

Why Not Try Collage?

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Most of us have seen a few collages in our wanderings through modern art galleries. If we paused to look closely at them, we saw all sorts of fragmentary materials—parts of photographs, crushed bits of newspaper, small objects like metal scraps or pieces of string, cutouts from illustrations, or fragments of cloth—pasted on paper bases and related, one to another, in an unusual and often bizarre manner. We realized that here were unconventional abstract materials used for their plastic and psychological effects rather than for their pictorial values. Whether we lingered over the collages or moved on to less puzzling exhibits, it probably never occurred to us that the art collage or any modification of it might serve a useful purpose in C/C courses.

Over the past ten years, first by chance observation and later by repeated experiments, I have found that collage-making has a place in C/C courses. In reporting the experiences which led me to this conclusion, I shall discuss three points: how the art collage can be modified to fit C/C courses, how a project may be set up and carried through, and what insights into problems in communication students seemed to gain from this work.

The art collage, child of the *papier collé* (pasted paper), is now a well-established form. The *papier collé* first appeared around 1910 in the cubist period of Braque and Picasso, who began to paste bits of newspaper, wallpaper, and textured materials into their work. These artists used *papier collé* chiefly for its plastic value as they sought fresh avenues of expression and broke with traditional techniques and materials. The art collage, developed in the 1920's

by the surrealists, became an independent form rather than a pasted-in portion of a larger work—a form important not so much for its plastic values as for its psychological and associative values. For some artists, collage offered a welcome means of releasing obscure and subtle feelings; for others, a way of rejecting what they felt were worn-out purposes and methods. Collage became significant for its unexpected juxtaposition of unrelated materials and for its power to evoke feelings and associations. Montage and photomontage, while bearing some resemblance to collage, aimed for a more pictorial effect in which narrative elements sometimes appeared. The movement beginning with *papier collé* and ending in photomontage had immediate and sweeping effects on such fields as film-making, advertising, photography, interior decorating, and stage design.

Collages made in C/C courses are, fortunately, many times removed from surrealist and dadaist art collages. As a combination of collage and montage, they include all the materials of both and follow the basic pasting procedure of both, but they aim for the pictorial representation of montage with its inclusion of narrative and thematic elements. Collage thus offers a new route over which students may approach problems of composition in the widest sense of that term. They are able to go through a complete simplified creative process themselves with unfamiliar materials which are, nevertheless, manageable and readily available to them.

Before students embark on collage, they need to distinguish it from posters and bulletin board displays. They need to recognize that it gives free rein to their imagination and includes a range of materials wider than those in the usual poster and bulletin board work.

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Collage combines feeling and idea, involves abstraction and private symbolism, and features overlapping and mixing of materials rather than presenting them in formal framed patterns. While some of these characteristics are part of effective bulletin board and poster work, in combination they represent something beyond the purpose of these moral literal media.

In initiating projects on collage, I have suggested that students work on anything important enough to them to stir feelings and visual images: concepts such as home, success, peace, love; persons they know well; places for which they have a strong attachment—their neighborhood, hometown, favorite vacation spot, or a foreign city they have visited. The challenge here lies in students ability to give a broad or abstract subject significant treatment within a limited space and with limited materials. Another approach which has worked well is to suggest topics such as “My Son,” “My Future,” “My First Impression of College,” or “My Three-Year-Old World.” Occasionally, by class agreement, all students work on the same topic. Several years ago I saw about twenty-five collages which were “First Impressions of New York City.” In these collages we had fascinating proof that every person has his own New York City and that foreign students’ feelings about the city were far different from the reactions of native Americans seeing New York for the first time.

After students have some notion of what collage is and have discussed themes for their individual efforts, a few rough blackboard sketches of patterns of organization—triangle, circle, overlapping circles, center with radiating lines, swirls and freer forms—can be usefully discussed. Elementary color symbolism should also be reviewed. Students should select the color of the poster paper base to fit their theme and they may shape the base to their theme also,

although many collages are set on the conventional, large rectangular base. I recall one interesting collage cut to the shape of an enormous black egg and centering a child in his crib, surrounded by an overlapping confused series of dream-like images—animals, a monster or two, fragments of dark forest, fire engines—in a cumulative symbolization of children’s fantasies and fears. Another collage, showing the worries of a young soldier off to war, was set on a base cut into a large question mark.

More often than not, students will be able to gather materials at little or no cost if they make full use of the family magazine racks and appeal to sympathetic neighbors. They now clip any images or fragments, usually in color, which seem relevant to their theme. My students also used straw, match covers, keys, wire, yarn, string, scraps of metal, badges and other insignia, and fragments of cloth. Finished collages, if my classes were at all representative, range from the near-poster efforts of the literal-minded through purely pictorial to highly symbolic productions. In this variety lie rich possibilities for class discussion.

Viewing the collages is, of course, the high point of the project. Students are usually eager to talk about variety and effectiveness in design; selection and appropriateness of materials; qualities of feeling and tone; and originality in perception. They observe the use of color, line, shape, and design to create mood. They see that some collages are projections of the conscious mind whereas others come from deeper layers of feeling.

