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Composing in words and images : a proposal for a tandem approach to written and visual composition pedagogy

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COMPOSING IN WORDS AND IMAGES:
A REPORT ON A TANDEM APPROACH TO WRITTEN AND VISUAL COMPOSITION
PEDAGOGY

by

Brian D. Parmeter

A REPORT

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

This project proposes a module for teaching visual composition within the context of a written composition course. Drawing from process writing theory, critical pedagogy, and photo-elicitation, “Composing In Words And Images” gives composition teachers a module and direct instruction for the incorporation of critical visual composition studies in their writing classes.

Introduction: Combining Visual and Written Composition Pedagogy

“Composing in Words and Images” (CIWAI) is a four-week module in visual composition designed to accompany conventional approaches to written composition pedagogy. It is intended to fill a gap among instructors inexperienced or otherwise uncomfortable with the visual end of the college composition spectrum. The educational goals of CIWAI are 1) to engender visual literacy through making photographs and discourse, 2) to improve students’ understanding and appreciation of Writing Process Theory, and 3) to create a richer, more authentic, and personally meaningful learning experience for students exploring visual and written communication.

This approach to composition pedagogy is kairotic on three fronts. By kairotic I mean, first, that advances in digital imaging put the communicative power of photography into the hands of everybody, and with unprecedented technological simplicity. Second, in a world where cultures with myriad languages interact on an increasingly global scale, photography becomes especially salient given its unique ability to cut across language barriers; the time is ripe for teaching and using photography toward improving cross-cultural understanding. And third, the backbone of most academic and commercial

communication today is in fact the Internet itself, a digital platform increasingly designed, and starving for, intentional, rhetorically rich photography (otherwise known as “good pictures”). Teaching visual and written composition in tandem can strengthen students’ understanding of each to a greater extent than teaching them individually.

In a broader scope, however, there are much larger philosophical phenomena at play that suggest we take up a rigorous and critical understanding of images at this point in our development--what WJT Mitchell has called the “pictorial turn.” (Mitchell, 11) Building on Richard Rorty’s historical philosophical scheme wherein medieval philosophy dealt with things, followed by enlightenment philosophy’s “turn” to ideas, thence contemporary philosophy’s “linguistic turn,” (Rorty, p. 263) Mitchell’s “pictorial turn” re-focuses our philosophical attention on the broad spectrum of technological innovation and scholarship surrounding images, their ubiquity, and the specter of “a culture totally dominated by images [which is now] a real [technological] possibility on a global scale.” (Mitchell, p. 15) For all of our theorizing, “... we still do not know exactly what pictures are, what their relation to language is, how they operate on observers and on the world, how their history is to be understood, and what is to be done with or about them.” (Mitchell, p. 13)

In *Image -- Music -- Text*, Roland Barthes opened a pictorial Pandora’s Box when he identified the phenomena of the “denoted” and “connoted” in photographic images. The “denoted” are the actual things depicted in a photo--the mechanical, analogous representation of the scene in two dimensions that the viewer would have seen for him or herself had they looked from the perspective of the camera at the moment the image was captured. But below the image’s surface, as with many still waters, is a complex depth of

the “connoted”--a rich realm of interpretive, subjective meaning making. (Barthes, P. 42) Within this realm, images can inspire us to altruism, at the enlightened end of the spectrum, or incite us to murderous hatred at their darkest. Often well below the surface of consciousness, images whisper their authors’ messages--good and bad-- to sometimes glorious, and at other times insidious ends. Whether to sort out the underlying persuasion in advertising, or to identify the hidden agendas in typical political rhetoric, a working knowledge of the mechanics of images and their potential effects on audiences is an important facet of holistic education; the pedagogical model I’m proposing with CIWAI takes a sure step in that direction.

Ideas regarding the roles of visual literacy in composition classrooms are not new. Diana George foresaw the inevitability of the conflation of these modes quite clearly in her 2002 article *From Analysis to Design: Visual Communication in the Teaching of Writing* in which she points out that we need to de-limit our conceptions of the kinds of visual projects and assignments that are apropos to composition classrooms. (George, p. 20) She presents an assignment she gave in her own composition class which challenged students to produce a rhetorically meaningful visual argument, and her article includes samples of student work that she claims succeeds at that challenge. The assignment is for her a turning from the use of visuals as writing prompts, to the use of visuals as self-contained argumentation. The CIWAI model engenders a similar intentionality in meaning-making, though in more self-reflective narrative essay form.

Cheryl E. Ball and Kristin L. Arola’s innovative CD ROM *Visual Exercises* acknowledges the communicative power of visual texts and the obvious advantages of combining various modes including visual, written, motion, and aural. Their

understanding of the communicative opportunities afforded by new media prompted a series of exercises composition students can practice in order to understand this new universe of options, but which also gives students small tasks wherein they actually design their own multi-modal texts. Both theirs and the CIWAI approach include a basic primer in the language and production of intentionally communicative two-dimensional visual composition, a primer largely underrepresented in traditional composition classrooms.

“Composing in Words and Images” rests squarely on two well known theoretical constructs and one new to Composition Studies: 1) process writing theory, 2) critical pedagogy, and 3) a novel adaptation of an ethnographic method: photo-elicitation.

