Critical Visual Literacy: Multimodal Communication Across the Curriculum

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Abstract: "Critical Visual Literacy: Multimodal Communication Across the Curriculum" makes the case for expanding the pedagogical space and communication possibilities in undergraduate communication-intensive and linked (learning community) courses by allowing students to create multimodal texts that deal with civic and cultural and/or discipline-specific themes. We argue that, rather than diluting the opportunities for rhetorical education—now comprised of critical literacy, visual literacy, and critical technological literacy in today's increasingly fast-moving visual and electronic cultural environment—multimodal composing more meaningfully reflects the environment in which students receive and generate text today. Using a theory base that draws from the literatures of composition and CAC, visual literacy, new media theory and ecology, and the theory and pedagogy of critical technological literacy, we make a case for this expansion of communication opportunities in undergraduate communication-intensive classes.

Specifically, we show how multimodal composing reinforces and further develops at least three essential characteristics of a critically literate person, thus helping to lift what W.J.T. Mitchell (2002) so aptly called the "ideological veil": 1) understanding that a text is not a transparent window on reality, but is constructed; 2) developing and demonstrating rhetorical awareness both as a composer of text and as a reader of text; and 3) developing agency as a communicator and as a reader, rather than opting for the passivity that our popular media environment makes so easy.

> 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 (Sean Williams, 2001, p. 22).

> ... knowledge, but perhaps especially disciplinary knowledge, despite its many fixed conventions, is simultaneously fluid; it is a product of ongoing inquiry for which critical thinking serves as a catalyst (Lewis & Palmer, 2001, p. 68).

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> Visual culture is not limited to the study of images or media, but extends to everyday practices of seeing and showing, especially those that we take to be immediate and unmediated (Mitchell, 2002, p. 170).

There can be little doubt that a rhetorical education's central value is developing in students "the abilities necessary to comprehend, interpret, and critically respond to the textual forms that they will encounter as members of the culture" (Charles Hill, 2004, p. 108). Such statements about the purpose of teaching and practicing rhetorical awareness—and its value as a means to acquiring critical awareness about how texts both reflect and reinforce cultural values—are not new in the literature of rhetoric and composition studies. For instance, James Berlin (1992, p. 32) described what he calls the "work of creating a critically literate citizenry," having earlier argued that,

> ... we are not simply offering training in a useful technical skill that is meant as a simple complement to the more important studies of other areas. We are teaching a way of experiencing the world, a way of ordering and making sense of it. (1982, p. 776)

What is new, however, are two developments that should concern us as university instructors with interests in CAC curricula. One development is the by-now undisputed fact that our students come to us having been "exposed to a broad range of information daily ... [and that s]o far our educational system has failed to take seriously and to adequately respond to the fact that so much of this information is in visual form" (Hill, 2004, p. 108). The attendant development is the idea that training in visual rhetoric should extend beyond solely first-year writing classes and be a multidisciplinary endeavor, reflecting the nature and ubiquity of visual/digital texts themselves.

In our present culture, in which our information often reaches us in technological and visual forms, the work Berlin described above extends, in the 21st century, beyond exclusively and perhaps even primarily written texts. Recently, Kathleen Welch (1999), expressing an increasingly supported viewpoint among rhetoric, composition, and visual literacy scholars, stated that all university students, not just those in first-year composition, should have the opportunity to interpret and analyze electronic and visual texts as a means to understand our culture's "articulation and power" (p. 134). For the same critical literacy reasons, Hill (2004) also strongly supports the idea that all students, not just those in "written composition or speech" classes, should be educated in visual rhetoric. Hill says that failing to recognize and take pedagogical advantage of visual literacy's place across the disciplines implies we are not

> [...]concerned with helping the rest of our students respond to these messages in an informed and critical way[.] If we can tap into the experience, expertise, and interest in visual communication that exists across campus, *then we can build a new paradigm, one that takes rhetorical education seriously and that recognizes it for the multidisciplinary endeavor that it is*. (p. 128, emphasis added)

