

# “Why Don’t You Do Something Innovative?”: Becoming Multiliterate Educators

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## ABSTRACT

*This autoethnography discusses the experiences of three doctoral students who took a course on using multiliteracies approaches to literacy pedagogy and how the course content contributed to growth in their experiences as educators. Due to the nature of the course readings and class practices, the students recognized an emerging change in their own pedagogical approaches and personal philosophies about technology, literacies, and access. This analytical autoethnography, a type of autoethnography discussed by Anderson (2006), is one way of deconstructing and redesigning their identities as both students and teachers. By situating their experiences within the scholarship of multiliteracies literature, they describe their own transformative process as they connect research to practice and how this scholarship directly impacted their identities as teachers. Broader implications are discussed for graduate students and faculty who work with graduate students who want to promote self-reflective practices and an awareness of the ever-changing nature of the classroom.*

## Introduction

In 1996, a collective group of literacy scholars called the New London Group developed a document outlining practices for teaching “multiliteracies”. The term multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996) explores not only the traditional literacies of reading and writing, but also other modes of meaning-making including linguistic, visual, audio, spatial, symbolic, and behavioral, to name a

few. Long before now-ubiquitous sites like Facebook and Twitter became part of our everyday vernacular, the New London Group acknowledged that literacy practices and mediums for communicating were quickly changing and becoming more diverse along with the rest of the world. As literacy began to take on new meanings, other aspects of academia began to shift as well including the types and quantity of the images we consume (Janks, 2010), the tools we might use to

develop students' literacies (Griffin & Minter, 2013), and the societal implications of access (Janks, 2010). These changes in academia are positive in that they afford students an opportunity to bring their own personal experiences, culture, and previous knowledge into the classroom. These "funds of knowledge" are quickly being recognized as critical components of students' academic identity into the classroom (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).

In the fall 2013 semester, the three of us, all doctoral students in education, found ourselves together in a course on multiliteracies. We were charged with the task of thinking about a line of research connected to the subject that would support our eventual dissertation research. Within a few weeks of the course and after meeting together, the three of us decided we would complete this task as a group. We each felt early on that the multiliteracies literature would create the impetus for us to be more creative in our practice to engage with students while also foregrounding the power of technology in teaching. Yet most importantly, we all recognized that the course was changing our own pedagogical approaches and personal philosophies about technology, literacies, and access. We discussed the power of deconstructing texts and integrating new kinds of technology with our college students, especially those who are preservice teachers, because they will go into their future classrooms and expose their students to new ways of learning with these types of tools.

Rather than developing a static literature review or another piece that might eventually be part of our dissertation, we decided to do a thoughtful, but rigorous, inquiry into how our own teaching approaches and practices adapted as we immersed ourselves in multiliteracies literature over the course of the semester. In effect, this class and the process of learning about multiliteracies became much more about our teaching than conducting research to prepare us for the dissertation. In a manner that reflected our learning process,

we decided to take a cue from much of the research we were reading and critically look inward at our own practices, assumptions, and teaching philosophies, similar to the type of collective inquiry we read about (e.g., Hamel, Shaw, & Taylor, 2013; Murillo, 2012). As Hamel, Shaw, and Taylor (2013) argue, a teacher-focused inquiry gives teachers the chance to reflect on critical parts of their worlds, their assumptions, and the knowledge they transmit to students.

The result of this inquiry caused a transformative growth in ourselves and a way to make sense of our strengths and shortcomings (Hamel, Shaw, & Taylor, 2013). In our doctoral course, the assigned readings reinforced the importance of self-reflection by asking us, the readers, to consider our own epistemologies in order to consider the assumptions we may consciously or unconsciously make (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Janks, 2010). Based on the literature, we decided that this project should be a way of deconstructing and redesigning ourselves, and this autoethnography emerged. We realized that this course and collaborative autoethnography was a chance for us to consider our role as teachers—an opportunity not always provided in research-focused doctoral programs. Teaching assistantships for doctoral students, for example, might reflect the needs of the program more than giving students a meaningful experience in teaching something new or preparing them for their work as future faculty members (Astin, 2002). This semester of reflection provided us with the type of reflective experience that we argue all graduate students should be encouraged to have in connecting research to practice.

### **Literature Review**

As previously noted, the New London Group (1996) called for an expansion of literacy pedagogy to include modes of communication beyond the written word; they termed this expansion "multiliteracies." In

light of the digital modes of communication in today's world, these additional modes of understanding play a large part in literacy practices more so today than when they were suggested in 1996, showing the foresight of the New London Group. Multiliteracies have also begun to encompass the diverse nature of linguistic and cultural aspects of our increasingly global society (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Goodfellow, 2011; Janks, 2010; Rice & Hausrath, 2014).

