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Using Visual “Bait” to Hook, Engage, and Empower New Community College Writers

Nicola Blake

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ABSTRACT

This reflective article focuses on a series of semester-long activities conducted with developmental writers in an urban community college classroom. It builds on the research of John Berger (1972) and Sondra Perl (1994) who highlight seeing and perception as key components of self-composition. The article showcases assignments where students created photo journals as a way to share their lives, thoughts, and experiences. The use of structured prompts allowed students to actively engage with their neighborhoods -- a sort of text to be read, captured, and ultimately decoded through written explanation. The examples will be useful to practitioners who may be thinking about how best to embrace student experiences within the classroom.

You know how children have secret hiding places or dream of a tree house or own one, well this track field is my “tree house.”

Student Writer

At a small urban community college, students are capturing their lived experiences through photo journals. This article focuses on a series of semester-long activities which encourages students to capture images of their neighborhoods that resonate with them -- a sort of text to be read, captured, and ultimately decoded through written personal narratives. By asking students to capture their lives – what they are seeing, photographing, and choosing to share – the assignment engages students as writers and provides a space to express thoughts about their communities and their traveled places and spaces. This assignment is implemented in a required six-week interdisciplinary three-credit

course, The Arts in New York City. Through experiential learning opportunities, the course engages students with the Arts and the art within and beyond their communities.

My goal in the course is to teach students how to make connections across and within texts while simultaneously bringing their voices into the classroom. Asking students to take pictures and write about their own environments encourages them to become more aware of their innate expertise as analyzers of their worlds. This awareness, in turn, facilitates writing practice because it gives students a concrete stake in the meanings that their writings convey and also enables them to take risks in their writing because they are comfortable (and expert) in their subjects.

Composing ourselves within the world involves the challenge of both seeing and using words to create meaning. Modeled on

John Berger's (1972) groundbreaking ideas on Ways of Seeing, the assignments I design focus on seeing. For Berger, individual realities are self-constructed within frameworks that are constrained by society, socioeconomic conditions, and language itself. Situating ourselves within texts and within the world is an active process of choice and engagement, in Berger's view, a sort of navigational orientation based on experiences and perception. "Seeing" is how we experience the world and how our perceptions cast meaning on what lies in front of us. Through processes of naming, recalling, and creating, in other words - through composing, we navigate the worlds we see.

For educator Sondra Perl (1994), Berger's (1972) definition of "seeing" as "composing" is a process of "negotiating edges" (Perl, 1994, p. 430). In a classroom setting, this process of negotiating edges is a difficult one for beginning writers who are also often beginning the process of transitioning from high school to college. Perl further asserts that "who we are and what we write is often in response to, and in dialogue with, the larger world that also lives within us" (p. 430).

According to Perl,

this interplay between individual experience and larger social and historical contexts only becomes composing when we give voice to what was formerly inchoate. And, it is by gaining access to and drawing upon the 'never before said' that we are able to create a new story, a new version of ourselves. (para. 19)

Perl's description of writing as a self-reflexive process perfectly describes what my students share about their experiences and themselves as they capture images of things they find meaningful. Many of the pictures they capture reveal deeply personal negotiations about their transitions to college, ways of navigating their emotions, and the spaces they encounter as young, and in most cases, first-generation community college students.

The Construction of Sight: Seeing the Unseen

To sharpen and make visible the skills students are already using to relate to different aspects of their lives, I incorporate photo journals within my course. In their article "Digital Storytelling in Placed-Based Composition Course," James S. Chisholm and Brandie Trent (2013) argue that digital storytelling provides a platform for rich personal expression. Chisholm and Trent write, "Digital storytelling provides students with multiple tools that they can use to mediate their thinking about concepts that are central to and extend beyond the curriculum" (p. 308). Following a similar model, I ask students to submit 10 photo journals to the course's online assignment toolbox over the course of the semester. For each, students upload a photograph they took and write a paragraph explaining the photograph and why they chose it for their submission. The baseline prompt for the first four photo journals follows: as you move about during the day, try to take pictures of things that stand out to you. Choose the one image you would like to write about for the day and explain to me why you chose this image. Photo journals five and six are focused on images of things students want to change in their neighborhoods. The prompt asks this: If you could take one shot of something that needs changing in your neighborhood, what would it be? Photo journals seven through ten are connected to themes we discuss in the course. Students are instructed in this way: Using your smartphone create a moving story on a theme connected to the class readings and theories.