Mary Hocks (2003) argues that, specifically, this rhetorical education should mean "students ... learn the 'distanced' process of how to critique the saturated visual and technological landscape that surrounds them as something structured and written in a set of deliberate rhetorical moves" (p. 645). In a way that echoes these rhetoricians, W. J. T. Mitchell (2002) calls on us to help students critically negotiate our visual culture by "overcom[ing] the *veil of familiarity and self-evidence* that surrounds the experience of seeing, and to turn it into a problem for analysis ... " (p. 166, emphasis added). To develop students' critical literacy abilities, we make an argument for going beyond the more conventional pedagogical combination of technology and visual texts, incorporating into writing-

intensive courses pedagogical space for what Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen (2001) describe as multimodal composing (p. 2).

The Critical Curricular Balance

Despite calls that invoke critical literacy, Hill (2004) delineates and refutes the concerns that remain about incorporating the visual into university pedagogy. These range from the "dislike and disparagement of mass culture" to the misguided concern that writing will become subordinated to the visual in the classroom (pp. 108-110). However, rather than conceiving of visual literacy instruction in impoverishing either/or terms, we want to show that opening up pedagogical space for critical literacy is an exciting, CAC-oriented expression of the Deweyan responsibility to our students of "a curricular balance between the interests of the learner and the demands of the disciplines, between our lives as individuals and our lives in democratic communities mediated by technologies of communication" (David Russell, 2002, p. 332). We agree with CAC theorists that the advent of new technologies of communication integrate well with and support an expanding importance of the CAC concept (e.g., Russell), for they are a natural extension of the deeper CAC impulses that seek to address what Russell (2002) identified as the myth of transparency—the notion that writing is simply transcribed talk (pp. 4-9). Indeed, the balance Dewey encouraged is even more urgent today when, far from any naïve and idealized notion of transparency, new communication technologies alter the representation of information we receive, creating the possibility of images having been reconfigured.

Indeed, some media theorists say that such "draining away of the indexical dimension of the image through digital manipulation is anti-democratic because it makes administrative control of 'meaning' easier ..." (Willeman, 2002, pp. 19-20). We agree with new media and critical literacy theorists who say that

> [...] education [should] concentrate, not on the transfer of information nor on the reproduction of value systems, but on the urgent task of equipping people with the necessary "thinking tools" to make sense of historical processes so that individuals may become better at assessing the "likely" verisimilitude of any account or representation of the world. (Willeman, 2002, p. 20)

It is with the development of these very thinking tools that Craig Stroupe (2000) is concerned when he notes that the "customary distinctions" between the visual and the verbal are no longer useful (a point that W. J. T. Mitchell also makes in his 1992 *Picture Theory*) and that we have an opportunity, in this communication environment, to "produce more critical forms of consciousness" (Stroupe, 2000, p. 609). Clearly, this is an opportunity that extends across the disciplines, for it underscores the critical pedagogical tenet that "vision is ... a cultural construction, that it is learned and cultivated" and that it is "deeply involved with human societies, with the ethics and politics, aesthetics and epistemology of seeing and being seen" (Mitchell, 2002, p. 166).

Communication Ecosystems and Technology

The literature of media ecology offers those of us with CAC interests a useful way to think about the visual and the verbal, and the necessity for students to see the rhetorical, or mediated, construction of these texts; media ecology's framework also helps move us away from the convenient fiction of arbitrary divisions and unproductively complicated layers of extra material to "cover" in communication-intensive classes. Media ecology scholars describe an organically connected web of relationships in our systems ("environments") of literacy, language, and communication. Robert K.

