

Engaging students through new literacies: the good, bad and curriculum of visual essays

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Abstract

In this article, we share our experiences working with students to read and/or write visual essays, texts that rely more heavily on images with minimal print text. We explore how students consider elements of design as they create a visual essay, which entails new forms of semiotic processing of the combinations of the visual, audio, textual, gestural and spatial. In particular, we share a case study of how one adolescent engages with an alternative to the standard essay format when he is not restricted by the use of words alone, but is encouraged to tap into the affordances of digital media, expressing himself multimodally by using words, images and sound.

Keywords

visual essay, multiliteracies, adolescents, multimodal design, digital media

Three events precipitated the research that we undertook on engaging students through the creation of visual essays. First, Janette's secondary English pre-service students were invited to participate in a mentoring project for struggling readers and writers at a neighbouring secondary school. The focus of this Ministry of Education funded mentoring project was boys and literacy and our

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task was to mentor two students each to help them prepare for the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT). In each of the four sessions with the boys, we worked with them through a variety of reading and writing tasks; but the primary focus was the five-paragraph essay as it is termed in North American schools. For the most part, teaching a formulaic approach to the five-paragraph essay did little to engage this already disenchanted group of young men, as we will explore later. The second event occurred closely on the heels of our mentoring experience. As a class we attended the *Reading for the Love of It 2009* literacy conference in Toronto and several of the students in the class went to a session on visual essays with Anthony DeSa, a Toronto secondary teacher and author. Two of those students shared their learning in a class seminar they led a few weeks later. The third event occurred when Sarah, a student in the same class, was awarded an undergraduate student research award to work over the spring and summer on one of Janette's research projects. After some consultation we decided to work together to dig deeper into this idea of visual essays and Sarah conducted a pilot project, during her final practicum, with a group of grade 10 students. With the success of this experience as a foundation, we went on to conduct a case study with a grade 9 student in order to examine more closely the process that he engaged in as he created a visual essay.

Visual essays are used to explore a piece of literature or to capture the human experience of social problems (De Sa and Flynn 2009; Fabos 2008; Kinchloe 2006; Lankshear and McClaren 1993). Reading or writing a visual essay, a text that relies more heavily on images with minimal print text, entails new forms of semiotic processing of the combinations of the visual, audio, textual, gestural and spatial (Kress 2003; Hughes, 2008; Jewitt 2008). Creating a visual essay requires students to consider elements of design (Cope and Kalantzis 2000; Jewitt 2008; Kress 2003; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001) as they choose the most appropriate features for effectively communicating their message to an audience. Design choice and multimodal understanding of the communicative ability of how modes work in concert to communicate meaning asks for producers to be critical readers in making choices (Bearne, 2003; Jewitt, 2008; Mayer, 2008; Burke and Hammett, 2009).

In this article, we share the *what*, *why* and *how* of visual essays and our experiences of analyzing and teaching them. In addition, we examine how the young man in our case study engages with an alternative to the standard essay format when he is not restricted by the use of words alone but is encouraged to tap into the affordances of digital media, expressing himself multimodally by using words, images and sound.

Teaching the 'essay' with preservice English students

At the Faculty of Education where Janette teaches and where we both conduct research, every student has a laptop with software that can be used for educational purposes, as well as ubiquitous access to the Internet. In the English methods course we begin by plunging headfirst into the rich depths of

multiple literacies: including media literacy, critical literacy, multimodal literacy and digital literacy – a depth we maintain throughout the course. Beginning in complexity stands in contrast to some English language arts teaching textbooks, which typically begin with one area of instruction, such as reading or writing for example, then address critical and multiple literacies toward the end of the text. This suggests that these newer literacy practices are peripheral topics rather than pedagogical frameworks that undergird language and literacy teaching and learning. As we strive to prepare our pre-service teachers to teach in a digital age, our goal is to guide beginning teachers in the uses of technology certainly, but more importantly, to be questioners and producers of technology itself (Selber 2004).