Process Writing Theory: Plan, Write, Revise

A dramatic shift in the way we view and teach writing dates back to a 1964 US government-sponsored report by Gordon D. Rohman and Albert O. Wlecke, “Pre-Writing: The Construction and Application of Models for Concept Formation in Writing.” (Rohman, 216) “Pre-writing” was here conceptualized as a separate process from actually writing. A prelude to a new paradigm, their ideas opened a floodgate of new scholarship that quickly moved us away from the predominant “Current-Traditional” approaches which preceded Process. A brief discussion of the major strands of thinking within Process Writing Theory will be helpful in understanding the specific and varied aspects of Process that the CIWAI approach utilizes.

The cognitive process theory, as put forth by Linda Flower and John R. Hayes in “The Cognition of Discovery: Defining a Rhetorical Problem,” compares the pre-writing

practices of “good” and “bad” writers. They problematize notions of discovery as a matter of “finding” truths or knowledge, preferring instead a model wherein good writers “make” truth or knowledge through rigorous cognitive processes (467). During the pre-writing stage, they found that good writers approach rhetorical tasks as a problem or series of problems that need to be addressed. Good writers assessments of a problem don’t rest when a single facet of the problem is recognized; rather they search for a more complicated, multi-faceted approach. In representing the problem to their audience(s) they seek a richer, more comprehensive array of potential outcomes, and a broader, deeper exploration of the matter at hand than the effort expended by poor writers. At all stages of their process, good writers expand their understanding of audience, the complexity of the problems they are addressing, and the array of potential affects on their audience, all of which result in richer, more comprehensive solutions to the problems under study.

“Expressivism” took writing through an inward turn in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s. A reaction to the positivistic nature of current traditional approaches, expressivists held that truths and reality are not fixed, but rather that individuals, through a process of shedding misconceptions, arrive at their own unique truths, their own individual reality. James Berlin traces expressivism to its Platonic roots, wherein individuals can discover truths but not communicate or disseminate them among others--each individual has to discover his or her own truths through their own individual winnowing process. To use Berlin’s words, “Truth can be learned but not taught” (p. 771). Expressivist composition pedagogy views writing as instrumental to the individual’s discovery of their own sense of reality, or as Donald Murray put it, “... *the process of exploration of what we know and what we feel about what we know through language.*” (p. 12) In *Telling Truths*, Ken

Macrorie gives his description of the expressivist writer as one who tells honestly of their experience of life, as opposed to writers who drape their texts with the perceived expectations of academic writing (p. 16). In-class workshopping is the process through which an individual's writing is purified--that which is untrue is removed through dialog. Conventional expression gives way to individual expression, often through a writer's original uses of analogy and metaphor.

Ann Berthoff's dialectical process model defines process in terms quite parallel to the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of dialectic: "a. the art of critical examination into the truth of an opinion; the investigation of truth by discussion...." In keeping with the Cognitive assertion that meaning is made and not found, adherents of the Dialectical approach further point out that making knowledge happens within a larger chaotic context. By embracing the chaotic nature of existence, through discussion, truths can be agreed upon at a given time, though with the caveat that in a different time or context, or viewed from differing perspectives or by different people using different languages, those truths may well change. To teach process, as opposed to simply "proclaiming" it, is to teach an appreciation for the ambiguity of reality, and of language used in the "forming" of truths through dialectical processes. Berthoff says "we can best teach the composing process by conceiving of it as a continuum of making meaning, by seeing writing as analogous to all those processes by which we make sense of the world." (648)

In his landmark paper "Teach Writing as a Process Not Product," Expressivist Donald Murray describes writing essentially as a way for students to "come to know" and discover new knowledge through writing:

What is the process we should teach? It is the process of discovery through language. It is the process of exploration of what we know and what

we feel about what we know through language. It is the process of using language to learn about our world, to evaluate what we learn about our world, to communicate what we learn about our world.

Instead of teaching finished writing, we should teach unfinished writing, and glory in its unfinishedness ... of choosing one word instead of another, of searching for the one true word. (12)

To learn process then is to come to understand writing as infinitely revisable, which holds true as well in photographic communication. Murray describes the stages of the writing process as *pre-writing, writing, and rewriting*. In “Composing in Words and Images,” the visual corollaries of pre-visualization, photographing, and re-photographing (or, more commonly, “shooting” and “reshooting”) are explored in tandem with writing, such that the two modes mirror and amplify one another. In other words, process theory, as a heuristic toward effective, intentional writing, is an equally helpful heuristic in effective, intentional visual composition. CIWAI engenders a process of discovery through the critical application of intentional photographic composition *combined* with the written word, a powerful combination with an illustrious history and an even brighter future given the ubiquity of today’s digital media.

Like much composition pedagogy in the wake of Current-Traditional approaches, the CIWAI approach seeks to transcend the positivism--the myth of scientific objectivity--that was emblematic of the modern era. Students’ growth in visual literacy occurs amidst the rich four-way transactional dynamic of the student, his or her reality, audience, and the written and visual language produced. CIWAI presents a doorway to enriched communicative practices that hinges foremost on 1) Murray’s suggestion that we “glory in [writing’s] unfinishedness,” and 2) the requisite in-class dialog which informs revision. The

knowledge gained is durable and sustainable because it does not take the form of rigid positivistic “Truth” with a capital T.