As students sift through photographs and select ones to share for each class session, they actively use the creative, analytical, and composing skills Berger (1972) and Perl (1994) envision in their theories. For example, students sort through multiple pictures to present a representative story of what they find most important to share. The choice of

the image is only a first step. Students must then use language to explain why the selected image is important. The second written component, explaining the why, allows students to synthesize multiple ideas to present a coherent, cohesive, and grammatically correct response which frames the images they selected.

Sights and Insights

In reflecting on the photo journal assignment for the purpose of this research, I chose images from approximately 600 that resonated the most with me as I tried to understand my students' ways of seeing. In my selection for this article, I looked for images and narratives that were simple (every day engagement with elements of neighborhoods), yet compelling because of the depth of what students were trying to portray through these images. This was not a parameter for the assignments but more so a parameter for what I chose to discuss here. Furthermore, what resonated with me perhaps spoke more about my own filters such as the experiences I had, the echoes of things I read, and the sounds and images of my own neighborhood. As students were seeing themselves within their experiences, I read about them through my own lens of a similar socio-economic upbringing and experiences as a first-generation college student – the type of meta-cognitive composing Berger (1972) references.

The images I discuss here give a brief glimpse into the lives of these ten students and also showcase their responses to the writing prompt. For example, Ana (all names are pseudonyms) uploads a picture of candles that were lit in her neighborhood the night before. The image of extinguished candles on rigid iron gates is enthralling to me because the student chose a jarring image representing the violence plaguing her community. (Figure 1). With almost Stein-like precision, Ana simply writes:

There was a murder in my neighborhood and to pay their respects, there were



Figure 1: Image of neighborhood memorial.

candles put along the top of the gates to the entrance of where the person that was murdered lived. The candles used are also for Santeria [s] which I thought was very interesting. It's sad to know that murders that happen in neighborhoods like Queensbridge doesn't even make it to the news a lot of the time.

While simultaneously making a sociopolitical statement on racial and social inequality in how the media responds to crime, Ana acknowledges the murder as part of a routine. She also refers to the religious motif behind the candles by mentioning Santeria, an Afro-Caribbean religion that uses prayer candles, which highlights her community's cultural frame. Chisohlm and Trent (2013) assert the following:

Digital stories extend the meaning-making modes through which students can develop concepts. This development has implications for students as they engage in 21st century literary practices that demand their fluency beyond reading and writing print texts so that they can consider, in the case of digital storytelling, how multiple layers of meaning are conveyed and recast

across linguistic, visual, and aural semiotic modes. (p. 316)

As her chosen image and words reveal, Ana is using the assignment to process recent events in her community. She often moves from her seat in the middle of class to prop herself on the windowsill. Fidgeting as she stands by the windows overlooking Madison Avenue, she remains fully engaged and present in the discussion -- thinking through ideas of access and equality --while all the time perhaps carrying a lit candle within her for the murders she has had to live through. Ana shares an essay she wrote for another class which tackled issues of race, class, and poverty – familiar themes that deeply interested and impacted her. Her fidgeting during class reflected the weight of her thoughts as she processed her day-to-day experiences. It was only after several discussions did I fully understand Ana’s rationale and her physical discomfort in class as she shared and processed the barriers she faces in her community and beyond.

