2009

FuturePerfect: Students Envisioning the Future

Fenobia I. Dallas
Saginaw Valley State University, University Center, MI

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm

Recommended Citation

Dallas, Fenobia I. (2009) "FuturePerfect: Students Envisioning the Future," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 25: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1085

FuturePerfect: Students Envisioning the Future

Fenobia I. Dallas
Saginaw Valley State University
University Center, MI

The abundance of media avenues complicates our students' writing efforts. Students write short, cryptic messages in their cell phone texting and engage in multiple, disjointed conversations on social networking sites. Visual images provided by cable television and Internet video subsume their engagement with the printed word. One way to help students foster a more complex writing stance is to adopt the "multiliteracies" approach. This literacy pedagogy engages the "multiplicity of communication channels and media...[and] the increasing salience of cultural and linguistic diversity" (Cope and Kalantzis 5). The multiliteracies approach can help students navigate the written text and visual images with their complex, overlapping, and numerous ways.

I use the multiliteracies approach to help students navigate complex media and ideas by challenging students to think about the future. First, students reflect on a past aspect of history, such as communication, medicine, or transportation, and consider how this historical past connects to the science fiction future. As a part of the reflection on how the historical past evolves, students research the origins and purpose of the National Aeronautical and Space Administration (NASA); and the science fiction future is visually presented through the science fiction television series *Babylon 5*.

As a means to compare the visual future with a written text, students also read Octavia Butler's *Patternmaster*. Students then conduct additional research and write an analysis paper of a particular futuristic perspective, beginning with the historical aspect. The timeline of communication, medicine, or transportation may be entwined with contemporary social, political, economic, or other issues. The conclusion of the paper reveals how students critically reflect on and address media's future potential impact. The goal of the analysis paper is to encourage students to develop a more complex writing stance. Students then create their visual perspective of the future by using Windows® Movie Maker to develop a short movie. Their challenge is to transfer or translate the text of the analysis paper into the futuristic perspective's visual depiction. This step allows students to consider and adapt the multiple layers of literacy to communicate in an increasingly complex and media-rich world.

Perspectives 'R Us: Mapping the Text as Visual

Michael Griffin notes that the schism between the realists and formalists—those who wish to realistically portray the visual world and those who wish to create a formalistic perception of the visual world—initially surfaced in film and photography studies (436). Ideally, the role of the visual image is to represent reality or to portray a constructed view of reality. Digital media in the form of television, cable, and the Internet shifts the realist and formalist schism into the areas of mass media and popular culture. The mass media world—which consists of the global media environment, television, radio, the news media, and the now interactive world of cyberspace—brings an additional complexity to the issues of visual communication. Griffin suggests that the mass media world, and by extension popular culture, shapes the visual image through subtly transmitting social and cultural norms (455-456). This constructed perceptual reality belies the reality-based social beliefs and values of cultures, even while the ambiguity of such representation is seemingly ignored.

The interpretative perception of the individual plays an important part in the visualizing task. W.J.T. Mitchell argues that a visual image "demands a viewer who knows what to say, [and] it also has a way of shaping the things that can be said" (28). This suggests that there is a tension between constructing

a visual image as reality and constructing one based upon a "system of representation" (38). The individual's desire to visualize and understand the representational image may be shaped by social and cultural norms. For example, an image transmitted worldwide of a seventy-three-story building may be associated with a large city in Michigan, USA rather than Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Likewise, an image of a kangaroo may be associated with living in the wild in Australia rather than in captivity in a US zoo. Mitchell suggests that the link between the image or visual representation and the idea communicating that representation be explored. The critique of the image-idea link leads to what Mitchell argues is "knowledge as a social product" (38) and, by extension, shapes the ideology of the multiliteracies approach.

In a fifteen-week semester university course called "Topics in Critical Writing," I explore this image-idea dynamic. Students, mainly first- or second-year undergraduates, use the multiliteracy approach in an assignment where they translate their written analysis paper into a visual image. Their goal is to see the complexity of communication as they manipulate the multiple layers of media literacy through the image-idea link.

