

Visual Journaling as a Method for Critical Thinking in Writing Courses

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Introduction

Assigning out-of-class readings and reflections in my undergraduate rhetoric and composition courses was often one of the more challenging aspects of my curriculum design. Throughout any semester, I was sure to provide students with prompts to reflect, between classes, on their writing processes, but my students often submitted mechanical, voiceless, summarized thoughts on readings and their experiences writing. To me, it appeared that the majority of them viewed these out-of-class assignments as tasks to complete as quickly as possible without pushing themselves to think critically. Csikszentmihalyi (1996/2013) noted that people are “born with two contradictory sets of instructions: a conservative tendency, made up of instincts for self-preservation, self-aggrandizement, and saving energy, and an expansive tendency made up of instincts for exploring, for enjoying novelty and risk—the curiosity” (p. 11). While the first tendency requires few outside influences to motivate behavior, “the second can wilt if it is not cultivated” (p. 11). My out-of-class assignments seemed to encourage students to conserve energy for activities other than critical thinking; thus, I knew something needed to change.

Critical Thinking, the Arts, and Writing Courses

The second tendency described by Csikszentmihalyi (1996/2013) can be cultivated through what bell hooks (2010) called “engaged pedagogy,” “a teaching strategy that aims to restore students’ will to think, and their will to be fully self-actualized” (p. 8). Instructors can use engaged pedagogy in their courses by assigning activities that invite students to construct knowledge while being honest, open, and authentic in a setting where all voices are valuable and are provided the same amount of time to be heard. Learning is self-directed, active, and individualized based on students’ experiences. Engaged pedagogy also provides opportunities for students to tell their stories and personally connect to material (hooks, 2010). Using engaged pedagogy, educators can help students “learn to embrace the joy and power of thinking itself” (hooks, 2010, p. 8). Hooks (2010) defined the “heartbeat of critical thinking” as “the longing to know—to understand how life works” (p. 7). Her definition involves “first discovering the who, what, when, where, and how of things [. . .] and then utilizing that knowledge in a manner that enables you to determine what matters most” (p. 9); therefore, critical thinking “requires discernment” (p. 9), as it is a method for approaching ideas in order to “understand core, underlying truths” (p. 9) rather than superficial, obvious, or surface-level answers.

Art-making can serve as a tool for enacting hooks’s (2010) engaged pedagogy. It is a way of knowing the self and information (Allen, 1995) as well as stabilizing ideas and stimulating reflection (Dewey, 1910/1997) by requiring students to create physical representations of their ideas and imagine how they should construct them. Aesthetic education, or learning through art-making, involves students paying attention to

appearances, sounds, and forms to come to new insights and understandings (Greene, 1980). If thinking is, according to Efland (2002), a process of making symbolic representations of the external environment, then art-making enacts this process, which can then lead to “imaginative reorderings” where students can “predict new situations in [their] environments and thus make adaptive responses” (Efland, 2002, p. 18).

In the field of composition studies, scholars such as Berthoff (1975), Dunn (2001), and Hanzalik (2019) have discussed art-making in ways that are consonant with hooks’s (2010) engaged pedagogy. Art-making provides a way for students to experiment with nonalphabetic methods of expression that reveal multiple ways to compose and showcase knowledge (Dunn, 2001). Berthoff (1975) explained that imaginative activities require students to engage in composing processes that become acts of knowing and making sense of the world. Hanzalik (2019) found that art-making supported research in her writing courses by creating opportunities for students to make experimental and thoughtful decisions in their composing processes.

Visual Journaling and Critical Thinking

Visual journaling is a particular arts-based tool that works with hooks’s (2010) engaged pedagogy in writing courses. It involves composing images and alphabetic text to “record the nuances of life’s experiences” (Ganim & Fox, 1999, p. 1). This recording of nuanced experiences can help students make discoveries about their learning and then use the recordings to develop their thinking further. Ganim and Fox (1999) explained that visual journaling is an inclusive practice because instead of focusing on artistic talent, it is used to express “an imagistic language whose alphabet is color, shape, line, form and texture” (p. 6). Students are invited to deviate from linear methods of displaying knowledge they may be accustomed to and instead explore, creating opportunities to put forth energy into thinking. While visual journaling is primarily focused on how images can express thoughts and feelings, words are used to “dialogue” (p. 6) with the images.