Supporting the concept of multiliteracies is Semiotic theory (Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 1998; Whitin, 2005) which delineates the multiple ways we have of knowing; that we experience the world through our senses; that all knowledge is mediated through our perceptions; there are cultural constructions (power and diversity) underpinning all learning; and that there are a variety of ways to create and express meaning. The key is transmediating, or expressing these forms of knowing (Whitin, 2005). One key way to encourage transmediation is through students' engagement with multimodal instructional activities.

In much of contemporary studies and research theories, teaching and learning from a multimodal analysis lens (New London Group, 1996; Kress, 2003, 2010; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004) is necessary in our technology-driven world, even if the theory of multimodality analysis is still emerging and not fully developed (Bazalgette & Buckingham, 2013). The various multiliteracies and semiotic systems, as referenced above, required for multimodal responses, elicit a shift in both practice and design.

The nature of texts is rapidly transforming due to digital and technological means, both in society at large and in classroom applications. On various technological devices, written text has become a compilation of words, visual images, music and sound effects, facial expressions, and touch capabilities (Cloonan, 2011; Kress, 2003; Jewitt, 2008). These semiotic modes

combine to create a much different reading experience from the time before today's digital age. Because of this rapidly changing format of text, the entire communicational environment is shifting from a predominantly print-based field into digital modes. The impact on literary meaning-making is profound. Reading and writing are increasingly social endeavors, more sociocultural in nature than ever. Additionally, there are new relationships between the author of texts and the readers. This exchange of ideas and co-creation of meaning crosses the boundaries (Jewitt, 2008), forever changing the roles of author and reader.

The transparency of and deliberate attention to multimodal design is also vital to understanding and meaning making. A critical stance is required to delve into the full meaning (Kress, 2003; Leu et al., 2004) of a text. A reader must be able to access the logistics and arrangement of a text in order to interact and have a connection to the author's intent and message. Kress (2010) describes this need for competency in the cultural and political contexts of today's society in order to understand how the "design, production, and dissemination of representations as messages" help to make meaning of our texts and our world. Jewitt (2008) writes specifically of the concept of multimodal pedagogy. Her position is that there are four elements of strategic pedagogical practices teachers can implement in the classroom to facilitate multimodal analytical learning: *situated practice* (incorporating the learners' experiences and cultural views); *overt instruction* (teaching metalanguages of design); *critical framing* (connecting meanings to the larger social contexts); and *transformed practice* (how students recreate and recontextualize meaning across contexts). These practices aim to facilitate a better understanding of and deeper connections to the literacy worlds of the students while supporting a broader understanding of how multimodal systems work. Teachers, she asserts, should shift from "monocultural and monomodal" (Jewitt,

2008, p. 262) texts and use multimodal texts as a way to increase critical engagement; teachers should explicitly teach how different modes create different meaning in different contexts. If we extend this to the broader view of reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1938, 1993; Sipe, 2008), which emphasizes the role of the reader as an integral part of the learning process, both the types of texts *and* the types of responses need to be multimodal in nature in order to capitalize on the nature of multimodalities (Kress, 2003, 2010; Leu et al., 2004).

Unfortunately, the current curricula in place in classrooms across the globe focus almost solely on written texts and responses, requiring teachers to learn and develop their own metalanguages and understanding of the pedagogy of teaching in a multimodal way (Cloonan, 2011). Within this course on multiliteracies pedagogy, we began to explore our identities as teachers, teacher educators, and students and what it means to teach multimodally. This course created spaces for critical reflection that is important for developing “culturally responsive dispositions and teaching practices that enable [us] to better support the learning of [our] diverse students” (Kidd, Sánchez, & Thorp, 2008, p. 316).

## Method

### Research Questions

The following questions guided our inquiry into our past experiences as well as into the ways multiliteracies research impacted our practice and world views:

1. How did our experiences in a class on multiliteracies pedagogy add to or challenge our existing teaching philosophies and practices?
2. How can we use the knowledge gained from multiliteracies to redesign our philosophies and practices?

### Setting

The main setting for this study was a graduate course on multiliteracies in which the

three authors were enrolled in the Fall, 2013 semester. Throughout the semester, we were exposed to some of the seminal works in multiliteracies research and various recent publications and were encouraged to engage with technology and multimodal texts through weekly class presentations. This class was offered through a department that houses many education programs that span content areas and grade levels, one of which is the literacy education program. This course was filled primarily with students completing degrees in literacy education as well as other subfields within teacher education. The department, situated at a university in a large urban area approximately 300 miles from the Texas-Mexico border, houses researchers who focus on bilingual/bicultural literacies, border literacies, and literacy in international contexts. The department’s mission shows a commitment to reflective practices, diversity and multiple perspectives, and the promotion of equity and social justice (Mission Statement, n.d.).