In today's world, literacy includes an understanding of how texts are constructed and how a variety of forms of representation work together to convey meaning. Traditional notions of literacy were once related more or less exclusively to competence in reading and writing; however, more recently an argument for a pedagogy that takes into account not only traditional print and oral literacies but also visual and multimodal representations, has emerged in the literature (Cope and Kalantzis 2000; New London Group 2000; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001; Alvermann 2002; Kress 2003). The concept of multiple literacies or 'multiliteracies' as conceived by The New London Group 2000 highlights the relevance of new forms of literacy associated with emerging multimedia, multimodal technologies. Kress (2003) argues that very soon the screen (whether TV, computer, cell phone or other emerging technology) will govern all of our communication practices and language use, with students more frequently understanding language use solely within an electronic medium. In digital environments words are no longer static black marks on a white page. Different modes of expression or 'modalities' – aural, visual, gestural, spatial and linguistic – come together in one environment in ways that reshape the relationship between the printed word and image or sound (Jewitt 2008). This change in the materiality of text – that is, the media that are used to create the text – inevitably changes the way we read or receive the text, and has important implications for the way we construct or write our own texts. As a result, to help our students understand and experience how literature brings them to a deeper understanding in life, we need to find meaningful ways to engage them with it, ways that are also part of their new media world.

Running counter to the notion that we need to provide students with opportunities to engage with new ways to explore reading and writing, many of which require time for exploration, is a packed curriculum and an over-emphasis on accountability which is manifested through standardised testing in many countries. These uneasy tensions exist for all teachers but especially for beginning teachers who might be struggling to find a balance. The mentoring project that we participated in was a huge undertaking for the school and involved partnerships between and among the school, the university, a district

school board team and a central professional network centre that would oversee the school's research results. Our class agreed to participate as a way to give back to the educational community in our area and also to gain practical experience working with at-risk adolescents. Although we had some freedom in the way we taught the learning modules, the organisers of the mentoring project had targeted very specific literacy skills that the students would need to develop to succeed on the OSSLT, a high-stakes test that grade 10 students are required to pass in order to graduate from secondary school in Ontario. The school's English Department approached the teaching of the essay through the use of a SEEC (Statement, Evidence, Explanation, Conclusion) paragraph formula, promoted by the school district on their website as a 'proven format to write winning paragraphs everytime! [sic]'. In the Ontario context, English teachers begin expository writing instruction in elementary school with the SEEC or 'hamburger' paragraph, asking students to write a topic sentence (the top bun), followed by three or four supporting sentences (the fillings – lettuce, tomato, pickles, cheese, etc.), and ending with a concluding sentence (the bottom bun). Once the student is confident with this standard paragraph format, they 'merely' have to join three of these paragraphs together, sandwiched between their introduction and conclusion. Although the SEEC paragraph is a chiefly North American phenomenon, the idea of writing down points and supporting them with textual references and examples is certainly widespread in English educational instruction. For the most part, this approach produces well-organised essays, but we were somewhat disappointed with the cookie-cutter results and later, upon reflection on the whole experience, lamented the lack of student voice this formula produced. As a result of this approach, the boys were able to create decent enough essays and, as it turned out the OSSLT test scores did increase; but how engaged were they in the process?

As a class, we began to consider alternative ways of teaching the essay and several of the students were interested in exploring the notion of visual essays so we began to explore their potential benefits. We began by viewing some sample visual essays we found on YouTube, posted there by many of Anthony Da Sa's students and based on *Romeo and Juliet*, discussing their strengths and identifying areas for improvement. After viewing and discussing one visual essay in particular – one that many of the students identified as exemplary – we became concerned about the extent to which we are taken in by the packaging of a media piece. The visual essay in question was certainly emotionally powerful and skillfully constructed in terms of the technology; however, it claimed to be about the conflict in the play but included images of the Holocaust and the Ku Klux Klan. As an essay on racism, it might have been very effective; but as an essay examining the conflict in *Romeo and Juliet*, it missed its mark. It became clear that we needed to investigate further and during her final practicum, Sarah had the opportunity to create and implement a visual essay assignment as a culminating response to a *Lord of the Flies* unit.

Sarah's story: Finding a place to start

Excited about the possibilities of using new literacies in her teaching and, in particular, the potential of the visual essay as an alternative way to get students thinking about constructing a persuasive argument, Sarah set out to design a grade 10 *Lord of the Flies* unit that would focus student attention on the power relationships in the novel while using digital media to create their visual essays. Part of the power of the visual essay is that it allows us to hear the students' voices (literally, through voice-over narration); developing voice in writing is such an important part of what we do in English language arts. Harste (2003) points out that 'writing begins in voice. If you can get students to write "what is on their minds", the rest may not take care of itself, but you will have come a long way toward creating a potentially great literacy program' (2003: 9). Given that there are few pedagogical models when it comes to implementing a new literacy like the visual essay, it was a daunting task, particularly for a beginning teacher.