Critical Pedagogy: An Integrative Approach

The revolutionary Brazilian educator Paulo Freire championed fundamental changes to age-old pedagogical practices in his *Education for Critical Consciousness*, including the important distinction between integration and adaptation:

Integration with one’s context, as distinguished from *adaptation*, is a distinctively human activity. Integration results from the capacity to adapt oneself to reality *plus* the critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality (emphasis Freire).

...In contrast, the adaptive person is person as *object*, adaptation representing at most a weak form of self-defense. If man is incapable of changing reality, he adjusts himself instead. Adaptation is behavior characteristic of the animal sphere: exhibited by man, it is symptomatic of his dehumanization. (4).

Pedagogy too often perpetuates a traditional top-down hierarchical structure engendering a student self-image as *object* within which she/he has limited agency. However, it can be re-envisioned to promote a student self-image of empowerment... of agency; an autonomous self-image of subjective existence. In the way that oars allow a person to decide whether to and/or how to navigate a river, Freire’s critical pedagogy encourages autonomy and engenders the intellectual development required for students to critically and proactively steer their own courses through the complexities of life. CIWAI embraces this idea as a core value--students are encouraged to decide what form their explorations of written and visual communication will take--topics taken from their own lives which they themselves choose. They are free to integrate their education with their

lives, as opposed to adapting their education to the agenda of an instructor who may know little or nothing about their interests or needs.

Further, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire opens our eyes to another disturbing and often damaging pedagogical tendency - the “banking” model of education wherein education “becomes an act of deposition, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor.” (72)

CIWAI challenges this “banking” mode through substantial time spent in a dialogical group critique. Here, learning is a negotiation process... a reciprocal sharing of intentions and perceptions of the student photos under discussion. Far from “banking,” or the exclusive act of deposition of knowledge *from* teacher *to* student, CIWAI facilitates an inclusive group interpretive process wherein the knowledge created remains malleable and open to re-interpretation in precisely the same way that student writing and images remain “unfinished,” and thus open to revision. A far more level and fertile ground for learning is achieved through this approach than through a top-down “banking” model.

Ira Shor, perhaps best known for bringing Paulo Freire’s pedagogical ideas to the United States and beyond, speaks in *A Pedagogy for Liberation* of his efforts to foster a Freirian integrative learning environment “...I must establish an atmosphere where students agree to say, write and do what is authentic to them. To help them say more, I restrain my own voice in the early going, to give their voices room.” (Shor, p. 6) Space is created for student dialog to predominate from the very beginning of the semester--Shor immediately pushes for a student-centered classroom as opposed to the traditional teacher-centered approach. He refuses to be the professor who simply *deposits* the knowledge with the expectation that students uncritically receive and repeat it. By creating

“...conditions in class where people could speak the themes of their lives,” he engenders motivation by nurturing students’ agency in their learning process. (Shor p. 24)

Another important facet in the shift from current traditional to process approaches is the idea of “authenticity” in student compositions, championed by Donald C. Stewart in his book *The Authentic Voice*. To his thinking, authenticity is attained through a process of ridding one’s self of patterns of thinking or expression that mimic the thoughts and expressions of others. It is to be expected that students mimic the thoughts and speech of others throughout their development, but he sees the first-year composition course as an ideal opportunity to help students break from the inauthentic and to embrace that which is genuine and unique to them as individuals. He sees the process of achieving authenticity as an instrumental aspect of self-discovery: “...the closer you come to rendering your particular perception of your world in your own words, the closer you will come to finding your authentic voice.” (p. 3)

Photo Elicitation: Empowering the Research Participant

A key innovation in “Composing in Words and Images” is the adaptation of a well-known ethnographic research method: photo-elicitation. First described by John Collier in *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method*, ethnographic researchers construct interviews around photographs, “giving the interview a concrete point of reference” (Harper, 12).

In *Talking About Pictures: a Case for Photo Elicitation*, sociologist and ethnographic researcher Douglas Harper discusses physiological differences in the ways humans process

text and visual symbols, pointing out that the part of the brain that processes images is much older than the part that handles text. “Thus images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words; exchanges based on words alone utilize less of the brain’s capacity than do exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well as words. These may be some of the reasons the photo elicitation interview seems like not simply an interview process that elicits more information, but rather one that evokes a different kind of information” (Harper p.13).

Likewise, the CIWAI approach attempts to elicit from students a different kind of information, or an *additional* kind of information. Murray’s statement about process writing : “...the process of exploration of what we know and what we feel about what we know...” is very similar to Harper’s in his book *Changing Works: Visions of a Lost Agriculture*, where he “asked people with a range of backgrounds to look at photos of things they did a long time ago, to remember how they did these things, and, more important, *to remember how they felt about it*” (Harper p. 18, emphasis mine). Each of them is attempting to tease out not only the objective information, but also subjective qualities--the feelings--associated with the matter at hand.

A central point in photo-elicitation is that the historically hierarchical relationship of *researcher to research-subject* is effectively ameliorated due to the “expert” status the *research participant* brings to the table. Harper suggests “... that photo elicitation be regarded as a postmodern dialogue based on the authority of the subject rather than the researcher.” (Harper p. 15) The recollections, opinions and feelings of the research participant are sought out specifically because of their expertise relevant to the subject under study in a given photo, which, as observed by Harper, elicits a much richer narrative

than in the traditional hierarchical researcher/research-subject relationship partly because the research participant, as expert, is empowered.

