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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Keli Woodard Weed entitled “Pedagogy for Millennials: Using New Literacies and New Media to Teach Old Texts.” I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

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PEDAGOGY FOR MILLENNIALS:  
USING NEW LITERACIES AND NEW MEDIA TO TEACH OLD TEXTS

A thesis presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Keli Woodard Weed  
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### *Dedication*

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Ryan Weed, whose passion, support, and sense of humor makes all of life enjoyable, and to our son, Beckham Davis, who made me the title I am most proud of – M.A.M.A. I would also like to thank my extended family and friends for their unwavering support, and my students, whose talents transcend standardized tests and make me want to be a better teacher.

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## *Abstract*

When teaching the rhetorical situation, English teachers often emphasize the importance of “knowing one’s audience.” As we move into a new century, it is important that these teachers consider their own advice. This project aims a critical lens at millennials – those tech-savvy, multi-tasking students who were born after 1994 – and aims to equip teachers with the skills, tools, and confidence needed to step out of the routine of skill-and-drill pedagogy in the language arts classroom and into the interactive, multi-modal world of 21st-century education. The project begins with an analysis of demographic information on millennial students that is relevant to instruction, and then moves toward practical strategies for engaging millennials in critical thinking about multi-modal texts. Rather than pushing to replace canonical texts with pop fiction, this project advocates for continued study of classics in the classroom by implementing new media into English curricula. Using Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as a model text, this study provides classroom-ready instructional strategies for using film, music, weblogs, cell phones, social networking sites, video games, and other media to engage students and bring new life to tired lesson plans. Relying on scholarship in new literacies and real-life examples, the study shows how adopting elements of youth culture in the classroom can create a bridge over apathetic waters, engaging students in fresh discussion of curriculum staples such as characterization, tone, and diction, while preparing them to use the tools of the Digital Age. The project serves as a call to action for teachers within the English discipline to research and implement new literacies and new media texts into their classrooms.

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## Introduction

Somewhere in America right now, teachers are talking. Huddled over cafeteria trays in faculty lounges, teachers are talking. Whispering under their breath during faculty meetings, teachers are talking. Wringing their hands in parent-teacher conferences, teachers are talking. They talk with their arms folded protectively across their chests, or with eyebrows raised as they simultaneously scan the halls between class breaks, or with shoulders slumped under the weight of another hard day doing a hard job. What are they talking about, all of these teachers? They are talking about their students, of course, and although their concerns and complaints are as varied as the zip codes they speak them in, one question echoes again and again amidst the cacophony of their voices: *How do I get through to them?* By “them,” of course, they mean those distanced, distracted students, and the intensity of challenge presented by said students is in direct correlation with the perceptible frustration, anger, or desperation that accompanies the question.

For many teachers, sadly, this question has become rhetorical. Not intended to elicit a meaningful response, but to solicit pity, camaraderie, or both. What is sought is commiseration, not collaboration. *Teaching is a Sisyphean task*, someone will posit. *They’re being entertained to death – how am I supposed to compete with that?* *We’re glorified babysitters*, one contends. Someone else will deliver the canned “*kids these days*” speech, which will be met with much nodding of approval and an occasional “*mm-hmmph*” to signify that the speaker has put his or her finger on the pulse of the problem. One tenderhearted soul might speak up to direct attention to the horrible home conditions of some of the students, but this will spark only a short detour into parent slandering before the teachers slide comfortably back into verbal battery of the real

enemy: the millennial student.

Of course, the cynical picture I paint of teachers is not absolute. For every “somewhere” where teachers are throwing up their hands in frustration, there is an “elsewhere” where students are raising their hands to contribute to insightful and engaging discussions, where rapt attention is the rule and not the exception. Places where both teachers and students are motivated to succeed at that centuries-old goal: organic learning that stems from genuine interest in and engagement with the subject matter. Unfortunately, I don’t teach in “elsewhere.” My own misanthropic tone in the previous paragraph was steeped in years of teaching at a small high school in a low-income school district where student apathy and parental abscondence were the rule, and administrators often kept such rules enforced.

As a teacher who was new to the profession, positioned on the edge of the generational dividing line with millennials, I remember silently condemning those colleagues whose conversations about students seemed so adversarial. Yet, after just a few years alongside them in the trenches, I understood their ambivalence. Teaching was tough, much tougher than I had thought it would be. A typical day would find me plodding into the school to the sound of those Pavlovian bells, balancing a stack of graded essays that had kept me awake until 1:00 a.m. and a mug of coffee that might keep me awake until lunch. In my mailbox, I’d find a “friendly memo” from the administration, reminding me of the importance of next month’s high-stakes test. On my desk, atop a stack of homework, the latest edition of a scholarly journal would boast that e-learning might someday render the bulk of teachers in the profession as useless. Bad news might continue in the local newspaper, where the economic downturn and a corresponding decline in tax revenue are likely to lead to significant education budget cuts. I would then be greeted by

my students, who talked excitedly over the new gossip of the day, only to turn lifeless as the lesson started. As class began, I'd hear the steady monotone of today's hour-long lecture from the teacher across the hall. This was not the way I had envisioned it. I was a teacher. Had no one here seen *Dead Poets Society*? *Stand and Deliver*? The students were supposed to be reluctant at first; then quickly be won over by me so that I could change their lives forever using nothing but my infinite supply of passion for molding young minds and a broken piece of chalk. These kids clearly didn't get it. Looking back, I see that I didn't either.

What hindsight has provided, however, is a clear indication that what I longed for in those early days of flops and failures was the same thing that I hope to achieve today each time I stand before a classroom of students. If you had asked me then what my goals were, I might have given lip service about meeting benchmarks and state standards. I might have even revealed a heartfelt desire to use my curriculum of reading and writing as a tool for helping students to become more self-aware, with greater confidence to speak their truths and become active in their communities. There is nothing inherently wrong with any of these goals. The first set demonstrates a practical need to perform well according to standards imposed by a governing authority, which, given the (albeit controversial) move toward teacher accountability through testing, is crucial to maintaining one's teaching position. The latter goals are more romantic, but are also important, for they outline why many of us went into the profession in the first place: a belief that education in general and literacy and composition skills in particular can empower students and change the course of their lives.

What I did not realize then is that these goals, however noble, are contingent upon a primary objective that is often overlooked. A pedagogical tool so powerful that, without it, the

most up-to-date textbooks, the best-laid lesson plans, and the most expensive technological resources are rendered useless. A tool that is deceptively simple, yet when educators (even those heralded within their disciplines) lose sight of it, their words fall on fallow ground. The tool that I longed for then—one that I still actively strive to wield well each day that I continue to teach—is student engagement. Put simply: nearly 100 percent of what I do in the classroom is aimed, either directly or indirectly, at engaging students. From the new media ideas shared here to the comments I scribble in the margins of their essays, I have come to realize that their learning potential depends heavily on my ability to meet them where they are and engage them in critical thinking. If I fail to do this (as I did so often in those early days), then they will fail to learn. While engaging students does not guarantee success, failing to engage students guarantees failure. The teachers in *Dead Poets Society* and *Stand and Deliver* understood this. Unfortunately, it took me longer than a couple of hours to rewrite my pedagogical script.

In a work aimed at helping teachers implement new media in the class curriculum, it is perhaps fitting that the epiphany that launched this project was powered by Google. My Damascus road experience took place on the information highway, on the familiar stomping ground of the most widely-used search engine on the web. I had been using Google Mail on my personal computer for many months, and I had also been performing Google searches on a classroom computer trying to find cheap used copies of Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*, a novel I was teaching during the Civil War period in my American Literature class. Though I am sure that the ad space on the margins of the screen had always been filled, on this particular day, a couple of the ads caught my attention. The ads offered wilderness adventures and quiet getaways in the mountains of North Carolina. Did I want to hike on Mt. Pisgah? Would I be

interested in purchasing hiking gear or a time share? I wasn't interested in any of these goods or services, but I was interested (and, admittedly, a bit paranoid) at how these advertisers were able to tap into my web surfing history.

A quick search gave me the answer: as part of its AdSense program, Google offers targeted, interest-based advertising by using a number in the computer's browser (known as a "cookie") to track your interests online. After recording previous site visits and page views, Google will link "categories of interest" such as gardening or sports to your browser, allowing advertisers to display ads targeted toward your interests (Kolakowski). While on a personal level, this intrusion into my privacy gave me pause, the idea surprisingly sparked a new insight for me on a professional level. As a teacher, I had often used critical thinking about advertising techniques as a way to introduce a unit on persuasive writing. Borrowing bits of ad messages from their real-life media consumption, I wanted to teach students to think critically about how advertisers won over a given audience by appealing to its preferences, values, and desires.

