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Transmediation and the Transparent Eye-ball: Approaching Literature through Different Ways of Knowing

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Harste (1994) explained that “Taking what we know in one sign system and recasting it in another is a process called transmediation” (p. 31). These sign systems include “art, music, drama and movement” (p. 29) as well as language, the bread-and-butter of the English Language Arts (ELA) teacher. I was introduced to this concept—although I didn’t know what to call it then—at the Bard College Institute for Writing and Thinking, in 2002. There, the instructors encouraged us to express our understanding of a poem through a sketch, or through another of what Albers (2009) called “visual texts,” “texts created from visual media (paint, collage, drawing, clay, photographs, and so on)” (p. 6).

Although I enjoyed the activity in the Writing and Thinking classroom, the method frankly seemed a little fishy to me, especially as I imagined using the method with my very goal-oriented, grade-focused, and right-answer-driven honors students. That is, it seemed fishy until the following autumn when I returned to my high school ELA classroom—junior American literature—and approached the unit on transcendentalism. Then, I discovered that transmediation encouraged close reading, cognitive processing, and engagement with literature in a way that classroom discussion alone couldn’t do (at least not for a room full of 16- and 17-year-olds for whom video games, onscreen images, and video mashups are as natural a way of knowing the world as *Sesame Street* and MTV were for me in the 70s and 80s).

As part of the transcendentalism unit, I tackled the Mount Everest of transcendentalism (at least in my experience), Emerson’s (1836/2009) concept of the transparent eye-ball. In the first chapter of *Nature*, Emerson asserted,

Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. (p. 1709)

Typically, in my experience anyway, classroom discussion of that passage stalls fairly quickly. But this time, I asked my students not only to read that passage as homework, but to draw it: I asked them to sketch (or otherwise visually create) their understanding of Emerson’s transparent eyeball, and to come to class ready to explain their sketch, to justify their choices through reference to the written text. Almost invariably, the students were meticulous in their reading, and the shades of difference between the sketches spurred thoughtful discussion: “Malia, I notice that you included an image of a cross in your sketch. What detail from Emerson led you there, and why? Kelsey, you drew the moon and the stars inside your eyeball, while everyone else has included a sun. How did you make that decision?”

My purpose here is to discuss the value of asking ELA students to express their understanding of literature through the production of visual texts or through some other form of transmediation. When students produce a transmedial interpretation of literature and then account for their interpretation and transmedial choices through spoken or written language, transmediation becomes a both/and paradigm for the ELA classroom: both visuals and language, rather than either/or.

As Staunton (2008) pointed out, “a transmediation is not simply a representation, but offers an interpretation or critical perspective on the text” (p. 171). Albers (2009) also characterized students’ visual texts as interpretations, arguing that students “create symbolic, metaphoric and literal messages that point to their interpretation of texts, their connection to a text, and what they want the viewer to know about their reading of this text” (p. 8).

In my high school ELA classroom, transmediation proved essential in prompting students to engage deeply with a text, to walk around in the text, as it were, and to actually interpret that text whereas before they might have only skimmed it. Moreover, asking students to account for the details of their visual texts—using specific quotes from the

written text—encouraged both close reading of the written text and thoughtful composition of the visual one. Finally, transmediation gave many students a voice that they had previously lacked in the classroom, an opportunity to utilize a skill (collage, or video production, or sound mixing) or a way of knowing that was central to their understanding of the world outside our ELA classroom but that previously had to be left at the door.

Relevant Literature on Transmediation

In Suhor's (1984) often-cited essay "Towards a Semiotics-Based Curriculum," he described transmediation as "translation of content from one sign system into another" (p. 250). As Suhor explained, signs are simply things that

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stand for other things: for example, "A STOP sign is a visual and linguistic sign representing, obviously, our culture's directive to apply the brakes" (p. 247). Signs work together in sign systems to create meaning, each system with its own rules and patterns that are

typically unspoken but understood by those acquainted with the sign system. Sign systems include such diverse realms as those mentioned by Harste—language, theater, movement, music, the visual arts—as well as many others including fashion, table settings, and body language.

