Part 1: thinking out of the pro-verbal box

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Abstract

As the World Wide Web and other visual media gain prominence in students’ lives, we, as teachers of composition, have to re-evaluate our strict adherence to the verbal medium. If our classrooms focus on a single mode of representation—the verbal—then the concurrent implication is that only one voice deserves to be heard. In such a classroom, students will not be able to recognize that verbal forms and visual forms—or better yet their combination—carry an equal degree of complexity, representational richness, and rhetorical power. Basing composition almost exclusively on verbal instruction counters the very nature of literacy education, because our current verbal-based education system produces illiterates in our highly visual and multimodal modern society. Drawing on composition scholarship published in three major composition journals, this article demonstrates composition’s verbal bias, argues that this bias is both politically and rhetorically suspect, and calls for a composition pedagogy that integrates verbal instruction with visual instruction. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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Until now, language, especially written language, was the most highly valued, the most frequently analyzed, the most prescriptively taught and the most meticulously policed code in our society. If, as we have argued, this is now changing in favor of visual communication, educationalists should perhaps begin to rethink what “literacy” ought to include, and what should be taught under the heading of “writing” in schools. (p. 32)

Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996)

Regardless of how we feel about the integration of visual and verbal media, that integration is occurring all around us. Whether we like it or not, online communication employs a much...
fuller integration of visual and verbal media than most print communication does. As early as 1980, scholars were forecasting that the development of hypertext, hypermedia, and multimedia was bringing about a fundamental reconceptualization of the way we communicate in a literate society. (p. 59)

Mike Markel (1998)

1. Introduction

Those of us who view composition as the subject where students learn to read and write verbal text are only partially right. Confining composition to verbal text essentially ignores a multitude of literacies that daily confront us and the students in our classes. In addition, if our goal as writing teachers is to produce students equipped with the literacy skills to critically engage with the world, then we need as a discipline to re-examine our role as teachers of “literacy.” As Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) argued in the quotation above, literacy is “now changing in favor of visual communication” (p. 32), so how can we chain composition to verbal instruction? We can’t, as Mike Markel’s (1998) quotation suggests. The emergence of digital technologies and the easy integration of content forms that digital media allow has caused us to redefine what it means to be literate in the United States at the turn of the century (McCorduck, 1992). To be literate in the twenty-first century means possessing the skills necessary to effectively construct and comfortably navigate multiplicity, to manipulate and critique information, representations, knowledge, and arguments in multiple media from a wide range of sources, and to use multiple expressive technologies including those offered by print, visual, and digital tools.

Consequently, restricting rhetorical instruction to verbal media, even if computers are used for instruction, implies that we are unwilling to recognize that literacy is in flux, that we prefer to teach students a nondynamic way of representing the knowledge that they draw on to define themselves. This choice is perilous. It contradicts what we know about the social construction of knowledge, it reproduces a rationality based on exclusion and it limits access to expressive possibilities. In short, restriction to a single mode of representation counters what I understand to be the goal of rhetorical instruction: producing students who can recognize alternatives, voice differences, and explore possibilities by effectively representing the significance of these complexities.

Our challenge as writing teachers, therefore, as Ilana Snyder (1998) suggested in Page to Screen, is to keep pace with this flux by devising theoretical and practical techniques that allow us and the students in our classes to “reconnoiter wisely” the expanding terrain of rhetoric and literacy, to reimagine writing as a skill that includes multimedia authoring, visual rhetoric, and the ability to critique cyberspace (pp. xxiv–xxxii). Yet, despite the opportunities for rhetorical instruction to assert itself exactly at the center of this expanding terrain, composition continues to privilege the verbal text. To be sure, all composition instructors do not limit the topics of their courses to reading verbal texts: journals, conference papers, and email discussion lists abound with teachers relating stories about the successful integration of writing assignments with movies, television, magazines, architecture, the natural environment, and Web sites into their writing courses (see, for example, the January
1998 edition of The English Journal, volume 87, number 1, for some examples at the secondary school level). How often, though, do we ask composition students, particularly first-year students, to compose anything except verbal texts about whatever type of text they “read?” This type of verbal bias disenfranchises students because “the skill of producing [alternative] texts...however important their role in contemporary society, is not taught in schools” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 15). Writing about any of these texts is not the same as writing them.

