

# Tumblr as a Visual Invention Heuristic

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This chapter explains how I used Tumblr as a visual invention heuristic for an assignment that asked students to create their own theory about leadership. I present the scaffolding of the assignment and examples of student work to show how the Tumblr assignment diversified students' thinking about leadership and created a space for their own experience in crafting the leadership theory.

Tumblr (<https://www.tumblr.com/>) is a microblogging website and social network where users can either create their own unique content—such as artwork, animated gifs, text posts, video, and audio—or share the content other users have posted by “reblogging” it. Tumblr users follow those who post content related to their interests and reblog this content for their own followers. Users view the posts of people they follow on their “dashboard”; from there, they can either like, reblog, or share to other platforms. In contrast to more user-friendly social media platforms like Facebook, Tumblr's complicated navigation and the lack of uniform structure offer insiders a sense of privacy, making Tumblr more welcoming of the weird, the offbeat, the creative, and the artistic (Dewey, 2015). Tumblr attracts teens and youth who see it as a refuge from the older adults on Facebook and Twitter (Monteiro, 2015).

The primary way that people use Tumblr is the bricolage of images and text, a visual literacy skill that is important beginning in primary grades. Particularly in middle school, students are “honing the creative dispositions of keen observation, purposeful investigation, data collection and analysis skills, collaborative interaction techniques and unique interpretations” (Smilan, 2016, p. 167). Tumblr requires searching, sorting, organizing, and combining images and text, challenging the user to find connections between ideas and across media. In a study of eighth- and ninth-grade students' multimodal projects, Kelly A. Hrenko and Andrea J. Stairs (2012) demonstrated that students' “ideas have become more specific and powerful when artmaking and writing are coupled” especially when “visual, auditory, oral, written” modalities are combined.

The appeal of Tumblr's customizability, focus on images, and popularity with youth demographics led me to consider ways it might be used in a variety of classrooms, including my college composition class. Previous approaches to social media in rhetoric and composition have examined how students compose on social media for different audiences (Swartz, 2010; Vie, 2008), but I want to look at Tumblr more as a personal, artistic composing tool for helping student writers

think through what they want to say. In this chapter, I explain how I used Tumblr as a visual invention heuristic for an assignment that asked students to create their own theory about leadership. I present the scaffolding of the assignment and examples of student work to show how the Tumblr assignment diversified students' thinking about leadership and created a space for their own experience in crafting the leadership theory.

## My Leadership Theory: The Curriculum Model

I developed this curriculum for a first-year composition course for students in a leadership living-learning community called the "Freshman Leadership Program" at my institution. As part of this highly selective program, the students live together in a residence hall, do service together, attend a weekly seminar on leadership, and take a composition class together. The first unit of the class focused on images of leadership, and the students conducted a visual analysis of videos and photos of famous leaders. In the second unit, students studied different theories of leadership such as heroic leadership, servant leadership, and transformational leadership. For the third and final unit, I wanted students to develop their own leadership theory, but I was not sure how to get them thinking creatively about their own views of leadership outside of the theories we had already read or give them confidence that they could come up with their own theory comparable to the leadership theories written by professional scholars in the field of leadership studies.

I thought that Tumblr might present a heuristic for helping students invent and articulate their own leadership theory. I first learned about uses of Tumblr while conducting research for my article, "Trends, Vibes, and Energies: Building on Students' Strengths in Visual Composing" (Kurtyka, 2015). I interviewed a member of a social sorority, "Margo," who was responsible for creating a Tumblr to recruit new members to the sorority. Margo drew from hundreds of photos of the sorority members to create a coherent image for the sorority. My previous assignments with visuals had asked students to analyze a single photo or image, but my conversation with Margo showed me that Tumblr requires analyzing sometimes hundreds of images and perceiving how they work together to create a singular message or elicit a specific emotional response. I wanted to create an assignment that reflected the more sophisticated rhetorical task of analyzing how multiple images and text work together.

I began with a homework assignment to familiarize students with Tumblr and to understand its place in the rhetorical landscape of social media. As Amber Buck (2012) argues, "The literate activity that individuals engage in on social network sites is, of course, produced under a number of rhetorical, social, and technological constraints" (p. 32). While all the students had heard of Tumblr, and about half of them had created Tumblrs, I wanted them to be familiar with Tumblr's

social impact, target demographics, and the different uses of Tumblr. The following homework assignment helped students think critically about the literate activity that Tumblr enables.

## Homework Assignment

Read:

“Tumblr and Social Media Demographics” (Smith, 2013)

“Tumblr is the New Front Page of the Internet” (Dewey, 2015)

Write:

- Why has Tumblr become so popular, according to these articles?
- What makes Tumblr different from other social media platforms, according to these articles?
- Why do most Tumblr users use Tumblr, according to these articles?
- Find one of your own favorite Tumblrs and post the link. Why do you think this Tumblr is effective? In what ways does it effectively use the Tumblr format?

Once the students were familiar with the genre of Tumblr and its impact as a mode of social media, I wanted them to be able to compare and contrast it with other forms of social media. So the next day in class, we had a “Social Media Town Hall.” I told them that to support each other during finals, their community had decided that they would all give up all but one form of social media until the end of the semester. In class, we were going to hold a “town hall” to decide which form of social media to keep. The students were divided into six groups: Team Facebook, Team Twitter, Team Instagram, Team Snapchat, Team Tumblr, and one team to serve as judges. Each team gave a three-minute presentation to the class on why their form of social media should be the only one the class would use until the end of the semester. The team of judges then had to facilitate discussion and debate for the whole class and decide on a winner. This activity allowed the students to consider the different rhetorical purposes and audiences of each form of social media and to think about the affordances of Tumblr in the context of other social media.