Scholarship on visual journaling highlights the aspects of critical thinking that are promoted by engaged pedagogy. Visual journaling requires discernment (hooks, 2010). Students must consider a variety of materials beyond the alphabetic text to convey their message, remixing, editing, and composing in thoughtful ways. The result, according to Hutchinson (2018), is that visual journaling takes people “off auto-pilot” (p. 1) because they must engage with materials in experimental and nonlinear ways. Additionally, engagement connects to Hanzalik’s (2019) point that critical thinking should involve students making thoughtful decisions in their learning.

Visual journaling also serves as a tool “to determine what matters most” (hooks, 2010, p. 9) through critical reflection. Haas et al. (2020) drew on Kember et al.’s (2008) definition of critical reflection as a type of reflection that is deeper than standard reflective practices because it examines underlying beliefs and habits and develops awareness of practices in a process of learning; thus, Haas et al. (2020) viewed critical reflection as “firmly rooted in critical thinking” (p. 1). Visual journaling provides nonlinear and nuanced ways to reflect, which can, in turn, bring students to new insights about their beliefs and processes. Hutchinson (2018) noted that visual journaling assists people in taking stock of their experiences, the information they consume, and the tasks they perform daily to get a “macro view” of their lived experiences and an opportunity to “course-correct” (p. 2) if they do not like the trajectory. When visual journaling, students develop a “silent language” that reveals

truths about their thoughts, feelings, and emotions “more fluently than words” (Ganim & Fox, 1999, p. 1). The result is that visual journaling can help students see course content and themselves in ways they might not when solely using alphabetic text to compose, leading to disruptions and developments in their knowledge that could promote change in themselves and the world around them.

As hooks (2010) explained, engaged pedagogy facilitates critical thinking. Visual journaling engages students because it creates personal connections to the course curriculum. Ganim and Fox (1999) stated that visual journaling “involves one’s inner vision to imagine what a thought, feeling or emotional reaction would look like if it were expressed as a color, shape or image” (p. 1). These inner visions are personal, less filtered, and diverse and express aspects of students’ lived experiences that are often excluded from learning environments.

Visual Journaling with Rhetoric and Composition Students

Application and Method

I decided to use visual journaling in my second-year, art-based rhetoric and composition course as a way to invite students to think critically in their out-of-class homework assignments. I anticipated the combination of visual and alphabetic responses to move students from attempting to conserve energy on their assignments to instead explore and take creative risks. Students were to complete the assignment with an additional reflection explaining their stylistic choices and the meanings within their works. Then, they would post pictures of their journal entries and their reflections on the course’s online discussion board so that their peer group members and I could provide feedback. In total, students completed nine visual journal entries over the course of the semester. I created prompts about assigned readings and their lived experiences, including the experience of completing the major writing assignments for my course. The prompts were designed to align with hooks’s (2010) engaged pedagogy (personal connections with materials), specifically critical thinking (discernment in decision-making).

After the semester ended, I invited students to provide feedback on their experiences in my arts-based writing courses by participating in IRB-exempt semi-structured interviews, which included questions specifically about visual journaling. For the students who agreed to participate in the study, I also used their visual journal assignments and their reflections from the semester to triangulate data and explore nuances of their experiences.

Results

I was unsure how visual journaling would be received by students because I was accustomed to them putting less effort into their out-of-class assignments when they were worth less points than major papers; however, early on in the semester, the majority of my students seemed to spend a great deal of time and effort not only in creating aesthetically pleasing visual journal entries but also in their design choices and reflections. Tables 1 and 2 showcase entries from two student participants’ visual journals. The prompts for these assignments were as follows:

- Prompt 1: Please respond to the reading by finding ways to highlight the important ideas/themes. Most of the readings for our course will ask you to

consider the purpose of writing or the writing process. Including quotations or words from the reading in your journal entry could be effective, as well as making personal connections.

- Prompt 2: Create a journal entry that reflects how you felt about making the first art project/writing and presenting it. You may choose an overall feeling or design different parts based on how you felt at different times.

These journal prompts were selected to highlight two ways visual journaling can be used in courses: to respond to readings and to reflect after major assignments. Data collected from the journals of the two students, who selected “Avery” and “Margot” as pseudonyms to protect their identities, illustrate hooks’s (2010) engaged pedagogy and demonstrate critical thinking as discernment in decision-making.

