Multimodal Writing in an FSEM Context

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Why teach multimodal composition in an FSEM?

My FSEM is titled "Graphic Writing across Cultures." We read a variety of contemporary graphic novels and examine how their creators tell stories that cut across boundaries of race, nation, gender, class, religion, and sexuality by exploiting the unique meaning-making opportunities afforded by the slippery, often surprising interaction between words and images. The students complete two major graded projects: each writes a research-based, thesis-driven interpretive essay and each creates a graphic novella of his or her own.

This latter requirement — creating a graphic novella — means that my FSEM qualifies as what folks in writing studies call a "multimodal course:" i.e., one that aims to teach not only written composition but other kinds of composition, too: aural, sculptural, architectural, or, in my case, visual. The question of whether, to what extent, and why a college writing course ought to teach modes of composition other than the verbal kind has been hotly debated in writing studies in recent years. On the one hand, because so much composing nowadays takes place in digital environments, where it's the norm to communicate not only with words but with sounds and images, too, it seems important to give students practice in composing across a variety of modes. On the other hand, however, because learning something meaningful about a craft as demanding as scholarly writing in a mere 10 or so weeks is, to say the least, a challenge, it makes sense to ask: Is it realistic to ask novice academic writers to grapple with elements of visual, oral, or musical composition, too?

The question is only more pressing in the context of the First-Year Seminar program. While it is true that FSEM courses often have a strong writing component, their primary purpose is not to teach writing as such but to introduce students to the richness and rigor of intellectual life in the academy. To invoke an invidious but in this case necessary distinction: the FSEMs aren't "writing courses" per se, but what are sometimes called "content courses." That is, the writing, however intensive, is not the end in itself; it serves, rather, as a means to an end: a deeper understanding of the course "content." So, again: why, in this context, teach multiple modes of composition?

In what follows, I'll try to answer that question by describing how and why I teach my FSEM as I do. In a nutshell, the argument I'll make is this: A particularly effective way to help students to become more purposeful, more attentive, and more imaginative writers is, paradoxically, to invite them to compose in modes *other than* writing, and then to adapt what they've learned about other modes of

composition to the business of putting scholarly words on the page. By asking students to compose in multiple modes, then, I am emphatically *not* attempting to inculcate in them yet another set of prescriptive rules (as in, "You have learned that you must never use the word *I* in an academic essay. Now you must learn never to use the color indigo in an illustration"). To the contrary, my purpose in asking students to try their hand at composing in various modes is precisely to help them shake off the oppressively prescriptive notions of scholarly writing that so many of them bring to college, in order that they may come to grasp the craft of creating continuous, argumentative prose — i.e., scholarly writing so-called — not as a stuffy, stultifying academic exercise, but as a creative process every bit as demanding and rewarding as the making of art. That, it seems to me, is exactly the disposition toward intellectual life that the FSEM program means to teach. And it's to that end that I ask my students to experiment with words and pictures alike.

The course itinerary

In the first four weeks of the course we read three graphic novels, each of which tells a personal story of coming of age through the experience of cultural conflict. In *Blankets,* Craig Thompson recounts how his development as an artist was shaped by the experience of growing up in a religiously conservative community that held virtually all forms of personal expression to be sinful. In *Fun Home,* Alison Bechdel explores what it was like coming out as a lesbian while at the same time dealing with the tragic consequences of her father's closeted homosexuality. And in *Spit and Passion,* Cristy Road depicts her experiences as teenage lesbian Latina punk rocker growing up in a largely white, heteronormative, and thoroughly un-punk suburb.

Our focus in class is upon the ways that the creators of these texts match "content" and "form," i.e., with how they render the tensions, ambiguities, and clashes of culturally conflicted experience via the semiotic tensions, ambiguities, and clashes that occur at the intersection of the verbal and visual registers of their texts. I therefore assign two kinds of secondary texts. On the one hand, we read some cultural theory, to help us understand the nature of the conflicts that the graphic novels depict; on the other hand, and in order to appreciate the artistry at work, we read selections from some of the now standard texts on composing comics: Scott McCloud's *Making Comics* and *Understanding Comics;* Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* and *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative;* and Alan Moore's *Writing for Comics.*

In these latter texts, the emphasis is on production over analysis, creation over criticism. The students attend to four comics composing strategies in particular: (1) how *conflict* gives rise to plots and the development of characters; (2) how these plot lines and character arcs are advanced through verbal and visual *sequencing;* (3) how the pages and panels making up a sequence are organized around various kinds of verbal/visual *juxtaposition;* and (4) how graphic storytellers enrich their narratives by *quoting from* and *alluding to* other verbal or visual texts. Drawing upon these precepts, and with the examples of Thompson, Bechdel, and Road in mind, the students spend week 5 drafting their first major project: a graphic novella that treats of their own experience of cultural conflict.[8] Each student tells his or her own

[8] Students do not need to be able to draw to take this class. For one thing, there are a lot of free comics-making services online nowadays. What's more, my goal isn't to teach them how

"origin story," i.e., the story of how, through an experience of cultural conflict, s/he has come to be who s/he is today.

