

Abstracts/Résumés pp. xv-xxi

Into Another 'Semiotic Landscape': Evaluating Models of Multimodal Literacy Curricula for Canadian Art and Design University Students

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The place of visual communication in a given society can only be understood in the context of, on the one hand, the range of forms or modes of public communication available in that society, and, on the other hand, their uses and valuations. We refer to this as 'the semiotic landscape.'

... Just as the features of a landscape (a field, a wood, a clump of trees, a house a group of buildings) only make sense in the context of their whole environment ('waste land' has meaning only in that context, as has 'field' or 'track'), so particular modes of communication should be seen in *their* environment, in the environment of all the other modes of communication which surround them, and their functions. (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 33)

An art and design university is a particular kind of 'semiotic landscape,' comprised of teachers and students heavily invested in the difference that non-linguistic modes of expression make to meaning and human experience. Here both experienced and emerging creative practitioners experiment with the signifying possibilities of, for example, wood, light,

movement, paint, clay, or digital media. Written English, as a mode of inquiry, research, and composition finds itself somewhat of an outsider in this landscape—at least more so than in a conventional university. It is from this outside territory of a writing pedagogue at an art and design university that my inquiry emerges.

I've directed a writing and academic skills centre at the Ontario College of Art & Design (OCAD), a Canadian art and design university, since 2002. I also teach first and second year writing courses in the liberal arts curriculum. As a result of these experiences, I've become interested in exploring ways to re-imagine and re-invent writing pedagogy for art and design students. In recent years, scholars and instructors involved in teaching communications and writing have explored the pedagogical value of encouraging children and adults to create multimodal texts in the classroom. Multimodal texts are those that bring together more than one mode—images, text, graphic design, sound, moving image—often by way of technology, to achieve purposeful communication. University course textbooks are traditionally multimodal, involving images, text, and elements of graphic design to present information. Web pages nearly always communicate information multimodally—through sound, moving images, text, etc. As the art and design community well knows, objects of art and design are often creatively multimodal. However, the first year humanities essay, even in an art and design university, is only rarely multimodal.

Writing courses within the liberal arts curriculum at my home institution are not currently shaped by multimodal literacy goals, although multimodality is highly valued at OCAD and students become literate in diverse modes of art and design communication through a complex web of learning experiences they have over the duration of their undergraduate education. Given that writing pedagogy at OCAD is not explicitly or coherently multimodal, what relevance would a multimodal approach to writing and composition have within its liberal arts and art and design curriculum more generally? What value would an inquiry with respect to this question have for researchers in the field of multimodal literacy?

In the western postsecondary context, in particular the UK, USA and Australia, researchers and university teachers have both considered and tested new writing curriculum that encourages students to develop multimodal skills in composition (Abu-Arab, 2005; Graupner, Nickoson-Massey, & Blair, 2009; Nanacs, 2009; Orr, Blythman, & Mullin, 2004; Woods, 2003). These curriculum initiatives emerged by way of a subtle crisis in traditional university writing pedagogy, linked to a large-scale increase in the availability and usability of more diverse and complex forms of communications and media technologies that have enabled humans, especially young people, to gain greater facility and effectiveness with applications of sound, image, and design in their compositions on the web and other contexts. The goals of curricula supporting multimodal literacy in postsecondary education and the historical goals of liberal arts, undergraduate education—to develop skills in text-based communications—can be viewed as non-complementary. One might argue that introducing multimodal pedagogy to an undergraduate composition curriculum puts undue pressure on composition teachers to teach and evaluate modes of communication that they do not have well-developed skills in. One might also argue that asking students to focus their attention on acquiring modes of communication that are not text-based serves to take students' attention away from "the basics"—or, composing with words.

At OCAD, where students and many faculty members already have a high degree of multimodal literacy (including spatial, visual, linguistic, and gestural literacy), there is little institutional tension stemming from whether or not to value multimodality in learning. Multimodality is an art and design university's strength. While professors in the wider university sector might argue about the value of a multimodal composition class for first year students, in the postsecondary art and design milieu, struggles have sometimes emerged from the opposite—that is, around the question of integrating English language-based literacy education, mostly in the form of liberal arts courses, within the context of art and design. What form should this instruction take? How do we impress upon art and design students the importance of writing to their education? How do we make writing a vital component of student

practice in the ceramic studio, the wood shop, or the digital studio lab without taking a student's attention away from art and design-making?

It's important to emphasize this difference with respect to an art and design university as 'semiotic landscape.' Since liberal arts education within art and design training for adults is still a relatively new phenomenon,¹ writing and composition curricula in art and design universities are at a relatively early stage of development. Unlike more conventional universities, art and design universities are peopled by multimodal 'experts,' and so a multimodal composition and rhetoric course would be received differently in this landscape. North American research in multimodal literacy has not investigated practices of teaching and learning composition and multimodality in the art and design, postsecondary context in any significant way.²

This research has the following objectives: (1) to identify, analyze, and assess models of multimodal pedagogy that have the potential for developing composition skill learning within the context of a liberal arts curriculum in a Canadian art and design university; and (2) to determine the contribution of art and design university-specific, multimodal pedagogy models to recent research in the fields of multimodal literacy, language and literacy education, and postsecondary writing pedagogy. In this paper, I juxtapose an analysis of a sample of recently published American and Canadian composition instruction books that encourage multimodal literacy in the context of a postsecondary, language-based curriculum *with* an analysis of how multimodality is manifest in one area of the art and design curriculum at OCAD. 'Thesis' is a multimodal genre of composition that is required from students in their final years of study at OCAD. With respect to this juxtaposition, my aim is to discover how my sample multimodal curricula fits--or doesn't--with OCAD as a specific 'semiotic landscape.' By looking at student thesis work, I'm trying to develop a provisional sketch of the nature of my home institution's 'semiotic landscape.'