As is the case in photo-elicitation, student writing in “Composing in Words and Images” also finds its basis in a “concrete point of reference” - a photograph. However, the significant and novel variation CIWAI introduces is that the student writes around a wholly authentic point of reference *of his or her own making*.

Implementing CIWAI in the Classroom: The Nuts and Bolts

The curriculum design of “Composing in Words and Images” revolves around four photography assignments using the following work-flow:

- 1 * PowerPoint introduction/discussion of topic
- 2 * Distribution and discussion of assignment in class ⁽¹⁾
- 3 * five minute individual ideation period ⁽²⁾
- 4 * fifteen minute small-group pre-visualization brainstorm session ⁽³⁾
- 5 * Prep for following class period - all students write a Statement of
Communicative Intent for the assignment, then execute the
photograph and write their self-critique. ⁽⁴⁾
- 6 * Group critique (1-2 class periods)
- 7 * Students have two working days from the date of their in-class group
critique to turn in a revision of their photograph, including a second
self-critique, along with their initial pre-visualization notes and first drafts
of their photo and self-critique.
- 8 * Instructor returns graded assignment within two working-days of receiving it. ⁽⁵⁾

Each of the four weeks within the CIWAI module is focused on one compositional element: Rule of Thirds, Balance and Proportion, Line, and Perspective (see Syllabus, Appendix p. 27). The topics are introduced through an instructor-narrated Keynote (or PowerPoint) presentation of example photos. After the presentation, a related photography assignment is distributed and students are given three or four minutes to brainstorm a quick list of approaches to their photo assignment. Following this, they are randomly grouped in threes or fours to further brainstorm each others' lists. From these notes, students focus their topic and write a statement of their communicative intentions for the assignment, and then shoot their photo and write a self-critique. Students orally present their images to the class in a group-critique setting, and based on the feedback they receive, re-shoot the photo, including a second self-critique. The items the student turns in for grading include:

- Notes from pre-visualization

- Statement of Communicative Intent

- First version of photo and self-critique

- Notes from in-class group critique

- Second version of photo and self-critique

Selected Examples: A Trial with Promise

The following photos were shot for the Balance and Proportion assignment. It was pointed out during group critique of the first version that 1) proportionally, the highway took up too much of the foreground and added nothing useful to the photo,

2) the tree on the right side was slightly cropped causing a slight overall imbalance, and 3) the quality of the light made the scene unnecessarily gloomy.



Version 1, Balance Assignment - Binxin Jiang

We see in the revision below that the student used a wide angle lens and chose a perspective which included the parking lot full of cars to show how busy a place the library is. He was careful not to crop the tree on the right and so achieved better balance, and also waited for much more cheerful light. Although this is not a particularly “personal” or “deep” expression of the student’s life or world, the feedback he received in group-critique clearly helped him learn about the aesthetics at play in balance and proportion, and helped him to better understand the emotional quality of the light itself.



Version 2, Balance Assignment - Binxin Jiang

Where the previous images may lack much in the way of personal or self-exploration on the part of the student, the following photo and self-critique exemplify the sort of rich and meaningful inward exploration that CIWAI can potentially engender.

Where Binxin (above) comes to understand the aesthetic considerations relative to producing a technically pleasing composition, Jihun (below) finds, and shares, through his written exploration of purely aesthetic considerations, a depth of emotion and meaningful expression:



Rule of Thirds-Jihun Jung

When I first heard about assignment I thought I should express some frustration, pain and trouble contrast to others. Like professor said ruined building is so interesting. I searched for it throughout the whole day. But i couldn't.

So I changed my mine. Even if I couldn't show destroyed structure I thought I should find something to substitute. So I chose the loneliness. fortunately my friend gave my a ride, We got to the lake. I don't know the exact name of lake. Anyway at that place I took a photograph that was one I wanted. He followed my direction. All of things went right. Well, from now on I will explain about a photograph.

First, I considered position that is to put him in the near right corner of intersections of these horizontal and vertical lines. I can't satisfy with position 100%. but I tried to comply with Rule of Thirds. that's enough.

Second, I wanted to use the weather and landscape that show the loneliness. When I arrived in the lake wind was blowing strongly so my friend's clothes seemed to fly away. And look at the sand it is not only identical color. Left side of sand is dark. Because I wanted to express gloomy feeling. Especially it is compatible with my subject, a friend.

Finally lighting is a little bad. Of cause there is enough dark and brightness. But if I went to the lake at sunset, may be more good photographs came out.