Extending the Expectations:
The Multiliteracies Approach
In order to directly engage students' critical and analytical perspectives for translating their analysis papers into a visual representation, I provide a structure that uses the multiliteracy pedagogical approach (Cope and Kalantzis 30). Griffin and Mitchell discuss how visual images are associated with social and cultural knowledge, and I argue that the multiliteracy approach shares a similar basis. The multiliteracy pedagogy's premise is that "human knowledge is embedded in social, cultural and material contexts" (Cope and Kalantzis 30). Moreover, Cope and Kalantzis assert that "human knowledge is initially developed as part and parcel of collaborative interactions with others of diverse skills, backgrounds and perspectives joined together in a particular epistemic community" (30). They distill their approach into four factors that constitute this pedagogy: Overt Instruction; Situated Practice; Critical Framing; and Transformed Practice. For this discussion, I collapse the four parts of the multiliteracies approach into a two-step procedure. This is not an attempt to reframe this substantive and complex theory, but to offer a simplistic model for this discussion. The wealth of instruction from the multiliteracies approach should be reviewed and appreciated in its entirety.

Step one: Overt Instruction and Situated Practice
Helping students to think about how to translate their analysis papers into visual representations initially calls for combining overt instruction with situated practice. I define "overt instruction" as providing students with specific information as scaffold-type instruction. At this

> *The multiliteracy pedagogy's premise is that "human knowledge is embedded in social, cultural and material contexts."*

step we examine the historical arc of the future and science fiction by learning about NASA and watching episodes of the science fiction television show *Babylon 5*. Students research information about NASA in class and share their new knowledge base. This information provides a common starting point for written critiques and analysis.

We then delve into the future by watching episodes of *Babylon 5*, a science fiction television series that takes place in the year 2258. Produced in 1993, this television show is based on the United Nations concept where a space station named "Babylon 5" is run by an Earth Alliance government and houses ambassadors from four alien races. The station primarily functions as a place for business and activities while its location in a distant galaxy serves as a base from which interstellar conflicts can be resolved. Class discussions focus on how social, political, and economic concerns are depicted in this futuristic portrayal, and whether human interactions remain the same or are different. We also examine the technological apparatus shown on Babylon 5, to ascertain its usefulness, practicality, and evolution.

Students read *Patternmaster* by Octavia Butler, an African American science fiction writer. Written in 1976, *Patternmaster* focuses on a futuristic society of telepaths

who use mental telepathy for power and control over non-telepaths. The telepathic Patternists are mentally linked in a social hierarchy and controlled by the Patternmaster. The two foci of conflict in this novel are two brothers vying for control of the Patternists and the archenemies of the Patternists, the Clayarks. The Clayarks are half-human and half-animal, and immune to the mental control of the Patternists. A third class of beings is "mutes," humans who have no mental powers and are controlled by the Patternists as a labor class. Class discussions on this novel initially center on the structure of the social society Butler created, and later address the seven deadly sins--pride, envy, anger, avarice, sadness, gluttony, and lust.

The connection between the visual (*Babylon 5*) and the printed text (*Patternmaster*) is initially the use of mental telepathy as a form of communication. In *Patternmaster*, all the Patternists are telepaths, but *Babylon 5's* futuristic world has a limited number of telepaths. On Babylon 5, those individuals who are telepaths are regulated and belong to the Psi Corps. These registered telepaths wear an identification badge, and are restricted in their mental communication.

Discussions in the overt instruction step about how the future is portrayed provide students with knowledge about how to analyze the depictions of the future. The situated practice step provides a guideline for them to emulate and follow when analyzing the future. Here I define "situated practice" as giving students an example or blueprint to use as a general guide for their consideration. In this instance, I work with students, explaining how to watch and analyze *Babylon 5*, and then provide guidelines to critique episodes in weekly commentaries. The general guidelines are presented through in-class lectures and a rubric. Students then write a one-page, single-spaced commentary, critiquing the episode and raising questions that they may address later. These commentaries give students other futuristic concepts to ponder. It is important to note that the situated practice example initially should be narrowed to help students focus on one aspect of the future—say communication methods—to allow them to examine and understand that particular nuance.

