

1-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

McVerry, J. Gregory (2007) "Power of Posting Poetry: Teaching New Literacies," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 23: Iss. 1, Article 10.
Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1139>

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Power of Posting Poetry: Teaching New Literacies

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Meaning making in today's technology driven economy often requires students to comprehend a barrage of symbols flying through cyberspace. Each image can evoke different emotions to different people. In order to construct knowledge in today's world students must be fluent with multimodal text, which refers to the many elements of text such as video, sounds, symbols, words, and images that students must now navigate during active meaning making. In other words, the concept of text has taken on many semblances. For example, researchers such as the New London Group have long noted the multimodal nature of new literacies. This powerful combination of textual elements plays out every day in the digital texts our students now read. Often as researchers and educators

it is useful to observe students as they interact with new literacies.

Through active observation we can identify how students succeed and struggle with a literacy environment that constantly evolves. Jillian, a former student of mine used multimodal texts and expressed how she felt about the pressures of middle school through poetry. She used words and images to understand the prison that the public passion for perfection had erected. In essence, Jillian used multimodal authorship (see Figure 1) to influence her sense of identity while developing essential new literacies skills for the twenty-first century.

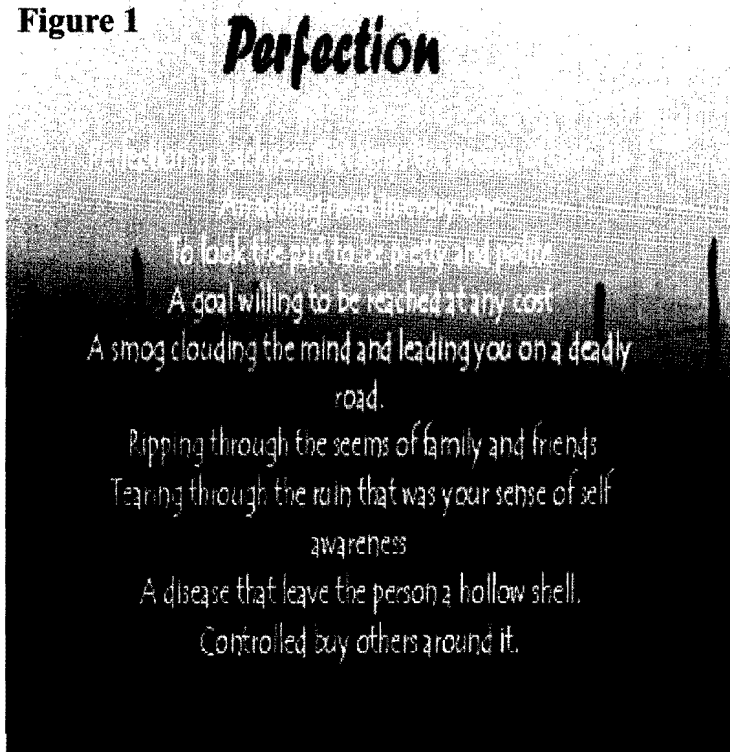
Jillian combined a moving poem about the pitfalls of perfection with an image of a fog-covered, dirt road lined with a dilapidated barbwire fence. The poem, an aggregation of words and images, illustrates how Jillian not only explored the role multimedia plays in new literacies but also the role literacy has in the construction of identity. The choice of fonts, images, and words all portray her emotions. Our students use multimodal texts every day to construct meaning of their world, but a fog has fallen over researchers and educators. We need to "see" through the many perspectives and decide on a path that puts competing theories into practice.

In this article I detail how educators can use poetry to teach the skills, strategies and disposition of new literacies. First I examine a theoretical framework that accepts Reinking's and Labbo's multiple realities of new literacies by detailing how Rosenblatt's transactional theory, Leu et al.'s work on new literacies of online reading comprehension, and Street's literacy as a social practice all influence current research and classroom practices. I then explain why educators can use poetry as an effective tool for teaching new literacies. Finally I suggest classroom activities that integrate prose and technology.

Theoretical Perspective

Research in the field of new literacies takes place across the globe and from different theoretical

Figure 1



perspectives (Coiro et al. 1), and the term often acts as an umbrella enveloping work in diverse fields. Labbo and Reinking recognized that this issue of literacy and new technologies requires a framework of multiple realities from both the researcher's and the educator's perspectives. First, they noted researchers often adopt multiple perspectives, the views that guide their work, and methodologies, and how they conduct research, to examine the relationship of technology and literacy. Secondly, Labbo and Reinking observed that no classroom could share the same reality.

The sheer diversity of people, perspectives, and resources make each classroom unique. Researchers and educators cannot examine new literacies through a myopic lens. Three of the many perspectives that influence research in new literacies are evident in this portrayal of online poetry include: transactional theory, new literacies of online reading comprehension, and literacy as a social practice.