As I take a photograph I felt a lot of things. A photograph is art and we are making the art. This class is getting interesting. I want to lean more I will muster up courage and will challenge one more. (Jihun Jun, self-critique)

We read that from the beginning of Jihun's efforts relative to the Rule of Thirds, he was interested in expressing personal "frustration, pain and trouble." Where he was initially trying to emulate the emotional qualities he perceived in example images shown in class during the discussion of the Rule of Thirds (see *Rule of Thirds*, index, p. 30), he changes his approach to a more personally relevant emotion he himself was feeling at that time: loneliness. He writes about not conforming precisely to the Rule; rather he has actually exaggerated the Rule to even better make the point of his model's loneliness and sense of insignificance relative to the rest of the scene. He further equates the gloominess of the darker beach sand as another indicator of the subject's darkness and isolation, and then even ponders the possibility that the quality of the light later in the evening may have helped get across the emotional tone he's depicting. Far from adapting to a external prompt and shooting in the dark toward his best guess at what the professor wants, we can see here in Jihun's photo and words the way CIWAI invites students to write with authorial confidence from the depth of their own, actual lives and experiences.

At the end of his self-critique, note also that Jihun writes "... photograph is art and we are making the art." From this very first assignment in CIWAI, he is making a very important connection. He is, apparently for the first time, "coming to know" the communicative potential of images.

Process Theory and in-class Critiques

A prerequisite to successful Writing Process is the availability of meaningful criticism; without useful feedback, revision is at best frustrating, and often little more than a shot in the dark. The creation of an honest and nurturing critique environment is of critical importance in the CIWAI approach. Given the common practice among composition instructors of getting a writing sample at the outset of a semester, a prompt asking students to share their working definitions of critique/criticism can create a natural segue to in-class discussion of the terms (Writing Assignment #1, Appendix p. 34).

Students need to understand that the feedback they give one another is both valuable and necessary and that it has the potential of being either constructive or destructive.

Instructors are encouraged to use whatever approaches they are comfortable with in creating the requisite critique environment, but establishing the following ground rules is highly recommended: 1) criticism of problems in a peer's work should always include constructive suggestions for improving the work, and 2) should only be made about the work itself, never the author. Students of the fine arts are relatively comfortable with "crits"--their egos are well accustomed to the often searing criticism of their peers, but in a first or second-year composition course there is potential for real emotional damage.

Toward the goal of creating a useful critique environment, I have experimented with the following topics in class discussions early in the semester:

1) *Everything is not great.* We live at a time when we often seem reticent to give our honest, constructive criticism to even our closest friends and peers. Rather, we seem more likely, and more comfortable, telling one another that their whatever--their paper, their haircut, their artwork--is "great." We naturally want to be nice to one another, and

positive--we want to encourage one another--but there is little value, or really anything useful or constructive in simply saying that whatever it is is "great." Rather, this is the precise moment when a rich and useful critical conversation must take place. By pointing out aspects of the work that we think could be improved, we demonstrate that we actually care about that individual's development, so much so that we're willing to risk offending them in order to give them our honest opinions toward the goal of improving the work. Where it would be easier to just say the work is "great," in this class we will be doing much more than that for one another.

2) *"If you're not falling, you're not learning"*

I came across this idiom some years ago when teaching junior high students to snowboard. We learn through trial and error--by falling--so we need to acknowledge and accept, as a group, the fact that we will be making errors. I also talked about the kind of snow conditions that are best for learning snowboarding and explained that we're able to take greater risks if we're learning in a meter of fresh powder than we can on days when the slope is harsh and icy. Similarly, if we are harsh with one another in our critique, nobody will want to take risks, and so we won't be able to learn as much as we would in an environment where we're thoughtful and helpful with each other in our criticism.

Throughout the semester, and especially in the early going, I referred back to these points as a reminder of the necessity of having a nurturing critique environment where all feel comfortable taking the risks the learners are so in need of taking.

Analysis and Reflection on the Project

My experiences and exploration of CAWAI suggest that the approach has much potential: when students are free to seek within their own real lives for the topics of their visual studies, it will elicit from them richer, more authentic, and more meaningful writing than the tired prompts many composition teachers continue to “bank” on.

I first experimented with these ideas during the Fall of 2010 in an English as a Second Language (ESL) course in advanced writing. This resulting CIWAI module is a blending of experiences I had while teaching that class, along with my experiences teaching college composition in a native-speaker contexts. The following suggestions are directed to composition instructors who wish to incorporate CIWAI into their native-speaker composition courses:

Consider the pace of the class and staying on-task

While the pace will be brisk, the schedule I’ve indicated in the sample syllabus (Index, p. 27) is not unrealistic. Much of the Wednesday and Friday sessions are devoted to group critique, and instructors will have to divide the number of students into the number of minutes available to know how much time to spend on each student’s work. In order to keep things moving, instructors may need to call randomly on students for comments if they are not forthcoming freely. In my experience, this sort of prompting was only needed in the first couple of critique sessions. Remind students to take notes so that they have the option to incorporate the feedback they receive in group critique into their revisions. And be sure to take those same notes yourself, as you’ll need them in order to assess the improvements in their revisions.

Yield the floor so that the students' voices predominate the group critique

Remember that helping students become conversant in the language of critique is one of the goals of CIWAI. To that end, if you have critical comments to make about a problem or weakness in a student's photo, consider giving hints that may draw other students to seeing and pointing out those weaknesses, rather than pointing them out yourself. In other words, nudge them toward the critical observations you'd like them to pick up on, and then give them the floor to experiment with the relevant language. This will also allow them to experience the act of giving meaningful critique, which is an important step in their developing the confidence to approach criticism as a constructive process.