Logan (2002) defines a media ecosystem "in analogy with a traditional biological ecosystem as a system consisting of human beings and the media and technology through which they interact and communicate with each other" (p. 19). This metaphor is particularly useful when working to balance what might be seen as strictly "English studies" issues across the curriculum with the democratic ones mentioned above, as Neil Postman's (1970) passage demonstrates:

> An environment is, after all, a complex message system which imposes on human beings certain ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. It structures what we can see and say and, therefore, do. It assigns roles to us and insists on our playing them. It specifies what we are permitted to do and what we are not ... In the case of media environments ... the specifications are more often implicit and informal ... Media ecology tries to make these specifications explicit. (p. 161)

Computers-and-composition theorists see our students as a "first generation" for whom technology is a profoundly influential component of their communication environment: it "defin[es] the medium of communication [and] creates the *very atmosphere* in which [they] function" (Myron Tuman, 1992, p. 5, emphasis added). Computers-and-composition scholars and media ecologists believe that digital technology brings about a "transformation in the patterns of thought and communication" (Ronald Sudol, 1990, p. 331), a transformation characterized by Logan (2002) when he notes that digital possibilities for generating and receiving texts, both visual and verbal, "not only change social patterns but they also affect the psyche and the ways in which people think and learn by creating a new sensory bias and hence a new cognitive style" (p. 13). It is precisely the 21st-century communication ecosystem's cognitive and cultural effects and their potential to blunt critical awareness that Ann Marie Seward Barry (1997) explores in detail in her *Visual Intelligence*, providing evidence that when we receive multiple, fast, intense, and engrossing messages in our media environment, we suspend analysis and enter a state very like daydreaming: "we become emotionally but not logically involved in the medium, and images stream into our psyche, accepted without critical analysis" (pp. 172-173).

Diana George (2002) makes an important argument for a reexamination of visual communication's place as a part of the necessary literacy skills of our students (p. 14), looking at how communication instructors might go about asking students to create visual arguments in a way that does not necessarily preference either images or text. However, we are concerned that the examples George provides of her students' visual projects are largely static. Although she mentions that some students did construct web pages and/or digital representations, she described these artifacts only briefly, and in a way that implies their form and use resemble the photographic visuals used by the other students in her class. We believe her choices in the descriptions of her students' work reflect a more general oversight in the academy about the actual communication environments that our students inhabit and the type of visual arguments they are exposed to every day. With the average person spending between three- five hours daily in front of the television, the major visual communication medium in our culture is made up of *moving* images (Mitchell Stephens, 1998, p. 8). As communication instructors, we are concerned about overlooking new methods of composing—methods which fundamentally rely on a mix of the visual, the verbal, motion, and even the aural—that offer students both composing and interpretation opportunities that more closely mirror those surrounding us in the media environment today.

Several scholars have resoundingly made the case that critical literacy and technology must be tightly pedagogically bound (Duffelmeyer, 2000, 2002; LeCourt, 1998; Selfe, 1999; Takayoshi, 1996). Given the combination of computer technology and visual communication in our media environment, we believe its production and reception possibilities need to be explicitly engaged rhetorically in CAC

classrooms. It is only in the active engagement with technology that students can develop agency in both their reception and production of technological/visual texts and extend this agency to wider awareness of some of the implicit, unquestioned, systemic and restrictive structuring of the communication environment Postman (1970) and W. J. T. Mitchell (2002) described.

Understanding and productively exercising technology's potential, as well as recognizing the inherent constructedness of messages students receive in their discursive environment are at the very core of the significant work of developing CAC critical visual literacy. We have not only a convenient but also an important and exciting opportunity to help students explore and gain facility with the possibilities of their media/communication environment in ever-more interesting and relevant ways with technology and the new attention to visual literacy in our curriculum. Rather than rely on a viewpoint that suggests that technology can and should be used only as a neutral tool in CAC curricula—which is Berlin's undesirable "training in a useful technical skill" (1992, p. 776), and that visual literacy is an annoying and arbitrary add-on to CAC curricula, we need to seize these cultural and curricular developments for what they are: enrichments of our literacy experiences of receiving *and producing* texts, and highly powerful pedagogical spaces within which to develop students' critical literacy.

