundaries, taking academic risks that can work potential wonders on my students, and willing to work positively through the obstacles—unless I am making waves in the classroom, in other words—it is not likely I am doing my students any good. What a disillusioning claim that is for a visual argument.

Works Cited


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