Invention Strategies for Visual and Multimodal Projects

Good ideas are, inevitably, constrained by the parts and skills that surround them. We have a natural tendency to romanticize breakthrough innovations, imagining momentous ideas transcending their surroundings, a gifted mind somehow seeing over the detritus of old ideas and ossified tradition. But ideas are works of bricolage; they're built out of that detritus. We take the ideas we've inherited or that we've stumbled across, and we jigger them together into some new shape. We like to think of our ideas as $40,000 incubators, shipped direct from the factory, but in reality they've been cobbled together with spare parts that happened to be sitting in the garage. (Johnson, 2011 p. 28-29)

Generating ideas for visual and multimodal projects requires people to engage with visual and multimodal (not just verbal) "thinking." Fostering visual thinking encourages people to go beyond relying on verbal idea generation and using visuals simply to illustrate verbal points. Visual thinking prompts people to explore how visuals and design elements themselves communicate meaningfully.

Sample exercises and activities to foster visual thinking:

- Brainstorm and interact with different kinds of visual elements (e.g., symbols, shapes, lines) to realize the breadth of representation choices

- Sample web and software-based material (image elements, color, type, image effects) and engage in playful cropping, layering, framing, etc. to extend your ideas for what's possible

- Consider emotional appeals as powerfully as logical appeals. How do you want your text to make someone feel?

- Depict a feeling, sound, emotion, or scene visually. What elements do you use? How do you arrange those elements?

- Depict an object or theme a dozen different ways. What differences do you notice?

- Design a nametag or vanity license plate to represent the values of the primary audience for the design. How do you use typography as a graphical element?

- Learn software and recognize its strengths. Software facilitates manipulating color, type, layers, cropping, and other visual elements and manipulations far more easily than working outside of software.

Picture This

Molly Bang in her book *Picture This* (2000) illustrates a number of principles used to convey emotions in visual messages, some of which include:

- Pointed shapes are scarier and rounded shapes or curves are more comforting.

- The larger the object is, the stronger it feels

- Warm colors advance (especially red) while cool colors recede

- Smooth, flat, horizontal shapes give a sense of stability and calm

- Diagonal shapes imply motion or tension

- An object placed higher up on the page has greater pictorial weight

- An object in the bottom half of a picture feels more threatened, heavier, sadder, or more constrained

- The closer an object is to the edge, the greater the tension.

A few resources

Arnheim, R. (1969). *Visual thinking*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bang, M. (2000). *Picture this: How pictures work*. New York, NY: Chronicle Books.

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Wilde, J., & Wilde, R. (1991). *Visual literacy: A conceptual approach to graphic problem solving*. New York, NY: Watson-Guptill Press.