Examining how the goals of multimodal literacy education are realized

In my project, I take as my starting place new scholarship in the field of multimodal literacy. This scholarship seeks to challenge the assumption that teaching writing—and traditional rhetoric and composition in particular—is adequate to contemporary education, both for children and young adults (Cope & Kalantzis, eds., 2000; DigiRhet.org, 2006; Elkins, 2003; Handa, 2004; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; New London Group, 1996). Kress, known as a leading researcher in the field of literacy, investigates the ways that students learn in response to differences between modes of communication in texts. Texts that present different modes are 'multimodal.' As a concept, multimodality signifies the materiality of different modes of expression and how this very difference in materiality lends itself to differences in meaning that shape a reader's interpretive experience. Kress's research—and other like research concerned with digital rhetoric, visual literacy, and video gaming among other forms of multimodality (DigiRhet.org, 2006; Kenner, 2003; Pahl, 2003)—explores the potential of multimodal texts as an alternative to language-based texts for learning composition, particularly in a climate where digital, web-based, and visual languages are so ubiquitous among young people.

An assumption in multimodal literacy research and education is that "language is partial" (Jewitt & Kress, 2003, p. 3) and that "different aspects of meaning are carried in different ways by each mode." In fact, multimodal literacy research acknowledges the partiality of all modes of representing meaning in the context of the immense complexity of our everyday phenomenal and remembered worlds. This perspective on the value and use of different modes of meaning are very intuitive to most art and design students and perhaps the main reason why they enroll. At the risk of generalizing, I want to claim that art and design students are interested in exploring the possibilities for representation and meaning in a particular or in several media. They have a sense of the partiality inherent in

all modes of communication. They develop interest in exploring the limits of meaning in media and how media can be put together to create new interpretive experiences.

In 2005 the National College of Teacher's of English (NCTE) Executive Committee, based in the US, approved a summary statement of the organization's position on multimodal literacy. This statement helps to clarify the meaning of multimodal literacy, particularly in the context of writing instruction. It articulates values of a multimodal literacy curriculum to learning and helps develop a picture of what a multimodal literacy curriculum wants for outcomes of learning. Some pedagogical values that a multimodal literacy curriculum can contribute are (1) the ability to enhance or transform opportunities for learning in creative practice "beyond illustration or decoration"; (2) the opportunity for students to develop their abilities to "read critically" and "write functionally" in diverse media, mirroring media used in communications more generally; (3) a response to the learning needs of a generation of young people who have been immersed in a multimodal, digital world from a young age (NCTE Guideline, n.d.). Interestingly, the NCTE Guideline suggests that a multimodal curriculum can support a renewed relationship to the visual for students in that curriculum; that is, an understanding and appreciation of the world of the image as more than just beauty and 'decoration'—a value so important to the disciplines of art and design.

Certainly the OCAD curriculum is heavily invested in inviting students to learn that art and design practice involves more than just making aesthetically pretty things or spaces. It immerses students in a process of gaining sophisticated technical insight into the uses and potentials of the materiality of media through its studio-based learning environments. It asks students to situate their experiments with the signifying potential of various media within social and historical contexts—aims that are driven by a visual studies or visual culture perspective and find their home in the liberal arts curriculum of the university. Recently, OCAD has enhanced its efforts to 'meet students where they are' by offering them more opportunities to investigate what vistas of practice and creation technology and digital media can afford. But, how is writing

configured as a modality or practice of communication within this milieu? With respect to writing pedagogy at OCAD, the goals of a multimodal literacy curriculum are partially met.

All students at OCAD must take a first year writing course option which is offered to them in two basic guises through the faculty responsible for delivering the liberal arts curriculum, the faculty of Liberal Studies. Currently, these options are a straightforward rhetoric and composition course *or* a writing curriculum embedded in a multi-credit, interdisciplinary course shaped according to the learning community model originating in the US, entitled LS One (meaning, Liberal Studies One). Neither of these options place heavy emphasis on getting students to make multimodal texts that do the sorts of things that texts in a liberal arts curriculum often do—argue, describe, demonstrate research, illustrate, among other things. Although students are almost always considering forms of visual representation in their Liberal Studies courses through the lenses of visual studies, aesthetics, or other methodologies, at the moment, they're not often asked to compose multimodally in their assignments. In this way, the Liberal Studies learning context at OCAD implements some aspects of a multimodal literacy curriculum and not others. Perhaps this direction is appropriate for OCAD, given that students are so immersed in multimodal learning in their art and design courses.³