Visual journaling was a form of engaged pedagogy (hooks, 2010) for Avery and Margot because it provided ways for them to connect their personal experiences to course content. They reflected on their past and present experiences deeply, providing details and connecting to metaphors that could help articulate their experiences. But Avery and Margot also explored their habits and beliefs, considering where they come from and what might bring about change (see Kember et al., 2008). In Avery’s first visual journal entry in Table 1, she recalled times that her desire for perfection made her less motivated to revise, and reading the course text, Lamott’s *Bird by Bird*, invited her to consider a new way of viewing herself as a writer. If even what she called a “real writer” struggles with similar thoughts that she does, what is possible for her own drafting process? She could find the rainbow, too. Margot wrote in her first visual journal reflection that she feels “helpless” when she thinks others may view her writing negatively but also identifies a strength in her poetic process, how seeds of ideas grow within her and motivate her to continue taking risks. In both of their second visual journal entries, Avery and Margot moved from the surface, external experiences of sharing their first drafts with their peers into critical explorations of what is changing within them. They both noted that their first draft sharing was a place where they were vulnerable, causing them to think towards the future of utilizing their voices in their writing again. Instead of summarizing Lamott’s text for the assignment, they thought deeply about the meaning of the writing but also how they received the information and how it connected to recurring themes and patterns in their composing processes.

In terms of discernment in decision-making, they revealed in their entries that they considered many aspects of their design choices and connected personally to both visual journal prompts included in Tables 1 and 2. In Table 1, Avery is open about her perfectionism and doubt in her writing process. She alluded to her first journal entry when stating she is trying to “find the rainbow” in her writing that will help her overcome those obstacles, which is a theme from the course reading. In her second entry, she created an image of a chick hatching to represent how she felt expressing herself in her first paper sequence, which she described as a process of opening up and finding her voice. In Table 2, Margot’s first journal entry is centered around types of writing that allow her to be passionate and less restricted, another theme from the assigned reading. In her second journal entry, like Avery, Margot used a metaphor that evokes feelings of freedom and limitlessness: a rocket ship going into space, with celestial bodies swirling around it. In her reflection, she wrote about having the opportunity to consider deeply how she feels and what she desires to convey. It is clear from

Table 1 (continued)

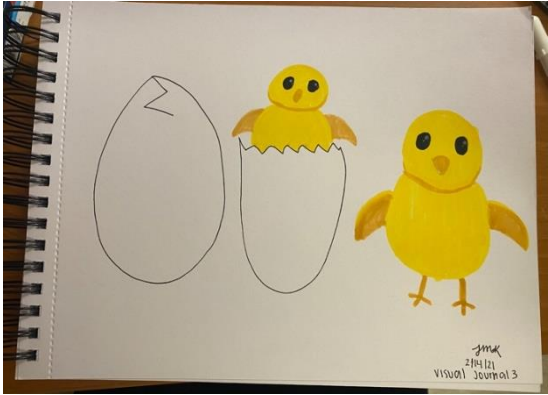
Visual Journal Prompt	Visual Journal	Reflection Excerpt
<p>Prompt 2: Reflection on first art project/paper sequence</p>		<p>“When I read the prompt and started to create my project, I felt like I was opening up [. .] I don't tend to advertise my love for musicals and theatre unless asked, because from experience, I just feel too vulnerable and I feel judged sometimes. So, I felt like I was in a shell, if you will, trying to break out. As I wrote my poem and began to open up more and more, I felt myself starting to break out of that shell. Depicted by the second image, I was a bit timid at first. I was worried that people wouldn't understand why it is so deep for me, and that my art and poem would be scoffed at. I have, honestly, never had that hard of a time opening up to my close friends, but with people I do not know too well, it is a bit more of a challenge. I did not know if I could fully do it, so I was only partially out of the protective walls I put up around myself. After finishing the project, reading everyone's comments, sharing it with my group, and feeling so accepted and heard, I really feel like I broke out of my shell in that regard. I felt so supported for being vulnerable about something so important to me, and I honestly feel free to be myself. I think that this will help me in future projects</p>

Table 1 (continued)

Visual Journal Prompt	Visual Journal	Reflection Excerpt
		to be really open and vulnerable with more ease than I had with this one. I am grateful because I was able to share about something important to me and (in reference to my poem) know that <i>I won't be silenced, I can't stay quiet.</i> "