At the beginning of the semester, students are encouraged to pay special attention to the use of mental telepathy as a form of communication and control. Additional examples could focus on or target another aspect of the future. Thus, later in the semester, connections are made between other aspects of the visual (*Babylon 5*) and the printed text (*Patternmaster*), such as organizational structure, religion, race and ethnicity, technology, economics, and conflict.

Step Two: Critical Framing and Transformed Practice

Once the students understand how to critique individual aspects of the future, they write an analysis paper that offers them the opportunity to pursue a topic of interest or respond to a question they posed in an episode commentary. Students focus on a specific aspect of the future from the situated practice step; then, they critically frame their assumptions about that aspect of the future. This step may be the most challenging to students, as it requires them to constructively critique their social and cultural knowledge. My definition of "critical framing" includes offering another viewpoint for consideration through contextualization. I encourage students to critically frame their values and beliefs by considering other perspectives and beliefs that may not have been introduced to them. This idea is put into practice by dividing the students into groups, and instructing them to consider the following definitions and question:

- Science Fiction: A form of fantasy in which scientific facts, assumptions, or hypotheses form the basis, by logical extrapolation, of adventures in the future, on other planets, in other dimensions in time or space, or under new variants of scientific law.
- Fantasy: Applied to a work that takes place in a nonexistent and unreal world, or concerns incredible and unreal characters, or relies on scientific principles not yet discovered or contrary to present experience.
- Question: Is *Patternmaster* science fiction or fantasy?

This discussion allows the students to take a step back and consider whether science fiction is far-fetched or a probable

progression of time. Each group must identify selections from the novel that support their chosen definition. The critical framing viewpoints surface as each student wrestles with their interpretation of science fiction and fantasy and then chooses appropriate selections from *Patternmaster* to support their choice.

Next, students discuss those choices within the group, continuing the critical framing process with their peers. Finally, each group shares its decision with the class, offering discussion points and appropriate *Patternmaster* references. This process can help students understand that there are distinct differences between the definitions and interpretations of the definitions of "science fiction" and "fantasy." This step also helps students understand how textual references support one or the other definition—a process I extend to their analysis paper assignment. While I ask students to constructively critique their social and cultural knowledge for future assignments, I do not force them to commit to those perspectives and beliefs.

After the critical framing is shaped, the students write their analysis paper. The final step in the multiliteracies approach, the transformed practice step, is a demonstration of lessons learned. In this instance, I use *transformed practice* as a means to help students develop a process to shape—or reshape—their critically framed assumptions through application. In this step, students would now take the analysis paper (text) and reshape it as a visual argument (visual). In much the same way that connections are made between the visual (*Babylon 5*) and the printed text (*Patternmaster*) in the overt instruction and situated practice steps, students' transformed practice process steps include determining what images reveal the characteristics of the future as discussed in their analysis papers. Extending the lessons learned from the critical framing step, students also address how their assumptions either mask or reveal a complex visual representation. The application for students is to transform their analysis paper (text) into a three- to five-minute movie (visual). The challenge for students is to consider the "multiplicity of communication channels and media" (Cope and Kalantzis 5).

The Process—Re-fashioning the Text into a Visual Depiction

Students spend about a month in the class working on their visual projects, equivalent to approximately eleven class-time hours. The visual projects are a two-step process. First, students begin with a storyboard activity that allows them to map out their movie in their mind. (A storyboard is a series of individual pictures that help transform the analysis paper to a visual representation.) Next, students draw some preliminary visual images and transitions. Storyboards also combine dialog cards or action notes to achieve a balance with the images. The storyboard form that I use is strategically similar to Windows® Movie Maker, as it allows the students to simply transfer their storyboard design into the computer program. Figure 1 displays sample storyboard and instructions.

