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Tapping into Students' Rich, Diverse "Mind Pictures" to Elicit Well-Developed Prose

Julie Mix

African-American oral rhetorical discourse patterns, a part of the African-American cultural experience, are evidenced in many urban church, neighborhood, and school settings. The rhetorical patterns, as Smitherman notes, are call-response, signification, tonal semantics, and narrative sequencing (99-166). One rhetorical quality embedded in many of the patterns, according to Smitherman, is "image making," which is "use of images, metaphors, and other kinds of imaginative language" (96). A typical example of rhetorical patterns with "image-making" occurs in many urban churches on Sunday mornings, when the preacher embellishes and "sequences" the events of compelling Bible stories in concert with the congregation's enthusiastic, punctuated responses. The stories' powerful images come alive in "word pictures."

Being endemic to the African-American (A-A) cultural experience, the rhetorical patterns, rich with imagery, often become ingrained as "natural" modes of expression. When writing for the college community, then, not surprisingly some A-A student writers hear the echoes of the particularized expressions in their minds when composing papers for their courses. As to the effects upon writing, a body of research on students' apparent use of A-A oral rhetorical strategies in writing (Visor; Balester; and Campbell) yields mixed reviews. Visor demonstrates how A-A oral rhetorical styles may translate into unsupported assumptions and disconnected ideas in academic writing, and Balester draws a connection between

A-A oral rhetorical styles and pretentious wording or super-polite forms in academic discourse. Campbell, on the other hand, relates vernacular rhetorical styles in written text to successful reading and writing development. Regardless of the debate over the desirability of the rhetorical styles in the writing context, however, the imagery is inherent and can be used to good advantage. I make this claim based on personal experience as a writing instructor of primarily A-A students at a large urban university. It began when I said to myself, "*Given that many of the A-A students have been acculturated to feel comfortable in imagery-rich environments, why not capitalize on the benefits? Why not center discussions about writing around vivid, 'seeable' illustrations?*" When I began doing so with my A-A basic writers, to my delight, I discovered the power underlying their rich array of interesting "mind pictures." As a matter of course now, we "tap into" the images, particularly while planning and revising papers. The various images that come to mind while writing are purposely examined for their underlying meaning, the unearthed meaning is used to structure a meaningful train of thought, and then the images themselves are "imported" as vivid examples.

The strategy I will detail here for eliciting "mind pictures" useful to prose development, focuses on investigating the "pictures" students hold in their minds and recording the discoveries on a questionnaire I specifically created for that purpose (See Figure 1). In some cases, students even become involved in examining the body

language at issue in their images because body language denotes attitude and attitude conveys meaning. The results are that generalized text becomes more specific, as the student writers' voices emerge, and disorganized text and ideas take organized shape. The best news is working with students on how to access, probe, and use their "pictures" is a most enjoyable experience for the instructor. Three examples drawn from my work with basic writers follow.

Figure 1

When you think of this topic, what picture(s) do you see in your mind?

Choose one of the pictures and answer the following:

Which people are involved in the picture?

What are the people DOING? Why are they doing it?

What body language are they exhibiting? Why?

Give a descriptive word or two about their body language:

What does what they are doing and how they are expressing it (through body language) tell you about your attitude toward your topic? (Use your descriptive words to give yourself clues.)

The first example demonstrates how the strategy works during revision, as a basic writer discovers deeper meaning(s) while remaining focused. As a writing assignment, students had been asked to reflect on an article they had read on "reading is fundamental." Using the questionnaire sheet I had created (see Figure 2 for completed form), I asked a student who had written a very general first draft on young children and reading to write the answers to some questions I would pose before he revised his paper:

I asked: What picture did you see when you heard the topic, "reading is fundamental"?
student wrote: "young children growing up without learning how to read"

I asked: "Which people are in the picture? What are they doing? Why are they doing it?"
student wrote: "a teenager boy who is playing video games in his room, while his little sister is playing with the household products under the kitchen sink"

This information, not represented in his original "generalized" text, interested us both. But he still had not answered the "why" question. Therefore:

I asked: Why are they doing what they are doing?" to get at the meaning behind the images.
student wrote: "She (the little sister) decides to drink one (of the products) from one of the bottles. The brother hears a thump on the ground and runs into the kitchen. He sees his sister lying on the floor and sees what she did. He immediately calls 911.

(student): The operator asks him to name the product, he couldn't. She then asks him to read the instructions on the back of the bottle to see what to do if the product has been drank by someone. He could not read the back of the bottle because he didn't know how to read. Later his sister died of poisoning. Now if this young boy was to read instead of playing videogames all the time or tell someone he is having trouble reading, maybe his sister would not have died."

