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Multimedia in the Writing Center: Visual Rhetoric and Tutor Training

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[slide 1] Introduce self. State title.

[slide 2] In a two-part series of articles published in 2001, Sean Williams argues that “restricting rhetorical instruction to verbal media, even if computers are used for instruction, implies that we are unwilling to recognize that literacy is in flux” (Part 1, 22) and that [slide 3] “composition... pedagogy should include both verbal and visual instruction in a hypertextual environment in order to help students develop facility with an expanded set of literate practices” (Part 2, 124).

With this increased attention to visual literacy in composition and rhetoric, it is only natural that writing centers become involved in the discussion of how to address visual projects. Writing, no longer limited to traditional eight-page research papers with one-inch margins, now includes PowerPoint presentations, hypertexts, and new media or multimedia projects designed in a variety of desktop publishing and design software.

[slide 4] What is the impact of visual rhetoric and new media on writing center theory and practice, and what are the implications for writing centers when students expect *or need* feedback on their visual projects? [slide 5] Michael Pemberton points out that “the consequences for writing centers are clear: more students with different texts in unfamiliar genres will be making new demands on tutor expertise” (15).

At some institutions, writing centers scramble to meet the changes and demands of campus writing programs that include multimedia components in their courses. On my own campus, the Introductory Composition program redesigned the first year composition course to include visual-based projects, and our Writing Lab has risen to the challenge by reaching out to Composition instructors and students to learn how we might best meet their needs. *But most importantly*, we have worked to address visual rhetoric in staff meetings and tutor-training practicum courses. As an instructor of one of our tutor-training courses, I have made changes and included a visual rhetoric unit to better prepare our undergraduate writing consultants to meet the demands of visual-based writing projects.

In this presentation, I will describe the process of integrating the visual rhetoric unit in an undergraduate tutoring practicum, and I will argue why writing centers should address visual rhetoric. While writing programs are working to include new media writing projects in course curricula, few writing centers are equipped to respond to such projects in writing tutorials. My presentation offers *one version* of a practical how-to for training tutors to work with visual-based projects.

In my tutor-training course, I integrated a two-fold approach to visual rhetoric: analysis and production. In my model, tutors learn how to apply the rhetorical canon to finished visual pieces and how to create visual arguments of their own. I argue that both analysis and production are necessary for tutors to learn not only the *basis* for effective visual arguments but *how* rhetorically-sound pieces *are constructed*—both of which are important for tutoring students who are composing visual projects.

[slide 6] Why should writing centers address visual rhetoric at all, much less in a tutor-training course? [slide 7] I will again quote from Pemberton, who states:

But even if most instructors will not encourage hypertext papers or teach Web design in their courses, others certainly will. [slide 8] Technical writing classes now incorporate Web documents and design as a matter of course, and a great many information technology, journalism, and graphic design classes view Web design and hypertext as integral parts of their curricula. [slide 9] This being the case, writing centers may feel it is their responsibility to prepare tutors to meet these students' rhetorical needs as well as the needs of students with more traditional assignments. (19)

I certainly agree with Pemberton, and I would argue that many writing centers have been working with students on visual design for quite some time by responding to layouts of résumés, working with format and readability of business writing documents, or even when offering suggestions to students who incorporate a few “pie charts” into traditional research papers. With the addition of new media projects into the mix, writing centers **must remain on the proverbial cutting edge in order to avoid remediation labels**. We must continue to develop new ways of helping students develop multiple literacies and communication skills. Otherwise, we risk being antiquated—too simplistic about writing to be taken seriously. Isn't the function of writing centers “to produce better writers” (North, 438)? If that is the case, then writing centers must consider how to address new forms of writing when working with students.

So, the question is, then, how can writing center administrators better prepare their tutors to work with visual-based projects?

Like others faced with the daunting task of preparing tutors to work with visual projects, I was unsure how to begin, and I quickly discovered that tutors-in-training should do more than *simply read* articles about visual rhetoric. Instead, they should develop rhetorical skills for responding to visual projects, and one way to develop those skills would be to analyze existing visual projects and to develop visual arguments of their own.

[slide 10] In my practicum course, I addressed some key concepts in visual rhetoric and some very basic visual design. I did not cover any technical information on how-to use software, but I did cover logos, ethos, pathos, audience, and purpose, concepts familiar to my students in one way or another. We spent time examining advertisements in popular magazines and websites for political organizations, media outlets, and gender and age-specific networks. Students identified the usage of logos, ethos, and pathos and discussed audience and purpose, focusing on *why* the designers made certain choices with graphics and text. I will admit that my students only scratched the surface of visual rhetorical analysis, but they did develop initial ideas of how to address visuals in a writing tutorial.

[slide 11] After we covered analysis, I asked my students to develop a visual argument, which students in some sections of Composition were doing. My assignment had two parts, a visual piece and a reflective essay. Students were required to create a visual argument on any topic of their choice, and they could use any media they

wanted—digital photography, hypertext, drawings, posters, etc. They could incorporate some text, but the primary mode of argumentation would be visual. [Direct audience to handout.]

My students had three weeks to complete the project, which did not leave much room for drafting and revision. Nevertheless, they produced some interesting visual arguments about a variety of topics. In this next portion of my presentation, I will show you some examples of my students' work and provide excerpts from their reflective essays. While I wouldn't claim that these were sophisticated visual arguments, I would note that my students' *ideas* about visual rhetoric and their *comfort* with visual literacy, increased dramatically.