Never before, though, had I considered my students as if *I* were the marketer. A marketer with more benevolent goals than consumerism, mind you, but a marketer nonetheless. After all, whether it fit my preferred view of the profession or not, wasn't it true that my message of comma splice correction and poetic explication was essentially in competition with the thousands of other messages being shoved at them? Advertisers and corporate entities like Google were using innovative tools to discover what might captivate the attention of my students; wasn't that my goal as well? If, as the success of AdSense seemed to signify, good advertising was targeted toward the interests and preferences of the consumer, what might that mean for good teaching?

This message wasn't new. I'd heard it before. I had seen it argued for effectively by

Carol Jago at the High School Matters session of NCTE in 2007. I had read her inspiring accounts of student success in *With Rigor for All: Teaching the Classics to Contemporary Students*. That same year, I attended a session hosted by Alan Sitomer, California's three-time Teacher of the Year, in which he told many stories of his own success using hip-hop music to teach poetry at an inner-city school. Good teaching was relevant teaching, they both argued. Achieving relevance meant adapting instruction toward a given audience – in my case, teenagers. Yet, while I had always understood relevant teaching to mean connecting the texts I was teaching to correlative issues in the lives my students led outside the classroom, I had somehow overlooked (or had viewed as irrelevant) the omnipresence of media in the world they lived in. I was creating connections based on what I thought would interest them, rather than sending tracking “cookies” into their real lives. While I struggled to make my message relevant, I had forgotten that the medium is the message. The tools I asked my students to use were not “bad,” in the same way that there is nothing inherently wrong with eight tracks or cassette tapes. Yet, much like these audio relics, the tools I was asking my students to use did not have the same appeal as those that reflected the contemporary advances in technology that my students were so impressed by. In short, Google knew my students better than I did. What's more, companies like Apple, Verizon, and MTV were having far greater success pushing their message of consumerism and consumption than I was having in my attempts to “sell” students on the merits of Shakespeare. Something had to give.

So I gave. Gave in, to be more precise. I made a commitment to myself and to my students to dive into the pool of new media resources, even though I knew going in that I'd be in over my head. While I was not a technophobe, I was by no means a media savant. I owned a

television but preferred spending my down time with a book. I owned a cellular phone but often kept it turned off – wary of becoming a slave to connectivity through constant chatting and text messaging. I was certainly comfortable with tools like email and web logs, yet still skeptical about the role these tools might play in a curriculum already heavily burdened with preparation for standardized tests. Essentially, I was caught in the middle. Just as my birth date landed me ambiguously between the dates prescribed for both the “Generation X” and “millennial” categories, my attitude about media usage teetered between my colleagues’ fear and my students’ obsession.

Like the young millennials who shuffle into their seats in my English classes each day, we of the old school millennial generation were radically different than our parents, nearly unrecognizable as a culture to our grandparents. We were children of the baby boomers, raised with high expectations about our potential. Most of my friends assumed that they would attend college; advanced degrees became the new “gold star,” a new take on the same trophies we had collected since childhood. We were more ethnically diverse than previous generations, and through the technology of television, we were well-traveled, at least in a virtual sense. Now, through the lens of my students, I see that the seeds of appreciation for diversity and cross-cultural experiences that were planted with my generation are increasing exponentially into the next. The expansive nature of technology has created a new, global youth culture, and the impact of this culture can be seen in student interactions both inside and outside of school. Tough homework assignment? Forget Mom and Dad – ask Google. No cash to buy tickets to see your favorite band perform? Catch it on YouTube. The teenage girls of today don’t have to reenact those long sessions my friends and I spent saddled to land lines using the hi-tech three-

way calling that was so popular in my day. They can be reached wherever they go through cell phones via text or instant messaging. While my generation learned about other cultures from watching them on television, today's teens have the option of interacting directly with people from all over the world on social networking sites. Not only do my students covet advanced degrees, but they want to pursue them in fields of study not yet invented when I was in high school.

The more I learn about these millennials, the more I realize that for every way that I can identify with their generation, there are equally as many ways in which they baffle me. To use a computer analogy, I am merely the Beta version of what they have become. The decade or so that exists between us is a chasm of cultural shifts. I may think that because I seem younger than their parents I understand their culture, but such thinking is flawed. Like the colleagues who insist they are old enough to be *my* parents, I must educate myself on how to be relevant to the millennial culture the old fashioned way: by studying them.

But what happens, you ask, if the study of millennial student culture leads us into places where we are uncomfortable? *I just don't get all this new technology stuff*, one colleague complains. *I'd look silly if I tried to use pop culture the way you do*, another contends. While I sympathize with fellow faculty members who feel apprehensive about treading into the new waters of technology and youth culture, I firmly believe that the shift toward new literacies and new media in English education has already begun. There is no turning back. The only remaining choice for reluctant teachers is how far behind the curve they wish to be dragged along. Thus, my aim with this project is to ease the transition into new media studies by showcasing simple ways in which even the most technophobic teachers can begin implementing

multiple literacies in the English classroom – often with minimal effort.

Furthermore, even in those situations where the effort seems taxing, I would urge teachers to consider the ways in which new literacies might not seem so new – the ways in which they help us achieve traditional goals. While stepping off the page of tried-and-true lesson plans might seem intimidating at first, beginning with the end in mind will provide comfort, for many of the goals are the same. As I tweaked my lesson plans to include new media, I noticed that many of the objectives for my courses remained constant. To illustrate, I have included some of these goals below. While each state specifies its own objectives for English curriculums, the following educational goals, taken from the handbook for the state of Tennessee, represent standard objectives:

- Utilize a variety of interactive reading strategies appropriate to text.
- Develop personal, imaginative, and analytical responses to literature.
- Analyze the effectiveness of literary devices (e.g., plot, characterization, setting, theme, point of view, tone, symbolism, irony) used in text.
- Demonstrate effective writing style by the use of appropriate voice, word choice, and tone.
- Recognize that language has several levels of diction determined by audience, purpose, and occasion. (“English IV: Grade 12”)

Working through the list, it is easy to see how using new media tools could enhance student achievement in these areas. The “interactive reading strategies” so often explained to students take on new meaning when they are packaged in the form of an interactive computer game, opening up a space for teachers to explain just what we mean by student agency and “talking

back” to a text. The concept of “personal responses to literature” rings hollow when we aren’t taking into account the plethora of media in the personal lives of students. How might our use of such media be useful in engaging real-world application of the themes we teach in classic texts? Traditional literary devices like plot, setting, and point of view are never clearer to students than when they are accessed through the visual medium of film, which offers students an opportunity for experiential learning rather than just lecture. Finally, the text message lingo that is so effective in raising the blood pressure of most of the English teachers I know takes on a new efficacy when used to discuss appropriate diction within discourse communities.

Looking over the state standards, I realized that the skills I was being asked to help foster within my students – skills such as rhetorical analysis, critical thinking, reading comprehension, and written expression – were not text-specific. At some point, it dawned on me as well that “demonstrates a passion and devotion for 16<sup>th</sup> Century drama” was not on the list of objectives. Neither was “weeps out loud in joyous rapture upon mastery of the five-paragraph essay.” My former expectation that, by offering just the right amount of arm flailing and entertaining reading aloud, I could convince my students to share my passion for literature was noble, but ultimately unproductive. Furthermore, at the end of the day, I wasn’t being held responsible for their opinion of literature; I was being held accountable for their ability to engage in the study of a text and make meaning from it. Comprehension. Analysis. Transfer. These were my goals. I decided from that point on to focus on the skills outlined in my objectives, and to help my students acquire those skills to the best of my ability – all without fretting over the tools I used to accomplish this.

Let me be clear about my objective here – it has never been my intention to kick classic

novels out of my classroom. Instead, I hope to divert attention away from the esteemed canonical (or controversially non-canonical) position of a given text and toward the skills (e.g. vocabulary, rhetorical comprehension, evaluation of literary elements, and synthesis with larger themes) necessary to make meaning from that same text. Day after day, I work to build and develop these skills within my students at whatever cost and through any means necessary. If my students can learn irony from the short stories of Guy de Maupassant – excellent. If I have to substitute with *Shrek 2* to lay a foundation before moving toward more classic short stories, I’m fine with that as well. Though this might make me unpopular with the long-winded lecturer across the hall, those criticisms do not resonate, for I am focused on using student engagement to construct essential skills first, enabling me to then transfer those skills to the canonical texts that will appear on more traditional syllabi and standardized tests. If teachers are to be successful teaching millennials, we must not be afraid to use the tools of their culture – even the tools of their popular culture—to engage them in the literate practices we desire for them.

For the teacher who values success more than maintaining the status quo, using new media and new literacies in the classroom simply makes sense. True, the bone-shattering beats of hip hop music might be tough to endure, but I will gladly take that any day over the oppressive silence that hangs above the classroom when the students have no angle from which to engage in today’s poetry study. True, students will not be asked to critically analyze social networking sites like Facebook on their next standardized test, but if posting inquiry-based instruction to a social networking page is what it takes to get my students to think critically, sign me up. What we as teachers must realize is that modern technology is not eradicating instructional objectives such as critical reading, analytical thinking, and clear composition skills;

indeed, in many ways it is justifying the need for them. At the end of the day, tailoring instruction to relevant pieces of youth culture represents a means to an end. That end is student engagement, and student engagement is where real learning begins.