Earn the student's respect by using your own visual products

As the instructor, you should produce your own photos for use in explaining the various compositional topics. Not only will your confidence and understanding of the topics improve, but also your credibility among your students. Using images produced by "master" photographers can be very intimidating to students experimenting with intentional visual composition for the first time. I recommend as well that you do the assignments along with your class, and submit your images to the same group critique as an additional step toward diminishing the teacher/student hierarchy. In this way you will expose yourself to the same "risks" that they take in presenting their work to the class. Share your self-critiques also in order to model the depth of writing you hope to engender, while at the same time modeling the kinds of subject choices you hope students will make, subjects that are meaningful to them personally... subjects that not only demonstrate the compositional element under study, but that also have personal depth.

In in-class demonstrations of the topics studied in CIWAI, don't only show examples of "the right ways" to compose, but also include examples of "the wrong ways" so as to solidify their understanding through comparison and contrast. Remember that perhaps most of the students will never have previously considered the "how to" of visual composition, and so will need to see explicit "good" and "bad" examples side-by-side in order to understand the value of intentional composition.

Be your own best critic

While assessing their self-critiques, instructors should make a point of praising students for identifying and critically discussing aspects of their images that can be improved. In this way we can help them to become their own best critics. Model this yourself in the group critiques. That is, when you introduce and critique your own images, be brutally honest with yourself, but in a constructive way. Don't say, "I wish I would have" or "I had terrible light." Instead tell them what you will do in revision to make your photo better. Critique your own work honestly in order to model an approach to self-critique that they can incorporate and sustain over their lifetime.

Nudge students into the "deeper waters" of authenticity

Grade assessment is also a great opportunity to gently steer students toward engagement with meaningful subjects and away from superficial ones. Steer them toward deeper personal exploration as a means of eliciting greater authenticity in their writing, as

Donald Murray might suggest. They are, after all, the authors of their lives, and so they can learn to write with more solid authorial confidence. By design, the CIWAI approach to composition creates a solid base from which students can go inward to mine the rich complexities of their own lives for the topics of their written and visual compositions.

Conclusion

The combined power of words and images hardly needs pointing out. However, the increasingly ubiquitous environment of the Internet presents the field of composition studies with opportunities and challenges. Composition pedagogy that continues to privilege the written word over visual texts is a limiting pedagogy. Conversely, pedagogy that recognizes, and also critically engages with the technological reality of today's digital media, is a sustainable pedagogy.

"Composing in Words and Images" proposes an inclusive pedagogical approach to written and visual composition that empowers students to engage authoritatively in their own education. The need for further empirical, historical, and theoretical study into using photography in the composition classroom, such as CIWAI offers, has the potential to bear important, and pedagogically rich outcomes for both teachers and their students.

End Notes

1. After a few minutes to read over the assignment, leave time for questions and discussion.

2. Toward the goal of maximizing student motivation for assignments, they should be encouraged to engage with meaningful subjects... to delve unabashedly into the expression of ideas taken from their actual lives. Instructors should not constrain students except in cases where their ideas are technically not possible (for example, one student's idea of using a water skier's tow-rope as a leading line in Photo Assignment #3, [Appendix p. 16 & 17] in February, in Upper Michigan). Again, per Freire's suggestion that we seek reciprocal dialog with students, instructors should encourage them to explore topics that they find personally meaningful rather than insisting that they conform to disembodied, decontextualized prompts. The CIWAI approach aims to maximize student buy-in by offering complete freedom in the choice of the subject of their photographic exploration, which will in turn provide them with a platform from which to write authoritatively in their self-critique.
3. Instructors should circulate and facilitate during this activity, especially early in the semester. Practice in pre-visualization is a very important step in moving students from vapid "snap-shooting" toward intentional, communicatively rich image-making. They are required to take notes during the discussion of their ideas, and should be made to understand the value of the dynamics at play in group brainstorming.
4. The importance of the Statement of Communicative Intent can't be overstressed as it is the culmination of their pre-visualization process. This is effectively the bridge that takes students out of a snap-shot mentality and into the realm of intentional, rhetorically sound photography.

5. In order to align instructor and student expectations regarding grading, early in the semester instructors should explain their grading processes in detail, and lead a conversation regarding subjectivity and objectivity as they relate to the grading process. Grading rubrics should accompany all assignments so that students have as clear an understanding as possible of the salient aspects that will be scored, as well as their point values. This creates an excellent opportunity to explain that one function of rubrics is to minimize instructors' subjective opinions of student work. This is also a good time to discuss the unavoidable truth that objectivity, while a worthy goal, is difficult to achieve. In service again to Freire's idea of reciprocity, instructors should encourage students to seek them out, preferably during office hours, for one-on-one conversation in the event a student doesn't understand why they've earned a given grade.

Appendix

Syllabus

Composing in Words and Images

Instructor

Contact info

Office address

Office Hours

Objective

“Composing in Words and Images” (CIWAI) is a module designed to introduce students to the language and basic elements of visual composition as a supplement to (Course name, e.g., UN2001).

