

Composition Meets Visual Communication

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"Questions do not express propositions; they are neither true nor false; but every question assumes that certain propositions are true."

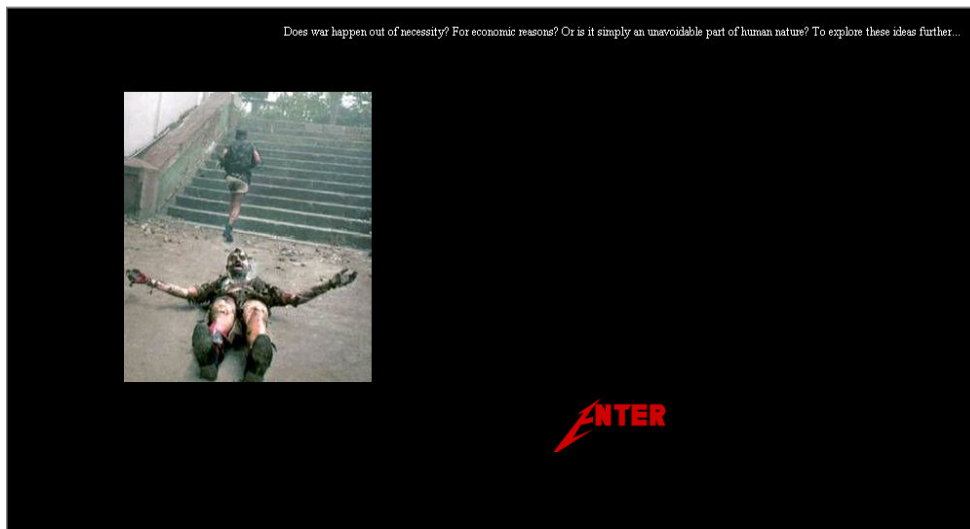
-Reginald Allen

I'd like to start this paper with a question:

Why should we teach visual communication as part of a writing class?

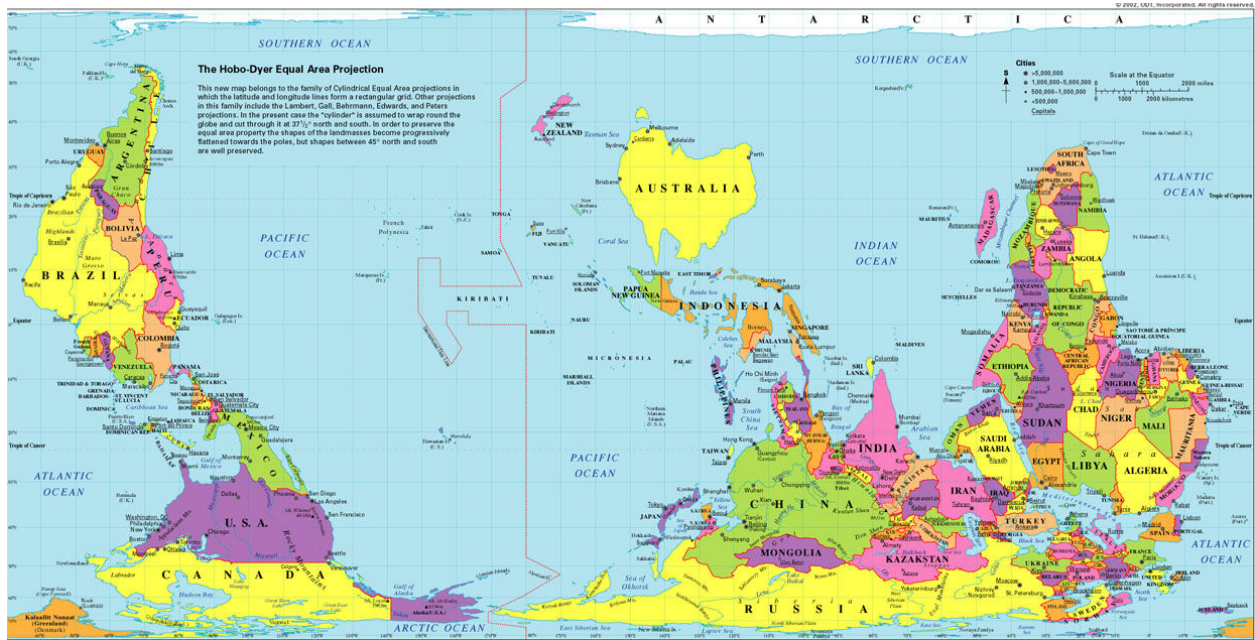
But as the quotation above from Reginald Allen suggests, we need first to consider the assumptions that make this a valid question in the first place. The assumption of the question is that we should be teaching visual communication in composition; it proposes that visual communication has something to offer composition that the field currently lacks. What are those things that make me think we should be teaching composition? This last question—the one asking for analysis of the assumption behind my claim that we should integrate visual communication into composition—is the guiding principle of this paper.