Another student focuses on the role of religion in commuters’ lives. On the way home, Vanessa sits in her usual subway seat and notices that in very small print, someone wrote the word pray on the handle of a lock (Figure 2). I am particularly interested in this piece because in a crowded New York City subway car, she has to have a keen eye and be acutely aware of her surroundings to see the word. She snaps a picture to capture the moment of “seeing” and then uses it for her photo journal entry. Vanessa expounds on her chosen image:

The word ‘PRAY’ is written on the door handle in a subway car. People will never really notice it until they sit down and actually observe. To me this picture represents the lack of ‘prayer’ in the sense that people never pray until something bad happens in their life.

Vanessa recognizes that although she detects it, others are not “seeing” the word. In the solitude and relative safety of a ride home on the train, Vanessa alludes that bad things are



Figure 2: Image of “pray” in subway car.

right below the surface of the everyday. She faults the commuters for their lack of seeing and indicates that if something bad happened, it would be only then that they would possibly need prayer.

Like Vanessa’s observation of a random word on the train that could have deeper contextual meaning in the face of tragedy, Bianca realizes that she has taken the subway from a local stop regularly without ever before questioning the name of the station. Observing the name and the image at the stop – a train station she has been using for multiple years – she uses the assignment as an opportunity to heighten her sensibility of her surroundings (Figure 3). She writes:

This picture is located at the heart of the Canarsie train station. Usually when I’m there, I am only concerned about getting a Metro card and leaving to get to my destination but during the weekend I had



Figure 3: Canarsie subway station, Brooklyn, NY.

to travel on the train and I noticed this sign presented at the entrance. The image makes me wonder if the name Canarsie has an American Indian origin. According to my research, it represented the ‘Canarsie Indians.’

Bianca uses the word research as she attempts to clarify the image she is seeing. She sees the image but then goes one step further to research the name of the station. Stopping to look up the meaning of an unfamiliar word or concept she encounters to fully understand and contextualize meaning, Bianca reads the station as students are taught when they encounter unfamiliar information in a text. The fact that Bianca stopped to capture the image is significant. Commuters in a busy New York subway station (even on a weekend day) can be run over if they stop mid step to do any activity at the turnstile. The student understood that to “see” she has to slow down from her daily routine, despite the bustle around her. In order to fully capture the things around her – even things that she saw every day that were overshadowed by the passing through of spaces - she needs to be cognizant of the everyday surroundings.

Many photo journal submissions over the course of the semester involve students commuting home on the subway. Like the student who researches the “Canarsie” stop, Evelyn rethinks the name of another subway stop and presents a picture that showcases liberty paradoxically (Figure 4). On her way home from the college, she sits on a bench at her local subway station. She notices the word LIBERTY -- barely visible through the thick metal poles across the tracks. She writes,

Sitting right in front of you, a word, and there is one single word with so much meaning. That’s Liberty, the so-called foundation of our country and the over bloated excuse used by politicians to get there [sic] way from us citizens. What does it really mean though? Protection, freedom, or honor? I don’t know and I bet they don’t either.

That’s why I named this Impossible Liberty, because in my eyes it is something that does not exist in our world anymore; they just really want us to believe it does.

When I first saw the picture, I stared at it and thought of Evelyn’s anger. In this simple assignment, the student reads the name of a train stop and uses the written explanation of the image to challenge the underpinnings of the American dream. In this student’s eyes, Liberty is impossible. Liberty is not free. Liberty is not accessible. And liberty is blurred by politicians and the media. Of all the images one could choose to shoot and of all the statements one could share with the class, I admired Evelyn’s insight as she captured and submitted her photo of the word LIBERTY barred between steel frames.

While none of our classwork focuses on despair, anxiety, insecurity, resilience, tenacity, and drive, the photo journals brought into the classroom the types of metacognitive reflections that shape our collective work in the course. While the photo journal assignments ask students to share only what they are seeing in their responses, they also show what they are feeling, thinking and how they are interpreting their realities as young students attending an urban community college in New York City. The images of Pray and Liberty illustrate that the photo journal assignments give students ways to read their



Figure 4: Impossible liberty.

urban surroundings as a sort of lived-in text. As the semester progressed, they become more aware of how they engage with what they encounter as they commute to and from the campus.