The goal of this article is therefore to address the state of composition and to suggest that literacy teachers need to see beyond our verbal bias. The article begins by explaining and demonstrating the verbal bias in composition, which leads into the second section, which argues that if our goal as writing instructors is to teach critical thinking, then we need to be careful about privileging a singular method of representing knowledge.

The article concludes with the suggestion that building a pedagogy on a combination of verbal and visual rhetorics empowers students to make connections among disparate, yet related texts and encourages them to weave together multiple content forms. I will describe this approach to teaching in an upcoming article in the next special issue of Computers and Composition, titled “Part 2: Toward an Integrated Composition Pedagogy in Hypertext,” which argues for a media-rich writing pedagogy based on a design model that can be implemented through teaching a combination of verbal and visual rhetorics using hypertextual tools.

2. Composition’s verbal bias

Composition is largely a conservative discipline. This claim might not strike a popular chord among composition scholars—and justifiably so—because composition historically emphasizes growth and change. For example, several histories of composition as a discipline demonstrate that although composition has roots in the Belle-Lettres tradition—that is, producing “correct” and “appropriate” texts that record in writing fully formed, pre-existing thoughts according to sets of prescriptive rules—the late twentieth century saw a transition from viewing writing as something students learn about to something students do, or what we call the “process orientation” (see Faigley, 1992; Harris, 1997; Miller, 1991; Miller, 1997; Russell, 1991). Several histories point to the 1966 “Seminar on the Teaching and Learning of English” at Dartmouth College as the moment when this “Copernican shift” happened (Harris, 1997, p. 1).

Despite this shift in orientation from writing product to writing process, the focus remains “writing” as such: Students still submit “papers,” verbal texts that presumably develop and demonstrate critical thinking skills. Curiously, we have expanded our concerns in composition beyond the examination of literary texts to include discursive formations of the contact zone (Pratt, 1991; Miller, 1994, p. 390) of the disciplines and of race, class, and gender, all of which involve a complex interaction of symbol systems including printed words, images, conversations, movies, television, magazines, and Web sites, yet we cling to the idea of writing about these representation systems in verbal text because that’s what we do in
composition. As Ben F. Barton and Marthalee S. Barton (1985) argued, we teach (and write about) writing because visuals can’t do the “real” work of words (p. 135).¹

A brief review of three significant journals in composition scholarship—College Composition and Communication (CCC), College English (CE) and the Journal of Advanced Composition (JAC)—supports this claim.² Using the years 1990–1998 as the review period, we see that in spite of the meteoric rise of new technologies like the World Wide Web—and personal computing more generally during this period—these journals published very little on theories or pedagogies that emphasize authoring the types of multimodal texts so easy to compose utilizing digital technology. CCC published only six articles on computers and writing during these years, none of which explicitly addressed authoring nonverbal text. Instead, they treated word processing (Sudol, 1990), the politics of computer-integrated writing (Hawisher & Selfe, 1991; Selfe & Selfe, 1994), and email correspondence (Spooner & Yancey, 1996).

Although College English published even fewer articles on computers and writing than CCC—four in all—John Slatin’s important article, “Reading and Hypertext: Order and Coherence in a New Medium,” appeared in a 1990 volume. The article’s argument that the emergence of hypertext demands new ways of imagining readers and writers as consumers and producers of multimedia texts, was not, however, further examined in the pages of CE. The remaining three articles reprise the topics present in the CCC articles: Marilyn Cooper and Cynthia Selfe’s (1990) “Computer Conferences and Learning: Authority Resistance and Internally Persuasive Discourse” addressed the political ramifications of student–teacher interaction on networks as did Frank T. Boyle’s (1995) “IBM, Talking Heads and Our Classrooms,” which pondered the future of technology in our classrooms and argued against technology’s encroachment. Finally, Gail Hawisher and Charles Moran’s (1993) “Electronic Mail and the Writing Instructor” discussed the use of email in the writing course.