W. J. T. Mitchell's "Ideological Veil"

Daily on our television screens, visual arguments are presented to a largely passive audience whose capacity to speak back is limited due to the implied "specifications" and "roles" imposed on us in these structured communication environments; these arguments generally conform to conventional cultural narratives. Thus, while the stories and audience roles are familiar, today our students do not, for the most part, develop an understanding of the world through conventional and exclusively written or spoken text because our culture's stories and supposed solutions to problems reach us in new ways. Our students do not, for example, decide how to view the situation in the Middle East, the war in Iraq, the events of September 11, 2001, recent election results, or the POWs on Guantanamo in Cuba by reading or listening to strictly verbal arguments. What we buy; whom we vote for; where we go to school; who we think is guilty or innocent; how we understand our very identities as men and women, students, parents, partners, teachers are based on decisions and formed from impressions in different ways than even a decade ago. Thus while we agree that we live in a highly visual culture, we believe the fact that it is a culture of visuals (and text) *in motion*, as opposed to the photographic images of a magazine, is extremely important to those of us concerned with helping CAC students compose and critically interpret text.

On CNN's Crossfire, for instance (a program apparently devoted to argument for its own sake, and not to in-depth and thoughtful examination of issues), no one is allowed to finish a sentence (indeed, at least two people are often talking simultaneously), let alone articulate and pursue a line of reasoning that would consume more than two minutes in the show's agonistic and commercial-driven format. Snappy put-downs are as acceptable as civil, fact-based assertions. While there is the appearance of audience interactivity with viewer emails and a few questions from the studio audience (in a segment aptly called "Fireback," in keeping with the combative nature of this kind of programming), these serve only as thinly disguised excuses for the hosts to careen off into more falsely dichotomized ("from-the-left-and-from-the-right") rants. The major network news is a carefully concocted, not-too-intellectually demanding, homogenized version of events that fits neatly into 30 minutes with commercial interruption for laxatives, Cialis, and Carnival Cruise Lines. Our role as passive audience members is simply to tune in tomorrow to let more diluted, one-sided information flow past us while advertisers have unfettered access to us as their captive audience. All of it comes to us in the form of less text, more visuals, moving backgrounds and footage, ticker tapes,

and background music, *and it is presented as if it is objective and complete information, offered solely for our education and not for any other reason*. Our students receive and interpret these kaleidoscopically and heavily visual texts as "natural, unstructured, transparent replicas of reality ... " (Gregory Veen, 1998), when in fact they fit perfectly into Postman's (1970, p. 161) definition of structured message systems which assign us a role to play, feelings to feel, and thoughts to think.

For example, in the popular news and issue-oriented programming we have just described, the audience is implicitly urged to line up neatly on the left or on the right, urged not to entertain a rogue question that can't be dealt with before the next commercial break, and urged to believe it is acceptable to filter important information through narrow viewpoints lest we encounter something complicated, ambiguous, new, or otherwise not completely compatible with our existing worldview. And above all else, our audience role is implicitly that of consumer of the products that support the programming. This is not the route to the critically literate citizenry encouraged by Berlin precisely because it does not assist students to achieve what Mitchell (2002) describes as the "Eureka! moment" of understanding that "things that ... are apparently automatic, transparent, and natural, are actually ... a system of codes that interposes an ideological veil between us and the real world" (pp. 170-171).

Critical Technological and Visual Literacies in CAC: An Organic Connection

In this context, then, critical literacy can be defined as the ability to see text (in this case, particularly visual text), not as a transparent window on reality, but as constructed from a viewpoint, with someone's communicative purpose and a calculated effect in mind. The critically literate person, however, goes beyond the individual text and applies that enhanced awareness, attained from being a creator/author and not just a passive consumer /reader of texts, to a more generalized critical consciousness about the world and the discourses therein that affect us. We need to assist our students to see these texts as "structured expressions ...perspective-laden purveyors of rational and social meanings" (Veen, 1998).