My focus for this project is to equip teachers with the skills, tools, and confidence needed to step out of the routine of skill-and-drill pedagogy in the language arts classroom and into the interactive, multi-modal world of 21<sup>st</sup>-century education. To accomplish this, teachers must unpack the various new literacies that outline required skills for the next generation. In addition, we must examine new media—from text messages to social networking—and brainstorm ways to utilize these tools as a bridge over apathetic waters. The argument that these tools are mere “play toys” is being drowned out by contemporary scholarship (see Dede; Gee; Prensky) that suggests that mastery of such media will be essential if we want our students to succeed in the Information Age.

My decision to feature *Hamlet* as an illustration of my premise here was made with a nod toward a saying that my grandfather frequently cited. If your aim is to teach an old dog new tricks, he reasoned, you should begin with a bone that is familiar and tasty. Enter *Hamlet*, a text that is both beloved and seriously dog-eared by most of the English teachers I know. How many of us could launch into Prince Hamlet’s second soliloquy without pause? Even those who have never taught *Hamlet* in a classroom setting will undoubtedly be familiar with its major characters and themes. While I claim no superior expertise with the play, I have taught it several times, and it is perhaps because of that comfort level with the text that *Hamlet* became, for me, a curriculum guinea pig for implementing a new literacies study and new media approach to teaching literature. *Hamlet* is a text that is worthy of our students’ close study, one that is rich in

rhetorical art—from the complex study of familial ties, to the use of metadrama, to Shakespeare’s witty and multi-layered language. I teach *Hamlet* to my students because I want them to enter the Danish kingdom that Shakespeare creates, to navigate his language with enough mastery to marvel at his double entendres, to empathize with his intimate portrayal of young love, to appreciate how his stage directions would have been received by a Renaissance audience. Yet, while the text speaks to many teachers in many different ways, I maintain that the text of *Hamlet* is not my primary concern with this project. *Hamlet*, for my purposes, can be substituted—the critical pedagogy, however, cannot. I have chosen to keep a single text for offering practical examples in order to create a pedagogical equation wherein the objectives and the text are constant, while the approaches are variable.

Many of the approaches that I offer here came about as a result of studying both the burgeoning technological resources available to English teachers and youth-inspired aspects of popular culture. When I first began trying to utilize new media within my lesson plans, I became frustrated by the lack of “ready-made” resources available for teachers who wanted to engage in new literacies and use new media, without spending countless hours in additional preparation time. I found many research-based studies that argued for the use of new technology in the classroom; I found other great sources that brought me up to date on all of the latest trends in youth media. I found very little, however, that synthesized the two with concrete examples of what a classroom filled with new media and engaged in the study of new literacies might look like. I knew I wanted to engage my students, but I also knew that merely bringing in new gadgets (the old “add technology and stir” approach) wouldn’t be effective in fostering the critical literacy skills I desired of them. It is my hope that this project will fill in a portion of the

gap that exists between the theory-based texts found in scholarly journals and the practical world of the average language arts classroom.

This project, then, is not designed to elucidate the totality of research on new literacies, nor is it an exhaustive guide to teaching Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Instead, it is a conversation about the space where these two entities collide—a space where I spent many months in a cycle of planning, teaching, and soliciting student feedback—trying things, failing, and trying new things. Ultimately, the shift that I made toward implementing new media and focusing on new literacies has been one of the most rewarding experiences (for both myself, and—I hope—my students) of my teaching career. More than anything, this work serves to chronicle my journey as a new media convert trial-and-erroring my way through new curriculum. It has been compiled with high school English teachers in mind, although the strategies discussed would be viable across varied grade levels and disciplines.

Because any pedagogical approach should be rooted in research, Chapter One provides information about the current research on new literacies in the classroom. I will begin with an in-depth look at the culture of the millennial generation, highlighting trends of media usage among today's teenagers, with special emphasis on the digital tools that might serve as pathways into more meaningful instructional time. This section will maintain a general focus, examining the need for new approaches to teaching literacy.

The remaining chapters will speak to the need for new tools with which to achieve the instructional objectives (e.g. reading comprehension, rhetorical analysis, composition skills) that are standard among English classes. Using Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a guinea pig, I will take a put-to-immediate-use pedagogical approach to my explanation of contemporary forms of media.

Rather than follow divisions of the play into acts, I have chosen to group ideas into three categories that represent both familiar (e.g. film and music) and new (e.g. social networks, blogs, and wikis) media. The first two categories, *Music and Film*, are not “new” in the sense of our awareness of them, but I argue for a new approach to their use in the classroom. The third category examines how English teachers might find what I refer to as a new *G.I.G.* (using *Gadgets, Internet, and Games*), implementing the Web 2.0 tools and recreational technology into their lesson plans. Within each of these categories, I discuss multiple ways in which these forms of new (and not so new) media can be utilized in a curriculum on *Hamlet*. Lessons are designed to accommodate those who want to test the waters (with minimally time-intensive prompts) as well as those who wish to teach the entire play through media exploration. At the end of the work, I have attached appendices to aid with class preparation and to help fuel further research on specific areas of literacy instruction. It is my sincere hope that these resources will provide teachers, both new and experienced within the profession, to explore the possibilities for implementing critical literacy through new media in their classrooms.

## *Chapter One – Multiple Literacies and the Millennial Student*

On November 2, 1946, the *Saturday Evening Post* featured cover art by renowned artist Norman Rockwell. The sketch, entitled “Norman Rockwell Visits a Country School,” depicts the vision that Rockwell saw when he witnessed a classroom reading lesson in progress. In the foreground of the picture, a pot-bellied stove is featured, a central image that reminds us of a time before the electric thermostat. The schoolchildren are huddled near the stove, surrounding the teacher as she reads aloud. A couple of students crouch on the floor in front of her, eyes fixed on her face. Several students peer over her shoulder at the pages of the book she is holding. One girl, dressed in red and positioned on the far right, away from the others, ignores her teacher and classmates and reads her own book. A window on the back wall frames picturesque rolling hills. There are a few papers scattered on the floor, for good measure. The scene reflects a quiet, reflective moment in an ordinary American classroom.

I stumbled upon this image while flipping through a Norman Rockwell calendar that was given to me as a Christmas gift by my husband’s elderly grandmother. Not quite sure how to best feign my enthrallment at this little piece of Americana, I seized upon the classroom image as an artful way to change the subject. And boy did I. Ryan’s grandmother, a 30-year veteran in the English classroom, launched into a lengthy sermon on the state of English education (or lack thereof) that ended with a dramatic sigh, a shrug of the shoulders, and a “My, my, how things have changed!” Prior experiences with Grandma made me certain that my opinion on the subject was unnecessary (not to mention the fact that my fear of making grammatical errors in her presence keeps me uncharacteristically silent most of the time). Yet, later on, as I tossed the calendar into the “what do we do with these gifts?” pile, I found myself examining the image

again. Grandma was right. My my, things *have* changed. I can scarcely imagine what she, or any of her WWII-era colleagues would think if she stepped into my modern-day classroom. Like the protagonist in H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, I am convinced she would find the setting incompatible with her notions of reality. The world in which Grandma taught—only a few decades ago—was closer to Rockwell than to my classroom.

Rockwell's vision, while quaint and nostalgic, has, for the most part, gone the way of the dinosaurs and the 8-track. The task of performing an *Extreme Makeover: Twenty-first Century Education Edition* on the classroom in the painting would require lots of heavy lifting. The fixed benches that the students recline on would be replaced by streamlined desks, or better yet, small media stations wired with high-speed internet. Rather than holding a book on her lap, the teacher might guide students through a hypertext narrative using a projection on a new “smart” screen. There would be no need for papers scattered on the floor, as assignments would be submitted via email or posted to the class webpage. The girl on the right might still be ignoring her classmates, but she would need a pair of mp3 player ear buds tucked beneath her blonde hair, perhaps a clandestine cell phone with which to text the details of her boredom to a friend in the class across the hall. Welcome to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Mr. Rockwell.

The move from Norman Rockwell's country school vision to the cacophony of media in many modern classrooms represents a paradigm shift in American education. Though some traditionalist educators have tried barring the doors against it, the technology and media domination of mainstream culture slid through cracks, bubbled up through pipes, and hitchhiked into our classrooms on a viable host: the millennial student. To the Rockwells and Grandmas of decades past, the millennial student may merely be fodder for discussion of the good ol' days,

but high school teachers who wish to successfully engage students in the contemporary classroom must work to get acquainted with a strange new breed of student.

