
Multimodal Trans(ACT)ions With Literature Through the Creation of a Zine

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In the fall of the year, at the University of Minnesota-Duluth a small group of pre-service teachers studying adolescent literature gathers in the back of a classroom planning to stage a scene based on their response to Lois Lowry's novel *The Giver*. A hush falls over the room as students stand, forming a circle facing in with their heads bowed in solemn posture. Slowly they begin to walk in a circular motion with their heads now facing rigidly up and staring blankly outward. They chant three times in unison, "Thank you for your childhood," a poignant line in the book said during the "ceremony of twelve" in which children lose their childhood to the world of work as they are given their "assignments" (Lowry 64). Each time the students utter the words, their arms and hands uniformly and alternatively lift straight out in front, then straight above their heads prior to release as they bow inwards toward the middle of the circle, symbolically surrendering their fate to the inner life of the dystopian society portrayed in the novel. A gong is played at the end of each phrase. Voices blend in rhythm, tone and pitch. Suddenly, the gong strikes three times and the group faces the front of the classroom.

The scene shifts. A new mood is felt as the students break out of the cult-like circle. Though still stone faced, one student pulls out a flute and begins playing an eerie tune created

for this scene. A drum pulses out a backbeat and xylophone chimes accompany the gong, intensifying the march forward following one student's lead as the chanter or wordsmith. The leader chants simple but powerful words chosen by the students as critically important to the essence of what is driving the protagonists, Jonas and Gabe, to a place Lowry calls "Elsewhere" (131). Words used to propel the group forward are *freedom*, *hope*, *love*, *Christmas*, *color*, *cold*, and *journey*. Outdoors, the students videotape a scenario, to be spliced together with another scene, to depict Jonas's cold, snowy ride up the hill with Gabe in their effort to flee the stifling community and get to Elsewhere.

At the heart of multimodal collaborative interpretation, when used in a multimedia context, is the integration of multiple perspectives through a layering of modalities resulting in a richly textured and nuanced gathering of meaning. The entire multimodal response to this piece of literature uses music, drama, scriptwriting, and videography, and the response is captured through the medium of an i-movie placed within an on-line digital literary magazine, or zine, that the students have titled *Intuitive Roots: Verbal, Visual/Aural Literary Meanderings* (Wright). As the instructor of this course, I watch as the magic of the moment happens, well aware that passers-by in the hallway linger slightly longer than normal; this is not a usual scene in a college classroom where the lecture model of instruction still dominates. Students are out of their chairs, working together, some playing instruments, using their voices and bodies in purposeful ways to simulate their interpretation of what has now become known as an adolescent classic. The intensity of their work is what draws hallway attention. Theirs is not the average question/answer classroom scenario, or even collaborative seatwork. As Csikszentmihalyi describes his theory of *Flow*, they are actively, fully engaged, at once in the moment, creating and thinking (6). They are working on capturing what is eternal in literature, that which can only be captured through internalizing the text through what Louise Rosenblatt so aptly described as transaction, an intimate meaning made between reader and text (20). However, this class and its successive cohorts have transcended the two-dimensional

transactions to literature to include multimodal responses, building meaning in a digital, media-literate environment through drama, visual arts, scriptwriting, music, and videography.

The Use of Multimodalities to Internalize the Eternal

Pulitzer prize winning author Thornton Wilder wrote of the concept of eternity in the play *Our Town*:

We all know that *something* is eternal.
And it ain't houses and it ain't names,
and it ain't earth, and it ain't even the
stars- everybody knows in their bones
that something is eternal, and that *some-
thing* has to do with human beings. (69).

All great artists strive to capture it. We try to describe it, feel it and know it, for we know that what that eternal something is will live on long after we are gone. William Blake exemplifies it as the eternal sunrise. It is captured in the essence of the smile in Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, in the haunting images of Picasso's blue period paintings, in the living gardens of impressionist painter Claude Monet. Literature reaches for it, too; its message lives on, capturing what we find so elusive in our everyday lives. Teachers realize that the eternal something in literature lives on in our students through our teaching and that what we are teaching in the text goes beyond today or tomorrow.