Transactional Theory

Louise Rosenblatt developed a theory towards literacy, which departed from the historical perspective that texts were examined and meaning extracted. She stated that no text had just one meaning and that meaning was made between the interaction between the reader and the text. Rosenblatt suggested, "the 'poem' comes to being in the live circuit set up between the 'reader' and the 'text'" (14). She also described two types of reading stances: efferent reading, for gathering information, and aesthetic reading, for enjoying or making personal connections. The stance a reader takes toward a text affects the meaning that develops in the transaction.

A large body of research discussing hypertext, a common term for non-linear texts that the audience navigates by clicking on links, is rooted in transactional theory. McEneaney suggests, "A transactional view of text

structure, for example, requires us to reject the notion of structure as a property of text in the same way this theory rejects the notion that meaning is a property of text" (2). Robert Tierney et al., from a socio-cultural perspective, noted the transactional nature of hypertext. He and his colleagues stated, "The audience is not fixed to the seat to enjoy the theater but are able to position themselves in the plot, setting, or characters" (14).

In other words, the metaphor of meaning making as a circuit is now literal. In continuance of Rosenblatt's metaphor, today's readers, empowered with Web 2.0 tools, which are more interactive than the original World Wide Web, can now cut into the circuit, add additional paths of meanings, or even splice in a transistor to either amplify or switch a message off. Students choose their navigational paths online and will not only interact with the text differently, but they may also change the text, the literacy, and the technology. Since the transactional nature of new literacies (Leu et al. "Toward a Theory") allows for literacy to influence technology and technology to influence literacy, educators must prepare students in the active process of making meaning with digital texts.

The nature of poetry as a genre, with its reliance on imagery, offers a wonderful opportunity to develop awareness in students about the role of multimedia in meaning making.

New Literacies of Online Reading Comprehension

Leu defines new literacies of online reading comprehension as: "skills, strategies, and dispositions necessary to... use the Internet and other ICT to identify important questions, locate information, analyze the usefulness of that information, synthesize information to answer those questions, and then communicate the answers to others (1)." These new literacies of online reading comprehension require traditional literacies, but these skills are not adequate. For example, Eagleton and Dobler noted that the movement good readers make between efferent and affluent stances is complicated online (33). Furthermore, this added complexity in reading is compounded by issues of equity. Leu et al. identified the fact that students who need new

literacies instruction the most are getting it the least (4). We need to include lessons in new literacies instruction in priority school districts. Otherwise a generation of “new illiterates,” students who do not have the skills, strategies, and dispositions to actively make meaning in today’s multi-modal environment, will arise.

Teachers can use poetry to teach online reading comprehension. The nature of poetry as a genre, with its reliance on imagery offers a wonderful opportunity to develop awareness in students about the role of multimedia in meaning making. Educators can also use poetry to develop strong comprehension skills in online readers. Students can search for poems by genre or authors, develop questions in the study of poetry and communicate about literary responses, or post their own poems in online environments.

Literacy as a Social Practice

Socio-cultural interpretations of literacy as a social practice (Street; Gee) also play a role in today’s comprehension of digital texts. These theories suggest that meaning making cannot be separated from the social context in which the “text” takes place. Street wrote that, “Literacy is a social practice not simply a technical and neutral skill” (“What’s New” 2). Basically, diverse people and situations can lead to different definitions of literacy and texts, and this fact influences how a reader might make meaning from texts, symbols, and images. Poetry, like all literacy, has always been a socially situated practice, and this connection is clearly evident with prose.

Another tenant of the literacy as a social practice perspective is the role of literacy practices in shaping identity. Rogers noted how social practices influenced the identity of students in an alternative high-school setting. These students created multimedia videos that use popular music, and they discussed issues they face in their reality such as peer pressure, drug abuse, and teen pregnancy. In comparison, Jillian from an affluent community, used multimedia to describe the pressure she often feels to succeed in middle school. In each of these cases literacy as a social practice influenced identity affirmation and the message of the author.

Theory into Practice

Poetry emerged as one of the earliest forms of literature in both oral and written traditions (Tiedt 2). Educators will find intrinsic rewards connecting this ancient literary genre with the newest emerging texts, and educators can use poetry to teach the multiple realities of new literacies. First the advent of digital poetry mirrors the development of Internet Communication Tools. Second poetry has already been established as a genre easily accessible to students in order to build comprehension skills (Beers 88-91). Also poetry can develop a sense of community that enhances literacy. Finally the universality of poetry combined with the wealth of online resources allows for diverse students to have access to motivational text.