So why teach visual communication? First, visual communication is a literate practice that involves complex rhetorical skills. Take for instance, this screen shot from a multimedia argument a student created for me:



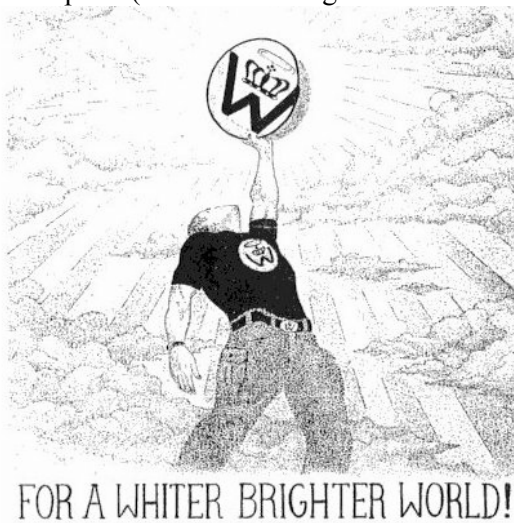
What you can't see here is the animation that leads through a series of horrific pictures, linking war to evil, to greed, to human nature itself. You can't see the type change from red to white to red. You can't see the chronological juxtaposition of George Bush, Saddam Hussein, Adolf Hitler. These are complex choices that all carry powerful rhetorical messages with scarcely any words at all. The only words on the page are these: "Does war happen out of necessity? For economic reasons? Or is it simply an unavoidable part of human nature?" How can this author be making such a powerful case without words?

A second reason is that visual communication challenges us to see – literally – in new ways. Take for example this “upside down” map:



As one student said in class: “This blows my mind. The world really isn’t the way it looks on a map?” No, and Illinois isn’t pink either, as Huck Finn realized floating down the Mississippi River. Visuals constrain our vision, what we can literally see and how we conceive of the world. Certainly words can do this, too, but visuals are in many ways far more powerful than words in this regard because we are pre-wired, biologically predisposed, to accept what we see. We accept a visual stimulus first then contemplate it later, as recent cognitive science has discovered (c.f. Barry, Livingstone). The physical act of perception precedes the physical act of cognition in time.

In other words, we can’t help but to see and to ascribe meanings to visuals based on the way they reframe our physical lived experiences. We associate visual framing, or the angle of representation, with degrees of power, so is this person representing “White Pride” from a White supremacy group’s website presented as powerful or helpless (not withstanding the biblical/religious allusions)?



Obviously, this person is powerful because we are below and he is up. Our lived experiences predispose us to believe that things above us are more powerful than we are. Visuals, that is, have a "deep structure" analogous to the deep structure of verbal language that can be used to construct images.