The other place to search for evidence of multimodal literacy learning at OCAD is in the art and design program curricula. Here students are often pairing written composition with other artistic or design forms of composition for their coursework. One particular site of student multimodal work in art and design is in the third and fourth year curriculum in both art and design. Many fourth year students at OCAD complete a project called 'thesis' which requires them to produce a body of work in their discipline (for example, graphic design, material art and design, or drawing and painting) and a piece of writing to accompany that body of work. Thesis is the culmination of a student's learning within their discipline and can also be viewed as the culmination of a student's liberal arts learning. How are thesis students negotiating the multimodal requirement of their thesis curriculum? Here, I'm interested in how

students are approaching integrating writing into their final projects. While it's not within the scope of this study to survey a large sample of recent work by OCAD thesis students, an analysis of the projects of three, 2007 thesis prize winners gives me preliminary insight into what these students are making and how they are deciding, on their own or according to the guidance of faculty or the curriculum, to conceptualize the work of writing to their art and design thesis projects.

For her thesis project, "Streetskin: Patterns in Urban Landscape," graphic design student Ola Rahatka (2007) explores graphic design as a "means to modify urban landscape and alter existing urban environments in a way that enhances them with a narrative of cultural, social, or local significance" (p. 1). This design goal involved Rahatka in creating "poetic, nostalgic, alluring, and intimate" patterns for application and presentation in what Rahatka describes as the "cold" and "unwelcoming" public spaces in downtown Toronto, Canada (p. 1).

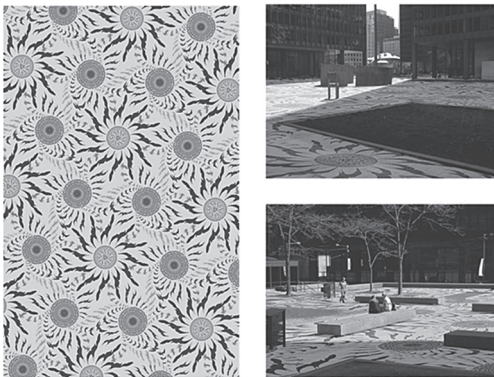


Figure 1: Ola Rahatka. (2007). Pattern and urban application. Design from Rahatka, *Streetskin: Patterns in Urban Landscape*, (Graphic Design thesis project, OCAD, 2007).

The writing that Rahatka created for her thesis project is what she describes as a "summary" of her research and also an "argument in favour" of the design solution that her project attempts to realize (p. 1). Applying visual studies and design research methodologies, Rahatka's writing is descriptive, analytical, and thick with the ideas and practices of other design-

ers and thinkers. The writing is supportive, summative, and explanatory—contextualizing Rahatka's work for the viewer and framing as well as enriching the viewer's experience with insight not readily apparent to the model of a design solution that her thesis writing is speaking to. Images are integrated into Rahatka's text but not always explicitly linked to meanings in the written text through descriptions or other kinds of markers for understanding. The images in Rahatka's thesis writing captivate the eye as being relevant and interesting to her project but work mostly as suggestions and episodic opportunities for getting a 'visual feel' for the meanings argued and explored in the written text. Rahatka's images are not integrated into her written text as a means to transform, in any substantial way, the reader's experience of reading or interpreting meaning in the written text. They function much like illustrations in a conventional publication like a textbook or art book.

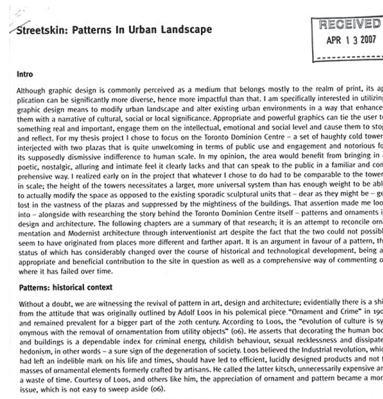


Figure 2: Ola Rahatka. (2007). Page 1, Thesis writing from Rahatka, *Streetskin: Patterns in Urban Landscape*, (Graphic Design thesis project, OCAD, 2007).

Annie Vuong's photography thesis project (2007, no title), explores the "crucial relationship between optical photography and the traditional fine art of drawing and painting" through a method of light painting (p. 1). Her written submission for

thesis describes the conceptual territory of her series of light paintings, visually stunning and haunting details of Guido Cagnacci's *The Death of Cleopatra*, through reference to the work of other artists—from Gerhard Richter to the music artist, Lemon Jelly. Paired with many of these references are images from artists like Richter. These images serve as visual markers for understanding the conceptual and methodological underpinnings of Vuong's work. Vuong's writing gestures to the significance of these images to her own work, but she does not closely or meticulously analyze or describe them in her writing. Like Rahatka's images, Vuong's function mostly as illustration.

At the end of Vuong's written thesis, which is essentially directed at giving background for and framing her process and intentions in creating her work, Vuong presents her own images printed on plain paper. These images are not associated with any writing, but simply leave the reader with a visual sense of the project Vuong created.