### *Introducing Student 2.0: Millennials in the Classroom*

*Watch now as the animal withdraws into its natural habitat. In the faint glow of the laptop, we see the creature perform its dance of multitasking. Note the calluses on the opposable thumbs from persistent text messaging. Listen closely, for unlike its evolutionary predecessors, this animal communicates most frequently through clicks and beeps. Observe the eyes, capable of processing multiple messages simultaneously, as they dart between browser tabs, a history term paper, and instant messaging. While many species have hearing that is pricked by the slightest noise, the animal's intake of perpetual music via mp3 player allows us to get right up close...*

The above description aims a photojournalist's lens at the modern-day student, striking an observant posture that would prove useful to those who teach these strange millennial creatures. Though the comparison of millennial student to safari exhibit might carry a tinge of hyperbole, the differences between millennials and their predecessors should not be underestimated. If we truly desire to meet our students where they are, we must first figure out where that is. This requires a close look into the world of the millennial student. Before launching into necessary shifts in pedagogical approaches, let us begin by examining where millennials fit in the big picture of twenty-first century education.

The chronological position of millennials (and corresponding historical events) is easy enough to chart, as evidenced in Table One. However, merely placing millennials on a timeline of events and giving them a cool nickname proves insufficient for unpacking how shared

**Table 1: The Generational Divide**

| Generation | Current Age | Entering Childhood           | Entering Adulthood           | Young |
|------------|-------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|-------|
|            |             |                              |                              |       |
| Lost       | 100 & Over  | Third Great Awakening        | World War I & Prohibition    |       |
| G.I.       | 76 to 99    | World War I & Prohibition    | New Deal & World War II      |       |
| Silent     | 58 to 75    | New Deal & World War II      | American High                |       |
| Boom       | 40 to 57    | American High                | Consciousness Revolution     |       |
| X          | 19 to 39    | Consciousness Revolution     | Culture Wars & Roaring '90's |       |
| Millennial | 0 to 18     | Culture Wars & Roaring '90's |                              |       |

(Source: Howe and Strauss 51)

traits might affect learning styles. In order to fully understand what is meant by the term, one must turn a critical lens toward the life of a millennial in his/her natural habitat—both inside and outside of school. These teens earned the nickname “Generation M” (“M” in this case referring to media) for good reason. Though many would view the nickname as pejorative, the prevalence of media provides an opportunity to develop critical skills in our students. Too often teachers dismiss youth media choices as mere noise, incapable of conveying any worthwhile messages. This is exactly the type of behavior that leads to the frustrated cries of “*How do I get through to them?*” Rather than lamenting the time and attention that our students spend “plugged in,” teachers would do well to instead focus on ways to route some of that connective energy toward our curriculum. While I sympathize with those who feel insecure about engaging with new media, or feel overwhelmed at the lack of resources and professional development in this area, the fact remains that engaging new media study in the classroom is often as beneficial for teachers (through student engagement and self-motivated study) as it is for students.

I will begin this chapter’s close-up of millennial students with a couple of clarifications. First, I recognize that grouping an entire generation by perceived similarities is, at best,

simplistic, and, at worst, deterministic. Yet, research reveals compelling distinctions between millennials and previous generations, across a wide span of diverse participants. However, no two teachers are alike, and yet professional development conferences seek to appeal to the needs and preferences of teachers. I simply ask that we apply the same methods for our students.

Secondly, any discussion of youth culture and media usage must take into account the problem of the digital divide, which prevents those without access to computers and the Internet from participating in the global community of information and connectivity found online. Though many of the problems addressed here are aimed at building generational bridges to new technologies, I am both aware of and concerned about the implications that similar bridges will be needed to reach those living in poverty or in rural areas beyond the range of internet connection. As technological advances increase exponentially, “it is feared that a digital divide will create a deep social and economic inequality, in which those who are not digitally literate will be seriously disadvantaged” (Lankshear & Knobel 21). As educators, we must give voice to these concerns and advocate for digital literacy throughout the entire student population. Yet, in order to be effective advocates for our students, we must recognize a need for and give attention to our collective requirement for digital literacy as educators within the profession. It is to this end that I will labor to highlight points at which we might work to intersect with the majority of youth who lead digital lives outside of school. Even if the tools of new media do not yet reach every child, even if students’ interest in and usage of media do not always precisely follow textbook statistics, the data we have suggest that the best course is to move forward, engaging the students who currently fill our seats with the best resources currently available to us. We do this in hopes that as more teachers begin to see the advantages to using new literacies and new

media in the classroom, the success of students, seen through engaged and critical practices in the classroom, will spread the seeds of change in our curriculums.

Secondly, when I began to research the learning behaviors of present-day students, I was troubled that the terms “millennial” and “neomillennial” seemed to be used, in the most current research, interchangeably. There seemed to be confusion as to the shelf-life of the term “millennial.” As such, researchers like Chris Dede, the Timothy E. Wirth Professor of Learning Technologies at Harvard's Graduate School of Education, now seek to refine the wide range in age of millennials by using the term “neomillennial” for those born after 1994. These students, Dede asserts, came of age in a digital era marked not only by a world-to-the-desktop interface, but by a “growing prevalence of interfaces to virtual environments and augmented realities. Immersion in virtual environments and augmented realities shapes participants’ learning styles beyond what using sophisticated computers and telecommunications has fostered thus far” (“Planning”). While I recognize that this distinction merits redefinition, my reasons for continuing with the “millennial” moniker are twofold: first, research on neo-millennials is still in its early stages, making it difficult to calculate conclusive deductions and causing some variation among scholarly opinions. Secondly, if Dede’s dating is definitive, most of the neo-millennial students are just entering into high school this year, and would not have been properly grouped with the students whose experiences fuel my anecdotes. Thus, for the sake of my purposes here, I will continue to speak about millennial students.

In their extensive study of millennials, collected in *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, Howe and Strauss identify seven characteristics of millennials that offer insights into common psychological and behavioral traits of this generation. According to their research,

millennials are special, sheltered, confident, pressured, achieving, team-oriented, and conventional (43-44).

The first characteristic, “special,” is meant to signify the attitude of Boomer and Gen Xer parents, many of whom delayed having children until they were financially secure and children were “wanted.” These same parents are the reason millennials are “sheltered,” having grown up underneath overprotective parents who posted “Baby on Board” signs and witnessed the passing of various pieces of legislation on issues such as child automobile restraints, movie and television ratings, and home product safety standards. In the United States, “millennials grew up in a time of largely uninterrupted economic prosperity; they’re perhaps the most protected generation in history, in terms of government and safety regulations, and they’re used to being indulged and consulted on family decisions” (McGlynn 14).

This was also the age when pop psychology shined its light on issues of self-esteem, and millennials fostered “confidence” as a result of their parents’ strong belief in their potential. Along with that confidence, millennials feel “pressured” to attend college, excel in their studies, and choose high-paying careers. It would seem, across the board, that this potential has largely been realized, as the “achieving” millennials are thought by some to be the smartest generation, showing rising proficiencies in math, science, and standardized tests (Taylor & MacNeil). Millennials are “team-oriented;” they are comfortable working in groups and establish tight peer bonds. In contrast to Gen Xers, millennials are more likely to identify with their parents’ values, accepting authority and following rules. When they do dissent, it is mostly passive—offering a dismissive “whatever” instead of an impassioned protest.

### *The Millennial in the Classroom: Pedagogical Implications*

Our millennial students do not simply check their generational nature at the classroom door. We can develop and enforce school rules to keep them “unplugged,” but we cannot undo the effects of their digital lives in the world outside of our classrooms. Table Two gives insight into just how “wired” our students are. While much of this media usage takes place outside the classroom walls, research compiled by Howe and Strauss as well as Richard Sweeney asserts that there are several ways in which millennial behaviors will affect their performance in class. Though my students were not the subject of their research, I can attest (as I’m sure many teachers can) that many of the findings they report are proven day after day in my classroom. First, given their penchant for mixing media simultaneously, millennials are experts at multitasking. *Sorry, little Johnny, but I would ask that you refrain from listening to your mp3 player, playing an online video game, and instant messaging with your neighbor while we are taking our final exams.* Raised on high-speed technology, they are impatient and have high expectations for media. *No, little Suzy, scanning the SparkNotes is not the same as reading the whole book.* Researcher Richard Sweeney of the New Jersey Institute of Technology explains that since millennials “have grown up with a huge array of choices ... they believe that such abundance is their birthright” (par. 8). As such, he says that “millennials expect significantly increased learning options and far more educational services” (par. 8). They learn best by trial and error, and expect immediate and frequent feedback. *Hey Mrs. Weed! Do you have our papers graded?* [5-minute time lapse] *How about now?* These effects are often attributed to the structure of video games. Of particular import to language arts teachers is Sweeney’s conclusion that millennials do not read literature or newspapers as much as previous generations of the same

**Table 2: Wired Habits of Teens**

| ACTIVITY                                 | % OF TEENS WHO PARTICIPATE |
|------------------------------------------|----------------------------|
|                                          |                            |
| Own a Desktop or Laptop                  | 60                         |
| Use Email                                | 87                         |
| Play Video or Computer Games             | 97                         |
| Own a Cell Phone                         | >75                        |
| Use the Internet                         | 93                         |
| Use Instant Messaging                    | 68                         |
| Have Their Own PDAs or Blackberries      | 20                         |
| Read Blogs                               | 54                         |
| Keep Blogs and Regularly Post            | 30                         |
| Find New Music Through Illegal Downloads | 35                         |
| Have DVRs in the House                   | 40-50                      |
| Use Wikipedia                            | 55                         |
| Own an MP3 player                        | 74                         |
| Use Online Social Network Sites          | >70                        |
| Own Digital Cameras                      | 60-70                      |
| Post Photos Online                       | 50-60                      |
| Own Video Cameras                        | 40                         |
| Upload Videos Online                     | 25                         |
| View Videos on Video-Sharing Sites       | 75                         |

(Source: Rainie)

age. “Certainly this is caused in part by the increase in the competition from entertainment and educational options. A millennial will be playing a game more often than reading a book” (par. 21). The challenge for those in academe, he says, will be stay ahead of the curve, bringing diverse forms of academic texts to them by working to “integrate ‘reading and writing opportunities’ to a greater extent across the curriculum” (par. 23). We can lament the shift away from traditional modes of literacy all that we want, but as the gaze of the millennial student shifts, we must seek out ways to persevere in teaching the skills they need with multiple (and varied) opportunities for them to demonstrate critical literacy.