In a world inundated by external mandates and a test-driven curriculum, some literature classes lack the vibrancy of the message literature offers as harbinger of the eternal. Ironically, advocates for education have long championed the use of the arts and the possibilities they provide us with for vibrant ways of knowing (Greene 122). Contemporary arts-based literacy pioneers, such as Ernst, Rief, Claggett, Chancer, and Neilson have worked during the past two decades toward establishing a more vital working environment within the English classroom in an attempt to reinvigorate the experience of learning and to excavate eternal meanings extant in the pag-

es of books through multimodal ways of knowing through the arts. Since contemporary adolescents are already living, working, and playing in a world that privileges multimodal ways of knowing, it makes sense for educators to shape their pedagogy to scaffold and mediate instruction in this area.

The New Adolescent and the New Literacies

When I taught adolescents in the late 1980s and 1990s, I witnessed much change. Students began to bring new gadgets with them to class, preoccupying their attention, and competing with school-based topics. Hand-held digital devices such as Game-Boys, palm pilots, digital watches, and cell phones mingled with conversations about discoveries of multi-voiced digital dialogues found on MSN messenger and chat rooms. With these changes, schools face new challenges in keeping students' attention (Lankshear & Knobel, "Attention" 20). With the advent of cell phones, multi-channel television access, and unparalleled and increasing growth in communication potential through Internet use, digital literacies and the adolescent meshed as part of what Alvermann and Gee refer to as the "new literacies" or "multiliteracies" (viii; "New People" 43). These changing views of literacy mirror what Mitchell forecast as the "pictorial turn" in our society, intimating an increasing need to recognize the "metalanguage" inherent in images and the link between image and text (9, 37). These changes raise the following questions:

How do we teach literature and textual analysis in the era of "the pictorial turn" and the dominance of visuality? How do we teach what cannot be taken for granted? What do we want from a course, a curriculum, and a discipline that seeks to connect and cross the shifting boundaries of verbal and visual representation? (Mitchell 88).

Living Literature

I have long been an advocate of arts-based literacy practices, utilizing the talents and proclivities of my students to motivate, enlighten, and heighten engagement with literature. I believe, as Wilhelm does in *You Gotta Be The Book: Teaching Engaged Reading and Reflection with Adolescents*, that the use of drama in the classroom engages students in physical, cognitive and affective transactions with literature (89). This pedagogy rests on the belief that the story world is a place students enter through text-based role-play and performances, forming unique and indelible reflective transactions with literature. In addition, I feel that whenever possible, the use of music, visual arts, drama, creative writing, and videography expand our current notions of literacy to one more fit to prepare our students to interact in an ever-changing world.

When students live the literature, they become deeply involved in the transaction. Playing the part of the characters, re-writing the script, staging scenes, etc., they feel those emotions untouchable within the text. That elusive eternal message created through the art form of literature is not “lost” but “found” in translation. The students, through enactment, embody the author’s intention, which is always first and foremost to provoke our thinking about life and living, ultimately affecting the way we think about our place in the world and our interactions in it. The electronic literary magazine uses multimodal lenses to calibrate classroom transactions with literature perpetuating the work we do in our classroom. A further benefit of this pedagogy is that through the digital infrastructure, transactions are frozen in time allowing us to relish them, reflect on our work, and provoke further thought and discussion about the literature.

Setting the Stage for Trans(ACT)ing With Literature: The Digital Platform as Stage

Much has recently been discussed in the professional literature about preparing our students to meet the new demands and challenges of life in the 21st century. Teacher educators often lag behind the changing times, clinging to the tried and true within

their methods courses. Lack of daily contact with contemporary adolescence, or “millennials” as Gee calls them, keeps teacher educators out of touch with the ever-changing world of adolescents and their increasingly new modes of expressing thought and communicating with one another (“Millennials” 51). Not only does this interfere with the progression of ongoing pedagogical practices, but curricular demands in a test driven educational environment often discourage teachers from taking the time to discover new ways to extend what Louise Rosenblatt encouraged as both “efferent” and “aesthetic” transactions with literature (24). Critically important in the education of pre-service teachers is allowing time and space to navigate in a non-prescriptive way the dialogue that literature engages one in. The drama of literature as lived in the moment is reinvigorated when students realize that they can negotiate meaning with literature through the digital platform as they re-write, re-stage, and perform their transactions in a three-dimensional format through the creation of a zine.

