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## Literacies in a Participatory, Multimodal World: The Arts and Aesthetics of Web 2.0

"I am who I am not yet."

—Maxine Greene, 1996

Sitting in front of a large Mac monitor, with his right hand on the mouse, 12-year-old TJ clicked through a variety of animation effects until he found one that applied a slow motion filter to the selected video clip. With another swift click of the mouse, TJ stretched a three-second clip into an eight-second rendition of his brother's flight through the air and ultimate fall from the playground's zip line. As he watched the clip repeatedly, TJ broke into fits of high-pitched giggles that I had quickly come to love soon after I first met him over a year earlier.

This was TJ's first time using iMovie, but not his first time using video-editing software; that introduction had occurred a month earlier when, under a pavilion in the park with my laptop on his lap, he experimented with Windows MovieMaker. TJ had earned a reputation among our group of five middle grade boys for being a gifted multimedia storyteller. Over the course of the 15 months we all met together, he produced several multimedia artifacts using photographs, video, and audio that our group had created. That "slo-mo" clip of his little brother found its way into a short, satirical piece entitled "Sibling Mutiny." TJ was an artful storyteller who also possessed a sharp wit, which was evident in his many compositions, including a multimedia treatise on the educational possibilities of our group as a result of being located outside of school; a visual essay about the possible stories that different pieces of trash might hold; and the dialogic cacophony to be found in the spaces between teachers' words and the everyday social practices of youth. The topic of teacher-student disjuncture echoed throughout many of the multimodal texts produced by TJ and four of his peers within the out-of-school storytelling project. Chief among their ongoing

reflective and multimodal analyses were their perceptions of how teachers viewed them and their practices, echoing the persistent tropes of risk embedded in schooling discourses (Vasudevan & Campano, 2009). TJ, Cyrus, Romeo, Jamal, and Shawn wished to be "seen" for who they were or *could be*; these were narratives that were constantly animated in our group conversations that often embraced the possibility of the "not yet." After getting to know three of the boys when they were fifth graders—TJ, Cyrus, and Romeo—I asked them to join me in creating this out-of-school space; soon, we were joined by Shawn, another student from their fifth-grade class, and Jamal, Romeo's brother.

I was interested in how this group of boys, as individuals and as a group, would take up the invitation to compose stories using a variety of modalities for communication and expression (e.g., digital still cameras, video cameras, digital voice recorders). For 15 months, the six of us met to explore the literacies, aesthetics, and digital practices associated with telling stories across multiple modes (writing, image, sound, and gesture). In this study, I was inspired by the call to action articulated by the New London Group (1996) to expand conceptions of textual design to include literacies associated with more than the expressive modes of print-based reading and writing typically privileged and evaluated in school.

The disjuncture between the in-school and out-of-school lives of youth, resonant in the texts we created in our project, has been widely theorized and reported (Alvermann & Eakle, 2007; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Vasudevan & Wissman, 2011). As youth are seeking new spaces for communication and composing, accessing a wide range of information sources, seeking and finding new audiences for their words and works, and forming new communities, relationships, and affiliations, their classroom experiences are becoming

more constrained by the imposed rubrics of a high-stakes testing climate. Whereas the curiosity of youth about the multiple affordances of new technologies is rich and varied, these same inclinations do not have a natural home in a context of measurement and accountability, where nearly every activity is viewed through the prism of standards. Philosopher of education Maxine Greene (1995), writing during a similar era of educational anxiety, laments the lack of attention in the Goals 2000 legislation paid to the "untapped diversity among American youth today—its still undefined talents and energies, its differentiated modes of expression" (p. 17).

Too often, the digital proclivities of youth are framed in the media and curricula through lenses of fear (e.g., cyberbullying), protectionism (e.g., Internet predators), frivolity (e.g., social networking), or appropriation (e.g., uncritically assigning rap lyrics as the medium of math problem solving). How might teachers and our students, who are potentially teachers in their own right, "come to use imagination in a search for openings without which our lives narrow and our pathways become cul-de-sacs" (Greene, 1995, p. 17)? Against this backdrop of possibility and uncertainty, I invite readers to engage in studied (re)acquaintance with the emerging and evolving practice of language and literacies in a digitally mediated, participatory, and multimodal communicative landscape.

Communicative and expressive modalities, such as smart phones and video cameras, have become increasingly multifunctional and reflect an evolving digital landscape often referred to as Web 2.0. This term, Web 2.0, signals a shift in Internet capabilities and functionalities toward greater collaboration, participation, and distribution with respect to the production of knowledge, meaning, and attendant literacies. In this sense, "digital" signals technologies that facilitate the production, manipulation, and dissemination of communication signs and symbols. Social media is another term used to signal this new Internet ethos that builds from the technical affordances of Web 2.0 technologies and platforms, such as greater ease of participation, collaboration, and distribution of texts, information, and other forms of communication (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007).