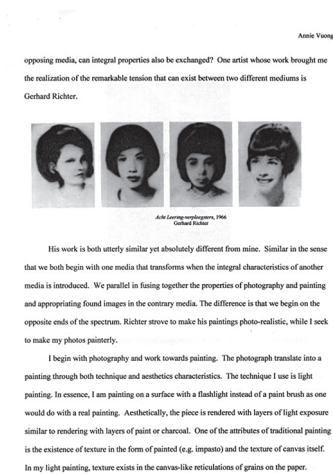


Figure 3: Annie Vuong. (2007). Page 6, Thesis writing from Vuong, Untitled, (Photography thesis project, OCAD, 2007).

The written portion of David Kopulos's (2007) drawing and painting thesis project, "Toronto Pending," presents the reader/viewer with a sense of the possibilities for creating a mul-

timodal research paper for OCAD thesis requirements. While OCAD's thesis curriculum is perhaps the best example of a multimodal 'course' on campus that asks students to make writing and art or design that reference and relate to each other, rarely do thesis students create thesis writing that is itself highly multimodal. Kopulos's 'thesis support paper' is a multimodal communication within an already multimodal assignment.

The core of Kopulos's thesis project is a series of "painted constructions" (2007, Forward section) of postwar, proposed Toronto megaprojects, some actually making it to the point of development and existing today (like downtown's Eaton Centre) and some projects never coming to fruition (like the proposed Spadina Expressway)—but all aimed at evoking a renewed sense of civic identity in changing times. Of his technique in building the constructions, Kopulos states that: "By utilizing artists' renderings from these designs and projecting and tracing them onto my supports, a connection is made with my thesis topic: projections and traces of hyperreality interacting with the real" (2007, Ring Roads: Technique section). The supports to which Kopulos refers are weathered plywood and metal sheets, "to suggest permanence as well as ephemerality," as well as translucent, corrugated plastic (2007, Ring Roads: Technique section). Kopulos notes that "By utilizing the urban landscape both as a referent and as a canvas, and through the layering of paint as an analogy to building a structure, these works blur the line between art and architecture" (2007, Ring Roads: Technique section).

Kopulos's online project, in lieu of a written thesis paper, evokes again a sense of the constructedness and layering of Kopulos's core painted constructions. The layered, multi-interface architecture of websites recalls the aesthetics and form of Kopulos's painted constructions. Navigating around the different pages of the site encourages a sense of researching in archives and moving into and through the past in a way, perhaps, a written paper cannot. The written content of Kopulos's project is not rigidly sequential, and so looking at different parts of the site, parts which have no strict beginning or ending, does not compromise the reader/viewer's interpre-



Figure 4. David Kopulos. (2007). Harbour Metrofront Left, Oil and acrylic on plywood, 24" x 24", From *Toronto Pending*, (Drawing and Painting thesis project, OCAD, 2007).



Figure 5. David Kopulos. (2007). Screenshot from the *Toronto Pending* online project. (Drawing and Painting thesis project, OCAD, 2007).

tive experience of Kopulos's work. The images on the various web pages are themselves layered, with graphics that recall landscape and space. The writing on each page appears on a weathered piece of paper, sometimes with a tear, a paperclip, or a piece of tape. These webpage images also support a navigator's sense of leafing through archival material—exploring long-forgotten and more recent renderings and imaginings of urban Toronto.

The thesis samples I've examined offer a sense of the range of approaches students might take to working through the multimodal demands of their thesis courses—specifically, the requirement to produce thesis writing. What do the samples say about whether we should be preparing and guiding students to make multimodal compositions for writing projects; guidance that is a heavy focus of the instructional books below? I know that students in art and design courses at OCAD *are* learning multimodal literacy through engaging forms other than writing. The writing of Rahatka, Vuong, and especially Kopulos suggest that the students are also already engaging a multimodal approach to composing liberal arts-type writing. Should those students receive explicit preparation for this kind of specialized writing? What could that look like?

Formulations of the work of art in first-year composition textbooks

Much can be learned from examining formulations of art, design, and writing as practices of composition and communication in a selection of first-year composition textbooks—particularly with respect to how the multimodal literacy research and teaching community is attempting to realize the learning goals of multimodal composition curricula at the postsecondary level. From my own vantage point as a faculty member in an art and design university, it's also interesting to notice how the work of art and design gets taken up and conceptualized outside the boundaries of localized, professional art and design communities.

For the purpose of this study, I've analyzed the following instructional books: *The Brief Penguin Handbook (BPH)*, *Writing in a Visual Age (WVA)*, *Convergences (CG)*, *Picturing*

Texts (PT), and *Seeing & Writing 3 (SW3)*.⁴ All books make an attempt to meet goals for multimodal literacy learning articulated in multimodal literacy scholarship. In various ways, all books acknowledge for student readers that different modes of communication afford different signifying possibilities. All of my samples, to varying extents, demonstrate that there is a specific practice of reading and composing associated with specific modes of meaning making. They acknowledge that composing a multimodal text involves examining and evaluating how modes are working together for the purpose of successful communication, or not, and involve students in learning to revise multimodal texts. The books meet students 'where they are'; immersed in analog or digital environments where visual and other non-linguistic forms of communication are the norm—or at least very prevalent. For all of these reasons, these books are laudable, representing brave new steps towards shaping composition instruction, in a North American context, to be more multimodal. But what can these textbooks tell us about how art and design are imagined as modes of meaning and part of the literacy development of undergraduates in a contemporary, North American context?