After students had a better grasp of the functions and purposes of Tumblr, I introduced the assignment.

## My Leadership Theory

Our first unit focused on visuals of leadership, while our second unit focused on leadership theories. In this third unit, you’ll put both together, creating a Tumblr

page of images of leadership and using these images to create your own leadership theory.

1. Sign up for a Tumblr account and create a Tumblr page specifically for this class. Set up a profile and design the look and feel of your site.
2. Upload to your Tumblr page of at least 10 posts (images, quotes, audio, video, etc.) that you feel relate to your own beliefs on leadership.
  1. For each of these posts, you should write a one-sentence caption explaining how this post connects to your idea of leadership. You can “re-blog” other people’s material, but you must write your own caption for each post.
  2. Your Tumblr should have at least one of each:
    1. Image—at least one should be a photo you took
    2. Song (can be your own or another person’s)
    3. Video (can be your own or another person’s)
    4. Quote (can be your own or another person’s)
3. Once you’ve put together your Tumblr page, write a 1,000-word essay where you create a single, coherent theory of leadership drawing on your Tumblr posts as evidence. Your theory does not need to be ground-breaking but it should:
  1. Provide a guideline or useful way of thinking about leadership.
  2. Be unique to you and your views about leadership.
  3. Use the Tumblr posts as evidence to support your theory. You do not need to analyze every post, but you should analyze at least 3-5 closely.

To get the students thinking about the connections between the images and their writing, I created my own Tumblr page and my own leadership theory: “un-famous leadership,” meaning that the best leaders try not to be famous or widely known. I again divided the class into five teams and one team of judges, and I showed them different images. For each image, they had to argue why it should or should not be used to support the leadership theory. The team of judges then determined if their arguments were persuasive.

## Conclusion: Successes and Challenges

Students reported that they enjoyed creating their Tumblr pages and writing their essays in conjunction with their Tumblrs. They found creating the Tumblr a refreshing change from typical brainstorming activities, and they enjoyed sharing their Tumblrs with me and with the class. Two particular successes stood out to me and are worthy of mention here. First, I found that Tumblr helped students think outside the box in coming up with and developing the theory. One student, David, developed a theory he called “Ant Leadership Theory.” David’s Tumblr combined a YouTube video of an ant colony working together, comics about ants, a Henry

David Thoreau quote about ants, and a clip from the Disney movie *Antz*. In his essay, he drew on his images, texts, and videos to define Ant Leadership as “working hard in a caring fashion so goals can be achieved with subtlety.” David argues that humans are typically annoyed by ants, yet he found that his Tumblr posts demonstrate that ants are “unselfish, good communicator[s], humble, and hard working.” I found that the *diversity* of ways of thinking about ants—the movie, videos, popular conceptions of ants—showed how creating the Tumblr expanded his thinking about ants and thus led to a more interesting, encompassing, and unexpected leadership theory.

David’s work also points to an issue I had with getting students to work in a recursive process. Ideally, the students would have moved back and forth between the development of the theory and the creation of the Tumblr; however, many (like David) came up with their theory first and then found the visuals to go along with them. In retrospect, I would have asked the students begin creating the Tumblr earlier in the semester, perhaps adding images of leadership once or twice a week earlier in the semester, before I had even given them the assignment.

I also counted as a success students’ use of their own experience in creating the leadership theory. I wanted the theories to be personally meaningful for the students, especially because they were in a program designed to form them into effective leaders. In previous classes, students have struggled to see their personal experience as relevant in academic writing and with how to incorporate personal experience and maintain the formality of the essay. In this case, the assignment requirement to select one of their own photos for the Tumblr created a more natural space for their own experience. One student, Rachael, uses a photo of herself and a classmate to illustrate “selfless leadership,” which she describes as “putting others’ needs before your own.” Her Tumblr includes a photo of herself and her friend lying on the floor of their residence hall study area. She writes:

We were studying and [my friend] decided that she was done with anatomy and laid down on the floor. I shared her sentiments exactly and decided to lie down next to her [to show] her that I too was in a time of desperation and that we were on the same level.

Overall, I felt that the students’ leadership theories were more inspired because of their uses of Tumblr. I would have liked their writing process to be more recursive, working back and forth between the Tumblr and the essay, but I still felt that creating the Tumblr expanded and diversified their thinking.

This assignment is more about the bricolage of texts rather than the specific use of Tumblr, so it could easily be adapted to K-12 settings with or without the use of technology. Younger children could make collages accompanied by handwritten or

typed text that support a central theme, argument, or idea. Cory Callahan (2015) argues that visual analysis skills, like those required to complete this assignment, have larger significance for students living in a visual world: “Pictorial-based social media (e.g., Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, Tumblr) continue to encourage and sustain contemporary culture; thus, it is reasonable to conclude that citizens will increasingly need the ability to critique visual information and take informed action” (p. 62). Ultimately, Tumblr inspired a creative bricolage that challenged students to think and compare ideas across different forms of media, a skill that will help them to engage as consumers of media.

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