Using Visual Metaphors as Teaching and Learning Tools

Karen Wadley
Boise State University, Department of World Languages

Research Question

Would the creation of three-dimensional expressions of term paper theses as teaching tools for end-of-term presentations help students learn more deeply and/or lead to more-focused and higher-quality papers?

Knowledge Base

The instructor wanted to create a community of learners who would learn deeply, in a short amount of time, by teaching one another through the use of what the instructor calls “Visual Metaphors”. Visual Metaphors (VMs) are physical, three-dimensional representations of lecture elements or thesis statements adapted from museum diorama practices combined with elements of multisensory learning and teaching techniques and design activities. They can be interactive or static, adapted to the needs of the lecture or presentation. VMs for main theme of G1’s class: that scholars and authors project their own world into that of “King Arthur”. Here Obi Wan Kenobi© was featured historical authors or the modern scholar; Duplos© were arched to illustrate “watersheds” in the Arthurian tradition; etc.). The language corresponded with the lesson topics.

Methods

In G1’s case, the instructor prepared models on a daily and weekly basis using the artifacts illustrated:

- VMs for main theme of G2’s class: that scholars and authors project their own world into that of “King Arthur”. Here Obi Wan Kenobi©, standing in for Sir Thomas Malory, is looking through a magnifying glass (the ‘lens’ of his world) and seeing Arthur as a late 15th century knight. The white and red roses represent the houses Tudor and York, and signify how Malory’s world-view and literary style were shaped by his involvement in the Wars of the Roses.

- VM for G1 class-content “watersheds”. This one shows a green arch of popularity rising from the Welsh dragon, representing the “Historical Arthur”. It peaks, then wanes, and Geoffrey of Monmouth (Obi-Wan Kenobi© once again) revitalized interest in the 19th century. A yellow arch of popularity then rises, and wanes once more until Sir Thomas Malory and the Wars of the Roses begins a third cycle.

G1 students were required to employ mixed media with tactile emphasis to communicate their theories, thought processes and findings in ten-minute presentations. Extra time was allotted for answering questions posed by peers and the instructor.

G2 was shown a single example of a VM as a visual description of their optional assignment. They were asked to express their methods of translating Latin prose into English after sixteen weeks of in-class discussion and practice.

Results

In G1, four students produced exceptional, fully realized VMs; four had VMs clearly connected to their thesis, but which lacked the depth of comprehension and originality of the “exceptional”; and two had thematic assemblages of elements which lacked synthesis. The grade breakdown for the eight papers: A+=3; B+=2; B=2; C+=1. As a tool for framing a question or an argument, creating VMs appear to have helped raise thesis quality; but the success of some students over others may have been caused by students' personal study habits, the clarity of their research topic earlier in the class, or other variables.

G2’s participating students scored A+=2; A=1; A=1; F=1 overall on personal reflections, yet all five VMs were of “exceptional” quality. The extra credit nature of the assignment may have caused self-selection among students naturally inclined toward design-based expression.

Conclusions

Consistent, thematic use of artifacts by the instructor successfully created a visual language which G1 students drew upon to express their own ideas. The more abstract the visual in lecture (i.e. removing Obi-Wan Kenobi’s® robe to transform him from a medieval to a modern author, or children’s toys in general) the more students seemed to feel comfortable using stuffed animals, Lego® blocks, and equally absurd devices to express their otherwise complex and, in some cases, professionally voiced theories. G2 students may have found freedom in the privacy of their assignments for using the same absurd elements. Stuffed animals, books, and everyday office supplies were transformed into deeply personal expressions of their experiences and thought processes.

The Next Stage:

Creating self and peer-evaluation rubrics for presenters and audience members to give feedback. Adapting VMs for language instruction concepts. Incorporating student-generated VMs as required assignments in language courses, with accompanying presentation to classmates.

Transferability

Visual metaphors have applications for instructors as a non-verbal means of communicating the relationship between topics presented in lectures. Culture-based topics have shown the best adaptability. Student applications vary between reflective exercises for formulation or refining a thesis statement, and as tools to learn through teaching.

References


Context

G1 – a five-week summer course on Arthurian Legends cross-listed between Gender Studies, History and Latin. Required as part of final presentation to class. VMs used by instructor in weekly and daily themes.10 out of 12 students participated in creating VMs; 8 wrote papers (two auditing students opting out).

G2 – a sixteen-week fall semester language course on Classical Latin. Optional for extra-credit on final Cultural Project assignment. VMs not used as weekly or daily themes by instructor. No in-class presentation of VMs. 5 out of 33 students participated.

Samples:

VMs for main theme of G2’s class: that scholars and authors project their own world into that of “King Arthur”. Here Obi Wan Kenobi©, standing in for Sir Thomas Malory, is looking through a magnifying glass (the ‘lens’ of his world) and seeing Arthur as a late 15th century knight. The white and red roses represent the houses Tudor and York, and signify how Malory’s world-view and literary style were shaped by his involvement in the Wars of the Roses.

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