One way for students to develop the necessary rhetorical awareness of these structured expressions of perspective is to engage them in composing texts using a multimedia program like Flash to complement their work in written composition. Why multimedia composing? Certainly much has been written about students creating hypertext documents (e.g., Joyce, 1995; Landow, 1992; Lanham, 1993; Williams, 2001), but we share Joseph Janangelo's (1998) concerns that some of hypertext's characteristics (the endless, non-linear connections of links and attendant, multiple meaning possibilities) reflect a composing process based heavily on accretion and non-linear organization. Thus, in some ways, composing in hypertext may not be as useful rhetorically to our students who need to develop, focus, articulate, and analyze the texts presented in their communication environment: "[a] rhetoric of endless growth conflicts with the idea, endemic to academic prose, that persuasion is usually predicated on focus, selection, and strategic presentation" (Janangelo, 1998, p. 29). Janangelo goes on to voice his rhetorically based concern that when hypertext remains the primary opportunity for electronic and visual composing we offer to our students, they may come to "confuse the ability to link materials with intellectual enrichment, subscribing to the idea that saying all that you know (or linking as much as you can find) about a topic is better than selecting your evidence based on an analysis of your reader's questions, knowledge, and needs" (pp. 29-30).

In contrast to the potential pedagogical drawbacks of offering hypertext linking as the only approach to digital/visual composing, multimodal composing instantiates different principles of text production and consumption. The multimedia composing process helps students see the rhetorical

importance of the unity and coherence of the full composition because students' attention is directed to images and other elements (e.g., sound, motion) not only "as individual carriers of meaning [but] to the ways in which the meaning of the composition in which they appear is conditioned by their combined synthesis ... . *[they] are consciously arranged to convey a particular message*" (Veen, 1998, emphasis added). As for students' conflation of transparent representations of reality with structured meaning, multimedia composing addresses this central tenet of critical literacy as well: when students reflect on the very deliberate process they have engaged in to choose a particular image and to place it into the composition in a particular way (at a chosen juncture, certain speed, with particular transitioning moves, and with particular music or verbal text accompanying it), that "image has forever lost any semblance of being objective, non-coded, neutral. Its structured status is literalized" (Veen, 1998). Mitchell's ideological veil has been pulled aside.

Pedagogical Work in the Digital, Visual Environment

In this section we present in more detail an approach to helping students become adept at composing multimedia texts and, in the process, become more critically aware readers of the textual environment (discursive reality) in which they exist. To provide students with the opportunity to work critically with texts in a way made more compelling and effective by their composing, not just receiving, such texts, Anthony engaged his composition students who were members of an Agricultural and Biosystems Engineering learning community in a three-week multimedia venture, composing their own texts in Flash. Flash is described by Cheryl Brumbaugh-Duncan (2003) as a program able to "create interactive project interfaces and designs. It can generate low file size animations and sharp, clear graphics and images . . . [it] combines streaming animation and ... ActionScript for creating movies" (p. 2). Serving even more of our ultimate purpose—to provide a successful multimodal composing experience for instructors and students which would then offer the opportunity for critical reflection on those texts—Flash is a program that is popular, accessible, and relatively easy to learn; there are estimated to be 494 million users of the Flash player worldwide, and over a million who actively program with it (Macromedia web site).

Students in Anthony's communication-intensive classes are asked to prepare reading journals based on issues arising from their readings and their discussions in class. These journals are used as the foundational content for course e-portfolios that the students create in groups of three near the end of the semester and which ultimately provide material and ideas for the multimodal composition. Anthony also prepares his students to work in multimodal composing in part by asking them to read some media/communication theory. For instance, Anthony introduces his students to media theory by having them read Marshall McLuhan's *The Medium is the Massage* (1989, c1967). This book serves two purposes in that not only is it an introduction to ways of looking at media, but it also provides a design template where visual and verbal information are brought together creatively. Hence, Anthony's students engage in discussions of not only the ideas contained within the book, but also of the way that they are expressed. After reading McLuhan's work, Anthony's students read four or five resources on film theory, hypertext theory, information architecture, and multi-modal design (see the Appendix). Each resource is chosen because it provides opportunities to bring a variety of cultural artifacts (television commercials, films, websites) into class discussion of how the multimodal environments use rhetoric to impact an audience. Once these readings are completed, students spend about three weeks learning Flash and creating their e-portfolios.

