Emma Head, Keele University

Alke Gröppel-Wegener, Staffordshire University

***Visual Soundbites Postcards*: Getting students to regenre essay-writing advice**

Abstract:

A tale of two parts, this ‘article’ presents a series of artefacts, the *Visual Soundbites Postcards* (2015) by Alke Gröppel-Wegener, as well as a reflection on how these artefacts have been used as teaching resources/inspirations by Emma Head.

Keywords: essay writing advice, essay writing workshops, postcards, regenring, visual analogies, visual metaphors

The *Visual Soundbites Postcards* are a set of 10 tips on different stages of essay writing, each based on an original two-colour linocut print in the style of a short slogan illustrated in a visual way in a square format. In their postcard format each design includes not only the print, but also a short explanation giving more context to the slogan. These postcards were developed as an extension of my book *Writing Essays by Pictures: a workbook*, which regenres the traditional essay-writing skills book into a colourful mix of text and images to provide “visual metaphors and analogies which are designed to highlight specific, important aspects of academia” (2016: 5).

The idea behind the book was that of a ‘slow’ pedagogy, providing making activities that would encourage students to spend time with their academic practice by turning it into creative practice. The postcards were meant as a ‘fast’ pedagogy counterpoint – slogans that would be fast to read and understand and easy to memorise.

Alke

[Figure 1: Some of the linocuts of the Visual Soundbites. Photograph by Lucy Biggs]

[Figure 2: The set of 10 Visual Soundbites Postcards]

As well as telling readers about the processes involved in essay writing, *Writing Essays by Pictures* (2016) also presents the reader with a number of exercises to help with their own reflection on the process of essay-writing. Inspired by this text, I designed a workshop on essay-writing for year two undergraduate students where participants would be asked to engage in the production of their own essay-writing advice, drawing on Alke’s *Visual Soundbites Postcards* with the addition of a new activity based on the production of postcards and greeting cards. In this way, students would be asked to regenre the traditional essay-writing advice by drawing and writing a greeting card addressed to themselves with content that would be useful for future essay writing.

In the workshop, the participants were asked to begin by reflecting on their own feelings about essay writing. The prompt ‘how do you feel when you have an essay to complete?’ was given and the participants wrote their reflections on a postcard. The workshop participants then discussed these answers which centred on negative feelings with the word ‘stressed’ being emphasised.

These postcards were then put aside to give the participants space to think about how their future self could tackle an essay in a way which would mean they would feel more positive and proactive and less stressed. Here, I explained to the participants that students often know what ‘mistakes’ they make in terms of essay-writing but continue to make them. How could we break this cycle and encourage students to feel more positively about their writing? My idea here was to introduce the idea of regenring by drawing on Gröppel-Wegener’s visual resources on essay-writing and to ask students to do some regenring of their own by making a greeting card with images and text on essay-writing.

I selected the greeting card as this style of writing usually lends itself to positive sentiments (Happy Birthday!), or at least sympathetic words, when a card is sent on hearing bad news. The production of the card was also a way for students to start to write and to think in a way which was creative and placed essay-writing and their own academic skills development within their control. I used the *Visual Soundbites Postcard* set and sorted these into loose categories: everyday activities; research and planning; writing. I worked with the participants to encourage them to think about which ‘tips’ from each category were the most important for them and to think about how they would build this guidance into their own study practices.

The participants then drew their own representation of the most important tips on their greeting card and added notes inside the card to emphasise the ideas they were taking away from the workshop. What this meant was that participants became reflexively engaged in producing their own regenred essay-writing advice that was tailored to their own study needs.

In the workshop, students were able to discuss difficulties and to creatively think of ways to overcome them. Prompted by one of the visual essay-writing tips, we had a really interesting discussion of reading for fun, a topic that is seldom covered in discipline-based seminar discussions. We discussed the value of reading widely and the pleasures of reading fiction. One tip we thought about was using audiobooks as way to have a break from printed matter.

This was a workshop format I will return to and it was good to hear that the session was also appreciated by the participants, who liked the greeting card mode of essay-writing advice and noted that it had given them a more positive view of essay writing.

Emma

References

Gröppel-Wegener, A. (2015), *Visual Soundbites Postcards*, [set of 10 postcards based on essay writing tips], self-published, available from tactileacademia.com

Gröppel-Wegener, A. (2016), *Writing Essays by Pictures: a workbook*, Huddersfield: Innovative Libraries

Biography

Dr Emma Head is a Lecturer in Sociology at Keele University. Her research interests focus on motherhood and the sociology of family life. She is also interested in the teaching and learning of sociology, particularly in the ways that students develop academic skills and the impact that digital technologies have on this process.

Dr. Alke Gröppel-Wegener is a National Teaching Fellow and Associate Professor of Creative Academic Practice at Staffordshire University. Her research interests include exploring the links between creative and academic practice, and she has developed a number of visual analogies and creative activities to help students understand ‘hidden’ academic practice, which have been collected in *Writing Essays by Pictures*, (2016, Innovative Libraries Press), as well as a board game and set of postcards linked to this book. She blogs about her work at [www.tactileacademia.com](http://www.tactileacademia.com/).

Contact Details:

Staffordshire University; School of Computing and Digital Technologies; College Road; Stoke-on-Trent; ST4 2DE

[a.c.groppel-wegener@staffs.ac.uk](mailto:a.c.groppel-wegener@staffs.ac.uk) or tactileacademia@gmail.com