Table 2 Excerpts from Margot's Visual Journal

Visual Journal Prompt	Visual Journal	Reflection Excerpt
<p>Prompt 1: Response to Lamott's <i>Bird by Bird</i></p>		<p>"The best word to describe my writing process is 'hectic.' I rarely write a formal first draft. Rather, I write down my thoughts as if they were flowing from my mind like warm honey without a filter. This works best in my poetry, which is my favorite form of writing. I let myself feel the hurt, stress, and implications of everyday life and the words just tumble from my mind. Although I do well with formal writing, I never feel the same passion. Passion is the main catalyst for my best writing. The second to last paragraph of 'Shitty First Drafts' addressed a main inhibitor for me when it comes to writing. I find myself questioning whether other people will like what I have to say. Eventually, I get so frustrated with myself for not being good enough at writing that I feel helpless [. . .] My poetry</p>

Table 2 (continued)


Visual Journal Prompt	Visual Journal	Reflection Excerpt
		<p>writing process is similar to my art-making process in that most of the preliminary ideas happen in my head. I have never been the person to make a sketchbook page to model an art piece after. The ideas for all of my art and poetry hit me when I least expect them to: in the shower, when getting my morning coffee, or even while I am in the middle of a conversation with my mom. After I get that seed of an idea in my head, I obsess over it until I can execute the art or poetry. My poetry and art are an extension of my mind, however hectic it may be."</p>
<p>Prompt 2: Reflection on first art project/paper sequence</p>		<p>"I used to struggle to talk about "myself. Yes, I could say "I'm fine, but I would never dare telling anyone the true internal emotions I felt. The emotions that felt like a weight attached to my heart and soul that would drown me the minute I jumped into the sea. Because of this, I never did anything "wrong" or even thought about pressing the boundaries of the straight and narrow. Life is pretty boring when you are chained to the ground. I hated who I was. Even worse, I was afraid of who I would be. No one presents you with a step-by-step guide to life when you are born. No guidance to prod</p>

Table 2 (continued)

Visual Journal Prompt	Visual Journal	Reflection Excerpt
		<p>you towards adventure. No, that journey is entirely your own. You decide the path to the life you dream of. You decide whether you want to keep your feet glued to the pavement or if you will shoot for the stars. My narrative shot for the stars, literally. I made countless metaphors to the stars, moon, and everything in between. I began to write about who I was with no omissions. I called out my faults, the ones that bind me like devil's snare in <i>Harry Potter</i>. I gave myself grace too. I had a self-reckoning. Who are <i>you</i>, [Margot]? Why are <i>you</i> here? Who are <i>you</i> going to be? Behind those pretty words in my literacy narrative, there is fear, hope, and even a little excitement."</p>

In the interviews I conducted after the semester ended, Avery noted that visual journaling was a challenging activity. "It's easy for us to just type out our thoughts," she told me, but to draw-and-write based on her thoughts required her to think critically about what she was composing and how she was communicating it to an audience. In her interview, Margot explained that visual journaling was far more beneficial to her learning than standard assignments with alphabetic text. She stated that she "[thinks] in pictures" more naturally. Putting thoughts into a picture and then using words was a more fluid process that engaged her and motivated her to put forth more effort, facilitating discernment in decision-making. Margot and Avery both noted that they spent more time on their visual journal assignments than they would have for schoolwork that restricted them to alphabetic text because they had more ways they could tell their stories and compose their knowledge.

Conclusion

Visual journaling was shown to facilitate critical thinking through hooks's (2010) engaged pedagogy. Students expressed moments of excitement and joy in their learning processes. They put forth more time and effort not only in creating images and reflecting on their

processes but also in the critical thinking those activities foster. There were, however, some outliers at times. Students might turn in a less developed visual journal for one week because of other demanding coursework or because the prompt was less engaging for them; however, visual journaling was successful overall. I had far less students try to conserve their energy than in previous semesters when their homework was restricted to alphabetic text. Instead, I saw from students curiosity and creative exploration, tendencies that, as Csikszentmihalyi (1996/2013) noted, must be cultivated, such as through hooks's (2010) engaged pedagogy. Visual journaling invited students to become active learners who explored multiple ways of understanding, made thoughtful decisions, and conceptualized in new ways course content and their lived experiences.

I invite readers to consider how this tool could work to promote engaged pedagogy across the disciplines. Visual journaling is a versatile method that can include open-ended or structured prompts. If, as hooks (2010) attested, the "heartbeat of critical thinking" is "the longing to know —to understand how life works" (p. 7), instructors can facilitate this process by allowing this creative method of constructing knowledge.

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