

## MAKING, RE-MAKING AND NEW MAKING

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### RE-VISIONING CANONICAL TEXTS IN CONTEMPORARY CLASSROOMS

Cheryl A. McLean

Rutgers University

[cheryl.mclean@gse.rutgers.edu](mailto:cheryl.mclean@gse.rutgers.edu)

Cheryl McLean is an Associate Professor of Literacy and English Education at the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University, USA. As a researcher and teacher educator, her work in adolescent literacy explores the intersection of practices (language, texts, and communicative tools), social contexts (environments, communities, local-global, digital and multimodal), culture and identity, and pedagogical instruction. E-Mail: [cheryl.mclean@gse.rutgers.edu](mailto:cheryl.mclean@gse.rutgers.edu)

**This article explores some of the underlying tensions of teaching traditional academic texts in contemporary classrooms. Re-visiting data from two research studies that focus on teaching canonical literature texts in English high school classrooms in the USA, the article examines how such pedagogical approaches might be operationalized to make school subject English relevant in the literacy classroom. Findings show that by tapping into students' modal skills and knowledge in order to interpret texts, students began viewing reading and composition as a process and not solely as product, and they learned to use their environments as resources to engage with literature texts that they initially resisted reading. This article makes the case that in the contemporary classroom, teaching content such as the "old" literary canon, now more than ever, requires a balanced literacy approach—one that harnesses the "new" literate competencies of the millennial learner.**

### Introduction

For meaningful learning to occur in our classrooms, there needs to be high level of congruence between students' needs, literacies and abilities, and teachers' instruction and the academic content. This view in itself implies a balanced approach to the teaching/learning process—one that takes into consideration "who" (teachers and students), "what" (curricular content and tools), "where" (contexts and spaces), "how" (modes, strategies), "why" (policies and goals). However, such efforts are not without inherent tensions especially given increasing demands of the curricular standards, diverse literacies, and teacher accountability. As educators and teachers, this task is made even more complex, given the significant impact of digital and technological media on our contemporary communicative and social landscape. Increasingly, the diverse digital literacies of our youth—e.g. the use of the screen and social media (e.g. computer, television, smartphone, websites etc.) as tools and resources to make meaning—play a major role in how young people interact, communicate, read and write and learn. With

these evolving literacy texts and practices comes the challenge for teachers in adapting, adopting, and/or modifying their own pedagogy in response to these contemporary contexts and literacy practices. What such classroom realities remind us is that teaching and learning does not—and cannot—operate in a vacuum. As such, these realities reinforce the need to create a working balance among student, content, context, and tools, if educators are to be truly effective in the classroom.

As a teacher educator whose research focuses on adolescent and multimodal literacy, I am continually confronting the very real-world question: How do we find ways to value our students' literacy practices within the traditional space of the school or classroom? The secondary school English Language Arts (ELA) teachers with whom I work, are consistently called upon to navigate the demands of disciplinary knowledge (e.g. literature, composition, grammar and literary theory), curriculum content and assessments, as well as multimedia. In their capacity as teachers of English language and literature, they are aware that the traditional use of literature-based reading instruction has brought the role of the teacher, the reader and the text to the forefront through "the use of literature for reading instruction views curricular materials as tools used by professional teachers who know their students' needs and interests." (Taffy & McMahon, 1994, pp. 103-104). The teacher is expected to play a pivotal role in re-visioning the traditional literature or canonical text within the nontraditional or contemporary classroom context. What this means is that, for example, the content of literature texts such as William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, or Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* or Anne Frank's *The Diary of Anne Frank*, or George Orwell's *Animal Farm* does not change, it is what the teacher *does* with this content that is critical. It is the teacher who must possibly make changes to how this traditional content is presented (e.g. strategies and tools), consider the connections across texts and students' lives, and also develop tasks assigned to help students apply and use this knowledge.

It is with such aforementioned classroom realities in mind that this article situates the idea of re-conceptualizing "old" texts within a "new" teaching/learning context. First, I explore some of the underlying tensions across traditional academic as well as contemporary texts and new literacy practices. Next, I present snapshots from two studies that offer insights into the use of multimodal tools to teach classic literature in English high school classrooms. I then go on to discuss how such pedagogical approaches might be operationalized in making school subject English relevant in the "new world" literacy classroom.

