



November 2016

Visual Rhetoric: A Case for Visual Literacy in the Classroom

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Recommended Citation

Tomlinson, Kaitlyn J. (2016) "Visual Rhetoric: A Case for Visual Literacy in the Classroom," *Channels: Where Disciplines Meet*: Vol. 1 : No. 1 , Article 9.

DOI: 10.15385/jch.2016.1.1.9

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/channels/vol1/iss1/9>

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Abstract

We live in a visual age in which we find visual information surrounding us on every side. The persuasive power of the visual has long been recognized by scholars, but there is a lack of emphasis in the classroom on how to effectively create an effectively persuasive visual. Professors at the collegiate level need to teach their students to be visually literate, to make them responsible users and creators of images.

Keywords

Visual rhetoric, visual literacy, communication, images, visuals, image, visual, rhetoric, visual age, visual persuasion, rhetorical persuasion, persuasion

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Visual Rhetoric: A Case for Visual Literacy in the Classroom

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Introduction

With the internet saturating our lives with information through computers, phones, and now even watches, consumers have become picky about what information they ingest and what they do not. Society has adapted to the influx of resources by making split decisions based on appearance, headings, and design. In short, we initially judge information by its visual appeal despite the old saying, “never judge a book by its cover”. This is why most refer to this present time as The Visual Age.

Rhetoricians have long appreciated the value of words. More recently, they have come to value the communicative and persuasive abilities of images. “Just as texts constructed by words are rhetorical so are texts constructed by pictures. And just as word-as-text is not innocent, neither is image-as-text” (Rosner 2001, 394). Images are how we communicate information quickly and effectively in The Visual Age. They are not stoic or neutral parts of an argument; instead, they hold persuasive power.

Scholars recognize that visuals have the ability to produce social change by persuading people from passivity to action. Therefore, it is crucial that professional writing students understand how to responsibly use images and that professors teach students these skills at the college level. Professors should stress these concepts in a required visual rhetoric course. By focusing on the responsible use of images instead of rote technological skills, professors will encourage students toward visual literacy, the ability to critically evaluate and responsibly use images.

Literature Review

Visual Rhetoric: A Broad Definition

Visual Rhetoric encompasses a broad range of ideas, and many attempt to define it. While definitions do overlap, each one takes its own unique view of what visual rhetoric includes and how we should apply it. The definitions include facets of literacy, classical rhetoric, and design theory. Portewig (2004) divides visual literacy into three categories, thinking, rhetoric, and communication. He argues that, with specific reference to the visual, it is evidenced

by an understanding of audience, purpose, and arrangement. Propen (2007) further supports this claim by defining visual communication as any visual artifact that embodies the communicative principles specific to the genre, given the limitations and conventions in that specific genre's purpose, audience, and context.

With a unique reference to film, Ponnivalavan (2015) defines rhetoric as a method of persuasion and identification that results in social change. Others support this function of visual rhetoric as social change, such as Barton and Barton (2004), Brasseur (2005), and Kimball (2006). We will study this idea in detail a little further on in this paper.

Images Compared to Text

A constant discussion rages over how visuals communicate versus how text communicates. Most often, we are guilty of treating images as something beneath or subordinate to text (Salinas 2002; Rosner 2001). Texts constructed by pictures are just as important and convey just as much meaning as texts constructed by words (Rosner 2001; Portewig 2004). Like persuasive text, there are purposeful, strategic decisions behind every image, and we do ourselves a disfavor by ignoring this fact or leaving it for the graphic designers alone to decipher (Salinas 2002). Furthermore, we cannot assume that the meaning of a text is self-evident while that of a visual is not (Willerton 2005).

While most of the conversation centers on bringing the visual up to the same level as the textual, Brasseur (2005) observes how Florence Nightingale used the powers of text and visual congruously to communicate with her audience and effectively bring about social change amongst general hospital practices. This example from Brasseur further illustrates the point Salinas (2002) makes by pointing out that images have a cultural significance we must decipher. It even goes so far as to say that images are aspects of communication we must learn to *write*. By making these points, Salinas and Brasseur bring the visual and the textual to the same level, even implying that they are more powerful working together than apart.

Visuals, Purpose, and Meaning

The visual communicates in a number of ways. Rather than being stoic, neutral, or subordinate to text (Salinas 2002; Rosner 2001), visuals often further an argument and convince viewers to move from passivity into action (Brasseur 2005). A very clear visual that creates meaning, though sometimes implicit, is the map (Brasseur 2005; Propen 2007; Kimball 2006). The selective process the author undergoes in deciding what to display and what to leave out on each map is heavily guided by the ultimate purpose of the document. In the end, the purpose helps dictate some of the meaning (Willerton 2005; Propen 2007).