As a way to organize my study, I intend to sketch descriptions and analyses according to the textbooks which, in my view, have least to most resonance with the semiotic landscape—the culture—of an art and design university. My aim in all textbook analyses is to look for implicit assumptions in the textbook curricula about what art, design, and writing *are for* as forms of communication; to examine how the textbook acknowledges differences in the worlds of knowing that different modes call forth; and to question what the textbook 'says' we should know about reading and composing in these modes individually and together. How each of the textbooks draws these assumptions says something to students and the broader readership about the social value and pedagogic work of art and design practice, important assumptions to look at in the context of re-imagining and re-shaping a multimodal composition curriculum for a relatively expert art and design student audience. While not so much a composition textbook as a handbook for students in composition classrooms, *Brief Penguin Handbook* is included in this study because, to date,

it is the only multimodal literacy-focused, writing guide for a postsecondary Canadian student audience that I have been able to find.

BPH works from the presumption that “writing is a visual medium” (2007, p. viii) and that this ‘visuality’ has been enhanced by the recent explosion of communication technologies. The composition of writing, including what we choose to integrate into our writing (spreadsheets, audio clips, images, web links, graphics), has become both more diverse and more complex. Composition pedagogy at the postsecondary level must change to respond to this contemporary dynamic. *BPH* responds by guiding students in learning ways to design documents and include images with writing in ways that support and enhance the communicative work of the writing. Writing is positioned as a primary form of communication for postsecondary students using *BPH*. Considerations of the visual in this book are—generally speaking—about assessing how to integrate the visual to enhance the effectiveness of written documents. Much attention is paid, in *BPH*, to demonstrating the many parallels between visual and verbal texts. The chapters entitled “Critical Reading and Viewing” and “Analyzing Visual and Verbal Texts,” encourage the student reader to understand that practices of critically reading and analyzing visual and verbal texts are highly correlative. Photographs and sales graphs are two visual text examples here—not images that do the work that art does in disrupting and representing new or provocative ideas or sentiments. Subsequent chapters, “Writing to Inform” and “Writing to Persuade,” provide students with samples of an informative or argumentative, written text and then a correlative visual text. The focus in these two chapters is to highlight how visual texts can do the important and efficient job of organizing and conveying a particular kind of message that a written text can. A later chapter entitled “Writing about Film and New Media” builds on the message of previous chapters—that visual texts can be as rhetorically driven as their verbal counterparts—by demonstrating how to rhetorically analyze different kinds of visual texts. A variety of visual texts are highlighted for analysis—e.g. films, video games, and websites.

The conceptions of the work of the visual and design are clear in *BPH*. What the textbook does is highlight that these modes can be used, like writing and speech, for rhetorical purposes. Because *BPH* does not explore the work of the visual or design outside the territory of rhetoric—and I'm alluding to the domain of art here—the book does not include images or representations or even other modalities, film or sound for instance, that are highly and complexly referential, drawing on multiple discourses, texts, ideas, trends and symbols from contemporary life or history. Nor does *BPH* devote much page-space to the notion that composing multimodally involves the composer, consciously or not, in referencing this same rich contemporary and social world of meaning. The question of art—in other words, those multimodal representations that have made the precious move from being only effective communication to something more densely packed with meaning and sensibility—is not taken up in *BPH* as being important to the development of multimodal skills. While a chapter entitled “Design Basics” asks students to consider the impact of elements of design—font type and size, tables and charts, drawings and photos—as well as invites the student reader to begin to immerse themselves in the materiality of the digital/visual mode, the chapter lacks a conception of design as interrupting the accepted or creating novel experiences. Nor is there much focus on asking the student to consider the difference that the integration of these other design modes might make to understanding. *BPH* clearly shows that different modes can work in parallel ways: a website can pose an argument as can a brochure and a written essay. But how an argument is different in a website, or a brochure, or a written essay is not extensively taken up.

Examining rhetorics in the visual world and involving students in analyzing and deconstructing the composition of rhetorically driven images for how these components work together to shape meaning are important steps in encouraging student multimodal literacy—and especially valuable for the average Canadian undergraduate student. That *BPH* positions the work of the visual and written as about effective, rhetorically-driven communication makes it less relevant to an art and design undergraduate education scenario. The rhetorical work

of the visual is important but not the only work, and certainly not the way the visual as a signifying mode is conceptualized in an art and design university. *BPH* focuses on helping students know the basics about reading visual and written messages and there is less emphasis on helping students understand the complex yet more open signifying potentials of more iconic mediums like the visual, aural, or the spatial.

Writing in a Visual Age poses a somewhat more relevant understanding of the meaning and communicative potential of non-linguistic media. *WVA* assumes that visuals and design elements in texts contribute to meaning, making the communication more appealing, engaging, and clear. Its creators state that their book moves past the long recognized pedagogical value of asking students "to reflect on nonverbal messages in a wide variety of materials such as ads, brochures, and websites" (2006, p. v). By contrast, *WVA* shows students ways to "use visual information to accomplish basic rhetorical goals such as engaging an audience's attention, creating an appropriate voice, or elaborating on a point" (2006, p. vi). As with *BPH*, *WVA* suggests that art and design are about composing with intention and should be considered as ways to enhance the effectiveness of the written. But, more so than in *BPH*, *WVA* spends time showing students how the visual can contribute something new and evocative to meaning and communications—something other than what writing can.

