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Multimodal Literacies in the Secondary English Classroom

A high school teacher and a college teacher collaborate on assignments that focus students on "anchored media instruction" and engage them in producing multimodal, technology-infused projects, including public service announcements, fictitious holidays, and music hall-of-fame inductions.

In the past few years, we have witnessed a dramatic increase in the study of multimodal literacies; scholarship has recognized the diverse ways 21st-century students create, share, and comprehend meaning (Cordes; Heydon; Mills). While this profusion of information certainly has piqued our interest, precisely how to make our classrooms more "multimodal" has proved troublesome—especially considering increased demands to raise test scores to meet Adequate Yearly Progress benchmarks. To provide insight into the issue of multimodal literacy instruction, we explore presentation techniques and instructional activities employed in our secondary language arts classes.

What Is Multimodal Literacy?

Multimodal literacy recognizes that for many children, knowledge construction has shifted away from the static, printed text to dynamic texts supported by sounds and pictures. Furthermore, knowledge construction is much more social and, hence, bound upon situational contexts (Heydon 39–41). As Kathy A. Mills notes, "This is an age of multimedia authoring where competency with written words is still vital, but is no longer all that is needed to participate meaningfully in the many spheres of life" (36). This means that teachers should shift from traditional literacy practices to instruction based on multimodalities where such texts may be presented in a variety of ways: "cards, books, movies, web sites, and video games, and others" (Cordes 11).

We have adopted multimodal literacy practices in our classrooms primarily for two reasons. First, multimodality is now deeply ingrained in how our society communicates (Tierney, Bond, and Bresler 359). Thus, it may be possible to draw on students' out-of-school literacies to help them perform better in our classrooms. Second, we recognize that not all of our students are proficient in multimodality (Mills 36); thus, they need training as well as access to technology to become competitive in the workforce on graduation from high school.

Tools We Use in Multimodal Literacy Instruction

Since the purpose of this article is the application of technology rather than creation of presentations, we will merely highlight discussion of the technical aspects of multimedia production. Our tools were all freeware or already installed on our computers. Selection of our software was mainly due to whichever program was listed first on a Google search. We did have an interesting problem in that while we could access YouTube, our school's filter blocked the word *YouTube* as a search term.

To save YouTube clips to our desktop, we use AVC Lab's "Any Video Convertor." This program saves clips in multiple formats including the Windows Media Video file format (WMV), which Windows uses for Movie Maker and PowerPoint. Movie Maker is an excellent program that was already installed on our pre–Windows 7 computers; the program serves as an editor to condense long clips into shorter, more manageable segments. It

also compresses the project into a smaller file that we can share with each other for class presentation.

Anchored Media Instruction

How did multimodal literacies influence our instruction? Our instructional style has definitely raised eyebrows in our building with some of our old-school colleagues who regularly rely on skill-and-drill instruction; they assumed that all we were doing was showing movies. In fact, we were anchoring our instruction through multiple media formats. Anchored instruction places learning "in problems that seem authentic" (Bottege et al. 300). The original purpose of anchoring was to create a context for "inert knowledge" as students utilized knowledge gleaned from a videodisc program, "The Jaspers Series," to solve problems in middle school mathematics courses (Dickinson and Summers 107). "Anchors are not merely lectures; rather, they are narratives, stories that create a realistic context to make learning motivating, meaningful, and useful" (Shyu 58). Numerous studies have demonstrated the efficacy of anchoring instruction from a variety of subjects from mathematics to language arts (Dickinson and Summers 108).

We broadened our use of anchored video instruction to incorporate other media that our students access daily, such as music and pictures. Anchored media instruction raised many a sleepy head of our students who eagerly embrace our new lecturing techniques. One such example was the use of video clips as story starters. When gauging prior knowledge for the short story "The Boar Hunt," we found that students did not know much about wild boars; many students assumed they were just docile pigs out in the wild. Their assumptions changed dramatically when they were presented with several YouTube clips such as "Smashed by Big Boar!" and "Hogzilla." The students discovered just how quick and dangerous a boar can be. A noticeable outcome was that the volume level with some of our boisterous classes perceptibly dropped when we played the

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clips: students were engrossed by the squeals and the viciousness of the boar. With a visual and auditory anchor, students eagerly turned to the reading assignment. Later they were able to compare and contrast the videos to the short story.