So why should we teach it? Well, first, and probably least significantly, there's the professional requirement. In 1996 NCTE recognized the place of visual texts in English studies by passing a resolution affirming that NCTE will "support professional development and promote public awareness of the role that viewing and visually representing our world have as forms of literacy." More pointedly, the background to the resolution states that "Teachers and students need to expand their appreciation of the power of print and nonprint texts. Teachers should guide students in constructing meaning through creating and viewing nonprint texts" ("Resolution on Viewing and Visually Representing as Forms of Literacy")

Second, and certainly more important, is the pedagogical imperative: we want to challenge our students to see things in new ways. Charles A. Hill summarizes this perspective well, writing, "Reading the Visual in College Writing Classes:"

One might assume—or at least hope—that a major goal of the educational system is to help students develop the abilities necessary to comprehend, interpret, and critically respond to the textual forms that they will encounter as members of the culture. Since so many of the texts that our students encounter are visual ones . . . it would seem obvious that our educational institutions should be spending at least as much time and energy on developing students' visual literacies as these institutions spend on developing students' textual literacy. However . . . the amount of time and effort devoted to developing students' abilities to comprehend, analyze and critique visual messages is relatively miniscule (124).

Several notable things that deserve comment emerge in this quotation. First, we can gather from Hill's words an historical perspective or viewpoint that pervades composition's view of its place in the academy. Specifically, compositionists, drawing on their roots in rhetoric, seek to produce productive, ethical citizens who can participate actively in a society. Hill expands this perspective to all of education here, but the point remains that one unifying thread present in composition is helping to prepare students to function as thinkers who can critically engage and reflect on the world around them. From this perspective, composition is actually as much about teaching writing as it is about teaching citizenship. If our students can reflect well on the texts they encounter and express those reflections effectively they can, the reasoning goes, become engaged participants in our culture whether that culture is the academy or whether it's the local community. Composition, like education, it seems, is fundamentally about creating a vision of how society should be.

If our students desire to actively participate in shaping the world around them as compositionists would like, don't they require the skills necessary not only to analyze visual or verbal texts, but also to create them? Again, turning to Hill, we see that it's "past time for teachers of writing to begin to pay serious attention to the communicative and rhetorical aspects of page and screen design" (142). In other words, composition teachers possess a great deal of critical acumen when applied to any textual form—verbal, visual, cinematographic, architectural, physical—and can teach those skills very well to students. We've been doing it for quite some time now. Composition teachers also do an excellent job teaching verbal literacy skills to help students demonstrate their critical acumen about these texts. What composition teachers do far less often, however, is teach the rhetoric of typography (Brumberger 2003), or how to effectively integrate visuals into a verbal text (c.f. Wiley 2004), or how to use color to create emotion appeals (c.f. White 2000), or how to design a page to emphasize key rhetorical points (c.f. Kostelnick and

Roberts 2000). In short, because most composition teachers have very little background in visual rhetoric, they don't teach it in spite of the critical importance visual literacy currently plays in our culture.

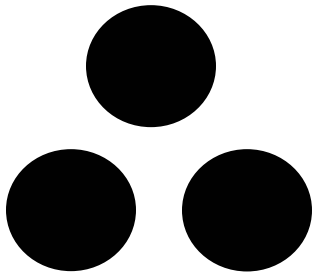
As a result, we have left visual communication to kids. Children draw and we encourage them to do so, but there are very few cultural standards of visual communication expected of educated adults. As adults, we simply aren't expected to be effective visual communicators in the same way that we, as educated adults, are expected to communicate effectively with words. Why is it acceptable to be visually illiterate, but a stigma to be verbally illiterate?

So the pedagogical imperative is great: our students need to understand how visual texts work on them by understanding how to construct them. Our students need to develop visual literacy as part of "advanced discursive and critical skills that empower individuals to succeed with the university and beyond" as the SDSU's Rhetoric and Writing website says.

Some Background

So if we accept that teaching visual communication is important, which I think it is, before we can teach it, we must understand a few things about how visual communication works. Most fundamental to this, and what is most often neglected in discussions I've read, is the way we actually see. It's incredibly important to understand the way we see because the physiological process of vision is the perfect metaphor for thought itself.