It is important to note that whereas digital literacies are multimodal, literacy practices that are multimodal need not be digital (see, for example,

Bomer, Patterson, David, & Ok, this issue). Multi-literacies (New London Group, 1996) was a term introduced to recognize global trends of increased linguistic and cultural diversity and the increased "complexity of texts with respect to nonlinguistic, multimodal forms of representation and communication, particularly, but not limited to, those affiliated with new technologies" (Jewitt, 2008, p. 245). With widespread social media use, particularly by youth, digitally mediated representation and communication are becoming increasingly diverse and more art-full. I propose that the "ethos" and "technical" affordances of Web 2.0 have the potential to catalyze the aesthetic creativity of youth.

Following a discussion of aesthetics in literacies, I explore the implications of participation in socially mediated communicative landscape for how we might rethink the nature of participation in classrooms. These new forms and spaces of participation are opening up opportunities for young people to assume new roles and perform new selves. Finally, I describe a stance that follows from the implications of broadened and reimagined understandings of participation and the performance of self: a renewed appreciation for progress and process in how we approach curriculum and pedagogy in language arts education, predicated upon the assumption that multimodal and multiliteracies work is a process that is perpetually in progress.

## AN INVITATION TO THE AESTHETIC

The literacies of children and youth in a Web 2.0 landscape are replete with acts of self-representation and expressive declarations. Evident in these works, accessible through online spaces such as YouTube and fanfiction sites, are the aesthetic inclinations of composing and authoring in a digital and multimodal landscape. By aesthetic inclinations, I am referring to the ways in which authors attend with care and intentionality to the design and composing processes of multimodal texts and communication, and to the ways that these texts communicate emotion, seek human connection, and embody an ethos usually evident in the arts. Imagination, which is both elusive and yet an utterly human capacity, renders our ability to connect with another's possible realities and to see meaning in the aesthetic constructions of those around us. It is this attention to the aesthetic that anchors my subsequent discussion of literacies in a social, digital world.

TJ's composing was an aesthetic response to his frustration at having to be his younger brother's caretaker while he was meeting with our storytelling group. TJ's intense, round face was bathed by the inviting glow of the monitor as he carefully reviewed and selected available images and video. Romeo, who had been using a digital video camera to record what happened during our meeting, had documented TJ's brother storming off, being retrieved by Jamal on his bike, and then returning to play on the gym equipment in our usual area of the park. By using these cultural artifacts captured by Romeo for a documentation purpose and then manipulating and combining them in new ways for new purposes, TJ was engaging in the art of remixing—what Knobel and Lankshear (2008) describe as “the aesthetics, appreciation, form, and composition dimensions of remix practices” (p. 26). He used the affordances of the video-editing software, such as adding titles, to strategically create an interpretive frame around the video clips. Through the making of this authentic text, some of the frustration he had been carrying for two days was alleviated. Furthermore, this unexpected creation was the result of both personal motivation and playful experimentation that built on TJ's prior knowledge and success with video editing.

As suggested by TJ's experience, an invitation to the aesthetic also includes a recognition of play, a perspective that matches well with the ways emerging digital platforms encourage an ethos of experimentation. When conceived not merely as tools for computing, composing, or communication, but rather envisioned and used as spaces in which composing, self-representation, and participation takes place, Web 2.0 technologies can be more effectively leveraged in classrooms. Thus, if we attend meaningfully and playfully to aesthetics in language arts education, perhaps there will be greater inclination on the part of educators (and those to whom educators are accountable) to focus more on possibility and multiple modes of expression and less on uniformity of form and content.

The social media terrain is burgeoning as technologies rapidly transform many of the everyday practices of youth. Their modes of communication, information access, and representation now routinely include the use of texting, instant messaging, microblogging (e.g., Twitter), blogging, creating social networking profiles, and

commenting on friends' online profiles, just to name a few (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Macgill, 2008). This interpretation of the impact of social media on literacies is framed by sociocultural theories that foreground the salience of sociocultural contexts for how literacy practices are engaged. Thus, literacies are understood to be social practices that are not decontextualized from the cultural spaces within which they are practiced (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007; Street, 1995). Portability of communication devices has perhaps complicated our notions of context (Jacobs, 2007; Leander & McKim, 2003), however the questions of “where,” “how,” and “with whom” remain important factors that inform language and literacy practices.

My argument supports Jewitt's (2005) claim that literacies are “always multimodal”; she points out that even printed texts require attention to “visual marks, space, colour, font or style, and, increasingly image, and other modes of representation and communication” (p. 315). Additionally, I draw from emerging interdisciplinary studies and commentaries about social media and resulting cultural practices in a Web 2.0 world (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009; Ito et al., 2010; Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Livingstone, 2008). A common thread in these discourses focuses on the seamless and unencumbered incorporation of communicative modes by young people for a wide range of purposes. Jewitt (2008) and others (e.g., Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Jewitt & Kress, 2003) underscore these findings in their ongoing theoretical project to decouple notions of literacy from the printed word alone. These scholars, writing out of the traditions of multimodality and semiotics, highlight the meanings held by *all* sign systems and symbols of which “letteracy” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007)—or the use of the alphanumeric code to produce written texts—is but one.