JAC, like CCC, published only six articles on computer-related topics during this period. However, three JAC articles address literacy’s expansion beyond verbal media. For example, Russell Wiebe and Robert S. Dornsife’s (1995) “The Metaphor of Collage: Beyond Computer Composition” explicitly stated that composition has a verbal bias, and that literacy instruction needs to be extended to include diverse media. Johndan Johnson-Eilola’s (1993) “Control and the Cyborg: Writing and Being Written in Hypertext” and Gary A. Olsen’s (1996) “Writing, Literacy and Technology: Toward a Cyborg Writing” also addressed the connections between writing in new media and the way it impacts our conceptualizations of authorship and literacy. The remaining articles, Teresa M. Redd and Victoria W. Massey’s (1991) “Race on the Superhighway: How Email Affects African American Student Writers,” Kathleen Welch’s (1990) “Electrifying Classical Rhetoric: Ancient Media, Modern Technology and Contemporary Composition,” and Irene Ward’s (1997) “How Democratic Can We Get: The Internet, the Public Sphere and Public Discourse,” repeated the themes we’ve identified: the politics of computer-integrated writing and email’s role in composition.

This evidence suggests that although composition scholarship has demonstrated a passing interest in nonverbal and nonprinted media, the focus until very recently has maintained the verbal bias: These three major journals simply do not address in any substantial way media forms other than print, either as alternative authorship types or as subjects of analysis. In
short, computers have been viewed as an adjunct to producing strictly verbal products, just as typewriters before them and the printing press before that (Kalmbach, 1997).

I should perhaps qualify this critique of scholarship in composition because everybody cannot treat everything: The very nature of academic specialization demands that individuals attend to different issues. Educational technology and technical communication scholarship, for example (both of which I draw on throughout this article), abound with research that addresses the integration of multiple media forms perhaps because their histories are less tightly interwoven with verbal education. Also, as Markel (1998) pointed out, most academic products, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, are verbal products and consequently there is little motivation for teachers to learn skills that are not valued in the university community that supports their research. Finally, education as a whole favors the clarity and economy of expression that verbal texts allow, and perhaps composition only reproduces this bias founded on the presumption that the level of abstraction required by alphabetic writing requires a concurrent level of intellectual development (Kress & van-Leeuwen, 1996).  

In sum, although composition, as the scholarship noted above indicates, has begun to theorize a composite literacy that evolves from the integration of media that digital technology makes possible, we still primarily ask students to compose verbal texts about other texts, whether verbal or not, because “that’s what we do in composition.” We teach students how to write.

3. Perils of the verbal bias

Restricting composition to verbal media and reproducing the verbal bias in our classrooms is perilous, however, because it contradicts the critical thinking skills that we as composition teachers strive to teach. In The Electronic Word, Richard Lanham (1993) asked the important question, “What business are we in?” (p. 8). Are we in the book business or are we in the literacy business? If we’re in the book business, then re-evaluating our verbal-based pedagogies is probably not necessary. But if we’re in the literacy business, then confining composition to a single type of textuality, the verbal, is very narrow because this position implies a nondynamic view of writing as a repository of established truths (Kaplan & Moulthrop, 1993). Culture changes, and if composition’s role is to help students acquire the skills to live a critically engaged life—that is, to identify problems, to solve them, and to communicate with others about them—then we need to expand our view of writing instruction to include the diverse media forms that actually represent and shape the discursive reality of students. The verbal bias, then, reveals two closely interwoven perils:

- a political one that reinscribes a conclusion-based rationality, and
- a rhetorical one that ignores the possibility that different media function more or less effectively in different contexts, yet both can, and most often should, work together to achieve rhetorical effects.