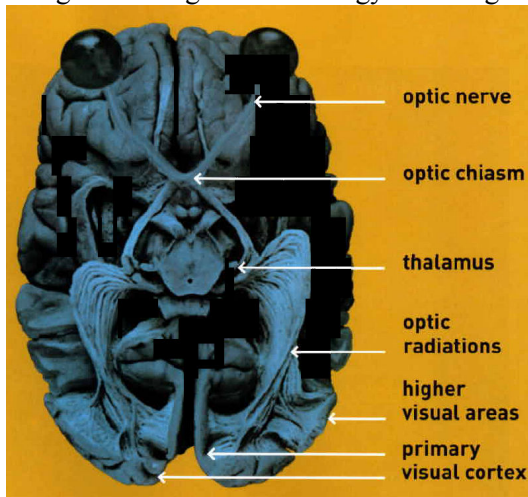
Let me explain. What do you see here?



Is it a triangle? Is it 3 dots? Actually it's neither since it's just electrons on a screen or black ink on a page, but most people probably would say that they see a triangle. This speaks to the way vision actually works because our mind scans for changes, boundaries, and forms then fills in the blanks. Your mind literally puts the pieces together out of parts because of something called "Saccadic movements" which is basically a way of saying that your eyes "Sample" the visual field selecting bit and pieces and then your brain reconstructs those sampled bits into meaningful patterns and shapes. We don't actually see anything whole. We see shape, form, movement, color, texture, etc, and our brains fill in the rest. Seaward-Barry, in her important book *Visual Intelligence*, wrote that the visual world is "an image created in the brain, formed by an integration of immediate multisensory information, prior experience, and cultural learning (Barry 15). The truth is not out there.

Why is it important to understand that the truth is not out there? It's important because we need to understand that we are biologically wired to accept what we see as real. We first accept the reality of the visual world and then analyze it, not the other way around. It's a survival tactic and the vision system itself shows this two-stage process since there is a "where" system that is phylogenetically older than the "what" system. The "where" system is connected directly to the thalamus which controls physical responses through hormones, and the "what" system comes much later in evolution and extends outward

into the cortex of the brain. In other words, the electrical impulses that really—physiologically—compose our vision pass first through our “flight or fight” system where we determine whether something is a threat or not and then passes into the visual cortex for higher processing. The figure below from Margaret Livingstone’s *Biology of seeing* demonstrates this concept.



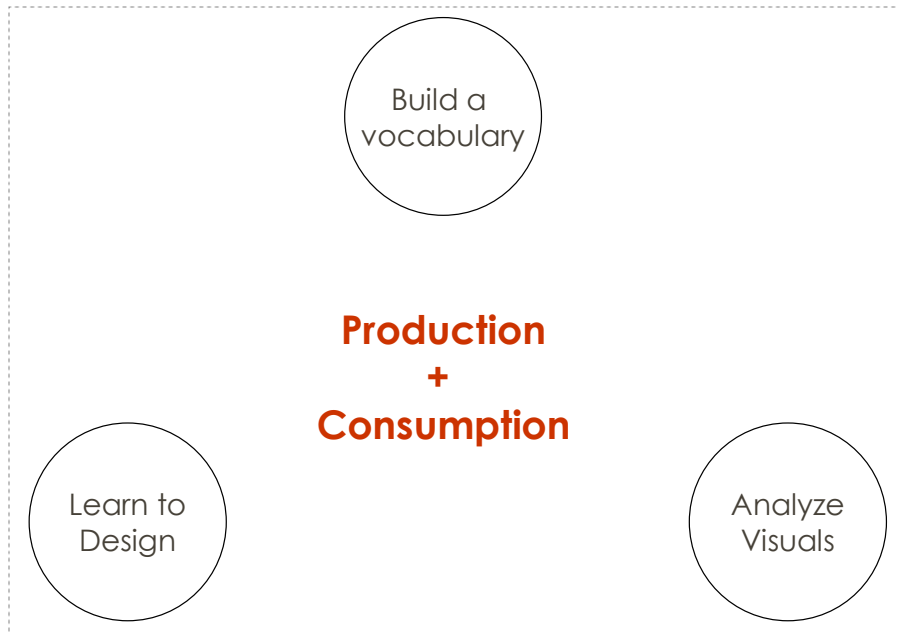
So what? Vision as a sensory system has two aspects that we need to effectively work with: the immediate, preattentive, “what” system that precedes rational consideration, and the higher order “where” system that reconstructs patterns and relates those patterns to concepts. Reading and writing are part of the higher order system where reading is a visual act of the highest visual abstraction. Remember that vision itself as a physiological process is about filling in the blanks – connecting the dots – and this is exactly what reading is: making meaning out of dots that form letters. It’s also exactly what higher order, analytical thinking is: recognizing patterns to make meaning.

