

# Response

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Dick has hit on some key points in this chapter, and I like it for the following reasons:

- *The lessons learned in the monument design project go far beyond what we frequently do in a discipline-specific course.* As Dick states, “By combining the visual and the verbal, the course gave students multiple ways to internalize what they read and saw—and it enabled them to objectify what was so much a part of their own cultural history.” Often we might encourage students to combine the visual and the verbal, but we allow them to get caught up in emotional reaction. We also need to emphasize the importance of *thinking* and *looking*, reading and writing.
- *The important role of collaboration in this project cannot be overlooked.* The backgrounds of Dick as historian and Tom as artist complement each other, as do their experience with writing across the curriculum. From the very start, the two instructors develop a cooperative involvement, make their goals and intentions clear to each other, and design a course that both are enthusiastic about teaching. Having been involved in such collaborations, I would emphasize how important their freewriting and sharing session is. It takes honesty and flexibility to make a collaboration work. Each instructor is also willing to take the time to make the course work effectively, with planning sessions, field trips, and so on.
- *Students are engaged and empowered throughout the course.* As Dick states, besides learning how the Civil War motivated memorial activities (verbal and visual), they want students to “experience the ability of both images and words to express powerful ideas and emotions [using monuments].” Although the teachers give the major assignments to enable students to have a common foundation of knowledge and experience, they also encourage students

to take over the classes by leading discussions, selecting what group they will represent in the major project, and creating their own original models. In other words, the teachers become the facilitators once the students have mastered what they need to know.

- *The hands-on experience helps students overcome their fear of taking risks.* The students who are not artists fear testing their visual skills or exposing them to the scrutiny of “real artists”; those who are studio art majors fear showing their verbal weaknesses. Dick describes this problem as “but a single manifestation of a dichotomy endemic in the western cultural tradition: *the visual and physical are often set in opposition and subjugated to the verbal and intellectual.*” With teachers like Dick and Tom, these students are inspired to get involved visually, verbally, *and* intellectually through the use of tangible objects, such as the historical artifacts loaned by a local historian.
- *This course is a true multimedia experience for students and teachers.* To the visual Dick and Tom add aural and tactile devices to immerse students in their learning and elicit a verbal response. From the opening day of class when they play Dvořák’s *American Quartet* and show slides of Gettysburg and its monuments, these teachers include as many of the senses as possible. Handling Civil War guns in a classroom or walking the ground and examining statues at Gettysburg provide learning experiences that reading and class lectures cannot offer.
- *Finally, Dick and Tom make clear the connection between the visual and the verbal.* The course projects involve teams modeled after those that designed monuments in the late nineteenth century. Yes, the teachers select the teams, but their selection is based on surveys intended to balance talent, just as similar committees would have done in the previous century. As involved as students are in the connection of all these elements, the teachers have kept their criteria credible historically and create a *real* visual and writing project.

## Thematic Variations

### *Assumptions*

Before I talk about variations on this assignment, I want to make several points. It is perhaps wise to remember that most secondary teachers do not have the luxury of such a small class, an entire quarter to devote to one topic, the financial means or facilities to cast monu-

ments in bronze, or the flexibility to take class trips out of town. For many, just planning a one-hour bus trip to and from a site becomes a jungle of paperwork, permission slips, chaperones, class coverage, funds, and so on. Now that we have established these assumptions, let's look at some ways we can apply what Dick has so beautifully described.

### *Involving Students Visually and Verbally*

Since this chapter has established that images and words can express powerful ideas and emotions, let's try a few possibilities. Several years ago, I worked with my students on writing persuasive essays and satire. Some just didn't seem to get the point. A cousin of one of the students, a political cartoonist, visited our class and explained that images in his cartoons conveyed strong emotions but in a different way than their essays. The ability to draw an idea that would take several pages to explain in words impressed students. But they said such things as, "You're talented," "You don't understand what we're trying to say." To make his point, the artist asked them to take a strong stand on an issue of importance to them; together they created a political cartoon. The cartoon shows the performers taking all the gold medals, posing, smiling, and pushing the writers out of the spotlight. The students saw their feeling that performers get the glory for "performing" what the writers have created and clearly presented it in the cartoon. Whenever students have difficulty getting started on a persuasive essay, I have them look at the cartoon to remember how we visualize what we feel.