Anchored media instruction proved especially effective in our efforts to teach state reading standards. Both of us teach tenth-grade English, and these classes take the Kansas Reading Assessment (KRA). A glaring weakness reflected on previous test results was Kansas Reading Standard 1.4.11: The student "Analyzes and evaluates how an author's style (e.g. word choice, sentence structure) and use of literary devices (e.g. foreshadowing, flashback, irony, symbolism, tone, mood, imagery, satire, point of view, allusion, overstatement, paradox) work together to achieve his or her purpose for writing the text." In fact, this was our lowest-performing standard; students scored a 62.1 percent on the spring 2009 KRA.

As a strategy to improve scores, we turned to anchored media instruction of literary concepts. For instance, Shawn demonstrated each element of the plot diagram by teaching clips from *Star Wars: A New Hope.* Will demonstrated the various types of internal and external conflicts though the *Family Guy* episode "Da Boom." The overall presentation length for each anchor was under ten minutes, and we were able to embed them in our short-story units so the presentations could introduce the literary term before reading the story.

We found that these clips help build background and draw on previous knowledge to make connections with new learning. For instance, to teach first-person narration, we used a YouTube clip, "The

Life and Death of a Pumpkin (The Original)." This award-winning parody of Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum" helped our students see and hear first-person narration as the pumpkin relates his gruesome tale. Days after students viewed the film, we asked them what first-person narration is. If they forgot (as they sometimes do), we referenced the pumpkin; this usually elicited a collective "Oh yeah!" in the room. When we showed this clip to our seniors, many remembered the Poe story from the previous year and were able to make connections. Later in the unit we returned to the clip and discussed how tone and setting and the humor of the piece contribute to the author's purpose and articulate his or her message. The clip became an effective anchor for teaching the rhetorical triangle.[1] As they watched the film, we had students note the pumpkin's ethos as exhibited visually and through his speech. Next, they examined his message to articulate his logos, or appeal to reason. Finally, students provided examples on how the pumpkin generates the pathos of the video; later they will be asked to apply their knowledge to their own writing.

We were delightfully surprised when some students told us that the voices from the video clips helped reinforce their learning. As an example, they remembered Joe Swanson from *Family Guy* being attacked by a giant rat when we discussed character versus nature. But what really made the clip most memorable was Joe shouting "Bring it on!" to the rat in his distinctive accent.

Anchored media instruction appears to be paying dividends in our efforts to raise test scores in that students on the spring 2010 KRA rose from the previous low of 62.1 to an 80 percent. While there may be a number of causes for this dramatic increase, we believe that anchoring our instruction has profoundly improved student performance.

Shawn also discovered that anchored media instruction was able to help us effectively introduce a poetry unit because it provided a fresh perspective to students who are normally resistant to poetry. To get his students engaged with the topic, Shawn played a number of YouTube clips introducing limericks. The clips greatly entertained the class and provided background knowledge for students to write their own limericks. Students demonstrated a great deal of excitement and talked with each other in the hallways and during their seminar classes. They seemed much more eager to share their own poetry and comment about the poems Shawn anchored.

Multimodal Activities

In addition to anchoring our instruction, we took traditional student activities and reformatted them so students could present their assignments multimodally. One such example is our podcasting assignment. To provide extended practice of tested literary terms, we developed an activity where students create public service announcements (PSAs) for their classmates. Grouped into pairs, students are assigned a literary term and are tasked to create a short radio commercial aimed at teaching their peers the term. As an anchor, we showed some popular PSAs from the past. One of our favorites is the old drug awareness commercial in which an actor uses an egg and a frying pan to show the audience what a brain looks like when it is on drugs.

Multimodal literacy instruction can also be used to teach research projects. One such example is Shawn's extension of a unit on *The Christmas Carol*, called Happy Festivus. The project aims to have students develop a personal holiday. Students create a PowerPoint presentation that outlines the holiday's philosophy, practices or traditions, and key literature.

We discovered that the creation of the PSAs was fairly easy technologically: one of our building's mobile labs has laptops with built-in microphones. Students created their scripts and planned out any needed sound effects. When they were ready, they recorded their commercial using the microphone and sound recorder (which is already installed on the computer) and then saved their file to one of our USB flash drives. Once everyone completed the task, we played the commercials to all the classes, so different sections could hear what others had recorded.

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Students also develop materials that serve as artifacts of the holiday: cards, songs, advertisements, and slogans—all items that promote the holiday's message.