Digital poetry emerged immediately with the computer, e.g., Jim Rosenberg, a poetry pioneer began experimenting with non-linear hypertext poems in 1968. Online poetry has roots in the early days of the Internet when poets immediately constructed networks of listserves, bulletin boards, and newsgroups before the dawn of the World Wide Web. After 1994, there was an explosion of websites and chatrooms for poets and new hypertext techniques such as David Knoebel’s *click poetry* (Antonio). Today with Web 2.0 tools these communities continue their exponential growth, and teachers can use this wealth of resources to develop a community that builds new literacies skills, strategies and dispositions.

According to Duke and Pearson, a community with high quality conversation is essential in developing meaning making skills (208). Educators can use poetry and the Internet to build these communities. After all, there are already many online resources (see Labbo 308-311) that act as gathering places for young poets. Teachers will find that students interacting on the Internet will be motivated (Kymes 499) and may even produce higher quality work when it is published online. Students, while they are developing new literacies can build classroom communities of young poets online or connect with the diverse groups of poets that publish on the Internet.

When teachers use poetry to develop new literacies skills they can also address the diverse needs of today’s multicultural classroom. For example, American students

communicated with Japanese and Chinese students by using email and Web pages (Yamamoto, et al. 1203-1204) through traditional Japanese and Chinese poetry. English language learners can find poems or communicate with students across the globe in their native tongue. Researchers found that L2 students often use online communities to develop critical reading and writing skills while practicing English and developing a sense of identity (Lam; Black).

Learning Activities

Only creativity and access can limit the number of lesson plans educators can develop to teach new literacies skills through poetry. A myriad of ideas to integrate technology and prose exist that can work for the single computer classroom or fully mobile laptop lab. Students could create a community of poets on a threaded discussion, become published poets on their own blog, or develop multimodal poetry projects. Each of these activities allow for the transaction between the reader and the text, help to develop a sense of identity, and teach the new literacies of online reading comprehension.

A threaded discussion, an asynchronous chat program, allows users to create a topic (thread) and other users to respond (post) a reaction, and threaded discussions may improve traditional literacies while teaching new literacies (McVerry). Educators can use this Internet Communication Technology to teach students about different modalities of poetry. The teacher or student can create threads for rhyming poems, free verse poems, sonnets, extended metaphor poems, etc. Students could then post poems under the threads.

A blog, while similar to threaded discussions, usually involves one author, as a dedicated writer, who consistently updates his or her online journal while other visitors leave comments. Catherine Poling, however, detailed how educators can also use classroom and collaborative blogs. She explained that students would post poems to their blogs and then critique each other's writings and reflect on the writing process (12-14). Educators can use individual, classroom, or collaborative blogs to develop poetic techniques while providing students an opportunity to publish online because students

will enjoy both the prose and the posting. A study on the motivation of bloggers found poetry blogs to have the highest level of reciprocity in the sample taken. Poets would read each other's posts, make comments and post original poems while developing a community of writers (Nardi et al. 45). Teachers can take advantage of these possibilities by launching a poetry blog that can even contain images, sounds or video of student poems.

As educators we need to expand our definition of *text* if the students we teach will have the literacy skills necessary for the twenty-first century, because the integration of technology, writing, and meaning making requires a greater understanding of the multimodal nature of literacy (Matthewman et al. 16-17). Teachers can help develop this understanding in students through poetry. One learning activity teachers could use is the poetry poster. Students write a poem and then search the Internet for a stock photographs (open copyright for public use) that reflect their text. Then using a simple desktop publishing program the students create a poster similar to Jillian's¹. This activity would allow students to develop an understanding of Internet inquiry, layout, copyright and digital ethics, font choices, and making meaning through images.

Another learning activity is to have students create videos of poetry slams or recordings of rap videos. Weinstein found that the inclusion of rap gave students pleasure and increased their motivation to develop literary practices. Students may write lyrics and using moviemaker software create their own videos. Teachers may also conduct classroom poetry slams, a type of performance poetry closely related to hip-hop, and have students record and produce a movie. Finally, teachers may have students create collaborative poetry websites. This could involve original poetry or biographies on poets. Each of these learning activities demonstrates how students can explore the multimodal nature of new literacies through poetry.

1 For detailed lesson plans and a step-by-step instructional guide please email the author at jgregmccverry@gmail.com.

Conclusion

Recent technology has caused a fundamental shift in literacy practices. These profound changes require educators and researchers to examine literate practices from many perspectives. Fortunately, we can turn poetry, one of the oldest literary genres to understand how technology has increased the transactional nature of literacy and how literacy plays a role in the social process. Teachers can also use poetry to develop an understanding of the increasingly multimodal nature of literacy and the new skills students will need to develop strong online comprehension skills. As educators, we might find poetry in using ancient prose to understand new literacies.

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