While many teachers worry that accommodating millennial learning styles will require significant sacrifice—spending time, money, and effort on technology classes and expensive equipment—the most pivotal move by teachers toward reaching millennials is a simple change of mindset. Thoman and Jolls explain it this way:

For centuries, schooling has been designed to make sure students learned facts about the world—which they proved they knew by correctly answering questions on tests. But such a system is no longer relevant when the most up-to-date facts are available at the touch of a button. What students need today is to learn how to find what they need to know when they need to know it, from the best sources available—and to have the higher order thinking skills to analyze and evaluate whether the information they find is useful for what they want to know. (5-6)

Never has this been clearer to me than in a recent lab session with a ninth-grade Composition class. A colleague of mine (her official title is media literacy specialist, but in our district that equates to “that lady you call when your computer isn’t working”) was giving a demonstration

on evaluating Internet sources. The media specialist (we'll say her name is Mrs. Barnes) was walking the students through an analysis of example web sites that she had bookmarked, pointing out specific features of scholarly sites that proved their credibility. As she began discussing the significance of a copyright at the bottom of a particular website, she stated that although copyrights were not a foolproof sign, most people would not go to the trouble of purchasing a copyright unless their interests were legitimate. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a student (we'll call him Justin) in the back pulling up a new tab. I couldn't see what was on his screen, but it became apparent less than a minute later when Justin raised his hand to speak. When asked if he had a question, Justin instead offered a correction to the media specialist's explanation of copyright, explaining how one of the phrases she had used was actually an issue of trademark, not copyright. Mrs. Barnes was somewhat taken aback, and, admittedly, I waffled on whether or not to interject myself into the conversation. In the end, I stayed out of it and Mrs. Barnes quickly recovered, but the story resurfaced in my mind as I read the Center for Media Literacy's assertion that what students need to learn most from their teachers is "how to find what they need to know" (Thoman and Jolls 5-6). In a time where the internet is "out-sage-ing" the "sage on the stage," we simply cannot expect to be the sole (or even the primary) source of information to our students. While it is certain that there still will be times when the information we know about a subject is superior to their understanding of it, the speed at which most internet-savvy students can level the playing field (speaking strictly about access to information) is impressive now and will only become more so in the future. Thus, the role of teacher shifts from "sole dispenser of wisdom" to "instigator of inquiry and guide through investigative critical practices."

This shift is radical to some, in that it seems to undermine our traditional, hierarchical model for learning, privileging student agency over a teacher's authority. I can imagine classrooms in which teachers would be highly uncomfortable with having students "talk back," especially when refuting a claim made by an authority figure. While I recognize the need for each teacher to chart his or her own course with regards to appropriate forms of student-led inquiry, I would encourage teachers to view incidents like the one described through the lens of millennial culture, noting ways in which life in the Information Age has caused a fundamental change in the role of educator.

For others, this shift will seem less radical, as student-centered classroom management is nothing new. Though the proliferation of information on the Internet in our wired classrooms provides a new catalyst toward student-centered learning, scholarship concerning de-centered authority in the classroom can be traced back to the Constructivist approaches of theorists like John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and Carl Rogers. Though these individual theorists (and the modern scholars who follow their teachings) might not agree on a single systemic approach to education, a unifying thread in their scholarship is the belief that a system of education should recognize the agency of the student to be a participant in his/her own education, not to be merely acted upon by dispensers of knowledge. Nearly a century ago, in his landmark work, *Democracy and Education*, Dewey explained it this way:

To suppose that students, whether in the primary school or in the university, can be supplied with models of method to be followed in acquiring and expounding a subject is to fall into a self-deception that has lamentable consequences ... One must make his own reaction in any case. Indications of the standardized or general methods used in like

cases by others—particularly those who are already experts—are of worth or of harm according as they make his personal reaction more intelligent or as they induce a person to dispense with exercise of his own judgment. (102)

Inserting Dewey's logic into the shift toward the uncharted waters of new literacies that I advocate here accomplishes two things: first, it frees teachers who worry that, like Mrs. Barnes, they will be caught without all the answers by noting that the presence of "those who are already experts" can be intrusive or even stifling to the learning process. Secondly, Dewey's words serve as a reminder of our ultimate goal—to "induce [our students] to dispense with exercise of [their] own judgment." While we aspire to be knowledgeable within our disciplines, we must recognize that our students need us to intrigue them with inquiry-based instruction, stimulate their discovery of new information through available technologies, and direct their exploration toward critical questions far more than they need us to lecture them from our finite stock of knowledge. Positioning ourselves as "guide on the side" rather than "sage on the stage" puts students in a position of greater freedom, but also raises the bar in terms of the critical thinking required of them. Successful teachers of millennial students must, therefore, be clear about learning objectives and student expectations, and must be ready to guide students as they navigate their own learning experiences.

To determine what this "guiding" might look like, we should consider what research tells us about the learning styles of millennial students. Dieterle, Dede, and Shrier, drawing from research on millennials' use of wireless handheld computing devices (WHDs) and multi-user virtual environments (MUVes), define the learning styles of millennial students by three criteria:

- Fluency in multiple media, valuing each for the types of communication,

activities, experiences, and expressions it empowers.

- Learning based on collectively seeking, sieving, and synthesizing experiences rather than individually locating and absorbing information from a single best source.
- Active learning based on both real and simulated experiences that includes frequent opportunities for reflection. (Dede “Planning”)

Confronted with this list, I thought of the many times I had violated the terms on it: requiring that assignments be completed in a single (text-based) media, enforcing the “do your own work” policy, and failing to provide frequent opportunities for students to reflect upon and revise their work. Though I had read and agreed with much of the scholarship on student-focused learning by scholars like Dewey, my own limited knowledge of new media made me hesitant about surrendering authority in an area where I perceived my authority to be diminished. In many ways, I realized that I needed “frequent opportunities for reflection” myself, and as I began to study my students’ responses to assignments involving new media, the level of engagement (perhaps most evident in the severe reduction of whining and complaining about their workload) and degree of critical thinking (confirmed by the huge stack of “save as future example” projects in the corner of my classroom) that I witnessed as I sought to include new literacies and new media made me a believer in student-centered pedagogy in a way that I had not anticipated. In a sense, taking a chance with my students resulted in *them*

teaching *me* how to be a better teacher. Many of the multi-modal lesson plans and strategies that I describe in later chapters are a result of the insights gained as I reflected with a critical posture toward my own pedagogy.

### *New Millennials, New Literacies*

Serious shifts in pedagogy should not occur without great cause, and while my individual experience might not suffice as infallible proof, research that predicts which skills will be necessary in our students' future echo the need for new media and a new definition of literacy. As we face up to the demands of the Information Age, our very understanding of literacy—a tool historically used as a measuring stick for educational status—has been reconsidered, leaving some, such as writer and futurist Alvin Toffler to argue that the “illiterate of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn” (Center for Media Literacy 7). The learning discussed here transcends the traditional textbook, as researchers and theorists seek to expand the definition of “text” to mean any message (whether verbal, aural, or visual) that is used to communicate between human beings (Center for Media Literacy 9). While this work is aimed at providing practical approaches to pedagogy, any successful pedagogy needs a solid foundation of research. As such, I will present a brief explanation of the research related to these new literacies, research which has caused me to pose questions, to seek new solutions, and ultimately, to change strategies in order to meet the needs of my millennial students. I want to be clear, however, that the summaries of multimodal literacies that follow are not intended to be exhaustive, for my purpose with this project is to examine each of these new literacies as a means of achieving greater engagement and participation in critical thinking exercises through the use of media and forms of literacy that were “new” to both my students and myself.