Gearing the entire unit (see Appendix A for an overview and the assessment tool) towards producing a visual essay meant that we had to focus on the elements of literacy that would enable the students to complete it successfully – from the visual elements in the novel itself, to practising the combination of text and image, as well as image as text in several mini-activities or formative assignments. In doing so, we managed to hit a large number of specific curriculum expectations the Ministry sets out for this particular grade and to be honest it was hard to narrow it down to these: multiliteracy is as fluid as it is slippery. So, 'instead of thinking about literacy as an entity (something you either have or you don't), [we thought] about literacy as social practice' (Harste 2003: 8) and in addition to many collaborative activities where the students produced a multimodal piece of work (book cover, post-card, and tableau) in a variety of multimedia ways (computer, arts and crafts, kinesthetic), we wanted them cognitively to verbalize and justify their literacy through their interactions. As a result we often overheard conversations between students discussing what they needed to do, how they were going to do it, what would be effective, and how this would be received by their peers. These literary practices often focused on connections to the novel regarding the comparison of environments and social interaction between themselves and the characters in the text. They indicated that the students had personalised and embodied their literacy.

It became difficult to do all the things that we had hoped to do, especially as the students had thoughts and ideas of their own that they wanted to explore. Our role became like that of butterfly catchers – briefly interacting to study them and offer support and guidance, but releasing them quickly, careful not to damage their own innate beauty or creativity. So how much of our teaching should be the exploration of knowledge by the students themselves and how much should be directed by the teacher? And how much time could be allotted to such exploration and still cover all of the expectations of the

curriculum? Despite their level of engagement with creating the visual essay, we struggled with these issues.

Teaching newness

In designing this unit, we faced the uneasy feeling that the visual essay assignment was simply 'reproducing familiar conventional literacies through [the use] of new technologies' Lankshear and Knobel 2006: 55 – rather like 'putting old wine in new bottles' (ibid). Even calling the assignment a *visual essay* in part appeases the traditional literacy approach, as the students are not deviating too much from the accepted identity of school-literacy: the revered essay. Indeed, the culminating assignment (see Appendix A) required them to change the format but still do all the same things that they would have done in a written essay – this hardly seemed innovative. In part we also wish we had not called the assignment a 'visual' essay, as the students produced pieces that were so much more than simply visual. Upon reflection, we should have called it a 'redesigned' demonstration of literacy (Cope and Kalantzis 2000) – not nearly as catchy and, if we had, we are not entirely sure my students would have known what they needed to do.

In contrast to implementing new literacy concepts in the classroom, a veteran teacher we approached about creating visual essays in his grade 10 class for the purposes of this research backed out of our project because he felt he could not allot time for a visual essay and also complete a traditional written essay. This did little to assuage our doubts and it spoke volumes about the reluctance to move away from traditional literacies, while also to the perceived validity of multiliteracies when putting the theory into practice. As a beginning teacher, Sarah had embraced the concept of multiple literacies; but she was also slightly uneasy about maintaining a balance between a new literacies approach and the more traditional approach that was still very evident in the classrooms around her. However, when we look at how the world is evolving and the modes of communications and mediums that school-leavers are required to communicate in, in order to be successful, we are both left with no doubt that we need to prepare them for the world they are entering into.

Implementing this unit and assignment was an exciting prospect as it posed a lot of challenges and provided a great many opportunities for both the students and teachers. We began with a lot of preconceptions about the 'Millennials' (Howe and Strauss 2000) that turned out to be misconceptions. We assumed that they would have had a great deal of experience with technology and be completely computer literate; however, it was often the case that they had no experience creating something for educational purposes. They were very quick to pick up the technology we used (Movie-Maker® or equivalent depending on their lap-top), and more often than not, the students simply needed our guidance in the basics, as once they had grasped these were quite happy to 'play' with the software and figure things out as they went along. Interestingly, the students needed most help with what they

‘wanted to say’ before starting and those who structured the backbone of their thoughts before delving into the multimodal and multimedia tools at their disposal found it easier to complete the assignment.

Beyond an audience of one

Digital media allow us to write and create for an extended audience, as digital pieces tend to be more often shared with family and friends than print-based text (Hughes 2008). In asking the students to complete this assignment we required them to move beyond ‘an audience of one: the teacher,’ to social discussions of their personal interests (Haviland and McCall 1999: 64). We encouraged the students to be ‘active designers and producers of information,’ by getting them to present their visual essay in front of their peers as well as their teacher (Haviland and McCall 1999: 65). It became evident that ‘the emphasis on new literacies, and the technologies old and new that support them, is not technological literacy or information literacy, but [...] [the facilitation] of technologies by users in particular contexts for particular purposes’ (Burke and Hammett 2009: 189), as it was during these presentations that we saw the greatest shift in the students’ perception and value of their own work. The digital media also allowed them to move beyond discussing the issues with each other to producing something for a wider audience (their parents, families, school community, or globally through YouTube), moving them beyond an awareness to taking some kind of action socially (Lewison, Flint and Sluys 2002).