Propen (2007) carries out the considerations on maps to its fullest extent. She observes that maps reflect reality, but they also create it. However, Kimball (2006) counters that the visual can at times be deceptive since they offer a more transparent view of reality rather than a complex view. This idea stems from Kimball's personal study of human response to

infographics. In his study, Kimball observed that people responded positively to infographics that made social problems seem small and solvable rather than complex and difficult.

Visual Rhetoric and Social Change

Without even mentioning the powerful changes brought about by the different historical instances of propaganda, visuals have often brought about social change, some after text failed to do the job. Broadly, Paradis (2004) quotes Barton and Barton (2004, 253) who say that visual representations as a whole are “social-control mechanisms linked to power and authority.” Propen (2007) follows this claim and says that many previous instances, specifically of maps, have had significant persuasive power. As Brasseur (2005) notes, Florence Nightingale worked with statistics, but she did not view these statistics as mere numbers. She viewed them as pieces of information that, if presented in the right way, would lead to a very beneficial social change. Similarly, Kimball (2006) discusses how Charles Booth envisioned and then instigated social change with his colored maps showing the poverty of London. Propen (2007) shows how a map produced by the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) promoted an environmental campaign to protect a population of marine mammals. In a situation apart from maps, Ponnivalavan (2015) looks to film, specifically two films that depict the problem of rape in Indian culture. The main point of these films, Ponnivalavan argues, is to promote social change in India.

Driskell (2004) links the change-inflicting power of the visual to its importance in the workplace, saying that visual communication contributes to the overall survival and flourishing of organizational contexts in our society. Salinas (2002), without much ado, simply advocates for us to recognize how images affect our social and cultural worlds. Kimball (2006, 360) says powerfully, “We should not underestimate the power of this visual rhetoric on its viewers.”

Visual Rhetoric and Pedagogy

While everyone agrees about the importance of education, some scholars have specific ideas of how to transfer learning from one generation to the next. Furthermore, individuals place value on different aspects of education when it comes to visual rhetoric. Brumberger (2010), for example, believes that students should be taught to be visually-literate citizens by giving them opportunities to interpret, criticize, evaluate, and produce images. Driskell (2004) enforces this idea with the assertion that students should analyze rhetorical situations in order to better understand the relationship between them and the culture from which they originated.

Brumberger (2010) further argues that we cannot confuse being technologically literate to being visually literate. In other words, students should be taught to use tools, but this should not be the end goal. Portewig (2004) agrees, stating that the emphasis on visual-literacy should be a primary, not a secondary focus in education.

Visuals and Context

Like text, visuals originate in time and space. In other words, they come from a specific situational context. They are influenced by culture, social structures, and current situations. Brasseur (2005) demonstrates how Florence Nightingale thoroughly understood her audience. Nightingale knew that they would be unfamiliar with the social sciences, and she drew her rose diagrams at a level they would understand.

Driskill (2004) emphasizes how important context is to the visual communicator when she points out that context is useful in helping a communicator write about or interpret a specific situation. She further points out that because contexts are dynamic and, therefore, always changing, how we approach context should be continually adapting as well. Kimball (2006) links Charles Booth's maps of London poverty to the visual culture already surrounding the issue. Because Booth used a simple map for the issue, it boiled down the seemingly horrific issue of poverty into a manageable, solvable task. By doing this, he addressed the specific situation and created a map that performed effectively in the context for which he designed it.

Ethical Considerations

As we have seen, visuals are not neutral or meaningless (Salinas 2002; Rosner 2001). Therefore, we must think about the ethical implications wrapped up in the use of images. Brumberger (2007) points out that we have responsibility over a broad selection of visual communication decisions. Kimball (2006) indicates that, in order to use images ethically, we need to understand their limits. Even more so, we need to acknowledge that communicating through images is no more certain than communication with text. We must be aware of this reality in order to use images ethically. Writing about specific legal issues, Paradis (2004) shows how we cannot hold others responsible for their actions if we do not provide correct, complete, and accurate information.

Analysis

The Persuasive Power of Visuals

Perhaps the most compelling examples we have concerning the persuasive power of the image are Charles Booth's poverty maps of London and Florence Nightingale's Rose Diagrams. Each image represented tabular data. Prior to the map and diagram, citizens were aware of the issues, yet they did nothing to remedy the ghastly situations of poverty in London or the preventable deaths in hospitals.

The image allows us to understand abstract concepts in a concrete way. As noted about Booth's maps, "The visual rhetoric of the map changed the public view of poverty, making the problem seem much smaller than had been supposed, and thus more manageable" (Kimball 2006, 359-360). Furthermore, the colors and appearance of Booth's map helped persuade Londoners that something could be done to quell the growth of poverty. As a result, motivated people began working towards social change.