WVA demonstrates the unique contribution of visual texts to written texts by organizing chapters on texts that have a particular purpose—there is a chapter on writing profiles, reports, position papers, evaluations, proposals, and instructions. In these chapters students explore how they can integrate visual information into, for example, writing that intends to narrate the "unique experiences and qualities of an individual" (2006, p. 27, from chapter called "Profiles") or writing that intends to communicate information that is "accurate, credible, and reasonably comprehensive" (2006, p. 103, from chapter called "Reports"). "Profiles" provides a good example of the kind of approach *WVA* takes to teaching students how to integrate visually represented messages. The chapter spotlights photographs as this is the kind of visual image most associated with

profile-type writing (2006, p. 31). In this context, the importance of critically reading images attached to written profiles is stressed. Photographs do not just capture reality, but are intentionally composed and constructed texts whose meanings are partly determined by the creator or creators. Students who are either interpreting photos associated with profiles or considering photos for profiles are urged to consider how “the impression created by the photograph (or series of photographs) contribute to an understanding of the unique qualities of the person, place, or activity being profiled” (2006, p. 32). Sample profiles then have prompting questions to help students think about what profile photos are contributing to the meaning of a written profile. One such a prompt is with the sample profile, “The Road to Kabul” written by Dan Rather and published in a 2002 edition of *TV Guide*. The prompt reads: “There likely were many photographs that could have been used at the beginning of this profile. What effect is achieved by beginning the profile with a photograph of a young child standing almost directly in the path of a tank?” (2006, p. 50).

In a section of the “Profiles” chapter entitled “Guide to writing a profile: Designing your profile and integrating visual information,” students are offered some practical strategies for integrating visual material into profile writing in ways that will both make sense to and be captivating for an audience. An information box in this section, called “integrating photographs,” asks students to:

Find some photographs that you think convey the attitudes or impressions you hope to communicate through the written text of your profile. Create captions for these photographs. Bring the photographs and captions to class. Show the photographs to your classmates, and ask what messages the photographs convey to them. Then show both the photographs and the captions to your classmates. Ask them to tell you whether the captions either (1) explain clearly and succinctly what is going on in the photographs, or (2) indicate an attitude that seems consistent with the photographs. (2006, pp. 97-98)

In this activity, students are asked to engage in a process of reflecting on the communicative work of photographs in relation to written material and with a critical eye that is correlative to the critical stance students are encouraged to apply to written material. Students are similarly encouraged to think about how modes of meaning work together in an overall interpretive experience. Finally, by requiring students to find their own visual representations for their written profile assignment, students are compelled to work through a process of shaping a visual sense of the persona they are profiling through writing—a process strongly recalling process in 'real' art or design making.

WVA is about developing student skills in written composition with a more sideline goal of enhancing student visual literacy. However, compared to *BPH*—which is admittedly limited by being a handbook and not a textbook per se—the images highlighted in the different chapters on profiles, reports, etc. are more shaped by art-making goals. These images are more open-ended, less easily interpreted, more complex, more evocative of multiple meanings and interpretations and therefore not just about 'effective' communication or conveyance of meaning. The photo associated with Rather's "The Road to Kabul" is one notable example. An image of a very young Afghani girl standing immediately in front of two enormous war tanks in the midst of a desolate and rocky landscape is conspicuously composed—focused in its intention to draw the viewer's eye to the young girl and her explicitly wrought vulnerability in the context of war and uncertainty. Here the choice of visuals signals a recognition that art and design have more complex, open-ended, and provocative messages to bring forward—messages that jar preconceptions and encourage renewed thinking and interpretation.

But the visual remains a mode of meaning for enhancing written communication in *WVA*. Overall, there is a lack of pedagogy around reading the visual in terms of its social, historical, and cultural meanings. *WVA* includes some images that are complexly woven—that disrupt or engage entirely novel practices within art and design practice themselves. But the range of modes of visual meaning investigated in *WVA* is conser-

vative—only photographs, graphs, and layout design. Save for a chapter with practical tips on how to design documents, entitled “Strategies for Design and Research,” *WVA* does not prioritize asking students to immerse themselves in the materiality of the medium. Nor does it prioritize asking students to consider what difference this materiality of the mode makes to the experience of meaning when reading multimodal texts. In sum, the potentials of composition in the visual world are explored for students in *WVA*, but not in a way that would satisfy an undergraduate art and design student.

Picturing Texts, *Seeing & Writing 3*, and *Convergences* together represent a departure from *BPH* and *WVA* insofar as all three encourage students to consider contemporary art work, by practicing professionals, as a component of the visual world. In this fundamental way, they all have strong potential for resonance with an art and design university undergraduate. *PT* and *SW3*, considered together, present interesting points of comparison, so I begin with these.