Positioning the students as ‘pseudo teachers’ (Jewitt 2006: 150) and having their work as the content source of the lesson was not only engaging for their peers because it moved beyond an audience of one, but provided opportunities for metacognition and critical thought. Students thought about their own work in isolation as well as in contrast to their peers, becoming involved in seeing the values associated with each visual essay – what worked, what did not work, and why. It became clear which essays were more powerfully persuasive, insofar as giving the viewer ‘chills’ or having that special something that made their thesis seem effortless and unforced, which enabled other students to understand what they might need to do to improve their own work, at least in terms of the end product. It was the collective ‘showing’ that facilitated this dispersion of information and in doing so promoted a better individual understanding of l(IT)eracy (Burke and Hammett 2009: 186). Once they had a taste of being a transmitter instead of the recipient of information, we could hardly refocus them. All they wanted to do was talk about the assignment and the choices that had been made and why. Many of the students wanted a ‘do over,’ practising the skills they had just learnt and using all the knowledge they visually attained during the presentations: armed with what was ‘better’ than theirs, they wanted a shot at improving their ‘product.’ It was key then to allow the students time to reflect and also to repeat the task (in terms of revising and editing) and having the opportunity to repeat the skills involved in completing this assignment meant that the

channels we would need to build for students to move between concepts and the learning and literacy processes: available designs, designs, and the redesigned, would need to be crossed over many times if success was their goal (Cope and Kalantzis 2000).

Case study: A closer look at the creation of a visual essay

Our experience of working with the grade 10 students on the *Lord of the Flies* helped us gain an understanding of both the rationale for and logistics of teaching visual essays. However, it also led to our desire to understand more fully the creative and critical processes that the students engaged in while working on their essays. To gain a more in-depth understanding of what happens during the creation process, we worked closely with one adolescent as he created a visual essay from start to finish. This qualitative research encompasses a descriptive case study (Merriam 1998; Stake 2000), participant observation (Erickson 1984), and side-shadowing and interviews (Welch 1998; McClay 2005) with a 13-year-old boy in his own home. A case study method is suitable for collecting in-depth stories of student learning. The case study method is also appropriate for studying a 'bounded system' (that is, the thoughts and actions of participating students) so as to understand it as it functions under natural conditions (Stake 2000). Case study research is particularistic in that it focuses on a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon. The case itself is important for what it reveals about the phenomenon and for what it might represent. This specificity of focus makes it an especially good design for questions, situations, or puzzling occurrences arising from everyday practice. As such, a case study methodology is well suited to our research. We conducted a content analysis of the transcribed interviews, audio-taped interactions, and the digital artifacts created by the student in order to identify themes informing a conceptualisation of how authoring a visual essay might change the way students construct texts and how the shift in process might reorganise or restructure their thinking about what they were writing.

Gavin was eager to participate in this research study, insisting that we use his real name after we explained the ethical protocol to him and his parents, asking, 'Why wouldn't I want to be me?' Gavin divided his time between taking Grade 9 credits predominantly online and being home-schooled. Although Gavin is an avid online gamer, his mother confessed that they had not used technology much in his schooling because she did not have a real interest in it. Consequently, we had to spend an equal amount of time facilitating his technology exposure as we did outlining the visual essay. Notwithstanding his lack of skills when using Movie Maker®, he picked up the skills very easily and we quickly became more 'guides on the side' and were able to observe more than deliver direct instruction.

We began working with Gavin, in much the same way as we had introduced the visual essay to Sarah's students during her practicum, by showing him

examples of visual essays and discussing what worked or not and how they could be interpreted. When trying to decide what topic to write his visual essay about, Gavin's passion for social justice issues became evident. He expressed an interest in the Tamil Tigers and Tiananmen Square but he only knew 'surface' information – bits and pieces he had picked up from a variety of media sources. We brainstormed key ideas and information on a number of topics before he settled on aid to Africa and began to develop a thesis. We then moved on to Movie Maker® and showed Gavin some of the program features. In addition we showed him some other things like keepvid.com, and saving files to a specific location to make them easier to retrieve. The 'keepvid' website allows users to download, for free, videos from the internet to their computer, by entering the URL (Uniform Resource Locator) of the video page.