Undergraduates who already knew Flash were recruited as peer mentors within Anthony's class and assisted him in creating online tutorials specifically for the assignment. Later, these same peer mentors were used as aides in class to help the students learn the software. Anthony also found a wealth of shorter tutorials on the Internet created by web developers and used them for specific tasks

for different groups of students (these sources are also listed in the Appendix). Thus, by creating or using these online tutorials, Flash can be broken down into manageable, task-specific modules to help the students negotiate some of the initial multimodal composing skills that they need to learn. In interviews conducted after the semester, although several students reported being daunted the first time they saw the software environments, they also said that, thanks to the shorter tutorials, they quickly got over their apprehension.

The amount of effort and time students invested in their Flash movies above and beyond what was required, combined with the sophistication of these digital texts and the students' subsequent reflectiveness about their work suggest to us that Anthony's students were engaging meaningfully and critically with this composing/communication environment in a way that went beyond just "having some fun with the software." In fact, Anthony found that instead of having to encourage students to work on the Flash compositions, most of the time he had to restrain students' composing ambitions by reminding them that they had to hand the assignment in by the end of the semester!

Anthony interviewed some of his students after the classes were completed to ask them about the choices that they made in the creation of their Flash compositions. In analyzing student responses, we were particularly interested in student indications of some of the characteristics mentioned above (e.g., Barry, Berlin, Hill, Mitchell, Postman, Veen, and Williams) as hallmarks of a critically literate person in this multimedia environment in which we live:

1. *Understanding that a text is not a transparent window on reality, but is constructed*; this understanding grows out of the students' awareness of the message they wish to relay in their composition and the multimodally rhetorical moves they make to accomplish that, and then extends to recognizing the same is true for other texts they encounter in their communication environment;

2. *Developing and demonstrating rhetorical awareness both as a composer of text and as a reader of text* (e.g., using the features and methods available to them in their composing environment to, as Janangelo (1998) says, focus, select, and strategically present their ideas; conveying a specific thesis, or message, in a way that is relatively unambiguous; paying attention to transitions and cohesion in the composition, as opposed to simple accretion of links to be followed randomly); and

3. *Developing agency as a communicator and as a reader*, rather than opting for the passivity that our popular media environment makes so easy; developing the willingness and the ability to interrupt a familiar cultural story and contribute their own ideas to it, thus complicating it and making it more meaningful for them.

Brandon's Flash Movie and Reflection: Developing Critical Visual Literacy

In the interest of space, we will describe only one student's, Brandon's, Flash movie/text and include some of his reflections on the choices he made as he created it. Obviously, we are not able to do Brandon's work full justice by simply verbally describing a composition that includes motion, recorded speech, music, and visual material, and that is of course part of the point we are making here. Brandon's four-minute Flash composition deals with the events of 9/11 and their aftermath from a variety of critical and carefully depicted perspectives: Americans', Middle Easterners',

terrorists', politicians', children's, POWs' on Guantanamo Bay, and Arab-Americans'. Brandon's movie might be described as a cautionary tale about being so angry at and fearful of terrorists, so overwhelmed in the aftermath of the September 11 event—that Americans become or do something as a nation that perhaps does not best represent what we want to stand for.

Brandon stated that he wanted his audience to receive a unified and coherent text and not "just see flashing images and it would be just another 9/11 kind of thing," a random kaleidoscope of images that would collectively create what he characterized as "just another" movie documenting 9/11. Rather, he was trying to communicate a very specific message and one that is slightly different from the usual cultural story we are used to seeing about this event: that while the event was horrific, we need to be careful not to react in ways that may compound the problem. This more nuanced thesis is described by Brandon when he says that he wanted his text to be a tribute to those who died on 9/11 while he also wanted to make his audience think about the problem inherent in "discriminat[ing] against other people because we feel like everybody is against us." For instance, of the terrorists and our reactions to them, Brandon believes that, "as we chase them down we can become a lot more like them." Brandon wants his text to be different from and thus more thought provoking than the simple, more conventional narratives about September 11 we see in the popular media (e.g. unquestioning retaliation, good versus evil).