Transitions: Image to Text, Seeing to Writing, and More

The heightened perceptions students document in their photo journal submissions also help to strengthen their critical reading and writing skills within the classroom. Like the text on a wall in a train station or on a small handle below eyelevel, words in a literary work must also be deciphered and decoded. Through my students' journal entries, they question author's intentions when he or she uses a particular word, image, concept, or theory. Within the visually imposing metal bars that crowd a subway station's name, one student questions the actions in a text. Students use their critical reading and writing skills to make meaning. The short photo journal assignments help students to grapple with their awareness of, responses to, and interactions with their lived realities. As part of this process, they begin to develop, through their own perceptions and words, their abilities to make conscious choices as writers. These choices are apparent in the images they choose and in their descriptions of the things they see.

My students articulate deep concerns in their photo journal assignments, which in some cases inspire more research and exposition. Their perceptions of imbalanced crime reporting and police response in high-poverty neighborhoods, for example, or the role of religion in catastrophic or traumatic life events, or the meaning of Liberty across social strata and race serve as starting points for larger, more research-driven engagement with sociocultural, anthropological, and sociopolitical debates. As Nathan Mickelson (2012) argues in the article "Writing at Transitions: Using In-Class Writing as a Learning Tool," intentional in-class writing,

and in this case digital storytelling, "can support [student] learning and is not just a mechanism for assessment and evaluation (p. 26)." Rather, it is "a tool [students] can use to build skills and knowledge in future courses...focusing their attention and enabling them to make unplanned connections through their writing" (Mickelson, 2012, pp. 26-27). Sharing responses can offer the opportunity to not only seek and possibly find a "common ground," as Mickelson also suggests, but also to probe the identity of a writer.

Juxtapositions: Light and Darkness, Hope and Despair

In the photo journal assignments that my students composed, many focus on light as certainty and hope while hinting at shadows, darkness, and insecurity beyond it. Stefanie writes, for example (Figure 5),

One bright light; it's the sun rising. Looking at this picture you notice that there's one bright light and everything seems to be darker than the rest of the picture. The position I took this picture [from] makes everything point towards the light and even the cars point or make you focus on the light. Looking at the windows you see the slight reflection of light from sun shining down on everything around it. In this picture you notice how darkness consumes everything except for rising sun light.

Not only does Stefanie note the rising sun as a focal point of the photograph noting its pivotal role in the scene she records, she also recognizes her agency in taking the shot. She chooses her position in order to best emphasize the point of it – to highlight the power and contrast of darkness and sunlight.

Stefanie uses the word consumes which is an interesting word choice portraying darkness as an almost all-consuming entity constrained only by the emerging sunlight. Stefanie positions light as hopeful and her surroundings as dimly lit and grim.



Figure 5: Darkness and sunrise.

Similarly, Edgar describes the image of a block in his neighborhood in pitch darkness, with a small light streaking through the middle of the street (Figure 6).

He writes,

I know that on first sight it's just an unfocused picture but isn't that what life is in the first place; it is to me. That light is the clarity that we get a glimpse of every now and then. So as we age, we get closer and closer to this clarity and a better understanding but as the picture shows that out of sync feeling never really goes away. It just becomes easier to deal with.



Figure 6: Light at the end of the tunnel.

Edgar uses light and dark to express the general confusion and blurriness of life as he perceives it, in addition to the potential for clarity, symbolized by light. He thus reveals his ability to speak metaphorically and opens a window into his private world.

Maya also equates lights with hopeful actions in the face of uncertainty. As urban dwellers, we perhaps never fully read a walk light. We may barely take notice of the lights at the crossing; they mean nothing more than signals to cross a street or to wait for the traffic to pass (Figure 7). But Maya tells her reader,

I was crossing the street coming from the train station and when I looked up this is what I saw. You might just be like 'oh wow the walk sign and a green light' but I realized more. I blurred the background because it was pretty much irrelevant. But for me this is a real positive note. I'm not 100% sure how to put it into words but it's like – 'keep it moving'; 'the light is green' – 'the walk sign is lit' - and 'you have a way to go.' There is nothing there to 'stop' you from going where you're trying to go. You have the light!