## Methodological Approach

Autoethnography is an emerging type of qualitative research where the researcher is allowed to place him/herself within the research study (Chang, 2008; Hays & Singh, 2011). As Chang (2008) writes, “The minimum requirement is that autoethnographers must be willing to dig deeper into their memories, excavate rich details, bring them into examination tables to sort, label, interconnect, and contextualize them in the sociocultural environment. Commitment to cultural analysis and interpretation is the key in proceeding with any topic” (p. 51). Our decision to take this methodological approach was two-fold. First, we knew that as we struggled to shift our pedagogical and theoretical identities into becoming multiliterate educators we would have to be reflective practitioners. Documenting our own journeys, therefore, would help us make sense of our new

learning. Secondly, our simultaneous roles as educators, students, and researchers naturally lent itself to this method. We found that our own learning process, including moments of discomfort in new concepts or the victory of understanding a complex concept, gave us a new sense of empathy for our students and their challenges as learners.

We were also influenced by Anderson's (2006) discussion of analytical autoethnography. Anderson lists five key features of analytical autoethnographies: "complete member researcher status, analytic reflexivity, narrative visibility of the researcher's self, dialogue with informants beyond the self, and commitment to theoretical analysis" (p. 378). Our presence as students in the multiliteracies course and subsequent work on a self-reflexive project based on that topic vis-à-vis our experiences as teachers established our member research status. This led directly to the next feature, analytical reflection, in which the researcher continually remains aware of the reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the setting and informants they are studying. From the outset, even before we decided on this collaborative project, we all understood that coming to know multiliteracies pedagogy would cause each of us to think about our own teaching philosophies and to challenge our assumptions. We included our own narratives that are individually written in order to highlight our visibility as individuals. Next, we analyzed our experiences as a group in order to consider commonalities and to uncover places for further discussion among ourselves. Last, we conclude with our thoughts on why these self-reflective spaces are so transformative for any educator and why educators at all levels, regardless of years of experience, should stop and take stock of their practice in changing contexts.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The course on multiliteracies offered us the chance to write and reflect continually

through the fall 2013 semester and beyond. Part of the course assignments required that we keep individual blogs that were reviewed each week by our instructor. We were asked to reflect about the week's readings, synthesize it with other readings and class discussions, connect it to our own practices and research, and to ask questions of our readings and ourselves. We also created our own multimodal projects that enabled us to explore a specific line of multiliteracies research that interested us.

Aside from the course assignments, the three of us also met on a regular basis throughout the semester, and though we were in less frequent contact formally, our meetings continued into the spring and summer semesters. Some meetings were more casual with us sharing the pangs and gripes of the experience of being doctoral students. Other meetings included us sharing stories about ourselves—our personal lives, our professional experiences as educators, and the changes we felt we were undergoing with the dual identities of educators/students. Over time it became clear that different aspects of multiliteracies education spoke to us in special ways, but perhaps most importantly, together we came to a dynamic understanding of what it means to be multiliterate educators. We understood that we were teachers stepping back into the role of students, and that throughout the academic year, we were on our own individual and collective paths toward learning about multiliteracies and what it means as a pedagogy. What follows is our experiences and how we see them as useful for other educators.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Most currently-espoused educational theories on learning and teaching favor a sociocultural approach. This shift from more behavioristic or cognitive approaches began with the seminal work of Vygotsky (1978), who radically challenged prior theories that focused on learning as a predominantly

individual endeavor. He positioned the learner within a society where, through human interactions, internal development is awakened in ways unattainable through individual means alone. This placed the individual as a member of society, with the individual's growth and development shaped and formed by experiences.

Sociocultural theory on learning also explores the individual's simultaneous impact on the society at large. This reciprocal process encourages change to both the individual and the people surrounding the interactions. The evolving and recursive nature of this theory invites exploration into the nature of how vital the "transforming participation in shared sociocultural endeavors" (Rogoff, Paradise, Arouz, Correa-Chavez, & Angelillo, 2004, p. 210) is to learning. This process of change is multi-faceted and encompasses a variety of theoretical understandings. One component of the learning process is that the learner has acquired new skills, or what Wertsch (1998) describes as the mastery of mediated activity, and what Vygotsky (1978) calls internalization, in such a way that the learner can use the knowledge in meaningful ways. This appropriation (Wertsch, 1998) of new material and engaging in ownership of the new knowledge further enhances our understanding of this component of the learning process. The cognitive stance of developmental learning applies here as well in terms of needing an existing schema or foundational knowledge from which to build new knowledge.

