Response

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In speaking for the three of us, Eric clearly states our belief "that the linkages that connect the composing processes they [visual artists] manipulate to create their work seem absurdly obvious." We learn this connection anew each time we work with another visual artist. And because we in the world of teaching writing have stolen so many of their ideas—most obviously portfolios—why shouldn't we look further to see writing in the context of a visual world?

The close relationship between the composing process in writing and the composing process in art is one of our key points. I remember the first time I saw the drafts of Degas' horse sketches at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. As an English teacher, my initial reaction was, *Now I can explain the role of revision in writing by using visual examples.* Some of the sketches clearly had minuscule variations; others demonstrated large changes in perspective. When I saw the final draft, I knew this visual metaphor would work in the classroom. No one had marked the sketches with circled mistakes; the changes were the artist's, the results of *seeing* the composition critically in a different way. This action correlates directly with what we want our students to do in revising their writing: to examine their ideas critically and modify the text to reflect that new way of *seeing*.

If we are going to explore the connections between visual and verbal learning, we must overcome the fear of inadequacy that Eric describes so well. When we are put in the position of using an unfamiliar medium, we resemble our colleagues in other disciplines when they are asked to teach writing. We fear that since we are not masters of the visual arts or visual artists, we shouldn't be using the visual arts in teaching writing.

By taking this risk, however, we model learning and writing as colearners with our students. If we approach writing as our students do, through discovery, perhaps we will likewise gain a better under-

standing of this shared experience. It will also open a new kind of dialogue between us. I still remember with delight not knowing what kind of bizarre still life awaited us in the art studio until I arrived with my class to write (see Chapter 5). If I had stopped by the art classroom to look at the design before class, I could not have reacted genuinely to this new visual experience, and the poem that resulted would not have reflected my spontaneous response to my visual surroundings. The students were amazed at what the still life triggered in them, and the discussion that followed demonstrated critical thinking on a level that required active participation from the beginning.

Eric's Activity

The added bonus of Eric's workshop activity is that it gives us a better understanding of the position we put our colleagues in when we ask them to use writing in teaching their disciplines. Like Eric, I have found that teachers in other disciplines are eager to try visual techniques, and that gets me in the door much faster than if I suggest writing across the curriculum first. In "drawing" a student, the focus is on the student, not on creating a work of art. It is an exercise in creating metaphors for our writing, in trying to describe, and *picture* a person through a medium other than words. My drawing is the one Eric labeled "the norm." As "visually challenged" as I may be, I have to admit I did not respond in any of the ways Eric found common. I've come to accept my limitations as an artist, and in leading numerous writing workshops I have learned the value of risk taking. However, these reactions ("I've never been good at drawing," "I don't know what you want") are the very ones our students give in class when we ask them to write. This activity makes participants sensitive to their own students' experience. It puts them in the role of a learner who does not know the answer or the "secret formula" the teacher knows. The last time I did this activity with a group of secondary English teachers, we all found it difficult to create the drawing without using words. This frustration of not having a "language" with which to communicate surprised us all.

I remember many years ago sharing a writing experience with poet Donald Hall. A group of us exchanged first drafts for feedback, as did Mr. Hall. When it came time to respond to his draft, we all darted around the issue trying to say something vague and complimentary about the piece. Finally, he confided that his writing is mediocre at best until it goes through many drafts. That experience taught us that not all writers use the same process.

Eric's workshop activity also reinforces the idea that there may not be one *right* answer. For many participants this is a surprise or something they have long forgotten. The anxiety associated with committing something to paper, whether in writing or in "pictures" that others may see, becomes concrete—we cannot deny what we have created. Our spoken words can be denied, explained, even mumbled! Ownership of marks on a piece of paper is harder to sidestep.

Learning Styles

Eric also mentions how important students' learning styles and personality profiles may be in their success or failure in our educational systems. His own experience in using visual note taking in school, and the teacher's reaction, is not unique. As he reminds us, we frequently see our writing classes as totally verbal. For this reason especially, I believe a visual environment is essential in a writing center. In the Caldwell Writing Center at the McCallie School, for instance, whether they are working at computers or large tables, students are surrounded by "visuals." Two sides of the center have large windows framing the hallway on one side and a view from Missionary Ridge of Chattanooga and its distant mountains on the other. On any given day, spectacular skies, rainbows, even the practice flights of the Blue Angels, will stop us from writing or inspire writing. The other two walls are covered with giant art posters from the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festivals, prints of original landscapes, purchased photographs of world-famous mountains or sights I have captured, and cartoons that stimulate students' imaginations.