Brandon stated that composing multimodally, as opposed to other forms of composing, gave him more flexibility and therefore the potential to compose a text with a strong and sophisticated message. This counters the charge that students have come increasingly to see the writing they do in college as totally separate from that which is meaningful to them in their everyday lives (Welch 1999). By omitting or shortchanging multimodal forms of composing in our pedagogy, she says we promote a duality which implicitly tells students that print discourse is for "school culture" and that "school discourse is not a place to pour out one's passions" (p. 159). Welcoming Anthony's invitation to expand the notion of "school discourse," Brandon described being motivated in working with Flash to "produce something with quality," something he would want to "look at when the class was over," suggesting that our students can see these texts as having as much potential and lasting value as conventionally written/printed ones and that the duality Welch described can be overcome. In addition, Brandon felt this communication environment offered him the opportunity to appeal to what Logan (2002) describes as the "new sensory bias" and the "new cognitive style" of his audience (p. 13). Because of what Brandon perceives as the tendency of many people to skim through written text and to passively watch images, he stated that a Flash-like composition is a more powerful medium than writing for some messages and that a program like Flash, with its ability to combine media (including animating images and text with sound) in one environment, involves his audience on more than one level and thus engages them more readily.

Certainly the "reader" of Brandon's movie immediately feels this invitation for audience engagement; it is difficult to just sit back in semi-attention, waiting passively until the images and music stop. With appropriately chosen music in the background (Buffalo Springfield's song "For What it's Worth"), the movie opens with an "outer-space" vantage point on earth and then moves in to focus on images of the New York skyline. Brandon next chose moving and fading images of the World Trade Center before, during, and after the September 11 attack (firefighters, flags, smoke, terrified and grieving people, photographs of the accused terrorists). In a highly deliberate and effective rhetorical move, Brandon also used the structure and lyrics of the song to help him create unity and cohesion and thus to underscore his message. Specifically, Brandon selected images of the moment of the attack, anti-war protestors in the United States, pro-Osama Bin Laden protestors in the Middle East, and a particularly compelling image of a young Muslim child in his mother's arms holding an AK47 pointed at the camera; then, throughout the movie, every time the song's refrain occurs ("everybody watch

what's goin' down"), this sequence of images appears in quick succession, timed to be nearly in syncopation with the music. Brandon's repetition of this particular set of visuals and words works like emphasis in a written text: to reiterate and deepen the meaning each time they appear. And Brandon, as the author, is aware of this when he says, "I tried to make that short refrain a little bit of a summary of my whole theme."

Further developing his theme of multiple points of view on the event with an overriding concern about how we respond as a nation to terrorism, Brandon's Flash composition next problematizes the connection between peace and justice. The familiar symbol of "blind" justice appears on the screen and is slowly covered over with more pictures of people protesting in the Middle East, American soldiers with gas masks, the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, and finally an American protestor holding up a sign saying "No Justice, No Peace." Brandon then juxtaposes two American presidents' words, using first a recorded portion of President Kennedy's speech so that the audience hears Kennedy's voice telling Americans to "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country," followed by Bush's face with his words superimposed over it: "Today our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature." Quickly, another Bush quotation fades in: "We will make no distinction between the terrorists and those who harbor them."

Near the end of the composition, Brandon has the words "Let us not forget the ones who have died, for they stand as a reminder of the dangers we present to ourselves" appear and dissolve into a series of photographs of September 11 victims. The last scene, hearkening back to the beginning of the text, is of the earth spinning and receding into space.