Both *PT* and *SW3* focus on what can be learned from visual images or works of art about composition and reading practices. Both include the art, design, and writing of practicing, creative professionals. *PT* and *SW3* are organized in a way that recalls *WVA*: chapters are organized thematically around kinds of visuals with kinds of writing like “Making Lives Visible,” “Representing Others,” “Projecting Gender,” and “Reading Icons.” In both textbooks, rhetorical methodologies are brought to the visual as are visual studies methodologies. Students are encouraged to explore how the experience of reading and composing in the realm of the written and the visual have both strong parallels and some points of divergence. One parallel, a unique strength in instructional value for both books, is a focus on the pedagogy of seeing. In *PT*, the chapter engaging a pedagogy of seeing is “Looking Closer,” placed near the beginning of the book. *SW3*’s equivalent chapter, also at the beginning of the book, is called “Observing the Ordinary.”

In the case of *SW3*, a pedagogy of seeing is greatly informed by the writing of John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*, so much so

that Appendix A includes an excerpt from this book. Understanding how one sees, practicing seeing and 'observing the ordinary,' become means for finding interesting and thoughtful things to say about experience. As the writers of *SW3* state: "By *actively seeing* the details of the ordinary, we hone our skills of observation, the first step toward becoming a confident writer" (2006, p. 32). Seeing well is a precursor to writing well—practicing seeing the visual, becomes for *SW3*, a skill that translates into better analytical skills for writing, a better ability to look at and evaluate writing, and better composition skills. Although *SW3*'s actual chapter on seeing does not explicitly reference methodologies for seeing—more so it encourages practice at 'observing the ordinary' with visuals, writing, and exercises—methodologies appear in the chapter before. These methodologies include concepts borrowed from rhetorical analysis and visual studies—context, purpose, tone, structure, audience, etc. *PT* approaches a pedagogy of seeing in much the same way with explicit reference to methodologies of seeing, borrowed from rhetoric and visual studies, appearing at the beginning of the book and then further referenced in the chapter on 'looking closer.'

With both books emphasizing a pedagogy of seeing for undergraduate students learning composition, near the beginning of the 'course' that each textbook is, *SW3* and *PT* spotlight practice and process—in the guise of seeing—as critical, guiding values in learning to write in contemporary times. The approach of the writer, the approach of the individual as part of a visual and language-based culture, and the approach of the creator making the visual and written worlds, are made virtually synonymous. This is an important message for art and design students in a postsecondary context, moving between practices of writing and making multimodal art and design objects—important because the difference in practices is de-emphasized signaling less effort to move between them. What one learns from looking at and making art can be engaged when writing—strong comfort for the first-year, art and design, university student.

Another notable aspect of *SW3* with respect to its emphasis on practice and process in composing, in the visual or written

sense, is the inclusion of interviews with artists and writers throughout the book. The interviews provide information about the artist's or the writer's process for composing—again, the difference between composing in visual or other media and composing writing is de-emphasized. Composition in the writing and the visual emerge as parallel practices engaging the same fundamental approaches and methodologies.

The student exercises in the thematic chapters of *SW3* and *PT* are also very similar—through exercises, each book asks students to apply their skills at noticing and seeing to developing a critical reading of aspects of their visual or written culture. For instance, following a selection of photographs in *SW3* by American photographer, Andrew Savulich, an exercise asks students to consider: “What story does each of these photographs tell? What is especially striking and memorable about each one? What similarities or differences do you find in these four images?” (2006, p. 278). Both books also include exercises that ask students to respond to writing and the visual, *through* writing and also, notably, through the creation of visual images or objects. This sample exercise is from *PT*: “Choose a favorite book and redesign the cover to better convey what you believe is the central argument of the book. Consider the audience. Is this a book for young people or for adults? What do you want your potential readers to think about this book? Is there a scene or an idea you can convey with a simple image?” (2004, p. 409).

To some extent, and importantly, both *PT* and *SW3* ask students to examine the difference in meaning that choosing a particular mode makes. In an assignment where students are asked to “create a visual representation of the structure” of an essay, students are also asked to “write a one-page reflection on your experience of the differences between describing the essay's structure in words and representing it visually” (*SW3*, 2006, p.167). *PT* includes similar exercises for students. With these exercises, the difference between modes, the partiality of modes with respect to meaning, and the potential for extraordinary, surprising, jarring, or memorable communications and interpretations is acknowledged for students. The materiality of the mode and what it contributes to meaning is

underlined. Again, *SW3* and *PT* present understanding of art and writing that would resonate with an art and design university undergraduate.

CG, the last instructional book to consider, accomplishes all of the pedagogical goals of *SW3* and *PT* through similarly organized chapters, similar exercises that involve students in thinking about practices of composing between modes of meaning as synonymous, and selections of writing, art, and design for critical reading, writing about, and visually responding to. There is less of an emphasis on the pedagogy of seeing in *CG*, but perhaps more challenging art and artists are chosen for students' consideration. Modes beyond 2D visuals appear, as does work that challenges preconceived notions of what art is—"allmylifeforsale.com" a project by American, John Freyer, who sold all of his material possessions on eBay in 2000 in part to develop a 'portrait' of himself as an artist (2005, p. 56) is one such example as is the controversial photographs by Sally Mann depicting her children in ways that have been criticized for their relationship to child pornography.