Student #1

[slide 12] This student chose a local issue about advertising done by student organizations, which, on our campus, usually involves taping flyers on sidewalks. These flyers are then trampled upon or rained on. As you can see, this student incorporated photos of these flyers in various stages of disintegration into his visual piece. The caption reads, "Purdue University... a beautiful campus."

In his reflective essay, this student describes the choices he made, noting that he "was able to quickly identify some problem areas that [first year composition] students might run into when assigned [a similar] project." He states that students may have trouble with audience and making a thesis clear in a visual assignment like this one. And what was encouraging to read this following comment: [slide 13]

...I now feel as though I have a much better understanding of the types of questions English 106 students ask themselves when working on this assignment. I am better equipped to field their questions if they should come up during a tutorial. Most of all, I believe I am finally starting to understand where the essential elements of composition fit into visual rhetoric projects.

My student's remarks illustrate a shift from his initial fear and apprehension of tutoring visual-based writing assignments. This student's attitudes and reflections on developing visual projects are not isolated, as several other students made similar comments in their own essays.

Student #2

[slide 14-- Tell audience that there is no example because the student did a collage poster.] This student chose a global issue pertaining to beauty and skin color. She found pictures of female celebrities considered beautiful by the media and the public, and she arranged the pictures into a collage on poster board, starting with pictures of white, blonde women and ending with pictures of light-skinned African-American women. On either side of the collage was a picture of a famous male actor. She incorporated the following text into her visual piece: "Who's got the power?" and used the words "blonde" and "light and white" in various places throughout the collage.

Unlike the previous student, who made clear observations about how he would address visual projects in a tutorial, this student's reflective essay described in detail the

motivation behind her visual piece. She demonstrates an emerging rhetorical sophistication when she states

While composing this piece, I first wanted to make a progression from light skinned, blonde and straight hair models to darker skinned, curly and dark hair models. However, I could not even obtain pictures of black women who did not straighten their hair. I was disappointed, but it strengthens the argument that models need to have these ‘white’ features to remain desirable.

Student #3

[slide 15] This student decided that one solution to the problem of rudeness in society was to offer an Etiquette 203 course. In her advertisement, she includes a picture of someone behaving rudely, a man sticking his tongue out at someone passing by. The caption at the top reads, “Want to treat others better than some people treat you?” There is additional information about the course at the bottom of the flyer.

While the flyer itself could use some improvement, this student’s reflective essay showed remarkable rhetorical awareness with her design choices. She noted that she [slide 16] “wanted [her] visual project to attempt to move people away from thinking that etiquette is simply a collection of rigid table manners.” [slide 17] She identifies her audience as students in the School of Management—hence the office setting in the photo—and describes why she used the caption and why

she chose the color red, referencing Lisa Graham's *Basics of Design: Layout and Typography for Beginners*. This student's reflective piece demonstrated that she thoughtfully considered her audience and purpose when choosing and placing elements on the flyer.

Student #4

[slide 18] This last student's project confronts the issue of Daylight Savings Time in Indiana, which has been a contentious issue for many people. The student uses a map of Indiana, designed to look like a clock, and an agricultural theme to argue against the switch to Daylight Savings Time. [slide 19] This student, like the previous student, discusses her design choices in her reflective essay. She mentions that she consciously chose a "harvest yellow-orange" background because of its agricultural connection and because it reflects the image of a rising sun. She describes her usage of cornstalks in the numbers on the clock because corn is "one of Indiana's major crops grown by Indiana farmers." This student has identified an audience for her argument and has developed her visual piece specifically for that audience.

Conclusion [slide 20—last slide]

Although my tutors-in-training had considerably less time to generate their visual pieces than students in Introductory Composition, their reflective essays demonstrated an emerging awareness of the importance of visual literacy and the nuances of developing a visual argument. Even before the visual rhetoric unit began, my students expressed some

hesitation and apprehension at the prospect of students in English courses creating visual pieces and of tutors being asked to respond to such assignments. Very few of the students in the tutor-training course had experience creating visual arguments, although many of them had used PowerPoint and similar applications in their coursework. Naturally they were nervous about their own (*perceived*) lack of knowledge and experience with visual language. They were unable to see the similarities between tutoring traditional print-based writing and visual-based writing, or to understand that rhetorical principles were common to both kinds of writing. After analyzing existing visual-based writing and developing visual arguments of their own, students became more comfortable with the idea of tutoring this “*new*” type of writing. And in subsequent mock-tutorials where the students practiced tutoring students with PowerPoints, they were clearly more confident in their responses. The students not only focused on the content of the PowerPoint slides—what we would call a higher order concern—they also addressed document design, usage of images in the PowerPoints, and inconsistencies they saw throughout the presentations.

I believe my students have learned that their exposure to visuals in everyday life and in culture, as well as their experience constructing textual arguments, allows them to make the leap to visual argumentation. Also, my students are reminded that principles such as audience, purpose, logos, ethos, and pathos are foundations of visual (as well as print-based) pieces of writing. Tutorials are beneficial as long as tutors can ask rhetorically-focused questions when responding to students’ writing, whether the writing is visual or print-based.

Ultimately, these tutors-in-training did not become experts in visual rhetoric in two or three class periods. Nevertheless, the unit on visual rhetoric helped these students gain confidence in their ability to address multimedia assignments in a writing tutorial. As we begin to see more and more students bringing non-traditional writing assignments to our Writing Lab—which is happening, albeit more slowly than we anticipated—I have no doubt that our writing center is equipped to respond to these new media texts like any other piece of writing.

Works Cited

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