### ***Situating New Literacies***

Street's (2008) models of literacy have served as a guide for understanding the ways in which normative conceptions of language and literacy are often reflected in the literacy practices that are valued and enacted in schools. On one hand, an autonomous model of literacy (Street, 1997) signals what Street refers to as a normalized a "universal standard" that is disassociated from individuals and social contexts and where language and literacy operates in a vacuum. For example, it could be argued the traditional emphasis on print literacy and canonical literature that comprise traditional standardized tests and proficiency measures speak to the autonomous approach to teaching and learning. On the other hand, an ideological model situates literacy within a social context and its practices (Street, 1984). The printed word then becomes one of the many ways in which people communicate, interact, and learn, and these practices are often environment-specific.

In this sense, the autonomous takes a narrow approach placing a common content at the core while in the ideological, context is central. With the evolving literacies in today's society, the work of scholars such as Street (1984, 1995, 2005) and New London Group (1996), have allowed educators to reconsider the traditional, narrow conception of literacy that is oriented toward a one-size-fits-all perspective in favor of a broader view of academic language and forms of expression in the classroom.

### ***Multimodality***

New literacy scholars (New London Group 1996) have highlighted the situatedness of literacy—i.e. the contexts and the practices used to communicate. By extension, multimodality (Kress, 2010) focuses on modes of representation and the related texts and the semiotic resources used to make meaning. Modes have different “modal resources” which allow the mode to do different specific semiotic work or common general work (Bezemer & Kress, 2011). The communication theory of modes (Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress, 1997, 2010)) point to forms of expression that afford ways in which to communicate that are inclusive of but not limited to the printed word. It is important to note that while multimodality is not equivalent to digital literacy, the digital media spaces such as websites, podcasts, film (which often combines modes) can be counted among some of the many modes of communication. When taken within the classroom context, multimodality instruction harnesses these authentic modes or semiotic resources (e.g. visual/images, animation, sound, symbols, audio, linguistic, spatial, gestural) to help students make meaning and demonstrate their understanding of curricular content. It would be fair to say that for many ELA educators, using print, images, talk, audio, performance etc. is not new. In fact, reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and performance are standard expectations in the ELA classroom. However, what is new or has become the “new normal” is the range of multimodal literacies that youth use in their everyday lives, and their relative comfort with inhabiting, blending, and moving across multiple modes to communicate. In fact, communication for many of these young people involves the synthesis of multiple modes that transform singular modes into forms that produce new or multiple meanings (Cordes, 2009).

Part of the concerns about literacy and reading instruction then, comes from the growing awareness of the theoretical, pedagogical and social implications of modal and digital literacies embodied in multiple tools and practices. Nowadays, the consumption, production, composition of digital and technological media, as well as the diverse modes of communication by which young people communicate and interact can be considered commonplace in society. Confronting literacy in a digital age now requires a critical understanding of images, words, and sound (Koltay, 2011). Confronting and embracing this broader perspective of literacy beyond prescriptive competencies ascribed to traditional academic English. What then, are the implications for practice in the ELA classroom is the physical and experiential space where students learn discipline of literary English, the technical skills of reading, writing etc.? In viewing multimodality as a hybrid, more balanced communicative practice, meaning-making becomes a symbiotic use of all primary literacy skills: speaking and listening, reading, viewing, writing. What this also signals is that privileging the written word is not reflective of the every-day experience; that communication and meaning-making are not solely restricted to the printed word. Whether it is via images (memes, photos, drawing) writing (text messages, chats, blogs), music, narrative, oral/talk or a combination of modes (zines, websites, games, videos), new

media multimodality has invigorated the literate traditions (Hull & Nelson, 2005) and should be seen as a bridge to a more authentic, balanced literacy instruction.

**Teaching and learning literature.** Instruction has to be contextualized for meaningful learning of literature and technical skills to take place, there should be opportunities to co-construct and communicated meaning. According to Enright, Torres-Torretti, and Carreón (2012), tension arises when a skills-driven orientation to literacy divorces literacy from its communicative purposes. For example, Eckert (2008) points to pedagogical and ideological gap between “teaching reading” and “teaching literature” because reading literary texts involve critical engagement and interpretation, and involves far more than decoding words. Therefore, for researchers as Eckert, the reading/English teacher must not only provide students with reading strategies but also interpretation approaches and the language of critical literacy interpretation (Eckert, 2008; Zhang, 2003). In fact Zhang, who in referring to students’ struggle with literary texts, points out that “the problem is not one of lack of ability but rather preparedness” (p. 14). Even further, Iser (2000) argues that it is the reader’s creative imagination, implications and connections to the written text that allows the written text to take hold, expand and construct meaning. Multimodality facilitates literary reading, analysis and interpretation by allowing students to transfer reading strategies and skills to the literary text. Viewing academic language and ELA learning as inherently situated and social that is contextualized by each user, speaker, listener, viewer, composer/producer etc. shifts reading, language and literacy away from a monoglossic or standard language ideology (Garcia, 2009; Davila) that labels variations of standard or mainstream language or literacies (e.g. English) as deficits.