This description of Brandon's text, albeit sketchy, provides a context for Brandon's subsequent reflections with Anthony on its composition. These reflections (some of which we interspersed with the appropriate portion of the foregoing movie/text description) reveal that Brandon's multimodal composing experience was an opportunity for him to develop his critical literacy in the three ways we have identified as being especially important.

Understanding that a text is not a transparent window on reality, but is constructed. Brandon's understanding of a text as deliberate construction, aimed at a deliberate effect on an audience, deepened as his work on his project progressed. For instance, Brandon said he was concerned that his audience not "misconstrue what I was trying to say. That they would have the wrong idea and miss my message ... I tried to make everything I did speak to my message." Of his own critical thinking, he noted that the very process of working with his text deepened and complicated the meaning of the event and our reaction to it for him as well: " ... my ideas about the whole situation changed over the whole video ... the pictures that I saw ... really impounded [sic] them into my own mind ... you see more of it and you see more [than] what you originally saw."

Developing and demonstrating rhetorical awareness. As Veen (1998) suggests and as Brandon's comments seem to confirm, composing in this communication environment urges the author to be aware of the features of the software and how his/her decisions about material (visuals, music, voices, printed words) and organization (arrangement, transitions, timing/speed) will affect how successfully his message as a whole is conveyed:

> I tried to keep it as a whole idea going through the movie but I found you get into it and you would be working with a few seconds at a time and you would get caught up in an idea and sometimes I had to take a break and then maybe re-edit the movie again to see if I was headed in the direction that I was planning. [And] you had to be thinking of how you transition to another idea so you always had to be working towards something and you always had to be thinking where you were coming from ... (Brandon)

Developing agency as a communicator and as a reader. Brandon's text and his subsequent comments to Anthony also revealed that this composing environment let him develop and exercise the critically literate characteristic of feeling agency in the face of familiar and seemingly impenetrable cultural messages. He felt able to push past the "ideological veil" Mitchell (2002) referred to and the "certain [assigned] ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving" referred to by Postman (1970, p. 161). Brandon re-entered the September 11 narrative and told a slightly different story; indeed, he said he felt he told it "in a way that had never been presented before." One aspect of his topic on which Brandon detailed this potential to use composing to re-see something that has already been structured and presented to us in the popular media in a particular way is in his comments about how his work with the images of the POWs on Guantanamo affected his thinking about them: "From one picture there's the detainees that the U.S. has—the Taliban lined up—and you see that as what the media presented." However, Brandon went on to express his experience of coming to relate, through his work with the composition, the feelings of these prisoners to those of Americans—feelings of fear and paranoia from which there may be no escape: "You gather that they have the fear that they can possibly do nothing to get themselves out and they can't say anything to save themselves or set themselves free."

Conclusion

Because literacy is a "material, multidimensional construct" (Faigley, 1999, p. 175), we urge instructors of writing-intensive classes to bear in mind the changed and changing communication environment in which our students operate not only in their other university classes, but in their professions upon graduation. Recalling John Clifford's (1990) impassioned statement of our "ethical necessity, a professional imperative" to create opportunities for critical literacy development in our classrooms (p. 261), we urge composition instructors to welcome these multimodal forms of composing text, not as trivial, chaotic, meaningless, plebian, MTV-like assaults of sensory material that we can ignore and go back to our "business" of teaching folks to read and write like we were taught to read and write. Our business has changed because our information environment has changed, and we fulfill the professional imperative we all believe in when we persuade students of the importance of—and give them ways of—pushing past the appearance of transparency in text. In a broader way, embracing multimodal composing as one element in our curricula encourages what Thomas Angelo (1997) described as one of the exciting elements accompanying the CAC movement: a change "[f]rom a model of higher education as primarily a quantitative, additive process to one that is fundamentally qualitative and transformative" (p. 68).

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Appendix

As a caveat to others who may follow us, many of Macromedia's current tutorials included with the Flash software package tend to build their lessons around cumulative long-term projects. Although these are still useful for helping students learn aspects of the program, Anthony found that shorter tutorials provided much-needed extra assistance with minimal effort.

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