This too brief primer on the biology of seeing demonstrates, once again, that vision itself is the perfect metaphor for higher thought because like thought, vision is a way of drawing disparate objects together into a meaningful pattern. But composition, as it has traditionally used visuals, fails to recognize that we can only rationalize our initial responses to visuals AFTER THE FACT of perception. Perception precedes any sort of thinking about visual forms. As a consequence, analysis of visuals becomes secondary to understanding the CONSTRUCTION of visuals since understanding how to compose a visual message is not only employing higher order thinking skills but also teaching students how visuals act on them. In a sense, teaching the composition of visuals trains the eyes to see forms, shapes and patterns, and NOT complete representations. If we can train our eyes to see shapes, patterns, colors, and forms, we gain power over the extraordinary influence of visuals.

Some Teaching Practices

So how do we train that “off switch” as it were, that critical eye, which helps students come to realize the ways that visuals are constructed? How do we help draw connections between our teaching of verbal composition and our teaching of visual composition? It’s an important question because, in fact, visual composition enacts the same higher order skills that verbal composition does.

If we want to teach visual communication, how do we do it, and how does it inform the writing curriculum? Because I believe that combining consumption and production helps students develop both better, I think we should educate students in both as part of our composition classes. Here’s what pieces I’d include in a visual unit in a composition class:



Let's take each of these in turn.

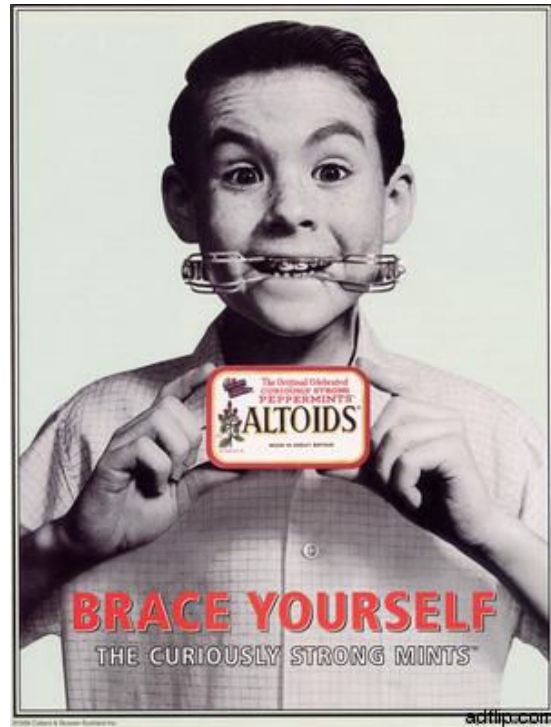
Build a vocabulary

We spend a lot of time in school learning the vocabulary of the verbal world: tone, style, organization – and the parts that make up successful writing – letters, words, sentences, paragraphs, papers, theses, and so on in a compounded experience where one thing leads to the next. Why can't we do the same thing for visual communication terms and concepts? If we can teach students a visual design vocabulary, then we're teaching them ways to talk about the visual in a language they didn't have. If they can talk about it intelligently, then is the first step toward training the off switch. Here is a sampling of some of the vocabulary terms that one of my classes generated:

Abstract	Descenders	Methodology
Aesthetics	Design	Negative space
Affect (positive and negative)	Element	Paradigm
Alignment	Emotion	Perception
Amplification thru simplification	Emphasis	Persona
Analysis	Font	Placement
Ascenders	Font family	Point size
Asymmetry	Form	Proximity
Audience	Framing	Purpose
Balance	Gestalt	Reflective
Behavioral	Given-new	Salience
Blank space	Good continuance	Sans serif
Cognition	Grid	Sequence
Color	Ideal real	Serif
Composition	Information value	Shape

Context	Kerning	Similiary
Continuity	Leading	Size
Contrast	Leading	Symmetry
culture	Line	Syntagmatic
alley	figure-ground	
	grouping	
	hierarchy	
	Margins	

But some might ask why they should try teaching a new vocabulary when students already don't know the vocabulary for verbal writing. My answer is simple: the visual communication vocabulary makes the verbal vocabulary real! Look at these two images—what's the point of view of the image on the left or the tone of the image on the right?



What we should be doing, then, is teaching our students about the “grammar of visual design” or how different elements—different concepts represented by these vocabulary words—combine in a piece of visual communication to create a message. But we can also use these same concepts to make verbal terms like “organization” or “style” or “tone” real because students literally SEE the concepts in play when they combine elements to create a visual message.

Learn to Design

One of the best ways to teach the students the vocabulary of visual communication is to have them design with specific concepts – vocabulary words – in mind. For example look at this:

In the beginning was the Word,

the Word was with God and
the Word was God. Through
Him all things Came into being and
apart from him nothing came to be.

What we see here is that typeface matters, that it has a "persona" to quote Eva Bruberg, and that choosing a typestyle has rhetorical impact. Students are learning about typeface and persona as concepts by literally seeing those things in practice in their designs. Or what about this flyer that was created for an assignment called "Designing Dissent"?



- The world health organization has declared obesity a global epidemic.
- Obesity is a cause of high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, cancer, and asthma.
- Hospital costs related to childhood obesity rose from \$35M in 1979 to \$127M in 1999.
- 80% of Type-2 diabetes is related to childhood obesity.
- Diabetes will cut 17-27 years off your child's life.
- One in four overweight children is already showing early signs of type two diabetes.
- 60% of overweight children have one risk factor for heart disease.
- Obesity will surpass smoking as the leading cause of preventable death in America.

your child's future.

What we're getting here is not just design. We're getting argument. We're getting involvement of the visual and the verbal and we're helping students to see that designing a document is simply a way of combining elements, in this case words and clip art, to have a powerful rhetorical effect. Again, we're using the visuals to teach the same skills as we have traditionally been trying to teach with verbal

composition alone, namely that the organization and combination of specific elements creates the message that you're trying to articulate.

And also just like teaching written composition, students should learn that every good design passes through a process of invention, drafting, revision, and publication. We should teach our students to identify the context, the audience, the purpose, and then draw up some ideas to show to their friends. Based upon that feedback, they revise, go through the process again, and then eventually submit the design. Students are far more likely in my experience to ask their peers for feedback of their kitschy visual constructions than of their serious academic essays. But the end result is the same because we're teaching students to compose using a process and to involve an audience in helping them craft their messages. And for most of this, they don't need complex computer classrooms because you can do everything I've talked about here with MS Word.

I want to re-emphasize my argument that we're teaching transdisciplinary literacy skills by integrating visual communication into the writing classroom. We're teaching the concepts of literacy not merely as basic competencies that apply only to verbal text, but also in terms of more advanced discursive and critical skills that empower individuals to succeed in a variety of media at the university and beyond. In reality, most of our students will be required to compose in multiple media once they leave our classrooms, so why not help them develop those skills in a holistic package under the rubric of "literacy?"

Analyze Visuals

I already talked a bit about analysis above when I spoke about building a vocabulary. Now comes the time to make verbal arguments about visual texts, and, I'd tell my students, that their arguments need to incorporate the document design, and typography and layout characteristics we've already talked about because that's what makes for effective writing now. So take this advertisement, for example.