Then I asked the student to write out a one-sentence controlling idea, connecting definitively with the topic, "reading is fundamental," working from his focused, detailed images. The student wrote, "It is important to learn how to read because you never know when you'll end up in a life or death situation, where reading is the only resort for life." While the sentence does not make perfect dictional sense or adhere to strict grammatical rules, clearly we had something with which to work. By probing his "mind pictures" containing capsules of meaning, the student had established a focus and invented a unique, more specific development of his ideas to replace his vague generalities. He had articulated a fuller elucidation, using language that "shows" not "tells."

Figure 2

Identify the picture that comes to your mind about your topic and answer the following:

topic: *reading is fundamental*

Which people are involved in the picture?
young children growing up without learning how to read

a teenager boy and his little sister

What are the people DOING? Why are they doing it?

A teenager boy who is playing video games in his room, while his little sister is playing with the household products under the kitchen sink. She decides to drink one from one of the bottles. The brother hears a thump on the ground and runs into the kitchen. He sees his sister lying on the floor and sees what she did. He immediately calls 911. The operator asks him to name the product, he couldn't. She then asks him to read the instructions on the back of the bottle to see what to do if the product has been drank by someone. He could not read the back of the bottle because he didn't know how to read. Later his sister died of poisoning.

How is your "picture" related to the topic?

Now if this young boy was to read instead of playing videogames all the time or tell someone he is having trouble reading, his sister would probably be here today. So it is important to learn how to read because you never know when you'll end up in a life or death situation, where reading is the only resort for life.

What BODY LANGUAGE are they exhibiting? Why? He has answered this above.

Give a descriptive word or two about their body language: Did not do.

Now, using the descriptive words or your connection to the topic as clues, specify your controlling idea for your paragraph/paper (put the topic words into the controlling idea):

Reading is fundamental because one may be in a critical life or death situation, where his or her only resort for life is knowing how to read.

A second example of revision work drawn from my teaching experience demonstrates use of the technique for synthesizing concepts from two written sources into a paragraph. I used a version of the questionnaire (see the completed document in Figure 3) with the student to explore the images behind his words. Both the original and the revised versions of the paragraph, before and after “mind picture therapy,” are provided below. The student had read “Three Types of Resistance to Oppression” by Martin Luther King and “A Life Defined by Losses and Delights,” by Nancy Mairs, who has multiple sclerosis, and had been asked to draw some sort of comparison.

First, the original version:

Both articles were related by the principles that they shared. King's reference to acquiescence principal as "accepting detriorating conditions" strongly resembled Nancy Mairs situation and how she handled it. Though she was dissatisfied with her condition, she didn't let her disease take control of her life; she didn't spend her time feeling sorry for herself. She read, wrote, spent time with her children, and spoke about MS to other people. She never referred to herself as "Disabled" or "Handicapped" because these were terms that she felt labeled her as being mentally "incapable" or "disadvantaged."

Not much sense is made in the paragraph, as it lacks balance, coherence, and cohesion. We went to work on the paragraph, therefore, tapping into the student's mind pictures and using the questionnaire, the content of which the student dictated as I recorded (See Figure 3). The student identified “acquiescence” as the common ground for comparison on the questionnaire and stayed with it when examining his “mind pictures” and while revising. Of particular interest, I asked him to concentrate on the body language in the images he held in his imagination. The images from the

MLK and Mairs articles came alive through examination of the body language at work in the student's mind—the lethargic blues player, barely moving, and Mairs in a “take charge” position in front of the podium in her wheelchair before a large audience, making the conscious, bold choice to situate herself thus. Through attention to body language details, the student was able to clarify the subjects' philosophical differences which impacted their lives and to write a more cohesive paragraph. The rewrite, albeit not perfect, demonstrates marked improvement:

Both articles deal with the topic of acquiescence, but they approach it differently. Nancy Mairs' attitude of courage, in her article, does not fit King's perception of acquiescence as it described in his article. King paints a picture of a Negro guitarist from the 1950's to characterize a acquiescent attitude. The Negro guitaist sits on a stoop, plucking and singing blusy songs about how he's "ben down." He's completely lethargic. He doesn't move or show any sign of enthusiasm or vibrance. He just sits in his chair, with a piece of straw in his mouth, strumming back and forth singing sad bluse songs. Nothing gets done. Mairs is totally different from the Negro guitarist. She refuses to let Multiple Sclerosis take control of her life and crush her spirit. At a seminar for people with terminal illnesses, she sits in her wheel chair in front of the podiun speaking to a crowd of 100 to 200 patients. Depite that most of movements are restricted (except for her arms and jaw), she still offers positive messages of hope to those acquiescing.