Gavin's visual essay

Gavin's visual essay, which can be viewed at (<http://faculty.uoit.ca/hughes/Writing/WritingProjects.html>), attempts to persuade the viewer that financial aid in Africa is less helpful and more harmful to the people, economy and country as a whole. When analysing and assessing whether Gavin has been able to create and sustain an argument effectively in his visual essay, we need to take into account various elements. Does Gavin succeed in creating a thoughtful research project or is the product a simple retelling of facts? In creating visual essays students are involved in articulating their argument through images, words, sounds (voice, music and effects) layout and choices of design (colour, font, transitions, effects). We struggled with how we begin to talk about the essay's various elements. Should we look at it holistically or break the various elements down and examine them layer by layer? What follows is a detailed analysis of the multiple modes of expression Gavin employs to convince his audience, though in examining the various pieces of the essays, we fear we risk missing the 'big picture'.

The visual essay's text

Gavin immediately grabs the viewer's attention with an argumentative statement: 'As a result of a lack of diligence, foreign aid has stopped working'. The choice of musical soundtrack (John Mayer's 'Waiting on the World to Change') offers a parallel text to consider as it promotes the notion of the 'change' that is necessary to improve the situation. The language is powerful and persuasive. Although most sections of text come in blocks of two or three lines with visual images supported by explanation, in Figure 1, we see how Gavin uses sparse text to slow the pace of the reader/viewer and to build his argument to a climax, as he asks, 'But were [sic] did the money go?'.

As any effective essayist, Gavin leads his reader/viewer through his argument, but Gavin does so by juxtaposing some rather plain images (of people and places like the ones above) with images that carry a profound emotional impact like Figure 2 showing people dead as a result of corrupt government.

Figure 1**Figure 2**

There is no randomness to this visual essay, with every picture, word, and lyric being specifically chosen to direct the viewer to conclude the author's argument is justified. In Gavin's essay, text is used to dictate 'fact' and leaves no implied or inferred meaning to be concluded by the viewer other than the author's own point of view. Gavin's litany of facts lends credence to his argument, as seen in this example:

*Say there is a local mosquito net manufacturer in Africa/
each staff member supports 15 relatives with their salary/
then a charity organisation donates 100,000 free nets to that area/
that puts him and his relatives out of work/
that is a total of 120 people without money for food.*

Again, Gavin uses effective pacing as he builds his argument screen by screen. By the time we get to the end of his visual essay, his proposed solution seems not only inevitable but desired by the viewer: we want to 'see' a solution.

Gavin allows the soundtrack to speak for itself, and chooses a font with a 'personalized touch' which looks like 'writing,' though he admits this was a 'subconscious decision' – he did not want the print text to look 'computer generated'. This font appears over most of the slides although the colour of the font changes occasionally. Gavin's choice of font colour was influenced more by the colour of the image and how the font would show up rather than being symbolic in any way. When asked about his choice of fonts, Gavin comments:

It looks like writing [...] well other people put it on the computer it's kind of subconscious I guess it looks like someone was writing it [...] I needed to be able to read it, since if I chose one color I needed to see it [...] that one (the different colored text at the beginning) was a mistake, I should have changed it.

We had inferred that Gavin's choice of font was deliberate: a hand-written font to imply a personalized approach to the social justice aspect he was dealing with, that also had child-like qualities to suggest that we can solve this problem quite easily – child's play – with the black and white colouring indicating how clear-cut the solution really was. However, from his commentary this was not the case – at least overtly – there seemed much that was innate, especially indicated by the 'subconscious' decisions he was making. Perhaps being part of a world where this type of medium is commonplace encourages a nascent understanding of the processes of re-designing. Or perhaps, just as likely, we run the risk of inserting our own meaning on the visual essay and inferring things that students never intended. This raises questions about assessment practices and the need to hold writing conferences with our students as well as reinforcing the importance of process and product.

The visual essay's sound

John Mayer's song, 'Waiting on the World to Change,' has evocative lyrics that fit well with the style and theme of Gavin's visual essay while also reminding us in the Western World just how far removed we are physically and emotionally from the troubles in Africa: 'it's hard to beat the system/ when we're standing at a distance' (Mayer 2006: track 1). Although Gavin never explicitly twins the visual with the audio, the overall lyric and verse of 'it's not that we don't care/ we just know that the fight ain't fair /so we keep on waiting / waiting on the world to change' keeps repeating in the viewer's ear, perhaps trying to convince us that we shouldn't wait for the world to change. Gavin chose the song 'because [he liked] the general theme' not because it had a specific lyric that inspired him. Indeed, this song was chosen over Band Aid's

'Do they know it's Christmas' (1984) because of its 'generality' and wider appeal – a key component when one is trying to reach as many people as possible.

