

4-17-2008

"The Gallery": An Experiential Approach to Visual Aid Construction and Analysis in the Classroom

Adam W. Tyma

University of Nebraska at Omaha, atyma@unomaha.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/commfacpub>

 Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Tyma, Adam W., ""The Gallery": An Experiential Approach to Visual Aid Construction and Analysis in the Classroom" (2008). *Communication Faculty Publications*. 93.

<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/commfacpub/93>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Communication at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

“The Gallery”: An Experiential Approach to Visual Aid Construction and Analysis in the Classroom

Adam W. Tyma

Objective(s): Students will create ballots based on established criteria and critique visual aids

Course(s): Public Speaking, Introduction to Human Communication, Business and Professional Communication, Persuasive Speaking

Rationale

When working with students to prepare oral presentations, the question*“What makes an effective Visual Aid?”*often arises. Most teachers realize the value of visual aids, but what makes them effective is sometimes unclear. Sellnow (2005) contends “presentational aids can increase the number of listeners you are able to reach because they address diverse learning styles” (p. 304). Metcalfe (2004) extols that “visual aids are vitally important to the public speaker” as they “promote interest, clarity, and retention” (p. 195). Cyphert (2007) maintains “it would be an irresponsible curriculum that attempted to teach public address without attention to visual meaning” (p. 169). Obviously, knowing what makes a visual aid effective and why is important.

Although most teachers discuss what makes an effective visual aid (VA), there seems to be a disconnect between what the teacher, the textbook, and the student actually perceive to be a “good” VA. Moreover, teachers often share examples of what they deem to be “good” and “not-so-good” visual aids. In reality, however, class time is limited, and hauling a collection of visual aids to and from the office can be cumbersome. This pedagogical quandary is where “The Gallery” comes in.

The purpose of “The Gallery” in-class exercise is to help students better understand and appreciate effective visual aid construction via student-led critiques. “The Gallery” creates an art show environment that encourages students to critically evaluate sample visual aids based on the principles they have been taught and their interpretations of those principles. Students ultimately defend their positions orally regarding what makes various visual aids “good.”

This idea emerged after attending the “Art-A-Whirl” event in my hometown. At this event, local artists invite the public into their studios to see and comment on their work. Some artists even hand out “ballots” for observers to record their thoughts. During the days before attending the event, I had been struggling with a way to make my upcoming lesson on preparing effective visual aids more interactive. I ended up modifying the “Art-

A-Whirl” experience into what I call “The Gallery” and have been using it in my classes every semester since then.

Activity

During class on the day before you plan to facilitate “The Gallery,” discuss the criteria for what constitutes a “good” VA. Then, as a class, create a checklist based on the expectations described in the textbook and your class discussion. Next, construct a ballot based on the checklist with a rating scale next to each item. I use a Likert-type scale of 15 with 5 as “excellent” and 1 as “poor.”

On the day of “The Gallery,” bring a collection of 1520 sample visual aids (some you consider “good” and some you consider “not-so-good”). Be sure to include a variety of media (i.e., posterboards, transparencies, printouts of PowerPoint slideshows, etc.) and types (i.e., charts, graphs, photographs, diagrams, drawings, etc.). Number each sample VA for easy reference during the analysis and debriefing session. Place the samples on the walls surrounding your classroom (i.e., hanging from the walls, placed against desks, etc.). Ideally, sample VAs will cover three walls, leaving only the white/chalkboard in the front of the room bare. Rearrange the classroom to make space for students to sit in the center. (That way, they can easily move around the edges of the room to observe and evaluate the “artwork.”) As a caveat, you might consider (a) providing food and beverages, (b) reserving a conference room on campus, or (c) playing background music; whatever will help make the event feel less like a class session and more like a gallery event.

For a 75 minutes class session, allow 2030 minutes for students to wander through “the gallery” and evaluate the visual aids, leaving 3040 minutes for the analysis and debriefing segment. While handing out the ballots, describe the purpose of the activity. The directions for the students are as follows:

Break into teams of 3 or 4 students each. Your task is to use the guidelines we created during the last class period to rate the “artwork” in the “gallery.” Critique each example on the ballots. Determine pieces that are good and why, as well as pieces that need some work and why. As a judging team, determine your top two and bottom two. Be ready to justify your positions using the criteria we have established. Once all teams have completed their ballots, we will get together and generate our top and bottom choices as an entire class.

As student teams move about the room, ask questions, but do not lead their decisions. Allow your students to determine what makes sense to them, what does not, and why based on the discussion from the previous day’s lesson. Do not dissuade disagreements that may emerge among judging teams. Let them work out disagreements amongst themselves.

Debriefing

The final step in this process is the report-back by the individual judging teams to the entire class. As each team reports, flow their comments on the board for the entire class to see. Hence, this debriefing serves not only as an impromptu speaking opportunity but also as a peer-to-peer teaching moment. Encourage students to ask each team why they made the choices they did, which pushes judging teams to offer informed justifications for their decisions. Some typical questions might be, for instance, “how are specific persuasive techniques used?,” “how does color and shape enhance or detract from the overall message?,” “what cultural stereotypes are being presented or supported in the piece?,” or “does the piece make sense for the audience it was intended to be presented to?” Your evaluation of each team report is based on their ability to defend their choices based on the guidelines developed in class, as well as their oral presentation skills.

Appraisal

I am often surprised about what my students take away from this activity. It takes a few minutes, but once an example catches a student or group’s eye, the analysis and critique begin. Anticipate this (a kind nudge never takes away from the experience). The more interactive you make the environment (music, food, atmosphere), the more the students enjoy it. This seems to result in a deeper analysis, as students are willing to move away from their role as student toward one of informed consumer and critic. Often, there are disagreements regarding some of the pieces, but students start seeing patterns emerge. This becomes an excellent segue into, for example, audience analysis discussions. Comments from students regarding audience analysis have included “the jargon in the VA is too much. It would lose me in a second” or “the colors and layout make sense. They draw me in.” Disagreements between judging teams have focused on, among things, color choices or the ability to read labels from the back of the room. Essentially, students demonstrate the ability to think critically and to justify “why” a VA is good rather than to merely say “yes, it’s good” or “no, it’s bad.”

References and Suggested Readings

- Cyphert, D. (2007). Presentation technology in the age of electronic eloquence: From visual aid to visual rhetoric. *Communication Education*, 56, 168-192.
- Metcalfe, S. (2004). *Building a speech* (5th ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Sellnow, D. (2005). *Confident public speaking* (2nd ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.