Collages are never graded. By the time a class has thoroughly discussed them, it is quite evident which collages are superior, which middling, and which weak. Then, in the light of personal experience and class discussion, students proceed to writing, which is graded. Since I have used collage only in con-

junction with expository writing, my students have written analytical, critical, and process themes. Collage-making could, however, be easily related to autobiographical, narrative and descriptive writing to serve as a means of releasing associations and memories, so important in these types of writing. Similarly, it could accompany explorations in reading and writing poetry.

What insights into problems in communication did students gain from this project? Among the comments from about 120 papers were many which attested to insights into personality. Students felt that collage-making gave them a chance to explore their thoughts and feelings more freely than they had been in the habit of doing and led them to a deeper appreciation of other personalities. As one student put it, "This project made me dig down into my inner thoughts more than anything I have ever attempted." To be sure, some students come to their freshman work with a rich background of creative activities; but here, evidently, was a student who had encountered in collage-making perhaps his first significant introspective experience. In one group we viewed a collage in which an older woman had cogently expressed her feeling that schools and churches were failing to inspire and guide. Another student, referring to her collage, wrote, "I share her conclusion that schools and churches are providing little enlightenment." One ex-serviceman drew closer to another whose collage expressed his tender love for his baby daughter. The first man wrote, "I can see that he is a man of understanding, hope, and love for what he has." Many students realized that what a person communicates in image, word, and gesture is necessarily an expression of what he is and feels and of the ideals and values he cherishes. Were some of these the same students who were reluctant to take full responsibility for what they wrote in their "theme a week for the

teacher" and how they wrote it? They were.

The second group of comments concerned insights into communication. Many students commented on the difficulty of communicating ideas and feelings and the complications which arise when others do not understand what we are trying to say. Apparently the challenge of working out symbolic meanings with simple but unfamiliar materials and of testing the results through others' reactions provided a fresh perspective on old problems. One student stated: "It was interesting to know what other students read into what I had made and to see how their ideas differed from what I thought I had expressed." Another wrote: "I had not intended to describe night as a morbid thing but I can see how a person might get this impression. It might have been better if . . ." And he proceeded to describe materials and a design which would have made his collage more effective. When we struck what seemed to be mysterious or ambiguous content in a collage, we asked whether this was the fault of the maker or of the viewers. From this question came discussion of the validity of private symbolism; the problem of readiness of viewers (or readers or listeners) to receive communication; and the role of ambiguity in verbal and visual materials. One man, whose writing up to this time had been diffuse and thin, rediscovered the meaning of relevancy: "I had to weigh and consider each element before I accepted it." Another student wrote that both verbal and non-verbal communication "need a definite plan of organization and each requires careful analysis on the part of the creator or writer to see if the ideas are expressed clearly and logically." One girl defined collage as "a bit of poetry in picture form," while another declared, "I discovered that something more than words is often needed to get an idea

across, that communication is more than words."

Collage can sometimes be a deeply emotional experience. I remember the thoughtful pre-theological student who united humanity within a huge Cross set on the Star of David. I recall the War and Peace collage of an ex-G.I. who set the tomb of the Unknown Soldier opposite a young man and his girl walking hand in hand in radiant autumn woods. Both collages were genuinely compelling in their sincerity and power. And there was the talented art student who, in a highly abstract and rich collage, expressed the variety of modern art and her love for it. She wrote that getting these feelings out of her system was worth the semester's tuition.

I began to use collage back in 1949 as a means of identifying certain primal concepts and problems which seemed to me to run through all composing, whatever the materials. I found that the pro-

ject required students to discuss, in a new context, a number of basic questions: the responsibility of the sender for his communication; the ability of the receiver to grasp it; the value of detail; valid ambiguity versus confusion and inadequacy; symbolism and image-making; the relation of color, shape, size, line and texture to the total effect; and the fusion of intellect and emotion in communication. On the problem level, students grappled with such matters as finding a dynamic idea which had emotional overtones for them, limiting it, selecting materials appropriate for expressing it, and arranging materials in an effective design and in harmony with the tone or mood they wished to convey. With very few exceptions, my students have responded imaginatively to this new format which permitted them to get at primal concepts and problems—old and new—quickly and with a refreshing sense of personal discovery.

Special Student, Special Section

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The near-illiteracy of the average college freshman is viewed with alarm by many observers of the contemporary American scene. It also presents serious problems to the instructor of freshman composition. Is he to devote himself primarily to drilling the students who failed to learn the principles of grammar in the seventh grade? If so, how can he avoid stultifying the comparatively rare but ever-present student who has some real command of the mechanics of language?

One popular solution to this problem is to exempt students from work in English composition on the basis of their scores in entrance examinations. This

method produces a more homogeneous class structure, but fails to help the better student use his command of language to advantage. It rests on the tacit assumption that a freshman able to write a grammatical, reasonably coherent theme—able, in other words, to attain a level of communication formerly expected of anyone admitted to college—needs little or no more work in composition.

More realistic, and far more valuable to the advanced student, is the institution of a special program in composition for superior students. This solution to the problem of the average freshman's incompetence in expression helps both the mediocre majority and the excep-

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