Florence Nightingale's Rose Diagram: The Causes of Mortality During the Crimean War



Charles Booth's Poverty Map Legend



Similarly, Florence Nightingale's Rose Diagrams had an impact on society. "For Nightingale, statistics were not merely numbers; they revealed patterns that would allow human beings to control destiny" (Brasseur 2005, 164). Nightingale understood the significance of the data she researched. Her audience, however, did not. In fact, she had tried several times to present and publish her findings via reports. It was not until she creatively displayed the tabular data with an easily-understood diagram that people understood how great the problem really was. Brasseur (2005) notes that "tabular data was not likely to persuade audiences at the time, in part because these audiences were unlikely to be schooled in the use of data in social science." Her diagrams showed the progression of the Crimean war and compared the deaths on the field to those in the hospital. With the abstract data in concrete form, Nightingale's audience saw the truth of her argument. Brasseur (2005) says that "Nightingale's rhetoric in her use of the rose diagrams is an important example of how visual abstraction of data can help further an argument." As Kimball (2006) so aptly states, "We should not underestimate the power of this visual rhetoric on its viewers."

So, images have value in a persuasive argument and sometimes have the advantage over text. In the Booth and Nightingale examples above, textual data failed to incite people to action; the visual representation of this data did. Since images have so much potential persuasive power, students need to first recognize this fact and then be burdened by the weight of responsibility of choosing and crafting images carefully, not haphazardly. In a visual rhetoric course, professors should stress the power of the image, providing examples like the two above. They should impress upon students that the popular motto, "With great power comes great responsibility," applies to how the professional writer uses images.

Images and Text: A Symbiotic Relationship

As demonstrated by the power of visuals, visuals are not subordinate to text. In fact, they can persuade more effectively than text at times. Yet, oftentimes, the underlying assumption about images is that they are somehow subordinate to or merely supporting the text. Most do not recognize the persuasive power in the visual alone, defining images as "products that tell a story that is single, static, and—if the writer is ethical—true" (Rosner 2001, 392).

Yet, we must be careful not to elevate the image to a position above text either. Both are effective in their turn, and most often they work together to accomplish their persuasive goal. For example, Nightingale used the Rose Diagrams and verbal explanations of the diagrams to "create an appeal that went beyond merely exciting inquiry to exciting action" (Brasseur 2005, 180). This exemplifies the symbiotic relationship between images and text. In biology, a symbiotic relationship is where two organisms mutually benefit and depend on one

another. Such is the case between images and text; they benefit and help one another. Their relationship is dynamic, not stoic. It takes a knowledgeable student to determine where and when images or text are appropriate within an argument. Students will gain this knowledge through a course in visual rhetoric that emphasizes the persuasive power of images and text, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of each and showing how they best work together to create an effective argument.

Teaching Visual Literacy in the Classroom

We have seen how the image has persuasive power and how it works symbiotically alongside text. Now comes the issue of how professors should teach visual literacy in the classroom. What do the students need to know and what is the best way to present that information to them? We will look at four areas of visual literacy professors should emphasize to their students: First, they need to explain the definition of visual literacy and its importance. Second, they need to recognize that teaching technology is not teaching design. Third, they need to allow their students to practice critically evaluating images. And fourth, they need to understand that there are ethical issues to consider regarding images.

First, Portewig (2004, 40) defines visual literacy as “the faculty of visually thinking, analyzing, and communicating. Its instruction seeks to develop in students the cognitive process of developing visuals as well as an understanding of the context and elements that form the visual message.” Visual literacy is the mark of a well-rounded professional writer. Portewig (2004, 41) further argues that students should be able to identify more than just the elements of a visual. They need to be able to pull from a “visual toolbox” when creating and evaluating visual messages. Just as there are entire courses teaching analytical skills regarding textual rhetoric, professors should teach their students “to be as canny in their reading of visual rhetoric as they are in their reading of textual rhetoric” (Kimball 2006, 379).

Second, when focusing on visual literacy, professors must meticulously avoid the slippery slope of technology-driven design. Technology-driven design focuses on how to use technology to accomplish a goal, for example, how to create visual effects using Photoshop. Many professors fall into teaching in a technology-driven way because, “[l]acking a strong background in art, visual studies, or visual communication in some form, [they] tend to gravitate toward the familiar” (Brumberger 2010, 461). While it is important to learn how to use technology efficiently and effectively, it is easy to mistake teaching technology as teaching design. Solely teaching technology focuses only on the “how” and neglects the “why”. If professors teach technology alone, they miss the chance to teach their students how to make the types of informed design decisions that lead to argument-furthering, effective visuals. This is not to say there is no room for excellence when it comes to knowledge about the tools within technology. Quite the contrary, in fact. The main point here echoes Brumberger (2010) who says, “Students cannot rely solely on technical proficiency, no matter how glossy the end products may appear; at the same time, however, they cannot rely solely on rhetorical knowledge without the tools to render that knowledge useful.” So, we see that knowledge of tools and visual literacy have the same kind of symbiotic relationship images and text have. They cannot function without each other, but there is danger in emphasizing one to the neglect of the other. Students in a technology-driven design environment quickly become excited about their marketable design skills. They eagerly list Adobe programs and other software on their resume, believing this to be sufficient. What they fail to realize, however, is the marketable skills they gain by becoming visually literate. Brumberger (2010) points out that “[b]oth students and instructors may easily fall under the spell of technology, thinking that they are learning and teaching design.”