Deborah Brandt (1995) addressed the political peril of emphasizing a singular literacy type in her article “Accumulating Literacy: Writing and Learning to Write in the Twentieth
Century,” suggesting that the products of literacy “always will reflect how individuals, including students, are intersecting at a certain time with the ongoing, official history of mass literacy and the institutions that have controlled it” (p. 666). Brandt suggested that literacy materials students create to represent their world reproduce the values that the schools and the teachers attach to literacy. In short, how we define literacy reveals the values we attach to it. The “official history” of literacy, as we learned in the previous section of this article, privileges singularity of representation by excluding the expressive possibilities of visual text, possibilities that are readily available in digital media (Forman, 1994). This runs counter to a pedagogy designed to teach critical thinking because it suggests to students that there is only one acceptable way of representing the world, when our goal as critical educators is to help students value the multiple forms of literacy and representation that constitute their lived experiences.

The political peril of limiting the writing curriculum to verbal forms extends beyond students’ inability to express meaning in multiple ways to the students’ identity and subjectivity itself. Gunther Kress (1996) wrote in his article “Representational Resources and the Production of Subjectivity” that

A curriculum is a design for a future social subject, and via that envisioned subject a design for a future society. That is, the curriculum puts forward knowledges, skills, meanings, values in the present which will be telling in the lives of those who experience the curriculum, ten or twenty years later. Forms of pedagogy experienced by children now in school suggest to them forms of social relations which they are encouraged to adopt, adapt, modify and treat as models. The curriculum... puts forward resources which students have available as resources for their own transformation, in relation to which... students constantly construct, reconstruct and transform their subjectivity (p.16).

In this passage, Kress argued that the education of today produces the society of tomorrow because students are trained in certain values, acquire specific knowledge, and combine the two to construct ways of operating in society. Students draw on what they have been taught to represent their identities to themselves and to others. What, then, do we make of a writing curriculum that privileges a singular form of representation? What sort of student subjectivity does such a curriculum suggest? What will be the character of a society comprised by students who know how to represent problems in only one way? What is the writing teacher’s role in the curriculum? “Knowledge” becomes limited to that information represented in verbal text and our role as teachers, following Michel Foucault (1972) in *Archaeology of Knowledge*, becomes “authorizing” texts (p. 216). Our role becomes creating a scarcity of knowledge by limiting access to literacy and thereby valuing the texts that survive through publication, reproduction, and distribution. Students become discursively formed by what we as a discipline validate, and in the case of composition, the verbal bias forms student subjects who do not value (and may not recognize at all) multiple modes of expression.

Linda M. Scott (1994) critiqued the verbal bias exactly for the way it limits expression by validating verbal text as “thought” and by characterizing visual perception as unavoidably biological and therefore passive. The verbal bias, that is, would ask us to equate the visual with the natural, which causes us to likewise equate visuals with reality, implying that visual perception occurs without mediating thought. Visual content, according to the verbal bias,
“simply empties into the mind” (Scott, p. 260). However, Scott, following Rudolf Arnheim (1969)—who originally mapped the false dichotomy between the visual and the verbal in his book *Visual Thinking* (pp. 171–174)—argued that like verbal language, “visuals signify by convention rather than by resemblance to nature” (p. 253). Visual texts—like verbal texts—are mediated through agreed upon conventions that serve to represent an object. In short, we see images as symbolic and that’s why, to use Scott’s example, we don’t go running when we see a picture of a tiger: We know that it is a representation of reality, not reality itself (p. 261).

The visual need not bear resemblance, however, to represent. A flag can represent a country or an organizational chart can represent corporate hierarchy. As Scott (1994) explained:

> If pictures can denote objects independently of visual resemblance, then we have arrived at the definition of a symbol: denotation by agreement or convention, a sign produced by culture, not nature. If pictures, like words, are symbols and do not rely on a concrete referent to signify, then they should be able to denote things other than objects in empirical reality (p. 263).

In short, visuals have their own conventions and grammar outside language, and these conventions are equally available in our culture. Consequently, for us as writing teachers to equate verbal literacy with thought and visual literacy with perception limits students’ access to the equally valid but alternative literacy manifested in visuals. The verbal bias, then, is rhetorically perilous because it does not recognize the symbolic and expressive possibilities of visuals and this encourages students to value only verbal representations when their most effective rhetorical strategy might be to use a visual.