### ***Multimodal Instruction in the Literature Classroom***

I approach my multimodal research with high school youth through the lens of literacy as a socially-situated practices (Author, 2012; Author, 2014) where each mode offers “potential meanings that another might not offer” (Rowse & Burke, 2009, p. 107). What I see multiple modes doing in the traditional literature classroom is creating opportunities for broader perspective or at least alternative entry points for understanding—so that students can critically engage in greater depth with the written canonical text.

Multiliteracies demands a “different kind of pedagogy, one in which language and other forms of meaning are dynamic representation resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve various cultural purposes” (New London Group, 1996, p. 64). It is a pedagogy that acknowledges and values the diverse communicative resources that young people access on a daily basis be it linguistic, visual, spatial, acoustic etc. This opens up the English literature classroom and text to the purposeful use of a range of linguistic, spatial, and nonlinguistic modes and representational resources to critically analyze a text.

### ***The context***

To help illustrate the use multimodal instruction, I refer to two ethnographic multimodal research studies involving the use of photography and audio podcasts and the literary novels, *Night* by Elie Weisel and *Day of Tears* by Julius Lester, where each of the novels were required high school literature curriculum. In choosing to use artistic forms of photography and digital poetry podcasts as forms of literary analysis and interpretation, I was acknowledging that these modes (e.g. visual, oral, audio) provided affordances that the print alone could not; that it complemented the print and created real-world participation, connection to literary and physical spaces; and that it bridged the gap between technical skills and engagement. I saw merit in order to move past the dichotomization of learning

experiences (Vasudevan, 2006). The two multimodal studies presented in this article stretched students to a heightened awareness and discussion of the affordances of modal choices, a closer more personalized connection to the literature texts, and a space with which to confront sociocultural issues that define their lived experience. More importantly, it challenged them to do so from their own perspective, through their eyes, and in their authentic voice.

### ***The students***

In the two English classrooms (10<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades) in the same low-income, urban high school, where I conducted the two studies, the students' interest in literature is varied—from the student who is motivated to read, to those who display disinterest, to those who have various reading remediation needs. However, for the most part, the concept of being a “reader” is not part of many of these students' identities as learners. As 16 year-old Kevin put it, “I read, but I’m not a reader.” In one of the interviews, another adolescent, Kiasha, identified herself as a poet yet not a reader. Neither of these two adolescents viewed themselves as competent readers and students despite the fact that Kiasha enjoyed journaling daily, wrote and performed poetry online and enjoyed reading and viewing spoken word poetry online, and Kevin was highly proficient in Math and was an active digital media user. Yet, like so many of their peers in both classes, they had become indifferent to school curriculum because according to them, the ways they were taught didn't always help them to “get it”. More so, these young persons had internalized the traditional view of literacy and reading both in their view of themselves and the school's and society's perceptions of them. These adolescents, according to school standardized measures and labels were labeled as “struggling”, “below proficient” and “at risk of failing”. What then, are the expectations for teacher and learner in this context? How is the teacher expected to prepare and provide opportunities for her students to read the required academic literacy texts that are part of the English curriculum? This question was one of the major concerns expressed by the school administrators and teachers that served as an impetus for these studies that integrated photography and podcasts as a way to engage students and promote critical thinking and deeper understanding traditional literary texts.

### **Snapshot 1: Photography and Day of Tears**

As part of the 10<sup>th</sup> grade English class, students were assigned a photography project based on Julius Lester's classic novel, *A Day of Tears*, which chronicled the Weeping Time—the largest slave auction in U.S. history. The Day of Tears project (Author, 2014) asked students to take photographs of their environment that they believed reflected the themes, characters and emotions in the novel. In addition, students had to compose an accompanying artist statement for each of their photographs as well as present their curated pieces in a gallery display. Working closely with the classroom teacher, we used a number of traditional approaches to supporting students in reading the text including whole class and small group read-alouds and discussions, visuals and video from the historical period, oral and written debates on key events and characters in the novel. All these activities were designed to help students better prepare for this culminating project demonstrating their understanding of events and characters.

The photography project was deliberately “low tech” in terms of the use of disposable cameras, paper, pen and pencil as the primary technological tools. It also required students to use artifacts (furniture, clothing, landscape) from their everyday lives in their homes, neighborhoods and school to stage their photos. In addition, the planning

process involved the use of discussions charts, storyboards, and was hands-on in terms of props and physical arrangement of artifacts and photos. Collectively, the project involved multiple modes because students relied on their understanding of how modes such as color, space, angles, symbols, words, and lighting worked together to convey a message and create meaning. In many ways, this literary interpretation/analysis project challenged students to draw directly on their physical and social spaces and use these modes and tools to create a “new” or alternative text (photograph) to express and interpret an “old” or traditional literature text (novel).