This new sustained transaction with literature is held by the digital framework as it reverberates across space and time and into the thoughts and hearts of others participating with the transaction as a digital viewer/participant. As Morris and Tchudi note, we must be aware that:

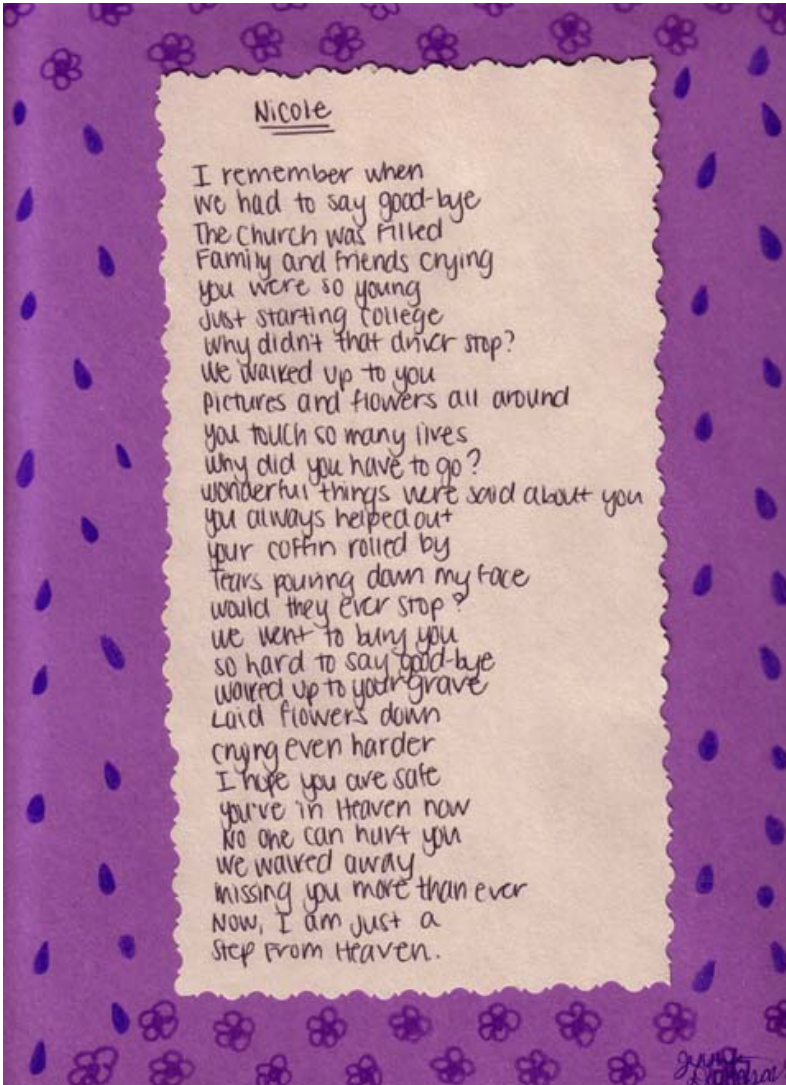
Each new voice that joins society offers a fresh way of looking at the world, and each new form of communication, whether it is the printing press, the typewriter, the radio, the telephone, the television, or the computer, suggests a new means of transmitting human thoughts, views, and feelings to the rest of the world (22).