Just by being present in and aware of our culture, we and our students are "readers" of many more sign systems than we may realize. For instance, thanks to our understanding of the sign system of classroom dynamics, we understand that it means something when a student moves from the back row to sit prominently in the front row. Transmediation occurs when we attempt to translate our understanding from one sign system into another.

Suhor endorsed transmediations that are both literal—such as a sketch of Curley's ranch from *Of Mice and Men*—and imaginative—such as a collage that symbolically represents characters from the novel (pp. 252-54). Despite his call for an ELA curriculum that is richly infused with transmediation, Suhor was explicit "that language is the primary organizer of human experience and is essential to virtually all school learning," since, as he pointed out, "critical analysis of the elements in any nonlinguistic work involves language, as does description of the responses that the work evoked in us" (p. 252).

Other scholars have also addressed the connection between transmediation and language, arguing that transmediation enhances students' language skills by empowering them with additional ways of knowing and additional means of communicating their knowledge. Hoyt (1992) advocated a transmedial approach with all students, especially "reluctant readers" (p. 580), arguing that "Classrooms that offer children a variety of communication systems facilitate learning in ways that stimulate the imagination, enhance language learning, and deepen understanding" (p. 584). McCormick (2011) recommended transmediation as a means of helping students learn academic language: "Transmediation can foster analytical conversations among middle school students and consequently enhance their ability to engage in a complex language function central to academic discourse" (p. 579). Others have advocated transmediation in the classroom as a means of empowering students whose language skills do not fully allow them to express themselves, including students who are English language learners (Wolfe, 2010) and young children (Short, Kauffman, & Kahn, 2000).

Recent scholars of transmediation have suggested that the profusion of digital and multimedia information in our culture means that students come to our classrooms with additional sign systems of which they must be critical consumers, and into which they can translate their knowledge. In other words, the sign systems to which our students have access have multiplied to include "all meaning-making devices, such as words in basic verbal communication, images, pictures, media messages, motion pictures, songs, and the more recent multimedia inventions, including iconic texts found in computer software and Internet communications" (Semali, 2002, p. x). This multimedia world offers multiplied possibilities for the ELA teacher seeking to incorporate transmediation into a classroom already rich with language. In fact, it may be transmediation—the intentional translation of content from one sign system to another—that can help our students to process this multimedia world through creating, composing, and communicating in a variety of sign systems. As Semali and Fueyo (2001) argued, "Transmediation has the potential to capture the postmodern reality of multiple texts, multiple meanings, and multiple interpretations."

Literacy, Literature, and the Arts in the ELA Classroom

A concern sometimes expressed about using the arts in the ELA classroom is that such activities take students

away from “the text.” Those expressing such a concern—including parents, administrators, and even grade-driven students—typically have a narrow concept of “text.” For them, “text” means language, either oral or written in alphabetic symbols, and does not include a visual text, or a digital composition, or a sequence of movements. In that narrow definition of “text,” *Othello* is a text, but a video mashup analyzing the character of Othello is not. My use of the arts in the ELA classroom is based on the assumption that “text” means more than alphabetic text, in the form of ink on paper or pixels on a screen. Instead, “texts” include digital compositions, audio, visual texts, movement, music, and other “sign systems” that human beings use to communicate.

Ironically, I have found that asking my ELA students to venture into different sign systems, to create non-alphabetic texts, has always led to their deeper engagement with the course’s literary texts; this was especially true in the case of the transparent eyeball assignment mentioned earlier. When students prepared their transparent eyeballs (as homework), they pored over the passage from Chapter 1 of Emerson’s *Nature*, looking for guidance and inspiration as they tried to draw (or sculpt, or collage, etc.) a very abstract philosophical concept. The following class period was devoted to students’ informal presentation of their eyeballs; they were asked to show their transparent eyeballs to their peers, explain their artistic choices, and explain what lines from Emerson inspired their various choices.

Although most students typically chose the sketch option for this assignment, other students took the assignment into 3-D by sculpting or crafting a transparent eyeball. One student, Lauren, overnight crafted an elaborate transparent eyeball out of cardboard, paper, cloth, glue, bubble wrap, paint, tape, wood, plastic, and plant matter (see Figures 1-3). She explained that she had included the bubble wrap and the “security device enclosed” sticker (from a purchased compact disc, see Figure 4) to denote the safety and security that Emerson describes feeling in the woods: “There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, --no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair” (p. 1709).