Course Requirements

- * Attend and participate in class discussions
- * Complete all coursework

Equipment Requirements

- * A digital camera. Anything from a cell phone to a high-end professional DSLR will suffice. Technical image quality does not matter for our purposes.
- * A portable USB drive

Required Texts

Photographic Composition: A Visual Guide, Richard D. Zakia and David A. Page
The Reader, the Text, the Poem, Louise M. Rosenblatt
Image - Music - Text, Roland Barthes

Grading

Course grades are based on the following:

Assignments, revisions, tests	80%
Participation (including attendance)	20%

Assignments

All photo assignments require a Statement of Communicative Objective(s) and your pre-visualization notes, a digital photograph, and a written self-critique. Photo grades are based on the degree to which your photo exemplifies the compositional element under study, as well as the communicative success of the image relevant to your Statement of Communicative Objective(s). The self-critique will be graded on three criteria, each of which will comprise one third of the grade: 1) depth/quality of ideas presented, 2) ideas for improvement in revision, and 3) grammar/technical.

Please note that revision is a central aspect of this class and will be required for all photo assignments (including self critique). Revisions are due two working-days after your in-class group critique date, and should either incorporate the criticism you receive, or explain why you choose to disregard it.

Calendar

Week One - Rule of Thirds

- Monday:
- * Introductions
 - * Discussion of Syllabus
 - * Discussion of Portfolio requirements
 - * Discussion: Snapshots vs intentional photography
 - * Discussion of Critique sessions, and objectivity vs subjectivity, and the need to create a safe and nurturing critique environment
 - * Assign "Criticism" writing sample
 - * Assign specific chapters--Zakia and Page
 - * Discussion of Revisions
 - * Writing Assignment #1, due Wednesday
 - * PowerPoint: The Rule of Thirds
 - * Photo Assignment #1- Rule of thirds
 - * Small group brainstorming session
- Wednesday
- * Vocabulary list and discussion (key composition terms from Zakia and Page)
 - * Group Critique - Photo Assignment #1: Rule of Thirds
 - * Collect/Discuss "Criticism" writing sample
- Friday
- * follow-up discussion of "Criticism" writing sample
 - * discussion of Zakia and Page readings
 - * Group Critique continued

Week Two - Balance and Proportion

- Monday
- * Discussion of "Criticism" assignment
 - * Assign reading--Rosenblatt
 - * PowerPoint: Balance and Proportion
 - * Photo Assignment #2 - Balance and Proportion
 - * Small group brainstorming session
- Wednesday
- * Group Critique - Assignment #2: Balance and Proportion
- Friday
- * Discussion of Rosenblatt readings
 - * Group Critique continued

Week Three - Line

- Monday
- * Vocabulary quiz
 - * Assign reading--Barthes
 - * PowerPoint - Line Structure
 - * Photo Assignment #3 - Line Structure
- Wednesday
- * Return Vocabulary Quiz - discussion
 - * Group Critique - Assignment #3: Line Structure
- Friday
- * Discussion of Barthes readings

Week Four - Perspective

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| Monday | * PowerPoint: Perspective |
| | * Photo Assignment #4 - Perspective |
| | * Small Group brainstorming session |
| Wednesday | * Group Critique - Assignment #4: Perspective |
| Friday | * Collect Photo Critique assignment |
| | * Group Critique continued |

NOTE: Portfolios are collected the following Friday.

Objective: Use the Rule of Thirds intentionally in a photographic composition

The Rule of Thirds can be very useful toward intentional photographic composition. In a nutshell, the idea is to imagine a tic-tac-toe board superimposed over your viewfinder. Generally speaking, placing your main subject(s) and relevant foreground/background items near the intersections of these horizontal and vertical lines is generally preferable to placing your subject dead-center or near the edges of the frame. Of course, as is the case with all rules, there are many situations you'll come across where you won't want to use this rule, but understanding it can be helpful also in intentionally breaking it.

Study your subject from a variety of perspectives and consider its relevance to the background and foreground, then use the Rule of Thirds to compose your shot.

Copy your image to a portable USB storage device for in-class critique. Also turn in your brainstorming notes and a hard copy of your self critique, which should include discussion of things that worked well, things that didn't work well, and suggestions for improving the shot in revision. Be sure to discuss specifically how you approached your composition in regard to the Rule of Thirds.

(Photo Assignment #1 continued from p. 22)

Grading Rubric - Shooting Assignment #1

Photo:

___ Use of the Rule of Thirds:

___ Fulfills intentional communicative objectives stated in pre-visualization

Self-Critique:

___ Technical:

___ Ideas/Content:

Objective: Demonstrate the intentional use of line.

Line is among the most important compositional elements used in intentional photographic communication. Understanding the varied effects of lines can help in directing the audience's experience of viewing an image, and can also help to avoid visual confusion.

In class discussion we've considered leading, repetitive, implied, and tangent lines. For this assignment, pre-visualize and experiment with all of them, and choose the one you see as most effective - the one in which the line(s) you've explored are most important to the overall composition.

Copy your image to a portable USB storage device for in-class critique. Also turn in your brainstorming notes and a hard copy of your self critique--as always you should discuss things that worked well, things that didn't work well, and any suggestions you have for improving the shot in revision. Be sure to discuss specifically how the intentional use of line affected the composition.