The second part of the course is, to my mind, the more challenging, though at first glance it may appear to be the more conventional. During weeks 6 through 9, the students read three graphic novels that explore cultural conflict on a less personal, more global and historical scale. *Incognegro,* by Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece, is the fictional tale of a Thirties-era African American detective who "passes" as white in order to investigate a series of lynchings in the Deep South. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* is a history of the continuing trauma of the Holocaust framed by the experience of a single family. And Joe Sacco's *Palestine* depicts Sacco's contemporary experiences in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as well as the history of the Palestinian people. During week 10, the students draft a research-based, thesis-driven interpretive essay about one of these three texts or a graphic novel of their choosing, having prepared to write that draft by completing a series of writing exercises in class and at home.

As in the first part of the course, our focus in this second part is upon how the creators of graphic texts match "content" and "form," i.e., the events represented and the verbal/visual style of their representation. And, once again, I assign secondary readings to help us toward that end, most of which are historical in nature, since much of the relevant history is likely unfamiliar to many students. However, whereas in the first part of the course I assign several secondary readings having to do with the craft of composing comics, here I do not. Rather, the students undertake a series of exercises that ask them to adapt the compositional concepts they learned during the first part of the course — conflict, sequencing, juxtaposition, and quotation/allusion — to the task of researching and interpreting the graphic novels that we read in the second. Students consider how theses are generated by staging conceptual conflicts; how those theses can be developed through careful and deliberate sequencing; how the sections and paragraphs making up a sequence are organized around the juxtaposition of various argumentative elements; and how those arguments can be enhanced through quotations from and allusions to sources discovered through research. In their final essays, then, the students not only aim to argue an original interpretation of the historical significance of the graphic novels they've chosen to interpret, but to cast that argument in an essay form deliberately crafted to fit it — in terms of the essay's overall structure, the shape of its various parts, and the ways that it incorporates outside sources.

Multimodal composition as a way of writing to learn

Teachers familiar with the rhetorical tradition will likely recognize in the adaptable concepts I have described at least four of the five cannons of classical rhetoric. *Conflict* corresponds to the canon of *invention,* which shows how arguments can be generated by framing the matter at hand in dialectically opposed dyads. *Sequencing* corresponds to *arrangement,* which has to do with ordering the arguments thus generated such as to bring them to a climax at once logically satisfying and aesthetically pleasing. *Juxtaposition* corresponds to *style,* which concerns the paragraph- and sentence-

to *draw* but how to *compose,* i.e., how to arrange visual (and verbal) elements meaningfully and deliberately. Therefore, the quality of a student's draftsmanship isn't an issue; she could create a brilliantly composed text using just stick figures and word balloons.

level choices a writer or speaker makes in suiting her language to her theme, the occasion, and her audience. And *quotation/allusion* corresponds to *memory,* which involves embedding a particular composition intertextually within the discourse of the community more generally, hence enriching it with history and commending it to posterity.

Again, these correspondences may be recognizable to a teacher. But they likely do not — and this is the crucial point — strike the students as familiar, even those students who have studied rhetorical concepts in, e.g., their AP English class. To the contrary: In my experience, asking students to deploy the strategies of comics composition to the writing of scholarly arguments strikes them, at least initially, as a strange idea, indeed. A novel idea, perhaps; maybe even an alluring one. But always also strange.

Provoking that sense of (hopefully productive) estrangement is precisely the purpose of taking the multimodal "detour" I've described. For it is a perennial pedagogical challenge — and not only for writing teachers — that students come to college with a good deal of prior knowledge about how to write. That prior knowledge is not, of course, a bad thing; indeed, it is often quite useful. However, and perhaps paradoxically, prior knowledge about writing can serve as an impediment to learning: that is, when the knowledge takes the form of prescriptive rules that seem somehow to have acquired the force of law, to be obeyed without question and regardless of context. Probably all faculty who have taught first-year courses can make a list of some of these imported prescriptions: *Begin your essay with a sentence that grabs the reader's attention. Don't use* I *in an academic essay. All essays should have five paragraphs.* And these are only some of the more obvious ones. More subtle are the broader attitudes toward the meaning and purpose of academic writing that students acquire as a result of their various high school curricula, their experiences of national and state testing regimes, and the myriad ways they have been asked to write in and out of the classroom.

The point, then, of provoking a sense of estrangement from prior writing knowledge is not to invalidate that knowledge, nor to replace it with a different, "truer" set of prescriptions. Rather, by making a familiar activity strange again, I hope to encourage students see the composition of scholarly texts not as a process of rule-following, but one of decision-making, of puzzle-solving, of art-making. My goal is help students take control over, and responsibility for, their choices as writers. For there is, of course, no "correct" way to compose a paragraph by analogy to a comics panel, to organize an essay by analogy to a visual narrative, etc. Experimenting with these acts of multimodal "translation" is just that: an experiment. Students are called upon to actively create the principles and strategies they'll employ in their writing; to decide consciously to adhere (or not) to one principle or another, to pursue (or not) one writing strategy or another; and to reflect critically upon their writerly choices. It is these qualities — imagination, an active sense of purpose, and a capacity for reflection — that make a strong scholarly writer.

Of course, it is these same qualities that make for a strong scholar in general, i.e., a deep, complex, and lively thinker, whether that thinking takes place in words, images, sounds, or numbers. Since cultivating that kind of thinking is a primary purpose of the FSEM program, it seems to me that multimodal composition is very well suited to it. Indeed, it can be one of the most powerful forms of writing to learn.