The visual essay's images

Gavin uses full colour images effectively. He avoids repeating images except for effect. For example, in Figure 3, Gavin uses the same image to emphasize the magnitude of the numbers (in dollars) that he is talking about.

Figure 3



These images assist Gavin in proving the gravity of the situation, as quite often huge numbers are publicized to the public without them ever really grasping the enormity of the situation. Indeed, Gavin wanted people to remember his video saying: 'well if they don't remember the entire thing, it kind of would be pointless [...] I hope people try and go to this site (<http://www.kiva.org/>) at least once [...] and if not to donate, at least [...] know' about the situation (Gavin, 2009). From his comments, it is evident that Gavin has a clear purpose in the creation of his visual essay. Gavin also notes that:

People see things normally with pictures [...] it grabs their attention [...] and people who normally might not pay attention to an essay might pay attention to a video [...] because people don't enjoy reading so much [...] a lot of people do, but some people are more willing to take 3 minutes to read this than to actually read an essay.

Indeed, this is precisely the creation of something for 'particular contexts for particular purposes' that defines new literacies (Burke and Hammett 2009: 189) though in our opinion has long been the undercurrent of literary practices.

Putting his 'big-picture' thesis into terms that allowed everyone to access the information within and see the point he was making means that this visual essay is extremely effective in terms of creating an argument, constructing supporting points and reinforcing these in a conclusion. Just like any other essay format, the author of the visual essay has the capacity to convince the viewer of his argument; however, we suggest that the visual essay goes beyond that. His conclusion promotes an idea or an alternative way of looking

at a situation – don't use aid to buy things for people/countries, but support local businesses in the home country so that they can sustain themselves. Gavin moves from being vaguely aware that there is a problem with aid in Africa to being part of the solution by creating a visual essay that encourages others to see the problem and address it. How could we hope for more as teachers?

Looking forward

We have no way of knowing, empirically, to what extent Gavin's case resembles or differs from those of other adolescents who might create visual essays of their own, therefore we make no claim that this research is generalisable. Because we seek an in-depth understanding of how students use new media in the meaning-making process, our focus has been on the particular rather than on the general. Further research is necessary if we are to develop a conceptualisation of the relationship between new media and students' writing while immersed in using new media. We need to extend this research to examine students at various ages and in different contexts as they engage in the process of creating visual essays. Our preliminary findings suggest that these students were able to develop the required essay related skills – developing a thesis, sustaining an argument with supporting evidence, persuading the reader – through the creation of visual essays. This might point to ways that literacy educators at all levels may harness technology to engage the types of reading, writing and screen modalities which are representative of our students' worlds. In part we believe these students benefitted from this type of new literacy production because the creation of the essay as a 'movie' was a format they recognized and valued. We began with students writing in a language they feel comfortable with 'instead of a voice that they do not naturally use', which encourages them to 'explore their curiosity' (Luther 2006: 68); however, we are not fully prepared to assert that all students automatically feel more comfortable with technology or demonstrating their literacy in a multimedia and multimodal format. In many cases, these skills need to be developed, since even seemingly media-savvy students have only a nascent understanding of how multiple modes of expression converge to make meaning. One of the ways we can help students develop these skills is to provide them with many opportunities to talk about their work, with peers and with the teacher, especially while in progress. To be successful the students have to use all the conventions and techniques at their disposal and understand at least the basic design principles. Although the visual essay format was prescribed by the teacher, the students had a great deal of freedom within the medium to make personal choices, i.e. still or moving pictures, colour and tone of pictures, music, voice-over narration, fonts, transitions, etc.. Discussions, conferences, and peer editing sessions all help formalise whether students are actively aware of the forms and conventions they are using. However, it is not enough for the students simply to be emotionally engaged in the visual essay, as this is not the

same as being critical and analytical. There is a need for other types of literacy to support this class-work, such as discussions on why certain elements worked and how an emotional response was built and influenced the audience for example.

One of the challenges that comes with creating visual essays is the availability of appropriate images to support the students' arguments. Many of the students resorted to finding images on the Internet which raises copyright issues. The New London Group argue that people in contemporary society 'create and innovate by hybridising' or articulating in new ways 'established practices and conventions within and between different modes of meaning' (2000:30). They use the example of popular music, which often combines cultural forms or traditions that are 'recombined or restructured' often through the use of technology. Our students are immersed in shared digital spaces that seem to encourage or expect this kind of integration and dispersion of information. Of course, such a pluralist view raises issues of ownership that are still being debated and are often the topic of media discussion. Those of us working with students in digital spaces must be cognisant of copyright, encouraging the use of copyright-free music and images. Better still, by encouraging students to create their own images (either electronically generated using draw or paint software, hand generated and scanned or using a digital camera) and music affords students the opportunity to be producers of new information in digital spaces.

