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“Making the Case for Visual Rhetoric”

Moving Towards a Language of Teacher Inquiry for Advanced Visual Literacy

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During the 1st Session of the 109th Congress, the United States Senate passed S.Res. 39, “apologizing to the victims of lynching and the descendants of those victims for the failure of the Senate to enact anti-lynching legislation” (U.S. Senate). This historic apology was initiated by Senators Mary L. Landrieu (D-LA) and George Allen (R-VA), who after reading the book Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photographs in America, were motivated to introduce legislation. Edited by James Allen, the book is a 350-page pictorial chronicling lynching in America from 1850-1960. Speaking at a press conference following the passage of the resolution, Senator Landrieu commented “the impact of the pictures was overwhelming and proved to be very educational and an emotional experience for me. The more I learned about this terrorism in America, the more committed I became to doing something positive and passing this legislation” (Landrieu). At one moment in history, these photographs of charred, mutilated bodies, hanging from trees, were semiotic of social and political retribution for a society that displayed unmitigated cruelty (Sontag, 2004). More than 100 years later, these same images are the cause of a political apology to rectify a grave human injustice. Consequently, these visual texts can be seen as a social codification in which the author and the reader shared a common historical moment (Tompkins, 1976). Within this context, our increasingly visual culture has repositioned the image as the primary literacy for the 21st century (Burmark, 2002). The pedagogical challenge for the classroom is to implement interactive visual cues that will stimulate student cognition beyond their passive receipt of visual information.

In the composition classroom, students often become excited when photographs, movies and graphics of many types are used to complement visual literacy. However, enthusiasm often dissipates as students soon realize they must perform analysis and find cogent arguments in visual imagery. The fact that our culture is so deeply visual, students should be explicitly encouraged to interact with images to gather greater facility in interpreting and analyzing them (Eichbauer, 2003). Considering the relevance of visual thinking as a basic cognitive process, it is no surprise many scholars of composition and communication heed the call for instructors to integrate visual literacy into text-based writing assignments (Berger, 2003). Furthermore, scholars such as Dianna George have emphasized the cultural significance of visuals as a strategy for implementation in the classroom (Dropping Bread Crumbs). According to George, literacy, as it is defined in composition pedagogy is:

. . . intimately connected to intertextuality as an awareness and understanding of the relationship among texts and between texts and readers, (so that) literacy is never fixed or finished. Instead, it entails an ongoing re-evaluation and reformulation of the cultural and textual terrain as that terrain itself, including the position of readers, shift (124).

This intertextuality George refers to exists between words and images and the social spaces, which includes time and place wherever one encounters them.

Visual images, whether they are television advertisements, billboards, or symbols of instruction at a train station, are pervasive in our culture. What is relevant for our students to understand is how images are representations in social spaces and their interpretation requires close analysis and argument. Therefore, students must acquire critical thinking skills to read and guide them through this avalanche of visual stimuli.

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