Presentation of the unit begins with a teaser to set the tone of the assignment; in this case it is a clip from "Saturday Night Live" in which Will Ferrell sings a special holiday message to his audience while spinning on a turntable ("Mark Jensen's Family Christmas"). Next, the purpose and basic elements of the assignment are reviewed. Shawn anchors the assignment with a clip from a *Seinfeld* episode, "The Strike," in which George explains to Kramer the origins of his personal holiday, Festivus. Shawn then gives more detail into what each component of the holiday project should entail. Throughout the presentation, additional *Seinfeld* clips provide extra context for students. Shawn created his own project to aid his students: "Happy Golden Eagle Day." His presentation chronicles winning the state football championship his senior year of high school.

We were impressed with students' final products. For instance, one student created a holiday based on an ancestor who achieved great fame as an aviator during World War II. Her project gave a detailed biography about the war hero and was supported by a variety of film clips, pictures of the aviator, and historical details regarding his role in the war. A humorous project celebrated "Ms. Kibbles Kat-tastic Adventure Day!" Ms. Kibbles happens to be the cat that one of the school's teachers is quite taken with. In fact, the teacher posted videos of her pet on YouTube and her Facebook account; these videos were useful to the student as he made his project. An equally humorous project celebrates "Crapper Day: The Life of Thomas Crapper and the Modern Toilet."

In addition to addressing reading standards throughout our projects, we addressed several writing standards. Students created personal and persuasive types of texts in which they invented their own holiday, defined it, and justified it to their audience. Students also engaged in technical writing as they made decisions about the format of the slides, videos, or speech so the visual and audio aspects were as effectively presented as possible. Students were required to document their sources and create a list of works cited at the end of their presentations. Finally, students had to write songs and make greeting cards for their holidays.

Another representative research activity is Will's Music Hall of Fame project. Students demonstrate that a musician or musical group of their choice should be inducted into a fictional music hall of fame. Students create a PowerPoint presentation or Movie Maker video in which they examine the subject's personal and professional background, explore the subject's discography, and explain the importance of the band in terms of its contribution to the music world. As music plays such an important role in students' lives, students demonstrate a high degree of motivation with this project since they pick their own favorite music groups for their research projects. Student who normally would not be engaged in traditional lessons put a great deal of energy and time into their presentations.

The project is interactive because the students are asked to be hall-of-fame voters. They are given ballots that have specific criteria that recommend or reject the group for induction into the hall. This generates a good deal of discussion among students about which group is worthy or not; it also exercises their critical-thinking skills as they come up with solid justification for their positions. Since the ballot is aligned to the project's grading rubric, students have more familiarity with the assignment's requirements.

Students present information that many of their peers are not familiar with. One engaging project, for instance, was on the group Los Lobos. One of our Latina students was able to impart some of her cultural traditions to the class through the presentation of her favorite band. Another student added a humorous bit of animation to his project on Michael Jackson. He created a stick-figure character "moon walking" as a transitional element from one section to the next. In doing so, he taught us a new way to incorporate pictures into our PowerPoint presentations while also directing his audience's attention.

In terms of standards addressed on the music hall of fame project, our students engaged in study of a variety of informational texts (in particular, biographies) and presented the material (visuals and sounds) in a persuasive format. Students also learned audience awareness as they made decisions about the appropriateness of music lyrics and videos.

Conclusion

Implementation of technology in the classroom initially proved problematic as we had to learn the software, teach several different programs to our students, and adjust our teaching styles to be more multimodal in orientation. However, once we were able to gain more proficiency, we found that students were more receptive to lessons and—as test scores indicated—learned more as a result. Over time, creating materials came much easier as we started making connections of our outside literacies (movies, television shows, and music) to our instruction. In the end, we found assignments to be much more than work; presenting and receiving information in a multimodal format became fun for our students and us. *EJ*

Editor's Note

1. For a one-page explanation of the rhetorical triangle, see "Rhetorical Situation: A Poster" in the July 2010 *English Journal*.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION   Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In "It's My Life: Multimodal Autobiography Project," students write autobiographies, illustrate them, and set them to music. Music is a powerful tool to evoke emotion, and students carefully select songs to accompany the stories from their lives. Students brainstorm lists of important events along with images and music that represent those events. They then create storyboards in preparation for a final PowerPoint project. After making revisions, students present their final projects to their peers in class. If PowerPoint is unavailable, students might create posters and play soundtracks using cassette or CD players or record a podcast. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/life-multimodal-autobiography-project-1051.html