Because visual texts are as equally symbolic, valid, and intellectually sophisticated as verbal texts—that there is not necessarily a binary distinction we can draw between verbal and visual text and what each can be used for—we have to grant that using visual texts is sometimes a more effective rhetorical choice than using verbal texts. Thomas R. Williams and Deborah A. Harkus (1998) argued, for example, that although it is nearly impossible to express abstract concepts such as “freedom” or “justice” visually (p. 34), visuals can express perceptual information such as color, shape, orientation, position in space, texture, pattern, size, and arrangement more directly than verbal text can (p. 36).

Williams and Harkus (1998), drawing on this distinction between the conceptual orientation of verbal text and the perceptual orientation of visual text, outline some criteria that differentiate verbal text from visual text that allow us to extrapolate situations when using visual text would be more effective than using verbal text. The distinctions between verbal and visual text are summarized in Table 1. The initial distinction (that verbal text is conceptual and visual text is perceptual) suggests that each system evokes their referents differently. Words, as we all know, are arbitrary signs that speakers of a language have agreed stand for something including abstract concepts. Visuals, by comparison, most often evoke their referent by resembling a specific thing. There is nothing in the word “sphere,” to use Williams and Harkus’s example, that suggests something round. By comparison, a photograph of a basketball, although still a representation of a basketball, generally evokes its referent by resemblance: The thing in a photograph of a basketball resembles a basketball.
Therefore, in the composition of a document, if a writer wishes to discuss a basketball, it makes sense to include a picture of the ball—to show it to readers—rather than frustrate them with a long verbal description.

A related—and more important—distinction is that text is linear and visuals are relational. Text processing occurs by understanding how a text asks you to reconstitute the relationships among the words and ideas it presents. This metadiscourse relies on a reader’s ability to locate certain words or ideas in specific functions such as subjects or objects, each of which occurs in a specific temporal order. Visuals, by contrast, do not rely on linear progression and can, therefore, represent a more complex view of the relationships among ideas: When we look at visuals we immediately see patterns, distances, and contours that simultaneously suggest several relationships. For example, in a document where a writer was tracing influences on Robert Frost’s poetry, a writer might draw a map with Frost connected by lines to the British Romantics like Wordsworth, to the American Modernists like Ezra Pound, to his wife, to his early failings as a poet, to his late successes as a poet, and to all sorts of other influences. However, the same map could also contain Frost’s influence on other writers like Carl Sandburg or Wallace Stevens. What’s more, both the influences on Frost and Frost’s influences on others could be related through dotted lines, for example. In short, this hypothetical visual could in one instant represent several relationships that verbal text could only represent in a linear progression of words and concepts over the course of several pages. Both media can represent the same set of ideas, but as Williams and Harkus (1998) pointed out, the way they do it is substantially different.

Because these two media aren’t polar opposites, where the verbal is used solely for abstraction and the visual solely perception, there are cases when utilizing a combination of media is the most effective rhetorical strategy. This is a concept called media redundancy, which suggests optimal learning occurs when users can synthesize different types of input to grasp a message. In other words, just words (or just pictures for that matter) might not always be the best way to get your point across (Markel, 1998). A good example would be Table 1. It compares words and visuals in a visual text (a table) using a combination of verbal text and spatial relationships that in turn complements an abstract verbal text. The combination is arguably more effective than just reading the words alone because the combination demonstrates what Charles Kostlenick and David D. Roberts (1998) called visual/verbal cognates. Specifically, the design employed in the table utilizes

- **Arrangement:** The grouping of elements that creates “cohesion among items in the sequence” (p. 15). The table exhibits the same order as the verbal text.
- **Emphasis:** The prominence or intensity of expression that controls that which stands out (p. 16). The items in the table stand out from the heading text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verbal Text</th>
<th>Visual Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Conceptual</td>
<td>• Perceptual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Based on arbitrary agreement of signs</td>
<td>• Based on resemblance of signs</td>
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<td>• Linear</td>
<td>• Relational</td>
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### Table 1
Comparison of verbal and visual text

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verbal Text</th>
<th>Visual Text</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Conceptual</td>
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<td>• Based on arbitrary agreement of signs</td>
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<td>• Linear</td>
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</table>
• Clarity: The strategies that help the receiver decode the message (p. 17). The table above summarizes the long verbal description to clarify the most significant points of comparison between verbal and visual texts.