Gavin's essay, and many of the *Lord of the Flies* essays that focused on some type of social justice or societal paradigm that they explored and in part resolved, tended to be the ones that were the most powerful – giving the audience 'chills'. While many of the students focused on simply making singular points with a clear direction and purpose, a few also chose to represent the paradoxes they faced in dealing with social justice or human nature issues. Facilitating the interconnections between multiple literacies is the crux to developing literacy as social practice and, where in this new space, the development of multimedia and multimodal skills occur. While 'education should lead our students to live their lives differently' (Grossberg 1994: 12) it also needs to be a place where all sorts of ideas can be considered, analyzed, investigated, and discussed, while also thinking through their consequences (Nilson and Donelson 2009). Adolescents are naturally concerned with emerging identities; and they are trying to find ways to express themselves. Through writing, adolescents can give voice to the things that concern them most. We need to provide them with opportunities to think about who they are and what they want to represent to the world through, not only what they say, but also how they say it. Writing essays using new media offers a fresh way to engage them in the writing process. It is by no means the only method educators have at their disposal to be able to enter into higher order thinking skill discussions with their students; but it

is one that creatively engages the students by getting them personally involved.

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Images used in Gavin's visual essay

[1] Mobutu

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[2] Mobutu Swiss Residence

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[3] Stephen Dunmore

[Picture of Stephen Dunmore]. Available at BBC, London, UK. Web site: http://www.bbc.co.uk/charityappeals/news/new_charity_chair.shtml (accessed 07.10.09).

[4] Singita Lebombo Lodge located in Kruger National Park, South Africa

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Figure 4



[6] Money – Trillion Dollars

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Appendix A

Student Name:

Date:

Teacher: Ms. Tolley

Course: English, Grade 10

***Lord of the Flies* visual essay**

After reading William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, you will create a visual essay. A visual essay is usually a video using a **combination of any of the**

following items: video clips, songs, lyrics, personal videos, pictures, drawings, etc. The visual essay is a new and alternative version to the traditional essay where you are able to bring in your own interests and apply them to a text used in the classroom through the **use of technology**. For this assignment, you will need to select photos, videos, movie clips, songs, etc that document your chosen aspect of this novel and **present them in a visual format to the rest of the class**.

This video will be **3–5 minutes in length** and must clearly focus on one theme, allegory, theory, or aspect in the novel. In addition to the media requirements, you must **also include a minimum of three quotations from the novel** as supporting evidence for your theme/allegory/theory/aspect throughout the course of your visual essay.

This is an **individual assignment** and you should consider taking your own photos, making your own movies or using your own music where possible; however, you must **protect the privacy and safety of your subjects** by asking their permission to be used in this assignment. If you use other sources of media (google images, stock photo sites), you **document where you obtained your media (Bibliography) in a separate document and ensure you adhere to any copyright limitations**.

Consider the following:

Audience: for this assignment, your audience will be your peers and teacher(s) in this course;

Purpose: the visual essay should help your peers understand key points about *Lord of the Flies* in a creative fashion;

Product: the visual essay should be produced using technology (Photo Story, Movie Maker, etc) and be between 3-5 minutes long.

Visual essay – checklist/technical requirements:

- ☐ **1%:** Must include a personal reflection/aspect;
 - **Example:** if you chose to create a visual essay on theme of power struggles, you could include a reference to a time when you felt like you were in a power struggle, or when were you the victim of someone exerting power over you or visa versa, etc
- ☐ **3%:** Visual Essay must include three (3) applicable quotes from the novel to support your visual essay;
- ☐ **1%:** Visual Essay must incorporate a thesis;
 - **Example:** you could pose a question or have a statement you provide insight on
- ☐ **1%:** Visual Essay must use sound;

- **Example:** songs, lyrics, instrumental music could be used for all or a portion of the visual essay. NOTE: Keep offensive language in mind when selecting your song and remember any offensive language wishing to be used must be approved by the teacher in advance.
- **2%:** Student narration required: at some point you must speak about what you are presenting
 - **Example:** you could read your thesis/question
- **1%:** Visual Essay must use visual support for thesis (not just text);
 - **Example:** movies, images, photographs to be used for the visual essay
- **1%:** Visual Essay is 3-5 minutes long.

Visual essay rubric

Overall Expectation

MDV.03 Creating Media Texts: create a variety of media texts for different purposes and audiences, using appropriate forms, conventions, and techniques.