A second component of the learning process is the ability to teach or explain knowledge to another. Without thorough understanding of a concept as a result of true ownership and mastery, the knowledge cannot be fully explained. Akin to Lave and Wenger's (1991) apprenticeship models to develop their theory on communities of practice, a learner must be situated in a learning model, with more experienced and knowledgeable members of the community in a position to apprentice neophyte members into the

practices and knowledge required to be successful. Success is determined by the learners' ability to acquire the needed skills and practices and eventually to overtake the veterans' position in the legitimate peripheral participation.

Third, transferability of the acquired knowledge (Billett, 1996) to new situations and the ability to make connections to new ideas is crucial to the learning process. This transference to new domains is both a cognitive and social process. Whereas the cognitive thought required for surface-level transferences may result in perfunctory task completion, complex thought processes require a situative experience to transfer to, resulting in deep understanding and knowledge that can cross boundaries. These boundaries require the ability to reason, assess the variables attached to the environment, and choose the best response for the situation. Finally, all new learning must be contextualized in the situation in which it is learned. Alexander, Schallert, and Reynolds (2009) describe the process of learning as having "as its foundation the systemic, dynamic, and interactive relation between the nature of the learner and the object of the learning as ecologically situated in a given time and place as well as over time" (p. 136). This dimension of time hones in on the longevity of learning as a process. The situatedness of the learning cannot be differentiated from the knowledge itself.

Within this framework of learning, the individual's identity formation plays an integral part in shaping what is learned and why. Identity theory (MacCall & Simmons, 1966; Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1968; 1980; 2000) looks at the placement of the individual within their communities and societies, placing particular importance on the inability to separate the two. The individual blends together parts of each social interaction, forming an integrated whole that could only exist through the experiences in that specific community at that specific time. Gee (2007) highlights this, as well, as he explores the

learner's identity formation as a means for commitment and motivation to acquire the new knowledge. The learner must have a deep commitment to acquiring the knowledge in order for learning to take place.

### **Our Transformation into Multiliterate Educators**

Learning is a reflection of dynamic growth and change brought about by both the individual's developmental processes and that person's interactions within the larger community and society. One cannot exist without the other; they are intricately intertwined to the point where one cannot be distinguished from the other. Regardless of where the individual starts at the beginning of the process, the situations, experiences, and interactions the individual undergoes results in a deep, complex, and fundamental change in identity and knowledge construction that never reaches an end.

The teaching implications of this theoretical statement on learning are complex, to say the least. In our standardized-testing focused world of organized educational practices, teachers will need to value the contextualized manner that sociocultural theory shows how students learn. This sociocultural manner in which students learn and identify themselves creates a strong need for a deliberate implementation of communities of practice, thoughtful and compelling authentic practices (or as authentic as can be in an inauthentic classroom), and committed, motivated students who want to learn. Possibly most importantly in terms of learning and teaching, and what overlays all decisions in a society, is that the power and cultural capital of the society at large determines what practices and what knowledge is valued. Classrooms are more than places to acquire textbook knowledge; they are hives of critical learning, where an individual can see beyond the message and understand the design behind what they are learning (Gee, 2007). From this perspective,

we present our individual stories—where we started, the present changes we observe, and our speculations on the usefulness of this knowledge for others.

#### **Tom**

When I first started teaching in the reading program at a local community college in the 2004, I remember sitting in the back of a large campus auditorium during faculty orientation noting the large number of heads with male-patterned baldness. The thought occurred to me, as I felt the back of my own head, how was the ever-aging population of teachers going to engage the youth of America? Then one of the speakers caught my attention when she said she was using students' stories and family histories to connect them to content in the classroom. I had recently purchased some video-editing software and wondered if I could help students tell their stories using videos. A few minutes later, the chairman of our department, who happened to be sitting next to me, said, "Why don't *you* do something innovative?" Perhaps this was because I was new, but it made me begin thinking about what my students' stories would look like on the big screen.

In the fall of 2004, I began teaching reading classes at this community college. The students I taught were typically Hispanic students who were attending college for the first time, predominantly from inner-city schools in low-income areas of the city. My students also included high school students participating in outreach programs like Gear Up and TRIO aimed at boosting college attendance rates. All of my students were labeled as struggling readers. I began these classes by having students write their stories using a complex story structure. According to the complex story structure, a character with goals is interrupted by problems or obstacles that challenge her. As problems are overcome, new problems surface offering new challenges and, perhaps, calling upon the character to use multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1999) to solve them. When all problems are solved, a truth

or theme, or several truths or themes, are realized (Bruner, 1991; Tompkins & Collom, 2003).