(Photo Assignment #3 continued from p. 24)

Grading Rubric - Shooting Assignment #3

Photo:

___Intentional incorporation/use of lines:

___Fulfills intentional communicative objectives stated in pre-visualization

Self-Critique:

___Technical:

___Ideas/Content:

Composing in Words and Images

Writing Assignment #1

(Due date)

In between 150 and 250 words, give me your a) reasons for taking this class and your expectations regarding what you hope to learn, and b) your current working definition of the term "criticism." Please don't look up a "correct" or dictionary definition, I'm interested to know how you understand and use the term currently.

As with all written work in this class, please use a word processor and hand in a paper copy, double-spaced using 12pt text.

Suggested Readings

Books:

Barthes, Roland, *Elements of Semiology*. 1964.

Berthoff, Ann E., *Reclaiming the Imagination: Philosophical Perspectives for Writers and Teachers of Writing*. 1984.

Elbow, Peter, *Writing without Teachers*. 1973.

Elbow, Peter, *Writing with Power: Techniques for Master the Writing Process*. 1981.

Kinneavy, James L., *A Theory of Discourse: The Aims of Discourse*. 1971.

Murray, Donald M., *A Writer Teaches Writing*. 1985.

Murray, Donald M., *Learning by Teaching: Selected Articles on Writing and Teaching*. 1982.

Rosenblatt, Louise M., *The Reader, The Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. 1965.

Shor, Ira, *Critical Teaching & Everyday Life*. 1980

Stewart, Donald C., *The Versatile Writer*. 1986.

Young, Richard E., Alton L. Becker, & Kenneth L. Pike., *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change*. 1970.

Articles:

Fulkerson, Richard, *Four Philosophies of Composition*. 1979.

Barnes-Karol, Gwendolyn, Magie A. Broner, *Using Images as Springboards to Teach Cultural Perspectives in Light of the Ideals of the MLA Report*. 2010.

Johnson, Robert R., *Audience Involved: Toward a Participatory Model of Writing*. 1997.

Shipka, Jody. *A Multimodal Task-Based Framework for Composing*. 2005.

Valdez, Lorraine, J. Michael O'Malley. *Performance and Portfolio Assessment for Language Minority Students*. 1992.

Primary Learning Goals of CIWAI

1. to engender visual literacy through making photographs and discourse
2. to improve students' understanding and appreciation of Writing Process Theory
3. to create a richer, more authentic, and personally meaningful learning experience for students exploring visual and written communication.

1. Visual Literacy

The visual composition elements taught in the CIWAI module (Rule of Thirds, Balance/Proportion, Line, Perspective) are intentionally scaffolded in order of least to most complex. As such, their application should be cumulative. For example, students experiment with balance and proportion in Assignment #2, but their compositions should also exhibit their understanding of the previous topic, The Rule of Thirds. The final assignment then should exhibit an understanding, and the intentional interplay of all four elements.

The following questions should be answered when scoring portfolios:

1. To what extent do the photographs adhere to (or break in intentionally communicative ways) the specific compositional element assigned? (1 = does not employ the assigned element intentionally, 5 = uses the assigned element intentionally)

___1 ___2 ___3 ___4 ___5

2. Is the scaffolding of the compositional elements apparent in the progression of assignments? (1 = scaffolding is not apparent, 5 = scaffolding is evident and consistent)

___1 ___2 ___3 ___4 ___5

3. Is there discernible improvement in the use of the composition elements in the second versions of the photographs relative to the first drafts? (1 = improvement is not evident, 5 = improvement clearly evident)

___1 ___2 ___3 ___4 ___5

2. Process Writing

The second drafts of student's Self-Critiques should communicate better their thoughts and opinions about their photographs than their first drafts.

1. Do the second drafts of the student's self-critiques exhibit technical improvement (grammar, spelling, capitalization, etc). than the first drafts? (1 = no improvement, 2 = great improvement)

___1 ___2 ___3 ___4 ___5

2. Are the second drafts organized in a more communicative manner? (1 = no improvement, 2 = great improvement)

___1 ___2 ___3 ___4 ___5

3. Depth/Authenticity

The CIWA! module attempts to solicit images and texts that are rich, authentic, and personally meaningful--topics that the student's are genuinely involved with in their lives, as opposed to relatively predictable, superficial, or decontextualized topics.

For example, a student could make a landscape photograph of a sunset and talk about how happy he or she was to witness such beauty. Or, on the other hand, another student could shoot the same setting sun, but in a scene which included a contrasting, somber element, say the rusting burned out hulk of an abandoned automobile. Perhaps this student writes in his/her self-critique of how they empathize with that abandonment--how the scene reminded them of how they feel in college, away from the comforts of the happy home they left behind.

1. Do the student's images and texts "go below the surface"--do they exhibit a depth of self-honesty or concern for the topic at hand? (1 = superficial, 5 = exhibits intellectual and/or emotional complexity/honesty).

___1 ___2 ___3 ___4 ___5

2. Do the student's photos or texts exhibit complex associations or use original metaphorical constructions? (1 = literal 5 = figurative)

___1 ___2 ___3 ___4 ___5

3. Does the student choose topics that lend themselves to rich, detailed reflection as in the latter example above (the photo of the abandoned auto as metaphor for that students emotional state), and if so, do the topic choices lead to the development of longer, more detailed and complex texts? (1 = staid/predictable topics resulting in brief, predictably uninteresting reflections, 5 = unique/original topics resulting in long, detailed, complex reflection)

___1

___2

___3

___4

___5

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