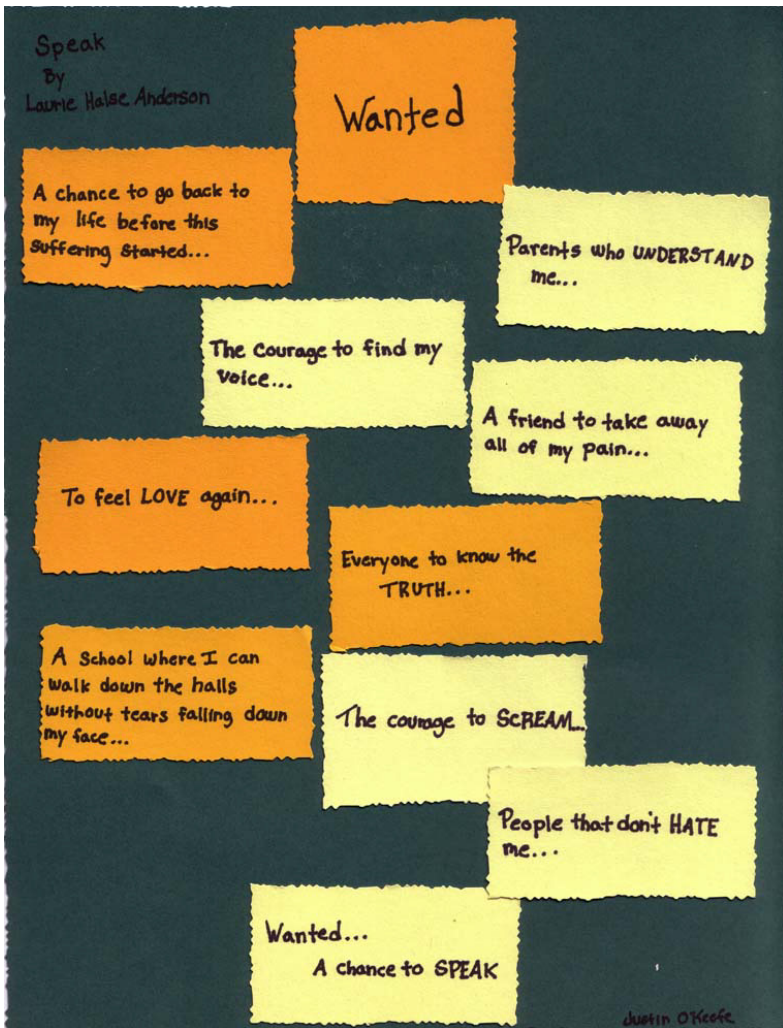
Typically, zines employ a two-dimensional rendering of creative thought framed in paper or digital form, supported by a social network of likeminded individuals focusing on a particular theme. Zines have been widely used

through the 1990's and into the 21st century as a way to empower young voices to speak candidly about politics, gender, and societal issues (Guzzetti & Gamboa 418). Paralleling the thematic nature of the zine in the past decade, adolescent literature has been more in touch with social issues confronting the adolescent today. One thing all *zinesters* have in common is a passion for their subject. Lankshear and Knobel state:

A zine may specialize in a single theme across all its issues, or cover diverse themes within single issues or across issues. In all instances, the writer-producers are passionate—at times to the point of obsession—about their subject matter and desire to share ideas, experiences, values, analyses, comments, and critiques with kindred spirits (“Cut” 168).

In both my Adolescent Literature and Teaching Reading and Literature grades 5-12 courses, the zine is a vehicle for passionate transactions with literature using creative writing, image, stimulating what Sanders-Bustle calls Creative/Critical thought (13). Other modalities expand potential transaction from two to three dimensional ways of knowing and expressing. The following two-dimensional examples are from transactions with An Na's *A Step From Heaven* and Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*:





However meaningful these transactions are, they are heightened via performance on the digital stage. Now literature transactions become trans(ACT)ions, powerful mediators of expression. The pre-service teachers cast their work upon a digital loom, rendered through performance, weaving meanings across borders, continuing an on-going dialogue with literature. Within this pedagogy, the critical/creative thought processes flour-

ish within the students' imaginative transaction as co-creators of expression.

The pre-service teachers are motivated in their creative work, for they are not only reading, writing, responding, creating and performing for a real purpose and audience but that audience is global via the digital platform. They know that beyond their instructor, other English teachers, and the University community, their work has the potential to reach any interested others with an interest in their literary transaction. Therefore, they learn that inter(ACT)ing and trans(ACT)ing with literature provides a forum for adolescents and pre-service teachers to project their voice beyond the school walls and out into the community at large.