I realized the stories that my students wrote about themselves for class could be turned into short digital narratives, which is an interpretation of the idea of multiliteracies learning. The digital narratives for my class were produced from 1½- to 2-page handwritten scripts of students' lived experiences and included personal stories, family histories, photos, and tributes to loved ones. Many of these stories addressed personal and family conflicts. What these stories of conflict presented in the short papers and the subsequent digital narratives taught us was that our struggles connected us to those who were, and who still are, oppressed in American society: Native Americans, Latinas/os, African Americans, and other racial and ethnic minority groups; women; and members of the LGBTQ+ community, to name a few. In fact, when asked to do a chalk talk about who, exactly, has been excluded or who has been discriminated against, objectified, victimized or treated like objects, students had no problem filling the *entire* board. This pedagogical tool of using what Giroux (1988) calls our "liberating memory" not only makes us aware of the "ruptural effects of conflict and struggle" but a "discursive reminder that people do not only suffer under the mechanisms of domination, they also resist" (p. xxxv). These narratives also help build an intercultural communication competence, as described by Rice and Hausrath (2014) by inviting students to exchange stories and to connect their personal narratives with students who do not share their same backgrounds.

After the first semester of using digital narratives, I began using them as a pedagogical tool in both my reading and education classes, and I realized that students' acquisition of reading and writing skills were better understood when I embedded these lessons as personal narratives. In other words,

students could understand *main idea, supporting detail, context clues, figurative language, and patterns of organization* much better by using them to write about their lives. Although I received high scores on evaluations from the chair and other faculty in the reading and education department, another faculty member complained, "Who does he think he is, the Francis Ford Coppola of the department?" Her main objection was that I was not keeping up with the department's standardized tests. This ultimately led to my decision to discontinue using digital narratives in my course.

When I started the doctoral program, I began teaching at a different institution. My advisor and others encouraged me to use digital narratives when teaching my current class at the university as part of my doctoral fellowship. I scaffolded the lessons early in the semester by having students write a page-and-a-half or so about having goals and overcoming personal obstacles. I told them their story could be about any subject as long as it included a character with a goal facing an obstacle and, in the end, learning a truth. I asked them to bring photos from home to illustrate their stories. I also asked students to write down what presentation technology (e.g., Microsoft Power Point, iMovie) they knew and were able to use and whether or not they would be willing to teach what they knew to those who didn't. At the same time, I learned a relatively simple software called Microsoft Windows Photo Story 3. Even though it was new to me, I learned it enough to be able to teach it to others if needed.

For the end-of-the-semester project, 38 students made digital narratives. I adhered to a standing rule with any kind of personal writing and sharing, especially the kind that expresses personal suffering or that might cause discomfort or embarrassment, that no one is forced to share what is too personal, whether that be pen and paper or through digital technology. I, for one, learned that students from Saudi Arabia do not show photos of female relatives (such as

grandmothers), but would depict them artistically as symbols such beautiful flowers. Through digital narratives, I grew as a teacher because this assignment allowed me to learn something new about students' cultures that gave me a new cultural competence to improve future teaching when working with other students of that culture.

The transformative process of incorporating multiliteracies pedagogy and self-reflection was two-fold. First, it demonstrated for me the power of technology and how it can help build skills in students, like storytelling, that they may be reluctant to try on their own. I admit that as someone who did not grow up with technology, learning about multiliteracies and multimodal pedagogy motivated me to experiment and to be more comfortable with learning the technology alongside (or just ahead of) my students. Second, the research I found on using technology in the classroom validated the digital narratives that I had previously abandoned due to push back from my former colleague. While I may have abandoned the "traditional" way of teaching in my classroom to my colleague's dismay, I allowed my students to explore the new ways to produce texts through technology in ways that, I argue, better prepare them for college and the workplace while experiencing something other than rote learning (Grabill & Hicks, 2005). Taking risks to encourage myself and my students to take steps, albeit sometimes small ones, towards multiliteracies, has not been easy, but being innovative has been rewarding for me as a student, a teacher, and a researcher.