As we work on the storyboard, I encourage students to think about the complexity of messages and how the visual image subtly transmits social and cultural norms. I also remind students that an individual's understanding of an image is shaped by social and cultural norms.

The second step in the visual project is working with Windows® Movie Maker software. I use this program because it is a standard accessory on PCs, is relatively easy to learn, and simple to use. Each of the basic steps is covered by the Import, Edit, and Publish functions of the computer program. I walk students through the steps of adding images (Import), adding text for titles (Edit), and working with transitions (Edit). The last part is locating an appropriate song to complement the movie (Edit). As students work on their visual projects, I encourage them to critique:

- images that offer mixed messages
- the use of too much text
- the contrast or readability of text and background colors
- the overuse of multiple transitions.

Students complete their visual projects by adding music, and then they convert their projects to play in Windows® Media Player (Publish). At the end of the semester we watch the visual projects in class, which give students an appreciation of the various perspectives of the future.

Challenging the Text and Negotiating the Visual

The multiliteracy pedagogy uses a four-step approach to engage the "multiplicity of communication channels and media...[and] the increasing salience of cultural and linguistic diversity" (Cope and Kalantzis 5). Overt instruction from the teacher guides students to a critically interrogate a text. Situated practice offers a critical lens for considering how the text complicates understanding by examining different perspectives of the issues at hand. This situated practice step prepares students to critically frame how they negotiate perspectives within a particular context. Students' response to a text can lead them to a transformed practice step, which encourages them to consider the visual in a more complex way.

Works Cited

Babylon 5. CD-ROM. Los Angeles: PNG Associates/ Warner Bros Studio, 1993.

Butler, Octavia. *Patternmaster.* NY: Warner Books, 1976.

Cope, Bill, and Mary Kalantzis, eds. *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures.* London: Routledge, 2000.

Griffin, Michael. "Camera as Witness, Image as Sign: The Study of Visual Communication in Communications Research." *Communication Yearbook* 24 (2001): 433-63.

Mitchell, W.J.T. *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986.

About the Author

Fenobia I. Dallas (fidallas@svsu.edu) is an assistant professor of Professional and Technical Writing at Saginaw Valley State University. She holds a PhD from Michigan Technological University, and her research interests include the rhetoric and visual representation of African Americans online. She recently received funding to study the impact of the interstate system on the 1960s African American community in Toledo, Ohio.

Figure 1

Visual project theme:

_____

Storyboarding:

A storyboard is a series of individual pictures, which, once combined into a structured organization, helps to conceptualize the final idea. Storyboards don't need to be composed entirely of images, but can combine dialog cards to achieve a balance.

1.   First, think about what you want to say.

2.   Then draw rough pictures for each frame idea, adding comments as dialog or musical background.

3.   Think about the transitions you want when moving from scene to scene.

dialog or action: dialog or action: dialog or action:
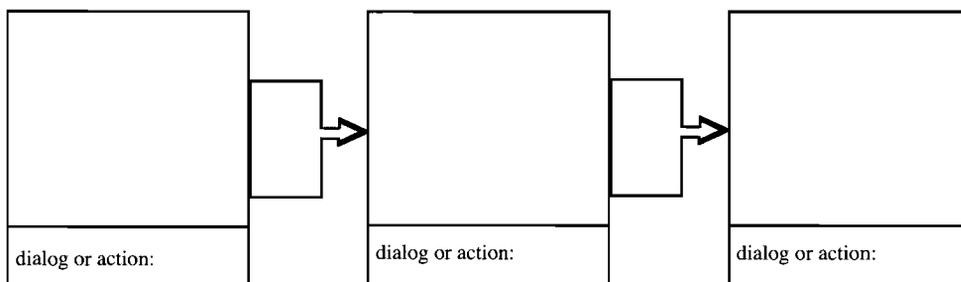
Mark your calendar, register and make reservations!

2009 NCTE ANNUAL CONVENTION

Once and Future Classics: Reading Between the Lines

November 19-22, 2009

Philadelphia, PA

For more information, visit NCTE's Web site:

http://www.ncte.org/annual