The collaborative creation of the zine is but one way that English language arts teachers and students can participate and contribute in the literary digital dialogue based on their own inquiry and experiences. Pre-service educators need to see beyond the mechanics of technology as tools and toward what those tools can offer as inquiry grounded in experience. This continues to be a critical component of the tenet of the new literacies in education as Bruce writes:

Our task is not to prepare them to be components of the global machine, nor to shrink from it, but to help them engage that world as informed participants and critics. Beyond any specific imperatives, the new literacies highlight the central role that language and cultural values have always had in education. Thus, as we move into the fast-paced, multimedia, internationalized 21st century, the needs in literacy education direct us to earlier conceptions of learning grounded in ordinary experience and social concerns (18).

Re-Writing, Re-Thinking, Re-Staging: Holes

The use of multiliteracies in the classroom can take many

forms. Within the contextual framing of an on-line literary magazine or “zine,” the inter-textual possibilities for creating what Lankshear and Knobel call “scenarios,” are at once freeing and challenging (“Attention” 34). For the teacher, it means giving students the time, place, and materials to collaboratively design and implement their chosen interpretive response to the literature under study. Since my pre-service teachers are studying adolescent literature, the focus of one of our multimodal zine responses is to Louis Sacchar’s fanciful and complex adolescent novel *Holes*.

In addition to discussion and writing responses to the novel, students are given the task of scriptwriting – using their knowledge of the complex plot, coupled with the underlying provocative theme of the role of destiny or fate. This stimulates the students to ask “what-if” questions, which in turn provokes the writing and triggers ideas about staging and ultimately performance. In nine hours, spread over a period of three weeks, the students conjure a scenario and decide to re-write the ending of the novel by changing the pattern of the action.

Within a multimodal response to literature, the text is not abandoned; it is extended. The students extract the lyrics sung to Stanley’s great-great-grandfather in the old country and attach a melody to it to use in their performance. Re-creating the scene calls for playing the part, demanding students find and don costumes, speak in voices they have thus far only imagined. Stepping inside of the roles allows students to embody the characters, feelings, thoughts and actions, leading to a deeper transaction with literature.

The final videotaped performance takes place in the experimental theatre space, providing the students with a professional dramatic setting. Theatre lights, a fog machine, and a real stage add credibility to the moment as students lose themselves in performance for the



final time, etching their transaction on digital film to be placed within the fluid digital pages of our zine.

Becoming Stargirl: A Catwalk In Her Shoes

Jerry Spinelli's adolescent novel *Stargirl* captures the essence of the barriers cultivated by peer group pressures to conform in high school. As noted by the fluctuating popularity and rejection Stargirl



Carraway faces at Mica High School, standing out, whether through fashion statements or everyday behavior, is risky business in adolescence, where fitting in means succumbing to the social norm. For their zine contribution,

my students teamed up to put on a Stargirl Carraway fashion show in order to reveal the daring side of Stargirl's exploits within Mica High. They relive the moments in the text where Stargirl appears in shocking costume-like digs, reprising her cafeteria appearance in a grass skirt where she serenaded the students accompanied by her ukulele, flaunting outrageous sunflower tights, wide-hooped yellow ball gown for the school prom, and kimono outfit and blonde hair extensions. These and other Stargirl Carraway images are highlighted within the staged fashion show.



To prepare for the video, students write the script, taking excerpts directly from the text to highlight the descriptive passages about her clothing within a running commentary as hosts of the fashion show. Two students carefully select music to match the ambience of each outfit (guided by the rich descriptions in the text) to embody the bold character of Stargirl as she lived through her confrontations with the rest of her high school class in each situation. Models meticulously prepared for each presentation of Stargirl's outfits, using clothing and accessories that were hunted down in local rummage sales, thrift shops and outgrown closets and basements.

One of the students employed at a local dance studio received permission to stage the show there for the final videotaped performance. A mock runway designed with leftover Christmas lights and masking tape glitters under a disco ball as mirrors along the walls of the studio duplicate the images of the models walking up and down the catwalk. The moderators of the event describe each scene in vivid detail, taking their cues directly from the text just as Stargirl appeared in each scene in the novel.

The becoming of Stargirl Carraway for the pre-service teachers threw them back to their own adolescent remembrances of the role that clothing plays in the formative identity of young people, provoking discussion of how society and the media dictate our fashion sense and downplay our unique individual sense in choosing how we clothe and decorate our bodies.