Figure 2: Plantation Pain



*The Butler Plantation they grew up on. The tired house. The rising sun. The life they led.*

### **Snapshot 2: Night Poetry Podcast**

The *Night* poetry podcast was designed helped students make a deeper and emotional connection to the required literature classroom texts (Author, 2011). The poetry podcast based on the memoir, *Night*, by Elie Wiesel was one of the focal 9<sup>th</sup> grade literature texts that students were required to read and analyze. For many students, this book was just one of many in which students had appeared to have little interest or motivation to read beyond the mandatory expectation of a passing grade on the final exam. Aware of students' apathy to what they considered to be yet another canonical text that has “nothing to do with us” as they often complained, the teacher sought to create opportunities to help

students connect with the text. The assignment prompt required students to compose an audio poem (with accompanying music/sounds) that evoked an emotion in the listener and/or expressed the speaker's emotion based on the novel *Night*. In order to support students' in deeper connections to the novel, one strategy included having students view the movie *Schindler's List*, after having reading the novel *Night*. In addition, the movie added the layers of visuals/images, sound/audio etc. and alternative or different perspectives that enhanced the students' interpretation, analysis and understanding of the novel.

The process of composing a poem and podcast allowed students to think critically about how they could use language (words and imagery, tone, voice, expressions etc.) and audio (sounds, rhythm, music etc.) to convey meaning. Teaching and learning in this space became collaborative and interactive with students moving along the novice-expert continuum depending on their facility with technological and digital tools (e.g. audio recorders, software editors) and familiarity with modes (e.g. music, sound, performance etc.) composition and language (poetry writing), and knowledge of texts (reading and movie).

### **Discussion**

The body of work that the students produced in both multimodal projects highlights some important points about teaching and learning in this literature and reading classroom context. By reading for meaning, learning and using different modes in which to demonstrate their understanding, and making explicit and deeper connections to their everyday lives and communities, students were engaging with literature in authentic ways. So, the modal and design choices these young persons made in staging and shooting their images or selecting sounds to evoke an emotional response reflected *their* critical understanding, meanings and interpretation of the event/scenes and emotions in these two literary texts, *Night* and *Day of Tears*.

In order to compose their photos, the students recognized that they needed to understand the story/events in the novel. This required such strategies as. Reading in this ELA classroom became an iterative process of re-reading, discussing, note taking, questioning, clarifying and explaining, and revising. By default of this multimodal exploration to identify and determine how best to capture and represent their selected event or emotion, these young people were employing many reading strategies that they were often unwilling or not always given opportunity to apply in a meaningful way.

### ***The reading and composition process***

The process of composing multimodal producing photos and a podcast forced students to take the time to plan and organize their responses to the before, during and after reading. For the photography planning was important since the students had to consider design principles such as props, environment, layout, angles, lighting etc. in order to have the image reflect as accurately as possible, the intended message; the poet had to consider things such as editing, sound, pacing, rhythm and language in order achieve the desired effect in the podcast. An integral part of the composition process involved thinking carefully about the emotions and mood they sought to evoke or represent, and consider how specific language, tone, and sounds expressed or conveyed certain emotions. This planning process involved storyboards and discussions in which students brainstormed, critiqued and worked through ideas. In the case of the podcast, trial and error with the digital technology along with writing and revision were also integral to the creative

composition process. Within the instructional space, reading and engaging with the novels became interactive, discussion, research and writing based.

Within this ELA classroom, the teacher was both facilitator and learner. In one sense, the teacher had the power to set up the space for learning opportunities. Multimodal instruction became a bridge to make literary text more accessible, engaging and a space for promoting critical understanding thinking and awareness. By purposefully integrating multimodal tasks and approaches to reading instruction in the literature classroom, it afforded students the opportunity to use modal resources, and the power to have a place in the classroom discourse. For example, visual images of the photographs and the musical sounds, present concrete details that make them immediate, accessible and dialogic in a different way from verbal texts (Author, 2012). The tasks created a ways to have previously silenced student voices become part of the critical conversations. Through photography and poetry, the students voices mattered, their perspectives and interpretations of the classic text played a central role, their choice of academic discourse added to the collective products of the art gallery and podcasts. In discussing Bakhtin's (1986) concept of the dialogic utterance—speech, written text, images etc., the speaker or writer “takes the position through his or her choice of focus of expressing and in relation to the social world around” (Smidt, 2011, p. 663). Similarly, in order to compose and produce a text it involves an active negotiation of the word (use of language, literature texts) and the world (identities, experiences, interactions and relationships).