Other choices that Lauren described included her use of a silhouette image of two children waving, used as part of a collage in the inner right-hand surface of the eyeball (see Figure 4); Lauren cited Emerson’s comment that “The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child” (p. 1709). Lauren’s explanation of her artistic choices and her attention to Emerson’s prose were as meticulous and finely crafted as the eyeball itself.

On the day when students brought their transparent eyeballs to class, every student had a chance to share his/her transparent eyeball and to explain his/her choices. The sharing and explanation of the visual texts took the class repeatedly back to the literary text, drawing richer connections between sign systems and different ways of knowing. As a result, we as a class repeatedly referred back to Emerson’s text, to look at the words and phrases that inspired students’ visual texts. We heard significant passages from Emerson read aloud and interpreted again and again; many students took inspiration from the same passages even though their visual texts and their interpretations of Emerson differed. As this activity demonstrated, when students engaged with literature through the arts using a transmedial approach, they were led to use other means of understanding the literature, not simply to fall back into the same patterns of skimming-for-the-quiz that some might rely on. Moreover, by giving classtime for each student to display and explain his/her visual text and the choices that led there, visual texts were shown to have value, to be legitimate “texts” in and of themselves.

This use of the arts in the ELA classroom encouraged student reflection and close reading, prompted by questions from the instructor. According to McCormick (2011), such questioning—including “teacher talk” (p. 580) and the resulting classroom discussion—“deepens the analysis that accompanies transmediation” (p. 580). McCormick argued that students strengthen their analytic skills and become more comfortable with ambiguity “when teachers and students review the organizational structure of compositions created in one sign system and discuss the choices students make as they map meaning onto a second set of signs” (p. 581).

In the case of the transparent eyeball assignment, many students would gladly have said “This is my transparent eyeball” and quickly sat back down. However, when I pointed out similarities between students’ visual texts or noted significant variations, students thoroughly detailed their choices and inspirations, explaining for instance why their visual text included a human figure or an image of trees. Students discussed why half the class included a Christian cross in the eyeball, and why some students depicted a nighttime scene whereas others depicted day. Students explained why their eyeballs were large or small, transparent or opaque, reflective or not. All interpretations of Emerson’s text were treated as valid, as I tried to follow McCormick’s call to “move us beyond the perception that skillful use of language is elicited solely through the creation and interpretation of written texts” (p. 587).

Using the Arts to Reach All ELA Students

Over the years, my use of the arts in the classroom became increasingly more technology-based, moving from student-created sketches to student-edited videos as I tried to honor my students' interests and abilities. Thanks in part to students' immersion in an ever-more visual, multimedia culture, today's ELA students are accustomed to multiple streams of information in multiple sign systems and are eager to explore other sign systems beyond language. Semali and Fueyo (2001) pointed out that transmediation is an approach especially tuned to reach 21st century learners:

As more students gain access to Internet communications and the media technologies of the 21st century, they are thrilled to see themselves as knowledge-makers who find and frame problems worth pursuing, negotiate interpretations, forge new connections, and represent meanings in transmedial ways.

The "thrill" that Semali and Fueyo described—the thrill of creating knowledge and of forging new connections—was precisely what I observed in students during another classroom foray into transmediation (inspired by Cabat's 2009 article, "The Lash of Film': New Paradigms of Visuality in Teaching Shakespeare").

As part of a sophomore high school English class study of *Othello*, students were asked to create a video mashup that expressed their understanding of the play and to write a reflective paper explaining their choices in making the video. To avoid copyright infringement, I recommend seeking approval from IT prior to embarking on this project—or any project that makes use of copyrighted materials.

Students selected popular songs (from any era, but with lyrics) that resonated for them in terms of some aspect of *Othello*. Using video editing software, they then matched lyrics from the songs with images in order to invoke the themes of *Othello* (or to produce a major character's profile or a plot overview). The resulting video montages, all based on the students' interests and choices, served as their interpretations of the play. In their accompanying papers, students explained those interpretations and their transmedial choices, covering everything from the lyrics' significance to the selec-

tion of video transition-effects (for example, a slow fade for Othello's death or a shatter-and-fly-out for a character study of Iago).