### *The Eyes Have It: Visual Literacy and Millennial Culture*

In August of 1981, MTV launched its network with its first music video, ironically titled “Video Killed the Radio Star.” In addition to putting British pop group, The Buggles, on the map, the prophetic song helped usher in a new era which melded music with image. While radio was not, in fact, “killed,” MTV’s popularity continues today. Indeed, millennials have never known a time when music existed sans video. Today, much of the entertainment teens enjoy – from music, to television and movies, to the Internet, to video games – centers on visual images. Even cell phones are now equipped with cameras, and images can be stored so that an image of a contact from a user’s phonebook will appear when he or she calls. The daily life of the millennial is a feast for the eyes, and it is important that they have the skills to read and interpret visual messages.

In order to develop a critical method for dissecting these reading experiences, we must first define visual literacy. According to scholar Cynthia L. Selfe, visual literacy is defined as “the ability to read, understand, value, and learn from visual materials (still photographs, videos, films, animations, still images, pictures, drawings, graphics)—especially as these are combined to create a text—as well as the ability to create, combine, and use visual elements (e.g. colors, forms, lines, images) and messages for the purposes of communicating” (Wysocki 69). Though defining visual literacy by its relation to print texts is problematic for some scholars, those who are less familiar with visual literacy might think of the rhetorical tools employed by visual composers (color, form, line, image, spatial positioning) as a parallel for the rhetorical tools (e.g. tone, diction, literary elements) used in print texts, especially in relation to how specific elements blend with others to create complex messages. Many even argue that visual rhetoric carries its own grammar:

It could therefore be argued that manipulating these elements is parallel to manipulating words in order to compose a desired message, and that the competencies required for composing and interpreting messages using images efficiently and effectively ... are vital to effective visual communication and are the basis of visual literacy. (Sims, et al.).

While my students cringe any time the word grammar is mentioned, I found it useful to approach our study of the visual through parallels to critical analysis of print texts, which students were more familiar with.

With regards to the complexity of visual images, a word of caution: given the ways in which print texts have heretofore been privileged, we must be careful not to diminish the intricacy of visual messages. Though much of traditional schooling posits visual literacy as “child’s play” (i.e. picture books used as the training wheels to “real” literacy), we should examine our pedagogical approach to the visual with an eye toward biases in favor of print texts. Indeed, as Gunther Kress informs us, those who view the interest in visual texts as a temporary trend need a history lesson:

Communication has always been multi-semiotic. What is happening at the moment is not in itself new; and yet it is a significant change. The cultural and political dominance of writing over the last few centuries had led to an unquestionable acceptance of that as being the case; it made the always-existing facts of multi-modality invisible. The recent powerful re-emergence of the visual has, then, to be understood in that context: not as new in itself, but as new in the light of the recent history of representation, and of a nearly unshakeable commonsense which had developed around that. (70)

If we are to fully prepare our students to enter into a world where the semiotics of word and

image exist simultaneously, we must approach visual images with the same critical posture that we afford print texts. While use of the visual is an excellent way to engage students, choosing rich visual images as primary texts can provide an experience just as challenging as more traditional print texts, with the added bonus of helping students learn dialogue for dissecting visual images. Arguing that visual images employ their own language, Suzanne Stokes argues that there is “a need to know how to communicate using this language, which includes being alert to visual messages and critically reading or viewing images as the language of the messages” (par. 5). We must work to ensure that our millennial students are given opportunities to critically approach the host of visual images that they interact with in their daily lives. Rather than push traditional literacy objectives out of our curriculum, our goal must be to reorganize our priorities to make room for new literacies. As we engage students in “reading” visual texts, we will undoubtedly be surprised by the complexities of visual rhetoric.

### *Digital Literacy: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Imperative*

Another form of literacy study that is receiving lots of attention in the media and has great potential for student engagement in the classroom is digital literacy. Digital literacy is a hybrid creature. Motivated by technological advances and fears concerning the digital divide, this branch of literacy studies has been referenced (in both overlapping and contradicting ways) as computer literacy, information literacy, and technological literacy. Advocates for digital literacy education, such as Kavalier & Flanagan, define it as “a person’s ability to perform tasks effectively in a digital environment, with ‘digital’ meaning information represented in numeric form and primarily for use by a computer” (par. 10). Proficiency in digital literacy, they argue, is evidenced by an “ability to read and interpret media (text, sound, images), to reproduce data

and images through digital manipulation, and to evaluate and apply new knowledge gained from digital environments” (Kavalier & Flanagan). Richard Lanham defines digital literacy as “being skilled at deciphering the complex images and sounds as well the syntactical subtleties of words” and says that digitally literate people are “quick on [their] feet in moving from one medium to another” (Lanham 198, 200). Millennial students, as multi-taskers, are already motivated to explore a wide range of digital media. The challenge for those who seek to engage and educate them will be to seek out connections between digital media and our curriculum.

### *Teaching Generation M: Media Literacy and New Media in the Classroom*

Take a poll on the streets asking people to define the term “media,” and you will likely receive a varied list of responses. The most popular response will likely be a description of the mass media, which includes broadcast and news media and concerns itself with the communication of information to the public. Some might mention the transmission of music or visual images, with media referring to the collective term for medium—the medium of television, radio, etc. Email is considered electronic media. The ads sold in the margins of email accounts would be considered advertising media, and the links between words in the ads and product homepages fall under the category of hypermedia. In the United States, media is the proverbial water in the fishbowl, and it is imperative that we educate our students to be critical and cognizant fish.

How would we define a literacy aimed at deconstructing so many varied types of messages? Media scholar W. James Potter offers a rather lengthy, but thorough, definition:

Media literacy is a set of perspectives that we actively use to expose ourselves to the media to interpret the meaning of the messages we encounter. We build our perspectives

from knowledge structures. To build our knowledge structures, we need tools and raw material. These tools are our skills. The raw material is information from the media and from the real world. Active use means that we are aware of the messages and are consciously interacting with them. (22)

Using Potter's description of the building of knowledge structures through raw materials that we take in and the skills that we possess, I would like to make an important distinction between what I refer to here as "media literacy" (where the tools used are critical thinking skills and the raw materials are media messages, such as television, film advertisements, etc.) and a pedagogical approach that involves media (where media is used as a tool for deconstructing the raw material of literary texts). While both approaches are useful, each has a specific goal. For my purposes here, I would advocate the use of both approaches, but I would encourage teachers to think critically about goals for learning outcomes as you organize lesson plans using media.

One example of a media-rich subject for classroom study would be the 2008 presidential election. As in any presidential election since the advent of these media outlets, news coverage leading up to the election was broadcast on television, radio, and the Internet. Yet, to the media-savvy observer, this election set a new precedent for media saturation. In the campaigning process, for example, both candidates sought out a presence on social networking sites. Not content to leave the campaigning to the candidates and their respective parties, ordinary citizens produced attack ads (including many of professional quality) and distributed them via You Tube. Democratic nominee Barack Obama's choice for running mate was announced to registered Democratic party members by text message, and air time on a cable television channel ran infomercial-style campaign messages for the Obama-Biden

campaign on a continuous loop. Both sides cried foul over accusations of partisan bias in news reporting, cries which were echoed on political web logs with a global viewership. As both sides clamored to spin information toward a viewing public that was getting its news from varied media outlets, the importance of media in presidential campaigns was undeniable.

The opportunity that this media circus created for critical pedagogy of media messages was irresistible. After all, if one of the chief goals of our profession is to prepare our students to be educated citizens, capable of analyzing and responding to persuasive messages, then an entire course could have centered on the election. Of particular interest is the multi-dimensional use of media as both “object of study” and “pedagogical tool.” For instance, using media coverage as an “object of study,” a teacher might have students examine reports on a single event that was covered by two separate media outlets. Students would search the articles for rhetorical cues, and respond to questions about the tone of the piece and the perspective of the author. Or a teacher might break students into small groups with the task of analyzing the web sites of each candidate. Such analysis would lead students into discussions of how each campaign used rhetorical strategies (through language, colors, design, and images) to persuade potential voters. The media coverage of the election might also be valuable as a tool for approaching a seemingly unrelated text. For example, after viewing campaign ads from both candidates and discussing the art of persuasive techniques, students might be asked to choose a character from a literary text and create an ad as if that character were running for president. Or students might work from a list of campaign promises to discuss the qualities of a good leader, moving on to analyze whether these qualities existed in the literary characterization of an authority figure. When used effectively, media literacy is valuable in encouraging student engagement as well as critical

analysis of media messages.

The reason for the candidates' omnipresence in the media was, of course, that media is a powerful influence in the lives of many people, and millennials certainly represent a fair share of that population. Given the demographic statistics on media usage by millennials, it is not surprising that many researchers and activists from technological fields have described media literacy (analyzing and interpreting the meaning of media messages) as a critical skill. From inquiry (search engines) to self-expression (blogs and social networking sites) to recreation (multi-user online games), media consumption is a staple in the life of the millennial.