### ***The social environment as a resource***

The task challenged students to make more strategic use of a variety of modes. In terms of sounds and audio, students became more aware of how the intensity, volume, pacing, and patterns of speech and sounds can tell a compelling story. In addition to the visuals, reading literary text involved written and oral expressions; students were also required to present their work in writing through artist's statements and in oral presentations for peers and teachers. Even then, in talking about their work, students were allowed to be as creative as they wished in expressing their meanings of compositions and connections to the text. The artist statements in their project took the traditional form of descriptive statement to the poetic expression. Each statement provided insight into the individual student's identity, creativity, writing skills and style preferences.

The students began to view the everyday aspects of their lives and the literacies and interests as resources—resources that not only brought photos and poems to life but also brought a new awakening of their identities as readers/learners and individuals. In order to produce photographs and podcasts, the students needed to focus on the novels and their environments and communities. However, they also had to exercise restraint and purposefulness in accessing one aspect of their environment: the Internet and digital sources. The screen and virtual spaces now served as a resource instead of crutch on which they young people were solely dependent. For example, students were encouraged to do online research and draw inspiration from images, stories of the historical time-period and become familiar with the photographer's craft. Hence, as a learning community, we were able to circumvent practical financial and logistical constraints within the classroom by taking *virtual* field trips to museums online in order to view artists' works.

Students soon began to purposefully take note of their homes, neighborhood, objects and persons/people. Their views of the physical spaces they inhabited and the sounds and music that they heard and enjoyed, which they had previously viewed as ordinary and

nondescript, were repositioned and took on an importance in their narratives of their identities that had previously not existed. Photography within the context of the novels allowed them to begin to see their world and the stories of slavery and the holocaust with new eyes and perspectives.

### **Conclusion**

Confronting normative traditions of “de-situating” literacy from the tasks and context (Enright et al. 2012) entails working within textual and semiotic conventions and modal resources (Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2005) by tapping into students’ key competencies, modal skills, and knowledge. While challenging students to purposefully read and write across genres and modes (Lam, 2009), the literature instruction also values their voices, literacies, and identities (Author, 2012). Engagement with traditional literature texts moves beyond reading to *interpretation*, enabling a shift toward critical reading (i.e. reading with understanding and reading for understanding).

With this contemporary youth literacies come challenges in practice (i.e. finding ways to work productively with literary texts). Addressing some of these challenges requires educators to consider the role of the teacher, variety of texts, multiple modes, and forms of standards and assessments. Firstly, the teacher’s level of comfort with using a variety of texts and modes is pivotal in the instructional space. The teacher’s pedagogical content knowledge is a critical part of the teaching/learning process since he/she needs to be able to comfortably navigate strategies that draw on the teacher’s content knowledge *and* knowledge of teaching. Secondly, young adult literature including novels and short stories (nonfiction, fiction, fan fiction etc.) should complement the more traditional texts, thereby increasing pathways to making real-world connections. Thirdly, using and orchestrating a range of modes beyond the traditional printed texts to the screen etc.: video (animation, games, film), images (photography, drawing/painting), oral/aural (music, narration, talk), performance etc. are viable ways to develop and represent students’ understanding of a particular literary text. Fourthly, it is important to also consider curricular standards of assessment and evaluation of student knowledge and performance in order to more effectively scaffold further learning experiences.

Shifting the issue of teaching/learning and literacy instruction away from a deficit narrative to one that focuses on what teachers and students *can* do requires openness to the process as well as hybrid balanced and real-world approach—one that considers the texts (the academic content) as well as the tools (technology and instructional strategies), and the contexts (learners’ social spaces). Oftentimes, the label of “new literacies” can be reduced solely to digital i.e. computer screen. Viewing multimodality as diverse ways of communicating meaning and demonstrating understanding, has the possibility of providing a more balanced literacy approach to “reading the word and the world” (Freire, 1987). Reconciling “old” and “new” literary and school-subject texts that can help bridge the perceived literacy gap between instruction and learning, between traditional literary texts and contemporary literacy practices, (con)texts, tools, and students. One such approach involves harnessing the semiotic power of multimodality, which entails taking the traditional while also offering students opportunities to “read” and write in diverse/multiple texts and modes. When as educators, we can purposefully harness students’ literate competencies, we will be better able to bridge the gap between traditional and contemporary literature texts and teaching reading and literature.

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