The music and image selections allowed students to present an argument about the play, while the papers allowed students to explain and expand upon their interpretations. Those who saw the play as primarily a tale of a man tortured by thoughts of his wife's adultery accompanied images with songs such as Marvin Gaye's "I Heard It Through the Grapevine," Jimi Hendrix's "Hey Joe," and The Killers' "Mr. Brightside." Others focused on Iago and his self-serving malice by juxtaposing images with lyrics from Gorillaz's "Clint Eastwood": "You see with your eyes/I see destruction and demise/ Corruption in disguise."

I was astounded by the time and energy that students devoted to building their interpretations through video mashups and explaining those transmedial choices through language (far more time and energy than I had observed in the past devoted to solely written interpretations). Moreover, tech-savvy students had the chance to use those skills for English class, and newcomers to video editing were proud of the mashups to which they had devoted so much time and energy. Throughout the process, similar to the close reading of

Emerson's text inspired by the eyeball activity, this project prompted students to pore over Shakespeare's text, searching for the precise moments that they wanted to highlight in their videos.



Figure 1. Front of eyeball



Figure 2. Inside surfaces



Figure 3. Back



Figure 4. Inside right surface

The benefits of using the arts in the ELA classroom—of having students engage with literature through a transmedial approach—were apparent to me through both the *Othello* video mashup project and the transparent eyeball, as well as other transmedial activities. Students pored over the literary texts as they sought inspiration and guidance in creating their transmedial texts, thus honing their close reading skills. They engaged more fully with the literature, analyzing figurative language so that they could re-present the latent meaning through other sign systems.

In addition, student motivation for these activities was significantly stronger than that I observed for other, more traditional language-based assignments. (During the *Othello* video project, numerous parents approached me on PTO Night to report, in tones of baffled wonder, that their children were talking about *Othello* at the dinner table. I never heard such reports in all the previous years when students produced written responses to the play.) Using the arts in the ELA classroom seemed especially powerful for students who struggled in a more verbocentric class (perhaps because of ELL issues, or because they were struggling writers or reluctant readers, or because their talents—in art, drama, gaming, music, or video production—weren't ones usually honored in ELA). Kress's (1997) point about transduction (a similar translation across modes of communication) applies here: "If the limits of imagination imposed by one mode of representation are reached it seems a decidedly positive situation to be able to move into another mode, [...]. This offers an enormous potential enrichment, cognitively, conceptually, aesthetically and affectively" (p. 29).

After my successful experiences using the arts in the high school ELA classroom, I was surprised when I began teaching undergraduate English methods courses and found the pre-service teachers intensely suspicious of transmediation. Seemingly, the most resistance came from the highest achieving students: the AP students, the honors students, the full-scholarship students. For these future teachers, alphabetic language has always been effective for them, getting them high AP scores, good grades, and repeated assurances that they are "good writers." Why would they want to try something new, something at which they might not be "the best"?

To put their suspicion in perspective, I need only remember my skeptical reaction to the activities at the Institute for Writing and Thinking. Sure, sketching a response to a poem was fun, but how could I expect my students to take that seriously? How could I justify it to parents or administrators? How could I counter colleagues who might grouse that

my classes are all about "arts and crafts"? Years of classroom experience and reams of educational research demonstrated to me the value of using the arts in the ELA classroom.

By denying students the opportunity to use the arts in their study of ELA, we would be cutting them off from a key way of knowing, a "strategy learners use to gain new perspectives on their knowing" (Harste, 1994, p. 31). In my undergraduate methods classes, I will continue to model the use of the arts in the classroom and share with my students the research that "indicates that students learn more and understand better when they are allowed and helped to use multiple sign systems" (Semali, 2002, p. x). I will show them Lauren's transparent eyeball and play for them a video in which the tragedy of *Othello* is set to a backdrop of Johnny Cash's song "Hurt." And I will hope that their field experiences prove to them—as surely as the transparent eyeball did for me—that student learning in the English Language Arts must always incorporate the arts.

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