Specific Expectations

- LA2.03 **Clarity and Coherence – ORAL 2.3:** communicate in a clear, coherent manner, using a structure and style effective for the purpose, subject matter, and intended audience
- MD3.02 **Form – MEDIA 3.2:** select a media form to suit the topic, purpose, and audience for a media text they plan to create, and explain why it is a highly appropriate choice
- LS1.05 **Extending Understanding of Texts – READING 1.5:** extend understanding of texts, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, by making appropriate and increasingly rich connections between the ideas in them and personal knowledge, experience, and insights; other texts; and the world around them

Appendix 1

Performance Criteria	Level 4: (8-10)	Level 3: (7-7.9)	Level 2: (6-6.9)	Level 1: (5-5.9)
Knowledge/Understanding Assignment: Develops and describes a thesis in the video which is supported by specific references and examples from the novel .	Development and description of thesis thoroughly connects to reference and examples used to support argument 10 9 8	Development and description of thesis considerably connects to reference and examples used to support argument 7.9 7.45 7	Development and description of thesis adequately connects to reference and examples used to support argument 6.9 6.45 6	Development and description of thesis somewhat connects to reference and examples used to support argument 5.9 5.45 5
Basic Identifiers: Use knowledge/reference of at least 3 examples from the novel to demonstrate understanding and interpretation .	Cites 3 or more obvious examples of information/quotations from the novel 10 9 8	Cites 2 obvious examples of information/quotations from the novel 7.9 7.45 7	Cites 1 obvious examples of information/quotations from the novel 6.9 6.45 6	Cites no obvious examples of information/quotations from the novel 5.9 5.45 5
Thinking Analysis of Thinking: Essay analyses and interprets the implicit (indirect) and explicit (direct) messages in the novel to support/counter thesis .	Essay analyses and interprets implicit and explicit messages in the novel with excellent applicability to the thesis. 10 9 8	Essay analyses and interprets implicit and explicit messages in the novel with good applicability to the thesis. 7.9 7.45 7	Essay analyses and interprets implicit and explicit messages in the novel with some applicability to the thesis. 6.9 6.45 6	Essay analyses and interprets implicit and explicit messages in the novel with limited applicability to the thesis. 5.9 5.45 5

Appendix 1 Continued

Performance Criteria	Level 4: (8-10)	Level 3: (7-7.9)	Level 2: (6-6.9)	Level 1: (5-5.9)
Communication Student communicates information effectively: The student effectively conveys their topic in unique way, demonstrating their own opinions and original thoughts on the novel.	Student's own voice is extremely evident in the visual essay. Unique ideas are used to a tremendous degree. 10 9 8 Essay makes insightful inferences that logically analyse the novel 10 9 8	Student's own voice is usually evident in the visual essay. Unique ideas are used to a large degree. 7.9 7.45 7 Essay makes complex inferences that logically analyse the novel 7.9 7.45 7	Student's own voice is occasionally evident in the visual essay. Unique ideas are used to a moderate degree. 6.9 6.45 6 Essay makes adequate inferences that logically analyse the novel 6.9 6.45 6	Student's own voice is rarely evident in the visual essay. Unique ideas are used to a slight degree. 5.9 5.45 5 Essay makes limited inferences that logically analyse the novel 5.9 5.45 5
Communicative Insight: Essay makes logical inferences based on analysis of information from the novel				
Application Student uses evidence from a text to support judgments: a minimum of three quotations from <i>Lord of the Flies</i> are required throughout the video and must support their argument.	The quotations from the text are extremely well used. The evidence supports the argument to a tremendous degree. 10 9 8	The quotations from the text are mainly well used. The evidence supports the argument to a large degree. 7.9 7.45 7	The quotations from the text are somewhat well used. The evidence supports the argument to a moderate degree. 6.9 6.45 6	The quotations from the text are slightly well used. The evidence supports the argument a little. 5.9 5.45 5

Appendix 1 Continued

Performance Criteria	Level 4: (8-10)	Level 3: (7-7.9)	Level 2: (6-6.9)	Level 1: (5-5.9)
Student adapts a work of literature into another media form: The student effectively adapts a theme/ allegory/theory/aspect from <i>Lord of the Flies</i> and converts it into the visual essay, using a variety of media	Student implemented a high degree of technology skills in their visual essay to adapt the novel. 10 9 8	Student implemented a substantial amount of technology skills in their visual essay to adapt the novel. 7.9 7.45 7	Student implemented a selected amount of technology skills in their visual essay to adapt the novel. 6.9 6.45 6	Student implemented a limited amount of technology skills in their visual essay to adapt the novel. 5.9 5.45 5