Spatial, Visual Rhetoric Meet New Media

By La Monica Everett-Haynes, April 30, 2009

The First Year Writing Showcase, which incorporates teachings in writing and visual communication, began at the UA in 2007 and has since seen exponential growth in participation among UA students, faculty and instructors.

Visual communication – typography, illustration, graphic design and other forms – and the educational focus encouraging alphabetic literacy in students are by no means new.

But the way The University of Arizona Writing Program collaborates with faculty members to teach students to evaluated and defend the ways in which text, images, audio and video commingle to create messaging is.

For three years, the UA program has opened its First Year Writing Showcase to a broader range of faculty and graduate student instructors outside of the Honors College. As part of the showcase, Writing Program staff train instructors to incorporate visual and spatial rhetoric into their English classrooms and in working with student.

"We are responsible for teaching writing to students in the 21st century," said Anne-Marie Hall, director of the UA's Writing Program and co-director of the Southern Arizona Writing Project.

And, at the semester's end, their students must complete a project showcasing their interpretation of how text and image placement can interact. That means understanding how information is collected, disseminated and arranged.

Individual students and groups will projects they created on May 4, from 4 to 6 p.m. in the Grand Ballroom of the Student Union Memorial Center, 1303 E. University Blvd. The event is free and open to the public.

"Students are being exposed at a much greater rate to visual and spatial rhetoric, whether it be an encounter with groups on Facebook, through videos or graphic print and print work," said Christopher Minnix, the Writing Program's assistant director.

The work crosses into creative, technical, business, public policy and other areas in writing, Minnix said.

"We are trying to students learn how they can use their knowledge of rhetoric to understand how text plays a role in shaping their lives and how they can become authors of texts that offer compelling arguments using visual elements and multimodal texts," he said.
"When you look at the amount of information on the Internet it’s dizzying," said Minnix, also an adjunct lecturer in the UA's English department. "The amount of people working to gain our attention with their message is great. In order to create an environment in which we are able to identify with message, to take action or be persuaded often requires creating a visual-spatial argument."

Though the showcase is young, its model has resulted in a steady growth in popularity.

The first open showcase in 2007 involved 54 students and four faculty members. Last year's drew 230 students and 18 instructors. This year's showcase will involve 22 faculty and more than 450 students.

Showcase coordinators say faculty members have been drawn to the project because it is meant to challenge the traditional mode of teaching alphabetic literacy, encourage students and faculty to consider special and visual rhetoric and incorporate new media forms in the classroom.

English instruction becomes not simply a matter of writing a research paper in a clear, concise and accurate matter.

But when students create a poster for a presentation, shoot a short film, develop a PowerPoint or build a Web site and incorporate flash animation, they must begin to understand that there exists deeply embedded meaning in the orientation of images, text and typology and other modes of communication.

Communication, then, becomes about placement choice and messaging, and both the writing and learning experience revolves around a topic that is much more fluid, fresh and timely.

Modern students, Hall said, often view writing as a more complex set. It's not a practice of setting pen to paper, or event type to a computer screen. Students increasingly use and are drawn to multiple images, video and audio influences in communicating.

"They are using language in different ways, and not just alphabetic literacy," said Hall, who presented information on the showcase with a UA colleague during the Conference on College Composition and Communication, which was held in March.

"We are really building the theoretical base and the instructors are building it into their courses," Hall said.

"I think there is a tension between teaching traditional writing – the five paragraph essay – and responding to where we live today," she added. "This is an exciting modality of our time. We’re pushing our curriculum into the 21st century and taking a bottom-up, organic approach to teaching and learning."