• Conciseness: The visual bulk and intricacy of design (p. 19). The simple table does not repeat the complex details of the verbal description.

• Tone: The attitude toward the reader and the subject (p. 20). The combination above reveals a serious, academic tone because it demonstrates arguably the two most formal modes of representation in scholarship: Verbal text and a table.

• Ethos: The character the writer attempts to portray to readers to establish trust (p. 21). Table 1 and the accompanying text attempt to establish the credibility of this argument by citing scholarship and by interpreting that scholarship into both visual and verbal forms to aid understanding.

In sum, composition, if it maintains the verbal bias, stresses one set of representational practices at the expense of allowing students to explore their ideas through visual texts or integrated texts and therefore limits the authoring strategies available to students. This restriction limits the means of expression available to students and it creates student subjects who are potentially unable to value a variety of perspectives.

4. Conclusions

Restricting students to verbal media is indeed perilous, not only because the restriction limits what students can write, and therefore limits what students “see,” but also because it reproduces values that we try to counter with rhetorical education. If our writing classrooms focus on a single mode of representation (the verbal), then the concurrent implication is that only one voice deserves to be heard. In such a classroom, students will not be able to recognize that verbal forms and visual forms—or better yet their combination—carry an equal degree of complexity, representative richness, and rhetorical power. A classroom, and a discipline, based almost exclusively on verbal instruction counters the very nature of literacy education because our current verbal-based education system “produces illiterates” in our highly visual and multimodal modern society (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 15).

To suggest, however, that we abandon teaching verbal rhetoric in favor of teaching only visual rhetoric is equally perilous. It reproduces the same binary and exclusive logic that I have discussed throughout this article. Instead what we need is an instructional paradigm that helps students weave multiple content forms together. What we need, to quote George Landow and Paul Delaney (1993), is a “new sociology of knowledge” that takes multiplicity for granted (p. 18). This new sociology of knowledge must, however, nonetheless find its place within old forms of representation to be comprehensible to an audience accustomed to receiving arguments according to conventional, written strategies (Bolter, 1991; Harris, 1994).

A new composition pedagogy must, therefore, equip students with the skills necessary to read, write and critique the “old forms” of literacy—specifically verbal literacy—and to read, write and critique the “new forms” of visual representation that exist in new digital media
like the World Wide Web. Further, as Judi Harris (1994) pointed out, a visual argument pedagogy must allow students to become comfortable with a tolerance for ambiguity, variable representations, and rapid change because digital media allow for easy play among viewpoints and representations. The move toward visual rhetoric, then, does not so much seek to abandon the prestige of print in favor of a novel technology as much as it seeks to maintain the goal of effective communication by articulating the argumentative and expressive possibilities made available through integrating verbal texts with visual texts.

Notes
1. I acknowledge the irony of my argument given its appearance in a print journal. Although related, the status of scholarly publication in nonprint media is beyond the scope of the present argument and warrants detailed consideration.
2. There has been limited, recent activity in this area, however. In May 2000, CE published an article by Craig Stroupe titled “Visualizing English: Reconceptualizing the Hybrid Literacy of Visual and Verbal Authorship on the Web, (which I draw on later in this article). Also, in spring of 1999, JAC published an article by Collin Gifford Brooke titled “Making Room, Writing Hypertext.”
3. This presumption also underlies the orality versus literacy debate in which scholars argue that written language alone allows the “academic” conventions of hypotaxis or logical hierarchies, objectivity, and generalizations that appeal to reason.

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References