Third, students will never become visually literate without opportunities to practice doing so. If they are not encouraged to think critically about the messages their images convey, they will spend their energy “creating effects with technology.” Their resulting work may be beautiful and striking, “but [they] are bitterly disappointed when their design does not achieve its rhetorical purpose and thus fails to earn a high grade” (Brumberger 2010, 464). Because visual literacy is not immediately present in students’ minds, the instructor must coax it to the forefront of their thinking. Brumberger (2010) argues, “If our goal is...to educate visually-literate citizens, then we must ensure that our programs, and the individual courses within those programs, give students opportunities for interpretation, criticism, and evaluation, as well as production.” This shift in a student’s thinking toward the visual will eventually give rise to a new way of discussing images and their meanings as more and more professionals become visually literate. Being visually literate, Portewig (2004) argues, “is not a set of peripheral skills but a foundation for understanding the visual. We should recognize the complexity of the visual and understand how each component contributes to a holistic approach to the visual.”

And fourth, instructors should teach students to use images ethically. This first assumes that students understand that the image is not neutral or stoic but, rather, has a dynamic, communicative relationship with its viewer. Like Kimball (2006) notes, using images ethically means that we must realize that images are as uncertain as text. In order to use them ethically, we must use them cautiously, recognizing that images have limits just like text has limits.

Visual Literacy and the Professional Writer

So, what advantage does being visually literate have in the everyday life of the professional writer? Brumberger (2007) makes a critical remark by saying “the emphasis on the visual will increase rather than diminish” and; therefore, organizations should pay special attention to the current conversation surrounding the use of visuals. With this increase emphasis on the visual, professional writers will feel the weight of responsibility as they design documents with text and images driving the argument. Images come from contexts with specific cultural implications and messages. A professional writer’s job includes analyzing these contexts, pushing these messages, and persuading their audiences in a way that is ethical, effective, and true. Whether writing a manual for a dishwasher or managing the social media for a Fortune 500 company, professional writers act as a catalyst for and a creator of meaning. More so than other professions, professional writers have a unique responsibility to understand how the image communicates persuasively and how they can channel this power for their purposes. Salinas (2002) notes well that writers must be “critically savvy about how images are recognized, read, and used as well as how they impact our social and cultural worlds.” Professional writers are culture creators whether they like to think this or not. They can promote ideas or arguments responsibly or irresponsibly. Being visually literate helps professional writers responsibly use images alongside text in order to create arguments that effectively promote social change, justice, and right actions.

Conclusion

Visual literacy is extremely important but, oftentimes, left on the back burner when it comes to education. With common pitfalls like teaching design tools over critical thinking, instructors sometimes neglect teaching their students to be visually literate professional writers. The result is students who can make a beautiful product but cannot produce a convincing argument (or students who do not even understand that an image IS part of their argument).

Professional writing programs should include a course on visual rhetoric within their requirements. The visual is important, and an emphasis on images in this visual age is only growing. Universities should seek to produce visually literate professionals who know how to use images responsibly and well. This emphasis on the visual will lead to common vocabulary and ideas used to discuss the aspects of visual literacy thus enhancing the conversation and students' understanding of the concept. The field of visual rhetoric is a constantly changing discipline. To be visually literate means to keep up with the current trends and ideas concerning visuals and to critically evaluate their effectiveness and meaning. By doing this and enabling others to do so, students are empowered to use the visual to the highest degree of effectiveness and persuasiveness.

Recommendations

First, in order for universities to make an effective decision about including a visual rhetoric course in their professional writing program, they need to understand what is currently taught in the present classes. They need research that shows what areas of visual rhetoric are already included in the present classes and what areas are lacking. Based on the areas that are lacking, universities can conclude what topics they should cover in a standard visual rhetoric course.

Second, I recommend that scholars research and rate potential topics for a visual rhetoric course. Instructors need to know what is most important for them to teach. Digging a little deeper into this subject, research on the best way to teach the important topics to students would help instructors do their jobs more effectively.

Third, we need further research concerning the long-term upkeep of a visual rhetoric course in a world of constantly changing ideas and trends with the visual. Researchers should discover how much instructors should focus on the visual in history versus the visual in the present.

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