Puzzleman: Discovering the Art of the Vignette in *House on Mango Street*

As a prelude to a zine contribution in a practicum intensive course for pre-service English teachers, we read and discussed Sandra Cisneros's coming of age novel about a young Latino girl finding her identity in *The House on Mango Street*. Since the novel intricately connects a series of vignettes concerning the people and community surrounding Esperanza's life while she grew up, we decided to parallel our class project in the following ways:

1. To appreciate the art of the vignette as a literary form, the students would each write a brief vignette recounting a personal encounter from their childhood that left an indelible impression on them.
2. To symbolize our class as a learning community, we would not only share the vignettes with each other, but also inscribe them on pieces of cloth that would be assembled in the shape of one of the students in the classroom.
3. To highlight our project as a collaborative transaction with the literature, we would perform the vignettes, illustrating the making of puzzleman and explaining briefly how this represented our learning and dialogic exchange with other pre-service English teachers.

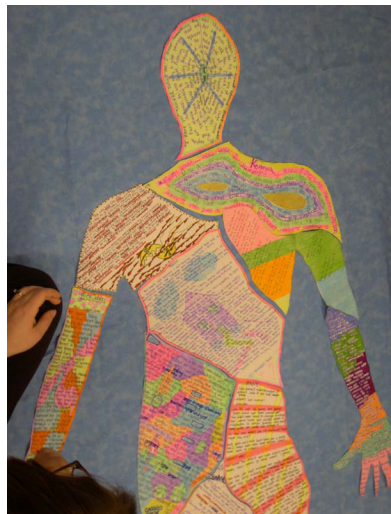
This two-week project became intensified as the image of puzzleman began to grow with the crafting and reworking of the student narratives. A volunteer from the class had his form traced on the floor onto a canvas-like cloth with an iron-on background. Another student carefully dissected the shape of "puzzleman" into the number of students in our cohort (fifteen) and another student cut the shapes out and handed each member of the class a piece of the puzzle. Their intent was to handwrite their vignette on the cloth pieces and decorate them with an assortment of col-

orful pens and markers. The task facing the students during the next class period was to assemble puzzleman and iron him onto cloth for the making of a video in which students would perform their vignettes and frame their rationale for creating this project. One student serenaded the narratives with his guitar. This musical interlude was spliced with a background of conga drumming, during which the scene shifted to students assembling puzzleman. The flurry of activity and excitement in the classroom cannot be appreciated here as it is a multimodal



performance, but it can be accessed now in the final i-movie posted on the zine. Behind a backdrop of music, student narrative and collaborative storycloth reflect the complexities of reflecting on our own experiences as we weave a multimodal representation of identity through image, music, narrative and videography.

The puzzleman project began as a way to transact with literature, and indirectly reconnected and extended our classroom community. The inquiry promoted an interplay of reading, writing and reflection, while reprocessing experience through performance. And art, music, narrative and videography fulfilled their potential as multimodal portals for each student's unique vision of and transaction with *The House on Mango Street*.



Concluding Thoughts

The multimodal projects brought to fruition in what is now an on-going project within our literary magazine, *Intuitive Roots: Visual/Verbal Literary Meanderings*, have connected my students with innovative ways of transacting with literature, and transferring those transactions onto a digital platform, one which will hopefully touch and inspire others to work and play like we do, in a dialogic rich learning environment. Maxine Greene's rejection of the belief that "all problems, all certainties, can be resolved. All we can do... is cultivate multiple ways of seeing and multiple dialogues in a world where nothing stays the same" is central to digital expression and English education (16).

Multimodal transaction with literature can be a pathway for English educators and students to cultivate multiple ways of knowing while entering the medium of the digital world. The new literacies are here to stay and with them the need for teachers to be aware of their critical place in the classroom. Furthermore, multimodal literacies, which have long been valued by arts-based literacy practitioners, are now seen as a critical piece of teaching in what Cope and Kalantzis call "a design for social futures" (234). I assert the need to embrace the critical extension of our notion of literacy and align our school-based practices to include multimodalities. As one who listens to the voices of my students, I find it necessary to support the intertextuality constantly evolving in a changing world. The possibilities are as endless as the themes and lessons we encounter through our literary travels. And while critical and imaginative interchange will guide our navigation as we chart our course, that which is eternal about the text will live on.

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