

**The Arcimboldo-Style Self-Portrait, Personal Labyrinth,
and Life Map: Ideas and Assignments Designed
To Engage Students in a Multimodal Class**

by Dan Godston

While teaching English Composition and New Millennium Studies (also known as the Freshman Seminar) classes at Columbia College Chicago, I have brought in visual art to help students make meaningful connections between writing and visual modes of thinking. Learning involves creativity and experimentation, and I ask my students to work in modes of expression with which they may feel comfortable, as well as modes that are new to them. Writing and creating works of visual art involve some similar and different kinds of expression, in terms of how you use your hands. In *The Hand: How Its Use Shapes the Brain, Language, and Human Culture*, Frank R. Wilson states that with “...‘intrinsic curiosity,’ responsiveness to the human and material contexts in which we are born, hands and brain are like none other on the planet, and the ability to build trust in our own instincts, skills, and judgment” (Wilson 290). My students and I talk about how they can trust their own instincts as they explore different modes in class, how writing and drawing relate to one another, and how engaging with and creating works of visual art can help one generate ideas for one’s writing projects. In this article I will describe three assignments that my English Composition and New Millennium Studies students have worked on: the Arcimboldo-Style Self-Portrait, the Personal Labyrinth, and the Life Map.

The Arcimboldo-Style Self-Portrait Assignment

Giuseppe Arcimboldo was an 16th Century Italian artist who painted amazing portraits of people and allegorical portraits that personify seasons and aspects of the world. Each portrait is a composite of elements that relate to Arcimboldo's subject. For instance, his portrait entitled *Water* contains dozens of marine animals. The man's mouth is a shark's mouth, his left shoulder is an octopus, his right shoulder is a crab, and so on (Kriegeskorte 23). Arcimboldo's portrait entitled *The Librarian* contains books: his shoulder is a large orange volume, his arm is a horizontally positioned white tome, his fingers are silk bookmarks, and his hair is an open book (Kriegeskorte 29). This portrait, like many of Arcimboldo's portraits, manifest his subject's identity, i.e., you are what you do and consume.

I introduce the Arcimboldo-Style Self-Portrait assignment to students as they are beginning to write their personal narrative essays. By this time students have already worked on brainstorming activities, and have brought in outlines and proposals for the subjects they have chosen for their essay topics. Columbia College Chicago is an arts college, and many of my students have backgrounds and career interests in the visual arts. I have found that my students are fascinated with the mysteries of the creative process, and this assignment helps them to investigate their own creative process. Creativity, cognitive processes, and the human brain are intrinsically related—

Seymour Sarason has illustrated a crucial link between the hand and intelligent action in his exploration of the meaning of creativity. The creative impulse, which is deeply personal, is a critical element at the core

of all learning. It requires that information be gathered, ideas explored and tested, and decisions made so that progress can be made toward a personally valued goal. (Wilson 291)

With this assignment, students are presented with a valued goal: creating a self-portrait, while using an approach to which they may not have been previously exposed (using a composite of elements). They gather information about themselves and assemble that information in a visually stimulating way that can cross over to having value in the context of composition writing.

After I have shown reproductions of Arcimboldo's paintings to my students, I ask them to draw self-portraits that are composites of elements that relate to things that are important to them. They start sketching their Arcimboldo-Style Self-Portraits in class. Then they develop their self-portraits, and turn in a one-page description of their self-portraits at the beginning of the next class. My students have turned in surprising and innovative self-portraits; for instance, my student Kendall's self-portrait includes a book for a chin and paintbrushes for hair; in Tabitha's self-portrait, her cheekbone is a pen, and her ear is a musical treble clef.

After students have turned in their self-portrait assignments, we debrief about what we have been doing. We talk about how writing and drawing relate to one another. In some respects, drawing and painting are much more visually dynamic modes of expression for the human hand—you can use different colors and textures, make short or long strokes, and focus on lines or areas of shading and coloring. When you write, you often focus on one or two colors—the color of the ink in your pen or the lead in your pencil, and the color of the paper on which

you write. Also, students are playing around with what they know, as well as what they don't know and are actively exploring—their own passions and backgrounds. Playful approaches in the classroom are key: “it is clear that the spirit of play of joyful or just curious experimentation and exploration comes to us, just as the hand itself comes to us, as a powerful organizer of learning and growth. We might consider pushing that side of ourselves a little harder” (Wilson 292). The Arcimboldo-Style Self-Portrait assignment is designed to help students push themselves to explore and experiment. My students gave me positive feedback about how they liked the assignment, so it sounds like they found it interesting and helpful to go back and forth between these two modes of expression. Both modes inform each other.

The Personal Labyrinth Assignment

The Personal Labyrinth assignment relates to the personal narrative essay that my students write. We all experience personal and professional problems, and we are aware of local, national, and international problems in life. How do we imaginatively navigate through those problems to arrive at creative solutions? How do we know when we are making the right decision? Sometimes you don't know at the moment of decision making if you are making the right choice; sometimes it takes a long time to see the ramifications of the choices you have made.

A labyrinth is an excellent image for a problem. We begin by talking about what a labyrinth is, and brainstorm examples of famous and iconic labyrinths in culture. Theseus had to slay the minotaur in King Minos' labyrinth on Crete.