In fact, many new media have become so popular that many parents (and some teachers) are suspicious of the influencing power of media, and they seek to restrain media privileges. As educators, we must avoid continually referring to media influence in negative terms, for to denigrate all media messages outright is to miss a valuable opportunity to walk our students through the complex process of analyzing multi-media messages. While the shielding reflex of many parents and teachers is exercised in the belief that simply turning off cell phones or the television will protect a child, this is problematic in a society where "media no longer just influence our culture ... they are our culture" (Center for Media Literacy 42). To serve our students well we must understand that media literacy is not merely about "protecting" kids from unwanted messages. Instead, we should work to frame our understanding of media literacy in terms of its potential:

Media literacy ... is about helping students become competent, critical and literate in all media forms so that they control the interpretation of what they see, hear or interact with rather than letting the interpretation control them. To become media literate is not to

memorize facts or statistics about the media, but rather to learn to raise the right questions about what you are watching, reading, listening or contributing to. (Center for Media Literacy 42)

The fact that most media usage by students takes place outside of school means that parents will obviously play an important role in encouraging media literacy. Yet, as teachers, we must recognize the potential impact of our attention to media studies and media integration within the classroom. If we can teach our students to be critical consumers of media messages, we will have impacted their lives both inside and outside of the classroom. If we can strive to use high-interest youth media to teach the concepts we want them to learn, we will have taken great strides toward engaging students through examples of new media.

*You Can't Choose Just One: An Argument for Multiple Literacies*

*Sheesh*, one might think. Trying to keep track of it all –visual literacy, media literacy, digital literacy—is starting to make the world of that Norman Rockwell painting look inviting, after all. It is true that the perpetual progression of new technologies and new forms of media make rigid definition of what it means to be literate in these areas a difficult assignment. In my own research, I quickly learned that one scholar's digital literacy was simply a branch of media literacy for another. As such, part of my goal for this project was to sift through some of the jargon used to discuss these literacies and unpack them so that those on the front line of literacy education could focus on implementing theory rather than dissecting it. In addition to the foundational treatment given to new literacies in this chapter, I would encourage teachers to make use of the new literacies resources made available to teachers online at the Center for Media Literacy as well as the website for NCTE.

While research into these new literacies is important, keeping a mindset that is open to new possibilities for the future is equally as important. Scholarship in this area must endeavor to run at the speed of technology—a difficult task. Scholars like Stephen F. Phelps, a professor at Buffalo State College, suggest that we should train our eyes continually seek out new opportunities for critical analysis of non-print texts. In *Reconceptualizing the Literacies in Adolescents' Lives*, a book he co-authored with Donna E. Alvermann and others, Phelps outlines the need for a wider scope of adolescent texts:

- The full range of adolescent literacy is much more complex, dynamic, and sophisticated than what is traditionally encompassed within school-sanctioned literate activity. Adolescents have multiple and overlapping literacies.
- As adolescents have multiple literacies, they also draw on multiple texts. Adolescents can and do immerse themselves in literate activities that transcend adult-sanctioned themes, forms, and limits. (1-2)

Thus, my approach in this work (and in my classroom) is informed by the study of multiple literacies, not just visual, digital, or media literacy. The answer to a student's question *What are we reading in class today?* needs always to reflect sensitivity on my part to the messages and varied texts that students are being inundated with outside of my classroom. While a foundational understanding of the research in these areas is important, I must train my focus on my students, studying them alongside the current research to determine the best way to help them to engage with and analyze multi-modal messages. In my efforts, I must shape my pedagogy around my overarching goals: to engage students using multiple forms of new media in practices that develop critical thinking across multiple literacies. Operating from a multiple literacies

perspective, I must remember to focus less on the text itself (whether movie, website, or someone's t-shirt) and more on the critical process of making meaning from the text. While the branches of literacy studies are numerous, varied, and overlapping, the process of critical literacy and the skills required to perform the process share many common characteristics.

At the end of a long day in the language arts classroom, any theory is only as good as the success of that theory as evidenced in its practical implementation in the classroom. In a job where teachers are pressured to deliver results—sometimes even at the risk of losing their jobs—contemplating theory for theory's sake is a luxury that most educators cannot afford. What I found most notable in my research on millennials was that the scholarship rang true with the behaviors I witnessed in class on a daily basis. Our students will “read” and process thousands of messages from a variety of media each day. By introducing multiple literacies and new media within our curriculums, we can offer them tools to read those texts more effectively, all while meeting our educational goals (and making our classrooms noisier and more productive) through student engagement and critical thinking. In this work, I will endeavor to share ways that I have employed a multiple literacies approach to teaching English at the high school level. It is my hope that teachers, in our willingness to collaborate with theorists as well as colleagues, and in our efforts to open up our pedagogical toolboxes and allow others to peek inside, will help our students learn to read the world around them.

## *Chapter Two: Designing Pedagogy That Is Music to Millennial Ears*

Teachers looking for inspiration to bring contemporary music into the literature classroom can turn to the Bard himself. Speaking through Orsino, a young duke in *Twelfth Night* who is ravaged by unrequited love, Shakespeare contends that “if music be the food of love, play on.” To Orsino, music is a balm for the soul, echoing his emotional state and assuaging his grief and longing for Countess Olivia. Were he not a fictional character from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, I might swear Orsino was a kid in my British Literature class. While the males in my classes might not wear tights and rock out to the lute, the connection to music that Orsino describes mirrors the musings from students (both male and female) I have encountered. It is also quite fitting for my purposes here to note that Shakespeare uses this expression of appreciation for music to open his play, for it is my contention that the most powerful role that music can play in the classroom is that of gateway, opening doors to student engagement in and comprehension of literary texts. Much like the fabled story where a rebellious son and his father grow distant –until the day the son discovers his father’s collection of Rolling Stones albums in the garage, music is a powerful medium for meeting students where they are and luring them, like a siren’s song, into the classic texts we want them to engage in.

Lest those with a Gershwin or Mozart CD smugly skip this chapter, I will issue a warning up front, one that well-trained instructors of composition will be very familiar with: consider your audience. Though many studies have shown links between classical music and increased test scores, my purpose is not to utilize the benefits of music found in cognitive science. Rather, I am interested in illuminating how teachers of literature might use music as a bridge over the troubled waters of textual engagement and comprehension. One would be hard pressed to name

a student who naturally, without any prodding or coaching, understands postmodern poetry. Come to think of it, even after years of studying and teaching it, I'm not sure that I do. Yet those same students do understand music. Even those who are untrained in the elements of composing music can describe a song's rhythm, can explain how different instruments are used to create mood, can offer a response to how the tone of the lyrics moved them in some way. Our students come to us ready and able to explicate music. They are not intimidated by it, but instead feel a sense of ownership of it. What a valuable opportunity for teachers to seize. By engaging in and encouraging our students to dissect music, we position ourselves to transfer both their enthusiasm and expertise with musical texts toward the more problematic literary texts within our curriculum.

Implementing the study of students' musical preferences alongside canonical texts is the very definition of meeting students where they are. Christian Z. Goering, creator of LitTunes.com, a website designed to provide links between canonical texts and popular music, argues that "as teachers search for new methods of reaching adolescents increasingly disengaged with the traditional sense of reading, tools such as music lyrics can pique the interest and allow students to connect with classroom texts" (Goering, par. 3). While the obvious benefit of music in the classroom is its instantaneous ability to engage students, another important aspect of music is the way in which musical literacy promotes literacy of literary texts. "By modeling intertextuality with secondary school students," Goering says, "teachers can facilitate a broader acceptance of the literacy practices students embrace" (par. 3).

Moving toward the more practical implications for what teacher-as-facilitator might look like in the classroom, I find it useful to group ideas and assignments on music into two

categories, the titles of which are taken from film terminology: diegetic and non-diegetic. In film, diegetic sound refers to sounds that originate within the sphere of the story. This would include ringing telephones, dialogue, and a blaring car stereo. Non-diegetic sounds originate from outside what is visible in the story. These include sound effects, narration, and musical soundtracks. It might be useful to review these terms with students prior to each lesson.

### *Non-Diegetic Music*

When using music to engage students within a literary text, teachers must play the role of mediator. Teenagers, as noted by John J. Mitchell, are passing through a developmental stage that is characterized by narcissistic tendencies and identity construction (Mitchell 175). Thus, any literature that does not seem amenable to their tastes and preferences is often shelved without a second glance. Yet, from my experience in the classroom, I have noted that all too often students do not give enough serious attention to literary texts before forming assumptions about the reading. Music is an inroad through the seeming impasses of adolescent fickleness. Few other tools can so effectively transfer students from the “real world” where their identities are being formed to the fictional world where they might find characters to identify with as music.