### **Rebecca**

When I look at the notes, reflections, and annotations I jotted down from the first few weeks of the Fall 2013 semester, I can see a definitive change in my understanding of what it means to be literate and multiliterate in today's society. My early reflections predominantly focused on practices that I used in my own classroom, where I had stumbled almost accidentally into the types of

multimodal education I thought was interesting or engaging. I had not yet started to understand the importance of creating pedagogy that both reflected and encompassed my students. I was so proud of being the "innovative" teacher; when I look back now, I realize how naïve and traditional my curriculum really was. Perhaps I needed that sense of efficacy in order to find the raw nerve to stand up in a classroom every day and proclaim myself as an expert in a field of study. Perhaps my continued education allowed me the time and opportunity to reflect upon our given knowledge in a way that forces us to acknowledge both our skills and our empty pockets of ignorance. All I know is that when I began this journey of earning my doctoral degree in literacy education mere months ago, I knew very little about being a multiliterate educator. This course afforded me the opportunity to take my nascent beliefs about being an advocate for student choice, social justice, and critical understandings to a much more thoughtful and nuanced understanding.

An early reflection from our multiliteracies course explored what I posit as the three core tenets for my future as a multiliterate teacher educator, professor, and researcher: creating democratic classrooms, facilitating social justice and global citizenry, and incorporating multiliteracies in pedagogy and curriculum development. These interests have only intensified as I have furthered my studies and research into the fields. Through my enrollment in this course and my own exploration and reflection of the new ideas I have learned, I now have a deep concern about the inequality of education in our country. The disparities between low and high socio-economic statuses, urban vs. rural schools, racial divides, state funding and regulations, political maneuverings, and so forth, have created a system that is not only unequal but in my mind, downright criminal.

My understanding of what it means to become a multiliterate educator is much more than simply consuming the research. Our

ability to take these new ideas and explore the social, political, economic, and educational implications of teaching them to others is a pivotal component of being a multiliterate educator. Almost immediately, I started to try the practices espoused in class: incorporating digital and technological means into existing coursework; encouraging my undergrad students to use multimodal means of reflecting on readings; opening up different avenues to demonstrate understanding other than the traditional essay or writing prompts; and allowing time both in class and out of class to explore the opportunities of multiliteracy education. For example, in order to explore and reflect upon the role of our experiences as students as an influence on our teaching philosophy, I asked the students to create a timeline using a variety of free online web 2.0 software programs that would incorporate videos, images, songs, and graphics that reflected important influences and events in their educational histories. We presented them in groups and responded to the various works of each student. This fostered a reflective community of learners where we all knew a little bit more about each other and ourselves, while experimenting with means of technology. In addition, we created online blogs, discussion sites, websites, and response boards as an extension of the classroom discussion. I let them work together to build and incorporate technology-driven lesson plans into their field study placements. Collaboratively, my students and I discussed the importance of weaving theoretical teaching into practical learning. The responses were overwhelmingly positive. As with all new learning, I needed to scaffold the students' interactions with these components and there were also growing pains as the ever-present technological issues arose, but, it worked. They learned the technology as I watched them collaborate on their digital lesson plans, and through this teaching, I learned from them.

When two-year-old children can use smart phones and tablets, when they can navigate

web browsers and communicate via technological methods heretofore not known to us, we know we are living in a different world. We do everyone a disservice by not capitalizing on it and ensuring that all of our young people have this same access and ability. Using multiliterate pedagogical practices is a way that I can make my own classrooms more equitable and provide rich learning experiences for my students who may not have those experiences at home, but will need them to be competitive in a world where those skills and tools are needed to succeed.

With the interconnectedness of our world via technological advances, we no longer live solely in our country or our geographic area. Communities of learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) have and continue to sprout among groups that transcend linguistic, cultural, and social class differences. Our classrooms, our research, our practices need to reflect this growing overlap of culture and citizenry. From ecological disasters to political coups to economic investments to human rights, our world is quickly becoming intricately entwined in ways like never before. In combining multiliteracies research with Lave and Wenger's (1991) work, I have learned that as educators, we have an ethical responsibility to employ every available tool to create an educational system that gives every student the opportunity and access to be full participants in the world around them. Our classrooms need to reflect the skills, practices, and knowledge that encompass both what our students come in the door with and what they are most likely to use in the future. No longer can the concept of literacy be limited to written or verbal textual communication.

The New London Group's (1996) design, deconstruction, redesign, transformation concept of learning and teaching model has far-reaching implications. Our pedagogical design model should continually undergo the process defined by the New London Group to reflect new understandings, new beliefs, new research. Unfortunately, there are other reasons pedagogy changes—politics,

economics, power, and money, to name a few. While it is easy to become cynical about the process, only by working together and standing firm in the knowledge and belief that what we are doing is right and beneficial to all students can we affect a true multiliteracy and interdisciplinary approach to learning. This course has made me delve deeper into my own educational philosophy and beliefs as well as consider the further implications of my emerging role as a teacher educator. No longer content to accept my teaching curriculum as it is given to me by others, I feel more empowered to not only include multimodalities and multiliteracies in my own classrooms as a teacher, but as a student as well. By modeling pedagogical practices that highlight ways in which the curriculum can both reflect and effect change on the world, I will be providing my students with a template for how to be a socially just educator.