The student's reflection that "she has the light" is deeply moving to me. I have been at thousands of crossing lights in my life, and never once did a simple walk sign prompt me into an inner dialogue and motivate me to keep walking and moving. Beckoned by the invisible walk signs to take a step onto the untrodden paths, Maya is compelled to see an ordinary walk sign as a symbol for the freedom and motivation to take another step in life.

Yet another student approaches the assignments more whimsically by looking at the dead tree trunks in her yard [Figure 8]. Her reflection is built on the notion that the actress Elizabeth Taylor, like the dead tree stumps in a Queens yard post-Hurricane Sandy, is the epitome of endurance and change. Jessica compares the violent shifts in a landscape with changes in ideas of 1940s femininity:



Figure 7: Walk sign.

What does a tree have to do with jazz, flapper girls, and Elizabeth Taylor? One word: change. The trees in my backyard changed my perception on its existence. We're constantly changing our actions for social acceptance. We went from big ball gowns and hidden legs to shorter dresses and more legs. As I get older my perception on things, people, and my surroundings needs to be altered.

Elizabeth Taylor went through change...8 times to be exact. The point is that change is a good thing and that's what my 3 trees and a stump represent.

Although the writing is not highly focused and Elizabeth Taylor is an amusing, not wholly unproblematic metaphor of resilience, Jessica associates Taylor's embrace of her highly glamorized marital discords with the resilience of the leafless tree stumps, bare and naked, yet still standing after Hurricane Sandy devastated parts of the East Coast in 2012. Taylor's personal life, like the tree stump, is stripped bare for the consumption of others. The student's identification with the tree stump as firm and resilient echoes in other students' association of the images they capture with inner strength.

Perseverance and Strength: Finding and Affirming Voice

Daniel, a single father, captures the image of Atlas, a bronze sculpture in midtown Manhattan, that depicts the ancient Greek



Figure 8: Tree stumps.

Titan bearing the weight of the world on his shoulders. He is drawn to it for its iconic depiction of physical strength, but his paragraph shows a deeper connection [Figure 9].

This statue inspired me so much because when you see him carrying the world he doesn't look like he's struggling; in fact, he looks like he's able to hold his own. To some he may look like he is crumbling to the weight of the world but to me he looks like he's pushing through against all odds. This is why I related to this statue because when I look at him I see that even though he has the weight of the world on his shoulders he is still willing to make it to the top. This statue motivates me to keep pushing forward even though it sometimes feels like the odds are stacked against me, but I know where I want my future to go and what it's going to take for me to get there.

The statue resonates with the student who shares the motivation he gains from the statue to continue on his own personal journey. Not only does he suggest that hardship and struggle in life can, as the powerful Titan suggests, be overcome, but he also identifies achieving his goals with the ongoing process of writing.

In her submission, Isabel makes meaning not only of her attraction to a particular setting but also expresses her preferences and boundaries. She touches on feelings of home

and belonging. Running helps her cope with things; she uses it as an escape. (Figure 10).

This park, this track field is my 2nd home. You know how children have secret hiding places or dream of a tree house or own one, well this track field is my 'tree house'. I like standing right in front of this field, right in front of #1 after stretching out and warming up to start my run. I feel that this track field is my escape of everything and that is why this is special to my friends and me. We can be mad, sad, and serious or in any mood but when we meet here it is as if it all goes away. I don't think anyone could understand how important this track field is to me. I also compare this field to life, we are always in a rush to get somewhere but we shouldn't, we should take our time and enjoy the moments.

The student recognizes that her neighborhood track is her "tree house" within a restrictive urban landscape of high-rise buildings. Her reading and decoding of the space is captivating because she transforms a mundane track to a space of creativity and identity. It makes me think about my own childhood spaces, cold hard floors much appreciated in the hot humid climate in the Caribbean, with Nancy Drew in my hand, a sacred place where I fell in love with words and ultimately pursued a life in academia. I grew up wishing for an impossible tree house,



Figure 9: Weight of the world.