What can we say about the context, about the combination of elements, about the typography, the color, the angle of the presentation, the center, the margins, the top and the bottom—the way the different pieces of the visual are crafted for a particular rhetorical effect? Certainly, cultural studies asks many of these same questions and we can learn a lot from that field. However, what we're asking students to do is look at the GRAMMAR of the design and how that grammar interacts with the socio-political context. First, we have to ask them TO SEE what's really there in terms of the actual elements, to train the off switch I spoke about earlier. If students can train the off switch then they can begin to make claims about the ways the elements combine to create particular effects.

So to trace back through our steps, this pedagogy I'm espousing helps students become both effective producers AND consumers of visual texts by approaching the visual world from both angles—as a producer and as consumer. But along the way, they've also worked a lot on the skills that make for good writers like analytical thinking and audience awareness and civic engagement, especially when they use their verbal skills to write about visual products. They've also learned how to create even more effective documents because as we know, people remember

10% of what they hear;
30% of what they read;
50% of what they see;
90% of what they do.

Fundamentally, you're working on all the same skills when assigning visual communication, yet you're doing it in two media when a writing class combines work in both verbal and visual texts. In theory, working in multiple media is going to create a better learning outcome than a single medium because students are doing, seeing, reading, and hearing about the concepts of composition and literacy and I argue that many of the concepts cross the boundaries, like arrangement, or ethos, or style. If we integrate visuals into our composition classes, we're involving our students in a much richer composition experience, ESPECIALLY when we dovetail our discussion of verbal concepts like organization or point of view with visual concepts like arrangement and framing angle.

Combining visual elements with verbal elements ultimately gets at the same transdisciplinary literacy skills. And those are the skills, like critical thinking and analysis, that we want our students to learn.

Conclusions

Given everything this paper has covered, what are the takeaways, the things to remember?

First, you don't need a high speed computer classroom to do this. Virtually every computer currently sold today has software appropriate for doing most of the work I've discussed here in terms of creating visuals. Microsoft Word is a very robust, if not sometimes frustrating, program for combining words and visuals. Computer equipment just isn't the barrier that it was even three years ago.

Second, visual communication can be taught. Certainly just as some students are going to be better writers than others, some students will be better designers than others. Perhaps they have a more keen visual sense or perhaps they have been schooled more in visual communication. Either way, the concepts I'm espousing here are teachable; they're not mysterious. The Gestalt principles, like balance and alignment and good continuance, can be taught and used. Students can learn about the interactions of typeface and message being projected. These are easy concepts, especially when they are interwoven with print literacy counterparts.

Third, visual communication teaches the same skills as verbal writing. The skills like process orientation, like audience awareness, like critical thinking apply equally to visual texts as they do to verbal texts. The skill is the same even if the medium under investigation is not. It's important that composition teachers recognize that teaching visual communication ultimately is going to make their students more thoughtful writers.

Fourth, and most importantly, if we don't teach visual communication, we're circumscribing the expressive and analytical resources available to our students. In our world today, it would be a tragedy for students not to be able to express themselves visually as well as verbally. Our culture is increasingly visual and those with the skills to persuade others visually are going to have more ability to influence the actions of others and determine the outcomes of debates. Conversely, if we don't equip our students with the skills to analyze visuals, it will be easy for them to be lured into positions that they might not agree with because, remember, we are pre-wired to believe what we see and the physiological act of cognition comes temporally second to the act of perception.

Visual communication, I argue, should now be recognized by writing teachers as part of what it means to be literate. If our students are visually literate, meaning having both the ability to create and analyze the representations around them, we will have a future citizenry that has the ability to produce effective AND ethical visuals, and to critique the visuals message that bombard us daily. Ultimately if we create visually literate people, partly through integrating visual communication into our composition classes, we're creating a culture of people who are responsible, analytical thinkers who can also communicate effectively enough to make positive changes in the world.

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