### **Erin**

Prior to starting my doctoral studies in higher education administration, I taught evening courses at a local community college for two years. My master's degree is in an academic discipline (history), however my degree program did not train me to be a teacher. This course on multiliteracies is the first course I took that focused on pedagogy. As a postsecondary education researcher, I had to begin the course by finding connections between the assigned readings, which focused solely on K-12 pedagogy, and postsecondary education. The discussion of Selber's "ideal multiliterate student," discussed in Grabill and Hicks (2005) proved to be a useful starting point, but I was increasingly frustrated by the dearth of pedagogically-focused multiliteracies research in higher education scholarship.

My academic inquiry focused on how to define the literacies college students need to be successful in college and beyond, regardless of their path, and how to hone in on those skills in the college classroom. Students in postsecondary education are an incredibly diverse group (Kurlaender &

Flores, 2005; Smith, 2009), and while this may be an obvious statement to make, I sometimes find myself losing sight of what circumstances bring students to my classroom. For some, transfer to a four-year university is in their academic plan while others are taking my course to get into a vocational program – most students from both groups truly feel that they will never need history once they leave my classroom. It is up to me to find ways to help them develop whatever skills they might need for the various life paths they may choose. My previous teaching philosophy focused on persistence—namely, trying to help students get through their required history classes as painlessly as possible, given that I constantly faced complaints from students who claimed to hate history. What I learned from a multiliteracies stance was that I had a larger responsibility to my students than to help them survive a course they hated; instead, I had a powerful chance to connect the past with the present and the future and to develop the critical thinking skills necessary to allow them to positively contribute to our global societies.

The course gave me the opportunity to develop a teaching demonstration of a lesson I could use in my classroom using a multiliteracies approach where I could get feedback from my classmates, most of whom are trained K-12 teachers. Based on my research interests on the writing process, I decided to develop a lesson for students in my college history course on how to deconstruct the idea of audience and audience awareness. To incorporate multimodal sources, I found clips on YouTube from the 1960 presidential campaign of John F. Kennedy where his wife, Jacqueline Kennedy, recorded a commercial speaking entirely in Spanish. To demonstrate my lesson, I asked my classmates a series of questions such as "Who is Jackie Kennedy addressing and for what purpose?" Though these questions were probably very basic for a graduate-level class, I explained that the

lesson could be used to develop an awareness of the audience in lessons on writing.

More importantly, I realized that these could also be extended to longer lessons in history about immigration patterns over time (i.e. “If this commercial was created 50 years earlier, what language might Jackie Kennedy have spoken?”) and discussions of the rising profile of Latinas/os as a population today. I developed a scaffolded annotated bibliography project that asked students to identify a person or event that fit within the scope of the class, American History since 1865 (e.g., Mark Twain, Gulf of Tonkin incident, Susan B. Anthony). Students were given a specific type of source each week including the class textbook, multimodal sources online (including YouTube videos), academic websites, and non-academic websites. Students were asked to evaluate their sources each week using guiding questions about its authors, its audience, its biases, and then students were asked to give recommendations on how the source could be improved.

To demonstrate, I showed a variety of sources on Rosa Parks over the course of the class to give students ideas about what could be considered a useful tool for building an argument. I used the stand-up comedy of Eddie Izzard and how he challenged some master narratives of American history; my students read poems by Langston Hughes, especially “Will V-Day Be Me-Day Too” to explain the frustration of African-Americans with segregation after World War II; I asked my students to think about how they could use academic and not traditionally academic sources (e.g. visual literacy, video literacy, media literacy) to construct their arguments and support with evidence.

This assignment served a variety of purposes. First, this multiliteracies approach helped students open their minds about what is considered “historical” or “academic” in nature and how common artifacts can yield important questions about society, equality, and humanity. The assignment created a

typology of sources that students could use to conduct research, and I purposefully included both high-quality as well as questionable sources to encourage students to consider the differences. However, on their own, for the most part, students were reluctant to use questionable sources for this exercise, perhaps thinking that the quality of the source mattered as it is an academic setting. It is something I will address in the future as my goal was to also read their critiques of questionable sources. Second, it challenged the notion that history books or other types of “academic” works are infallible. The assignment also asked students to be critical in their assessments of sources, particularly in considering the audience for whom a source was created. Students were asked to consider how a source, even a peer-reviewed and edited history text, could be redesigned in the same way Janks (2010) asked her readers to consider their own sources.