Eric's doodled symbols were his verbal cues to the words, ideas, and relationships he had learned in class that day. Many artists, naturalists, scientists, photographers, journalists, and writers of all sorts use field journals or notebooks that include sketches and words. An artist friend visited the Provence region of France, where Vincent van Gogh lived and worked. Her intent was to see what he had seen and create her own watercolor interpretations for her journal. In looking through the pages of her journal, I was more fascinated by the mixture of art and words than by her watercolor landscapes, because I realized that she had substituted visual symbols for the words she did not know in French. One delightful double page spread recorded a special lunch she had attended one sunny day. She had drawn pictures of each food amid the words she jotted to describe the host and hostess, the sequence of courses, what was said, and so on. By the time I had read to dessert under a willow tree

and eyed the painted strawberries, I was salivating. She created the entire mood by combining the visual (in translucent watercolors) and the verbal (in black ink).

Eric's discussion of learning styles touches on an issue many secondary educators have been dealing with for years. A variety of learning styles inventories (Dunn and Dunn 1978; Fleming and Mills 1992), including the NASSP Learning Style Profile (1986), are now available as computer software that can be easily scored and evaluated. Boarding schools and colleges have been using them to pair dormitory roommates according to best study times, the effect of light and sound on reading, and sleeping requirements, for example. Classroom teachers and parents of secondary students have attended inservice programs so that they can approach learning through as many teaching styles as possible. Teachers are encouraged to give directions orally, to write them on the board or hand out copies, and even to offer alternative assignments when necessary. Visually impaired students qualify for books on tape, dyslexic and dysgraphic students are given extra time to read or write responses on tests, and ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) students frequently get hands-on activities to focus them on their learning. Unfortunately, knowing that these various learning styles may coexist in one classroom does not make the job easier for trained professional educators, but it does make students more aware of how they learn.

Eric's approach puts more responsibility for learning on learners themselves, once they know their dominant learning style. The VARK inventory (Fleming and Mills 1992) seems to lend strong support to the need to integrate visual and verbal writing instruction. If teachers could focus basically on this method of instruction, perhaps this pedagogical shift might ensure improved learning and writing.

Just as Eric has questioned his own teaching of writing in his college-level course, those of us on the secondary level wonder if we can reach the students who are there for reasons other than learning—warmth in winter, meals, a place to store their belongings (a locker), a shower, and people who care whether or not they are alive. I remember many senior skills classes of students and seeing sparks of learning with their writing only when they were given the opportunity to mix the visual and the verbal. One year, I raised enough money from a variety of sources to take the class to see a Broadway musical. Those eighteen-year-olds squirmed in their seats with the excitement of six-year-olds, and they had no trouble finding something to write about the next day.

Another year, before the luxury of videos, individual students viewed Super 8 film loops of historical events and scientific projects.

Many undertook self-motivated research projects based on these short films. One project in particular that fascinated me was on Siamese fighting fish. After viewing the film loop, Harry, a regular sleeper in my English class, decided he would get a red and a blue Siamese fish from the biology lab and bring them to our classroom in a large aquarium, separating the fish until he was ready. We set a class period aside for Harry's experiment. He invited other students and created a scoreboard. Harry had even taped labels for each fish—Pink Pad and Big Blue—to the front of the aquarium. The scoreboard included such items as: two points for forcing the opponent to back up, and three points for raising a dorsal fin. I suggested that we needed a referee to call the fight before either fish was seriously injured. He agreed that I could handle that role as long as I allowed some points to accumulate; there had to be some action for his experiment!

By the time class started and the divider between the two fish was removed, we had double the enrollment in the room and cheering sections for Pink Pad and Big Blue. Harry explained the rules and held chalk in hand ready to record points for each side. The fight was on! In less than ten minutes, I called the fight with Big Blue the victor. Half the students disappeared to whatever class they were skipping, and Harry was writing down his observations and asking his classmates for input. After visits to the biology teacher to get more information on these fish, Harry wrote a paper most seniors would have been proud to claim. The use of the visual with the verbal had done the trick. Of course, there were some rumors that Harry may have been taking some bets on the fight, but we never found any proof of that.

Not surprisingly, I discovered that it wasn't just the visual that fascinated Harry; he had seen lots of movies. He was intrigued by the black-and-white format of authentic historical film. From fish, he next turned to the Scopes Trial, stopping and starting the short Super 8 film loop on frames of William Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow. "These were real people, weren't they?" he whispered to me after the third day of viewing. "Yes," I said, "and the trial still has an influence on the way people think." I found him a copy of *Inherit the Wind*, and Harry took off for the library to find everything he could on the Scopes Trial, Bryan, and Darrow. Within a week, Harry had made himself an authority on the topic and written an entire research paper in which he proposed that Bryan did not die of a heart attack: he was murdered. When he presented his paper to the class, he once again used the film loop and stopped it two or three times to try to prove his point. Today I have seen many Harrys getting the same kind of excitement from viewing videos to inspire their research and writing.

Postscript

As learners and as teachers, all of us may have different styles, but sensitivity to the learning styles of others may help us revise our teaching styles or shift our pedagogical paradigms. The three of us are not suggesting that we all teach the same way. Instead, we are stating that as teachers of writing, we must be aware of the role visual elements play in students' learning processes. If we are aware, we can find ways to encourage students' active involvement in their writing.