David Bowie plays Jareth the Goblin King in Jim Henson's *Labyrinth*, and Guillermo Del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* is an amazing film whose central image and metaphor is the labyrinth. In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Harry Potter and his friend Ron Weasley have to travel through a hedge labyrinth, and the hedge's roots wrap around and almost kill Ron.

We talk about how the labyrinth is a mythological archetype, and how students can add visual and mythological dimensions to the problems on which they are focusing in their personal narrative essays by creating their own Personal Labyrinths. Students can choose to use what they focus on with their Personal Labyrinth assignments as they develop their personal narrative essays; however, they don't have to. My student Matt turned in a fascinating Personal Labyrinth—he decided to focus on his decision to stop hanging out with friends who drink alcohol. The entrance of his labyrinth has imposing Greek-looking columns, and the map of his X-shaped labyrinth includes a dotted line passageway through it.

The Life Map Assignment

The Arcimboldo-Style Self-Portrait and Personal Labyrinth assignments lead up to The Life Map assignment. I ask students to continue developing ideas and images they have developed in the preceding assignments as they think about their life maps. We talk about what a map is, and we talk about different kinds of maps: geo-political, topographic, smell, sound, and so on. We talk maps found in *You Are Here* and *Mapping the World: A Illustrated History of Cartography*. We critique the inventiveness and debate the “veracity” suggested in several of

those maps. For instance, in *The Road to Success*, a path at the bottom of a mountain leads up to a giant illuminated harp on the mountaintop, with the word “success” above it. Along the way travelers encounter the “Right System Railroad Station,” the “True Knowledge” tunnel; they try to avoid falling into the “Bad Education” trap door or the river of failure, and taking other “wrong” routes (Harmon 49).

We talk about the challenges of mapmaking, and how you can draw a map and write something that describes a map. However,

Words can never be a simple reflection of life. Our very limited set of symbols, the letters of our alphabet, are forced to translate the unspeakable data of our senses, our thoughts, and our emotions...All of our approaches are possible projections. “How to choose?” Denis Wood asks. “This is the question, for the answer determines the way the earth will look on the map...The selection of a map projection is always to choose among competing interests, to take...a point of view.”

Wood argues that maps give us “a reality that exceeds our vision, our reach, the span of our days, a reality we achieve no other way. We are always mapping the invisible or the attainable...the future or the past.” He adds that through the map we “link all [our] elaborately constructed knowledge up with our living.” (Turchi 90-91)

My students and I talk about how they can create life maps that chart their pasts and futures and the “invisible or the attainable,” and how they can create memory maps with a vision of what they plan to do in their futures. For instance, my student Scott’s life map is an island, and the bodies of water surrounding it are

the Ocean of Mother and Ocean of Father. Nia's life map includes a paper cutout family tree, a Campbell's soup can (which alludes to her fascination with Andy Warhol and Pop Art), an iPod, an illustration of a girl holding a vinyl record, and so on.

Conclusion

Visual art can be effectively used in a writing composition class to enhance the learning process, and to help students learn more about how art and writing relate to each other. Writing composition is one way of thinking about what composition is. Visual artists, composers, industrial designers, and people working in other professions compose in different ways. When you compose something you are framing it, and you are deciding what should be foregrounded or backgrounded. Sometimes when you experience writer's block you can switch modes to free up your mind and approach your project in new ways. These assignments provide opportunities for students to reflect on where they have come from, and think of ways to define themselves by using words in multiple ways: the backgrounds of their lives and the backgrounds in their life maps, the compositions they are writing and the compositions they are illustrating, and so on. In *The Hand: How Its Use Shapes the Brain, Language, and Human Culture*, Frank R. Wilson writes—

We begin life with our parents as the first teachers, learning through early exposure to toys, language, music, and other children and adults. We perceive change in ourselves through countless interactions, formal and informal, with others to whom we are drawn or driven:

teachers, relatives, friends, and rivals. As emerging adults reaching toward the heady goal of independence, we seek to match ourselves to an exemplary archetype, and through emulation of this person (his or her principles and work) we are directed toward a life of productive work, companionship, and reward. The socialization that formal education strives so hard to inculcate is, as Kieran Egan argues, actually built into this process as we increase our familiarity and facility with tools (hand-held and cognitive) offered to us through our contacts with those around us.

No wonder learning is so hard to control, so easy both to direct and to misdirect. It is brain and eye and ear and skin and heart; it is self alone and self-in-community, it is general and specific, large and small. The interaction of brain and hand, and the growth of their collaborative relationship through a life of successive relationships with all manner of other selves—musical, building, playing, hiking, cooking, juggling, riding, artistic selves—not only signifies but *proves* that what we call learning is a quintessential mystery of life. It demands energy but produces more than it consumes. (Wilson 294-295)

The Arcimboldo-Style Self-Portrait, the Personal Labyrinth, and the Life Map assignments help students to explore who they are and who they aspire to become in the world. Jorge Luis Borges once wrote, “Everything a man writes traces the outlines of his own face.” Thus, writing can be a form of personal cartography. With these assignments, I ask my students to creatively immerse themselves in projects where they can explore their sense of control and

direction. As they explore themselves through these assignments, hopefully they learn more about how they can become cartographers of themselves and their futures, and the worlds they experience and envision.

Bibliography & Suggested Readings

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