The unique strength and contribution of *CG* with respect to developing student multimodal literacy skills are the parts of the book which ask the student to consider the 'medium' of messages more generally and the specific medium in selected multimodal compositions for how the materiality of the media contributes to meaning and the readers' or viewers' interpretive experience. One such exercise appears in the chapter entitled "Telling Stories," following an essay by David Sedaris and a selection of the documentary photography of Danny Lyons: "Both Lyon and Sedaris are telling stories, though in different media. Choose a family story of your own to tell, about an individual family member or occasion. Then pick a medium in which to tell your story: in words, with pictures, or in any combination that makes most sense to you" (2005, p. 154). Here, students must explore composition in a medium that might be outside their comfort zone, which means requiring students to experience and negotiate the difference that another medium presents for creating meaning. Students in this exercise are very likely to tap into the partiality of meaning and

potentiality with respect to other modes—in other words, they will get a sense that the exactness of language is less apparent when, for instance, using comics to tell the same story, but that comics afford other reading experiences. Art and design university students, as I've suggested before, at least by the end of their education intuitively know that modes are partial and have different potentials because of the subtle, material differences between them. The emphasis on 'medium' that CG presents would resonate in an art and design university semiotic landscape.

Transposing multimodal composition curricula 'into another semiotic'

The academic support centre I direct focuses on demonstrating to art and design university students that strategies for negotiating the creative process for art or design making are very similar to strategies needed to tackle writing—even academic writing. For its interviews with practicing artists about their process, and its inclusion of a pedagogy of seeing, *SW3* brings an approach to multimodal literacy that is relevant to an art and design milieu. For its exercises in working with other media to achieve rhetorical goals, and even, in some cases, the goals of art making or design which range from politicized representation to aesthetic beauty, *SW3*, *PT*, and *CG* are also highly resonant with an art and design milieu. *CG* perhaps brings another level of complexity and therefore another level of resonance with the multiple opportunities it gives students to be reflexive about the difference that a particular medium makes to meaning and interpretation. Because all books align the work of writing to the work of making culture, an art or design university student would find some value in them. But those books that acknowledge that the visual as a medium has more to do than achieve rhetorical goals are supporting art and design university students' understandings of the work of the visual outside of composition class. Books that reference 'images' or 'designs' that are challenging—by practicing artists and designers—further supports students' understanding of the role of art and design outside of first-year composition.

Juxtaposing OCAD student thesis writing with the multimodal literacy curriculum of the instruction textbooks I've selected demonstrates that there is a place for multimodal composition instruction and learning in a liberal arts context at a post-secondary art and design university. The writing of Vuong, Rahatka, and Kopulos provides some evidence that OCAD students are using the image, and even web architecture, to achieve *both aesthetic and rhetorical goals in assignments that pair writing with the visual*. Even more crucially, this set of student writing samples explores and references the complex relationships between the visual realm and human experience and interpretation. The instruction books I've examined encourage students to think about written and visual composition and inquiry in ways, just articulated, that are relevant to an art and design 'landscape.' It remains for teachers and curriculum planners of this context to continue to develop and test liberal arts instruction with a multimodal approach—particularly in the area of composition—to meet the learning and composition needs of emerging artists and designers.⁵

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Endnotes

¹ In *Why art cannot be taught*, James Elkins traces a history of art education from ancient art schools, through the Renaissance and Baroque academies with their emphasis on technique, to the Bauhaus with its emphasis on a foundation curriculum in two-dimensional art and design to the modern period. Elkins points out that it was not until after WWII that art and design schools began to integrate disciplines from other university contexts, like the courses OCAD now includes: visual culture, critical writing, sociology, psychology, science, math, English literature, art and design history, and others.

² A notable exception is the work of Canadian, William Garrett-Petts and collaborators. In *Photographic Encounters*, for instance, Garrett-Petts and Donald Lawrence explore the multimodal practices of a selection of Canadian artists and writers for how these practices contest and then extend conventional understandings of text and narrative. See also *Proximities: Artists' Statements & their Works*.

³ While not the emphasis of this paper, the question of whether writing pedagogy in an art and design university should engage a multimodal approach is an important one. This paper provides a supporting inquiry insofar as it examines the constraints and possibilities of employing a multimodal approach in an art and design, postsecondary context.

⁴ This is, by no means, a complete list. So as not to burden my readers, I will be using acronyms for all textbooks: *BPH* for *The Brief Penguin Handbook*, *CG* for *Convergences*, *PT* for *Picturing Texts*, *WVA* for *Writing in a Visual Age*, and *SW3* for *Seeing & Writing 3*.

⁵ One compelling pedagogical direction for composition instructors in art and design, university contexts is arts-based research and inquiry—research and inquiry that is represented multimodally in an academic context. The selections in Volume 34 (2007), *Canadian Review of Art Education*, represent the potentials of Canadian artists and artist/educators working multimodally to present research as do the publications of the Centre for Arts-Informed Research (see <http://www.utoronto.ca/CAIR/about.html>).