Yet, the invitation to compose in image, using a variety of media (pastels, paints, crayons, markers, mixed media) and modes (the spoken word and dramatic performance), alongside the printed word is persistently missing in schools after early elementary grades. Given the multitude of composing that happens multimodally, it is an educational disservice to relegate these elements of design and meaning making outside of the language arts domain to more specialized domains of arts classes, theater clubs, and the like. Although,

posture invites recognition of the various authorial stances (Vasudevan, Schultz, & Bateman, in press) that children and youth assume in embodied and performative ways. Web 2.0 technologies can amplify educators' ability to build on what we know about the storied lives and playful tendencies of children's imaginations provided that we "recognize that children's identities—who they imagine themselves to be and who they imagine they could become—are inextricably bound with learning" (Stornaiuolo, Hull, & Nelson, 2009, p. 384).

### PROCESS AND PROGRESS: TEACHING FOR OPENINGS<sup>1</sup>

*"The possible's slow fuse is lit by the imagination."*

—Emily Dickinson, 1914

With all of this composing, communicating, and representing, one might ask: where does all this stuff end up in a seemingly infinite world of online sites? Is it of value to anyone? Certainly educators and composers alike want to know what becomes of the digital artifacts that are created. However, the question also suggests a concern about the influence on and traces of the composing process in the composer. We can imagine the "digital afterlife" (Soep & Chávez, 2010) of texts once they are designed, composed, produced, disseminated, and interpreted. Videos on YouTube, comments made on blogs, and most recently the announcement that tweets will be archived by the Library of Congress cement our understandings that these are texts that are present not only in the current moment, but will continue to be present in the ways they are referenced in other productions, remixed for new purposes, excerpted, re-vocalized, and reinterpreted in new contexts by others. In a different sense, the narrative residue remains in the embodied memories for the composer and is reconstituted in subsequent narratives and acts

<sup>1</sup>This subheading comes from the title of Chapter 9 in Greene's (1995) collection of essays, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change*. Greene's persistent faith in teachers is echoed through this volume, but especially in this chapter where she calls on educators to view literacy as a "social undertaking" that must be "sought in pluralist classrooms" where "there will be a play of differences, inevitably, through which meanings can emerge" (p. 121).

of participation and citizenship in newly formed communities and affiliations. The aesthetic of Web 2.0 is quintessentially "not yet," where the self—and its textual and multimodal manifestations—are truly in process.

In her rich descriptions of children's storytelling and play, Paley (1986, 2004) writes convincingly and compellingly about the educational possibilities that are opened up when children are given the space to fully explore their fantastical imaginations. For TJ and Leonard and countless other children and youth, these imaginations are finding homes across digital and digitally mediated social spaces. We have ample evidence to recognize that the literate self implies "a familiarity with the full range of communicative tools, modes, and media, plus an awareness of and a sensitivity to the power and importance of representation of self and others" (Hull, 2003, p. 230), as well as an ability "to use the dominant symbol systems of the culture for personal, aesthetic, cultural, social, and political goals" (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009, pp. 4–5). Do we have the educational spaces to foster these literate selves? How might we read and write and teach for openings and also maintain the integrity of our convictions?

The invitation to reconsider the aesthetics of language arts education, as inspired by the emerging Web 2.0 landscape, does not imply a total dismissal of all prior practice. Rather, as I have argued here, the established tenets of play, imagination, and possibility that have long been advocated by philosophers of education, teachers, researchers, and youth themselves, gain traction with increasing digital capabilities. The deep chasm that is growing between young people's in-school and out-of-school experiences amplifies the urgency for incorporating an aesthetic stance in literacy studies (and language arts education, particularly) as the arts are slowly being pushed out of the commitments schools make to children. Such a reality is especially unsettling at a time when there are virtually countless spaces and artifacts available for the cultivation and thoughtful nurturing of the creative impetus. Teachers have an opportunity to engage in the pursuit of the imagination—to learn, play, and explore—with the children and youth who share their classrooms.

Such a stance is also cognizant of the portability of technologies and the ways platforms for

production and distribution and social networking capabilities encourage the circulation of literacies. Many scholars have aptly called attention to the increasingly constrained conditions that teachers face daily—precipitated in large part by the demands of high-stakes testing and federally and state-mandated measures of accountability. If “place, spaces, and landscape play a role in affording and constructing, constraining and directing, the dreams and practices of youth” (Stornaiuolo, Hull, & Nelson, 2009, p. 388), what do current classroom configurations indicate about their ability to nurture the “dreams and practices of youth”?

The field of education will likely continue to wrestle with whether and how “broad forms of semiotic mediation” might be made to count as literacy (Leander & McKim, 2003, p. 225; see also Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000). At a time when new technologies demand that we reconceptualize our basic notions of communication (Kress, 2003) and the very concept of educational “basics” (Stornaiuolo, Hull, & Nelson, 2009), teachers are challenged to ask what the purposes of language arts education should be. Even though most classrooms are overwhelmingly governed by policies that restrict students’ new literacies knowledge, teachers can pursue a pedagogy of the “not yet” told, imagined, and communicated.

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