Although improvement in form, sense, and connection with the reader is considerable, clearly,

this paragraph still needs work: on development through inclusion of pertinent information from the original draft (e.g., Mairs's productive use of time, despite her dissatisfaction with her condition) and through further discussion of the blues player; on ordering the examples in the paragraph in line with the topic sentence; and on correction of spelling errors. Therefore, I asked the student to make more changes and additions. In this case as in many others, however, when basic writers concentrate on improvement in one area (here on development of meaningful, compelling, organized text), other areas "suffer" or are subordinated, at least temporarily. Where the "mind picture" strategy is involved, though, the work ultimately proves worthwhile.

Figure 3

When you think of this topic, what pictures do you see in your mind?

yes aggressive people from the 1950s MLK with multiple sclerosis no

Choose one of the pictures and answer the following:

Specific Structure: Which people are involved in your picture?

blues players from the 1950s wheelchair at a summer on multiple sclerosis

What are the people DOING? Why are they doing it?

sitting on a stoop in front of a microphone
sings all day talking to three thousand people -
about how he's 100 are paraplegics
down and out - telling her story
the "man's got She refuses to let the disease
win." take over or
What body language are they exhibiting? Why? crush her. She
Stoic body doesn't move, just but spirit to
body doesn't move just hand strumming hope people
guitar straw in mouth reach might
Give a descriptive word or two about their body language: be down
but not aggressive
sassy

What does what they are doing and how they are expressing it (through body language) tell you about your attitude toward your topic? (Use your descriptive words to give yourself clues.)

singing about the Irish be oppressed
by a dominant race than to be freed by some
stranger

students work sheet

A final example from my teaching experience demonstrates the technique at work during the planning stage of a paper. I used the questionnaire to help the student unearth images and remain focused, progressing from the general topic to specific support. A clean rendering of the thought progression is provided in Figure 4. The student had chosen the topic "obesity in America" and had narrowed the topic to "causes of obesity in America." I asked the student for the "mind pictures" she envisioned, body language and all. She referred to these intriguing images: a woman stuffing herself with two-dozen chocolate chip cookies at the kitchen table and a boyfriend and girlfriend stuffing themselves on rolls and water in a cheap restaurant. I asked what these "pictures" had to do with causes of obesity, and she generalized, "Eating is a way to break a barrier"—still too far out for the reader to make a connection. Therefore, I asked her what barriers were being broken in her pictures. For the woman, it was comforting herself emotionally, and for the couple it was connecting with people socially. I asked the student why she associated those barriers with these situations. The answers: The woman didn't have the "guts" to confront harassment on the job, so she was eating to pay attention to herself, if no one else would. The couple wanted to spend time together on a date, so they chose a hole-in-the wall diner and stuffed themselves with garlic bread while drinking from red plastic glasses, having ordered one serving of food they would split. Therefore, they broke through the barrier of poverty to do what others who are better off do—go out to eat on a date. The student concluded that the couple was also actually involved in eating for emotional purposes. All of this analysis of their motivations moved the discussion to a deeper, more poignant level. Her controlling idea became: "People are obese in America because they use food to become fulfilled emotionally." (We later qualified: "Some people . . .") In essence, then, she began to capitalize on the meaningful interpretations gleaned through her "pictures" to plan the paper. Ultimately, she would use the extended examples in her paper to demonstrate her point.

Figure 4

My student population is about 98% African-American, but as is probably evident at this point, the “mind picture” strategy is applicable across populations. That is, the images we hold in our minds are as diverse as we are. Although for a percentage of the A-A students, the task of tapping into the images may be easier, any one of us has only to reflect on the sheer enjoyment of the “mind pictures” we created while listening to stories as children to realize the unique, rich images each of us is capable of formulating in his/her mind. The child sitting next to us as a story was being told did not share the same images. Image making is, in fact, universal yet individual, at any age, across the various genres of printed text. The person sitting next to us on the plane reading a popular novel or the colleague in the next office reading the same text at the same time we are does not “image” as we do, and anyone who writes anything “images” individually. The principle certainly applies to college students. The key is to make the students aware of their riches and to teach them how to “tap into” the images or “mind pictures” commonly associated with their reading experience as a technique for producing better prose. Student writers can elicit multi-faceted interpretations of their own written texts through the “pictures” they hold in their minds during the re-

cursive writing process, from prewriting through the various “re-visioned” drafts to the final version. They can better focus their papers, provide intriguing trains of thought, and actually “place” the images into their writing as examples to demonstrate their points. Teaching students how to do so is a most rewarding endeavor for instructors; learning how to do so as students can be exhilarating.

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