Figure 10: When a track becomes a house.

the type of private getaways only seen in the movies. I had never met anyone who had a tree house and, similar to Isabel, growing up, I longed for one.

Composing the Composition Class: Scholarly and Pedagogical Connections

Whether focused on freedom and light, darkness and inner strength, or the possibility of a tree house escape, my students' photo journals demonstrate the benefits of the kinds of "engaged pedagogies" and "common ground" bell hooks (1994) and Kurt Spellmeyer (1990) theorize in their respective approaches to composition and rhetoric.

hooks posits:

Engaged Pedagogy necessarily values student expression. [...] When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not simply seek to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. (pp. 20-21)

Spellmeyer asserts that creating a "common ground" is important in the classroom in

order to foster a collaborative learning environment where both student and faculty are meaning makers. Like hooks, he argues that “education should demystify knowledge by showing it to be something made, something anyone can make, [and] made through the activity of dialogue” (pp. 334-335). As the students write their thoughts and analyses, their reflections pull me closer to the things they experience which, in turn, enrich the dialogue in the classroom.

In asking students to peel back the layers of text, song, or landscape embedded in their daily experiences and to dig into them with words, we ask them also to peel back the layers of who they are in the midst of transitions. We ask them to develop as critical writers and thinkers while also developing as human beings. I would not have seen the images I share in this essay nor heard these additional vignettes had I not assigned these low-stakes writing assignments. Through the individual and collective efforts of producing, sharing, and discussing the photo journals, my entire class ultimately engaged not just with what students see and experience, but moreover, with how each is beginning to write him or herself into the places and spaces of their everyday lives. By asking students to capture their world visually and make connections relevant to our course topic, I ask them to engage in critical reading and writing tasks that ultimately shape and reshape us all as students and teachers.

Prior to this assignment, it was not always clear to me who the students were beyond the classroom. Perhaps that does not matter nor should it. And yet, the glimpses of the students’ neighborhoods and their thoughts about each individual photo choice reshaped classroom discussions on equality, equity, race, and political structures. Students shared images and paragraphs about graffiti that needed to be changed, empty lots that could be transformed into community gardens, and shuttered businesses that devalued a community. One student was chased away by a neighbor who yelled “snitch, snitch,” as the

student took pictures of overfilled garbage pails. These are riveting; nothing prepared me for these simple photos and the few sentences that revealed the anxieties that would have never become apparent in assignments driven by content alone. The photo journals provided an incentive for writing and each set of writing prompts moved students toward increasingly complex analysis.

Students who have difficulty writing responses to purely abstract questions can use images to enter into class discussions. In their written compositions, my students demonstrate a heightened awareness of the community around them and the ability to directly connect course material with issues in their lives. Writing and rewriting their comments give students opportunities and a safe and controlled environment in which to practice writing and revision. Students learn from the ways their peers approached the assignments and gain better insight into neighborhoods and issues of New York City through the photos and comments each of their classmates shared with the class.

To return to the words of Sondra Perl (1994), my students’ photo journals help me see that “teaching allows me to utilize myself [and] enables me to think, to shape, to compose both the class and myself” (para.19). Perl writes,

On the playful side, I want to liken it to fishing, where I cast out a line and see, first of all, if it stays poised on the surface or if it sinks. Is there a bite? Does someone have something to say? Then comes the reeling in, when someone grabs hold, sometimes two people or more, wrestling, thrashing. Landing the fish is never my job alone, but the job of the entire class. And, when a point emerges or an insight is shared, the joy is shared too, because we have worked at it together. (p. 429)

Low-stakes writing assignments that actively involve photography are perfect examples of Perl’s “bait.” Once the students are “hooked” to the format and routine of the photo journal

assignments, it becomes clear how smoothly and effectively they can practice John Berger's

(1972) "ways of seeing" in and beyond the classroom.

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