Perhaps a collection of political cartoons demonstrating a particular point of view in a history class, or any course, could begin the process of writing. Students could draw their own cartoons to express their point of view on the issue and refer to their cartoons to focus on the factors they want to mention in an essay.

### *Civil War Trip Variations*

The trip to the Gettysburg battlefield is an extravagance for many of us, but the idea could work just as well in any town with a war memorial or public statue. An activity for a history class, an American literature class, or an art class might be to research the town or city, find out the building restrictions for a memorial or statue, and examine existing physical spaces and historical sites in the immediate area. Teams of students would research and design a memorial for the town, find an appropriate site, meet town requirements, and write the inscription and a dedication speech. Some communities might even encourage

such a project and build the best design. A national bricklayers' association in one city held a contest to elicit designs for works of art for a restored section of town. The bricklayers built the winning designs and the designers received a cash award and participated in the construction.

### *Connecting the Visual and Verbal with Hands-On Activities*

While watching a television news show one evening, I learned about a successful photographer who has given up his career to teach students in an inner city school how to use cameras. By having students focus on others, the photographer has taught them how to see, to question, and to critique. A series of the photographs, accompanied by a statement from the student photographers about the composition and subject are now on display at the city art museum. This is a powerful way to teach writing: by encouraging students to focus on something, photograph it, develop the film, and write about the photograph. The result is a composition that is visual and verbal.

Michael Lowry, a biology teacher, uses a hands-on activity along with writing as his 45-minute unit test. Students have access to clay, colored pens and pencils, scissors, and colored paper. In this limited time, they are asked to demonstrate their knowledge of cells by using any of these materials to create a model of, for example, a phase of mitosis. As each student completes his or her model, Michael photographs it and gives the Polaroid print to the student, who moves on to the writing center to write a description of it. The photograph is stapled to the finished text and submitted to the teacher before the end of the period. It is amazing how fast students are able to complete the process.

Michael and I have spoken about using a video camera or digital camera the next time so the pictures are larger and clearer, but that would eliminate the immediacy of having the picture nearby during writing—students often put their photos in the paper stand and look at them as they type. A student's knowledge of a particular concept, applied in a visual world with hands-on involvement and expressed in writing, becomes a tool for learning in new ways.

### *Constructing Narratives*

Dick and Tom's narrative history word game may sound aural and verbal, but it also involves spatial skill. I see some other possibilities. When I teach Whitman's "Song of Myself" in American literature courses, I have students pick their favorite lines to bring to class. Then we go around the room reading our first choices, even if someone else

has already read those lines. Students begin to see the importance of repetition and pattern in a poem. We then read the same lines going around the room in the other direction and vote on which order is more effective. Rhythm, rhyme, balance of ideas, connection of images all become part of our discussion. What if students also brought in a visual image with the lines they selected? We could try them in different sequences to see how the images work with the written words. I want to try this a few times to see if the visual reinforces the structure of the poem. I think my next natural inclination would be to ask students to pick a visual that is not theirs and try to respond to it in a fresh twentieth-century Whitmanesque line.

Again, in classes across the disciplines, I can think of ways that teachers could encourage a better understanding of the construction of narratives by using visuals. For schools with performing arts programs, such collaborative activities are natural. Dance, television, drama, music, and writing majors can form teams to create their own civilizations once they have been given some background on civilizations that have existed and survived. We did such an activity at Red Bank Regional, grouping students so that there were representatives of each major on every team. Each team had to create a language and a culture with its own set of myths or religion. The teams were given a week, meeting one period per day, before the presentations began. In their evaluations of this project, students mentioned how much they missed a written language and found that to be an important step after they began to create visual interpretations of what they were trying to say. Body language, sounds, and visual interpretation became extremely important. They certainly appreciated their own language after this exercise.