Put another way, students walked away thinking about how a poem or a painting was just as valuable a historical object in academic inquiry as something more commonplace in history classes like a copy of a treaty, the *Constitution*, or a political speech. It also pushed students’ critical thinking skills by asking them to consider how texts, even academic texts, present a certain narrative to the exclusion of others. These research and critical thinking skills would be useful to students across contexts and majors.

Experimenting in pedagogy is both a challenge and a reward. For the first time, I felt that I was thinking through the teaching process and the design of my lessons. I made myself question what previous content could be kept, what should be thrown out, and what I felt were the shortcomings of my teaching—both in terms of content and the way I interacted with students’ experiences and needs. Taking this time and energy to completely revamp my courses was time-consuming and required an open mind and a willingness to do things that might fail or not be as successful in practice as they were in

theory. In the end, multiliteracies instilled in me a new awareness of my students, their backgrounds and needs, and the responsibility I have to my students to set them up for success in my class and beyond.

### **Discussion**

Perhaps the most important lesson we learned is that in order to facilitate the process of learning, teachers should have an intentional practice for their classroom lessons, strategies, and activities. Cultivating a situation where learners have a voice and agency rather than a passive role will increase engagement, motivation, and commitment, all three necessary components of knowledge acquisition and identity formation. Beyond school-based engagement, teaching in other settings such as after-school programs, tutoring sessions, and museums is just as valued as classrooms, if not more than, due to their authenticity and learner commitment. The same tenets prevail: a thoughtful, engaging practice that happens within a larger community of more knowledgeable others and motivated learners. This is perhaps an obvious point, but for three doctoral students who arrived in the classroom as students with more than two decades of experience among them, multiliteracies pedagogy encouraged us to look deeper in depth and breadth - in depth, we wanted to learn more about our students than we ever had before and in breadth, we wanted to look beyond the walls of our classrooms.

Murillo (2012), a practitioner and educator who researched biliterate practices in homes in Mexico and the Rio Grande Valley, encourages monolingual teachers (such as us) to visit the homes of our bilingual students to witness parents, relatives, and other community members who are our students' literacy resources. She further encourages us to take a bilingual liaison with us. These types of visitations allow us to discover our students' funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) and we can

encourage fellow teachers to invite students into more active learning by allowing them to use technology to create digital lesson plans, as Rebecca did, or to redefine their tools for research, as Erin did.

The projects we developed that changed our practices, such as Tom's digital stories, allowed our students to bring knowledge, experiences, personal creativity, and practices from their home and/or adopted countries and cultures into our classrooms, broadening the idea of what artifacts can be used in education. According to Mills (2009), digital narratives are part of multiliteracies that "...aim to move literacy education forward from antiquated pedagogies to those ...inclusive of informal, open ended, multimodal forms of communication which cross national boundaries and support productive diversity" (p. 105). These types of more inclusive practices that bridge students' home and academic lives can and should be embraced by the larger academic community, especially because they have the ability to launch the classroom into a larger, more globally connected society, resulting in students who maintain a critical stance about social justice and are more fully aware of the world around them.

### **The Meaning of Transformed Practice**

Why share our story? Or better yet, how is our story useful? As a group, we varied widely in terms of years of teaching experience and the level of formal training and professional development we have undergone as educators. However, this experience taught us how important it is to be open to learning and exploring new things, meaning that while we as teachers may have become comfortable with the content we taught semester after semester, this course challenged us to think about our own practices and how we can do better by teaching students to be part of the ever-expanding world described by the New London Group (1996) twenty years ago. What does it do for student confidence if students

are given the chance to present their stories digitally rather than leave them struggling for their voice while writing a traditional narrative? What does it mean to decenter one's classroom and establish a democratic classroom? Lastly, how can it benefit teachers and students to think about the assumptions they make about "academic" sources and the lessons we create from those limited perspectives; rather, we all must consider them with an eye toward equity and social justice.

Admittedly, we have chosen a conventional way of disseminating our ideas by writing about our experiences in a traditional format through a research article in a peer-reviewed journal. However, we aim to reach such traditional audiences as we belong to that group as well and feel our experiences

were enlightening. Newer academic journals such as *Kairos* do innovative work in digital publishing, but publishing in venues like this require webtexts, or forms of publishing that are specifically for the web that require skills like hypertexts that none of us have. Even we, as a more "elite" group of academics, are not privy to all knowledge funds.

We believe that all educators should remain in the student role in order to consider the ways the world is changing and how the needs of future students will change. Preservice teachers, advisors and supervisors should promote this self-reflective process as they can promote growth in students and their approach their teaching. For us, multiliteracies was a spark that ignited new ideas for fresher practice, facilitating a deep change within us as students, teachers, and emergent scholars.

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