As for a personal distaste for the music du jour of those teens sitting in a classroom? I’ll be honest. There is not much I can do on that front. Many colleagues of mine scoff when I admit to playing hip-hop or grunge rock music in my classroom. In my responses to them, I never waste time arguing aesthetics (perhaps this is due to the fact that, in many cases, I share distaste for the music as well). Instead, I offer anecdotes of classroom experiences where students who had zero interest in literature came alive to discuss music. True, the change wasn’t

permanent. Often, those same students would zone out again when, perhaps the next day, there was no music playing—but never in lessons where music was involved. When I reflect on how students have responded to music as “text” in my classroom, I honestly cannot imagine teaching without it. Many of my students roll their eyes during our reading of Thoreau’s *On Civil Disobedience*, but talk excitedly about the social protest songs of *Rage Against the Machine*. At the end of the day, I would gladly trade a few minutes of mind-numbing noise for a classroom of students who bring their guard down just far enough to let the Bard have his say. Again and again I have found it to be true: when students hear *their* music, when they see me stepping (however timidly) into *their* terrain, I will, in most cases, earn their respect just for trying. However, there are some pitfalls to avoid. From my experience, there are a few sure-fire ways to limit the success of using pop culture in the classroom. First, check one’s judgmental tone at the door. Just as any teacher does not care to hear tirades about how Chapter One of the assigned novel is “BO-ring” to the point of being untenable, students will not benefit from a lengthy dissertation on why rap music should not be considered real music. Instead, one should model an open-minded approach to new forms of “text.” When students see a willingness to engage in music that they feel a connection to, the teacher earns a chance to ask them to show the same.

This does not mean, however, that one needs to trade a button-down for a Slipknot t-shirt. While keeping an open mind toward contemporary music might help a teacher engage with his or her students on a new level, one should be cautious about delving too far into their culture. Instead, once the foot is in the door, use that space to instigate real rhetorical analysis. Literary terms such as simile, metaphor, personification, and diction become more than just test items to be memorized when you highlight the ways in which songwriters use them. Tone,

typically a tough concept for my Composition students, is more accessible when students can discuss the ways in which music and melody interplay with lyrics. Additionally, one might look for opportunities to make connections between composing music and composing texts.

As you begin to integrate contemporary music in the classroom, you should refrain from drawing attention to your divergence from the canonical curriculum. Instead, position your approach so that students see connections between the two texts and feel confident in transferring skills and enthusiasm from one to the other. Introduce the music with the same demeanor and critical mindset as you would any other text. Allow students to practice song lyric analysis alongside the explication of poetry. After a few introductory sessions of “reading” music, your students will begin to see the prevalence of rhetorical strategies that overlap between textual genres.

Above all, do not let your unfamiliarity with a musical genre inhibit you from using it in the classroom, and don’t be afraid to let your students lead. Some of the best experiences I have had using popular culture in the classroom were times that I didn’t try to “force” a connection between cultural references and canonical texts. Keep in mind that your job is to facilitate exploratory questions between the genres, not to give students the “right answers” about parallels between the two. Letting students lead with their interpretations of and connections to the music frees teachers up to play the role of instigator, creating paths between thematic parallels, but allowing students to be the true trailblazers of them. Remember, students are the “experts” when it comes to their culture; don’t be afraid to let them bring the teachable moments to you. And when opportunities arise, take full advantage of them, keeping engagement and transfer as your curricular goals.

Moving beyond the pedagogical approach to using music in the classroom, I will begin with practical applications that require little if any preparation from the instructor and move on toward larger projects. Keep in mind that while the examples I offer here came exclusively from a unit on *Hamlet*, you could easily adapt any of these assignments to a different text.

At the least intensive level, contemporary music can be effective as a tool for pre- or post-instructional review. One of the first exercises I used to involve music in my literature curriculum was what is known to teachers as a bellringer: a short, pre-instructional exercise designed to get students thinking about themes and issues related to the text. The class I was teaching, a group of seniors who had been labeled “low level learners,” was less than enthused about my announcement on the previous day that our next assignment would be a play written a few hundred years ago. Undaunted by their ambivalence and encouraged by the number of them who brought mp3 players to class each day, I began class the next day with a journal assignment that was unlike any I had assigned so far.

“List ten of your favorite songs,” I told the group. “Don’t worry about naming the artist; just list the title of the songs.” I could read it in their eyes; they thought I was giving them a free day. Once the lists were made (and all titles inappropriate for classroom purposes were begrudgingly replaced), I allowed the students to share some of their favorites, then asked them to store the lists in their notebooks. The assignment took very little class time, and was useful for several weeks to come.

After we had progressed through the first two acts, I asked the students revisit their lists. I told each student to select a song that related, in some way, to what we had read of Hamlet’s story so far. The exercise was a win-win. While the students enjoyed getting to discuss their

favorite song titles in what was normally viewed as a “staunch literature only” type of setting, I benefited by successfully convincing them to do several tasks that normally required much prodding. To complete the task, they had to review the events we had covered so far, evaluating plot details as well as conflict. Next, they wanted to know if song titles that described characters’ personalities would work. After giving my approval, I listened as the students argued about which songs might fit Shakespeare’s characterization of Hamlet or Ophelia. Once those ideas were exhausted, the students led themselves into deeper waters. “What if the song has nothing to do with *Hamlet*, but it talks about revenge?” they wanted to know. I will allow it, I said, and listened to spirited discussions featuring boyfriend-bashing songs redirected at Prince Hamlet himself. There was no need to brow beat them with themes from the text; I had given them a reason not just for consulting our list of themes, but for applying it to something from the “real world.” As I listened to their conversations, I was performing formative assessment, for the song connections being made highlighted areas where students were misreading characterization cues. Those who had trouble making connections needed for me to walk with them through various themes from the play. Across the board, students were far more interested in and motivated by the assignment—far more willing to take risks in their reading and interpretation of Shakespeare’s language—than they had been when we read only the print text. At this level, the assignment accomplishes basic learning objectives—reading comprehension, close study of Shakespeare’s diction, discussions on characterization—and my students enjoyed Shakespeare, to boot.

This assignment represents a step toward using music in the classroom that almost any teacher can easily accommodate. It requires very little preparation and uses minimal time in

class. The list can be formed during any scene of the play and can be referred back to multiple times, if you so choose. Teachers who want greater control over the tracks selected might alter the assignment somewhat by creating a “master list” of pre-selected songs for students to choose from. This might work in several different formats. You could begin class with a bellringer in which students listened to a selected song while lyrics were posted on an overhead projector. After the song has played once, play it again, this time having students compose a journal response that links the song to elements (either specified by you or left open to them) of the play. You could repeat this activity as a bellringer for multiple days, per your discretion.

Still another option, if you have the classroom resources to create “listening stations,” is to organize students into groups and provide each group with audio of a selected song along with a printed copy of the lyrics. Students would then engage in discussion over how the song relates to the play, either spontaneously or in response to questions you pose via handout. After each group formulates its own reading of the song’s relevance, the class as a whole might discuss the findings of each group and debate which songs fit most convincingly into the thematic elements of the play. In addition to the learning objectives outlined in the original assignment, this option introduces multi-media awareness through the listening stations. Students also perform both textual analysis (independently) and persuasive rhetoric (group debate).

For those who have more time to devote to a music-inspired unit plan, you can assign students (either individually or in groups) to organize an entire soundtrack of songs. When using this project in class, I begin with a discussion of how music is selected for a soundtrack. I typically bring in examples from well-known films for both classically-inspired soundtracks (e.g. *Titanic*, *Finding Nemo*) and soundtracks with vocals (e.g. *The Lion King*, *Oh Brother Where Art*

*Thou?*). I have students practice making connections between the mood of the scene and the tone of the musical piece that accompanies it. Next, I ask students to consider select scenes from *Hamlet*. Through response questions, they determine what type of song might elucidate the underlying mood for each particular scene. If I have time, I play a scene from a film version of *Hamlet* that lacks music or with the volume turned down, to encourage them to brainstorm ways that music might add to our interpretation of the scene.

Students work from an initial list of songs that they compile through brainstorming and research. Using internet search engines, they print copies of the lyrics to each song and study the lyrics to determine if the songs are appropriate for school and compatible with their vision for a soundtrack. Depending on the teacher's level of comfort with media literacy and the time allotted for the lesson, this project can be altered to accommodate the class schedule. Some teachers might require students to produce an actual burned cd or folder containing mp3 files, while others might put less emphasis on the finished product and allow students to submit representative soundtracks with no actual audio recording included.

While, in my experience, students feel a certain pride about creating a finished product, the real value of this lesson is the level at which students engage both the play and the musical text. Throughout this process, the teacher becomes less of a lecturer and more of a sounding board for students as they work through their understanding of the play. Often, opportunities for a more in-depth study of the characters' motivations are presented. For example, I recall one student who wanted to use a contemporary song that spoke of disappointment and dejection about a lover. Reading through the lyrics of the song, the student's knee-jerk reaction was to link the song to the frustration and abandonment Hamlet suffers because of his mother's choice

to marry Claudius. Yet, other parts of the song gave hints that the speaker in the song was romantically attracted to the person the song was written for. This seeming incompatibility sparked a great discussion about Freud's Oedipal interpretation of Hamlet's plight. After researching (chalk up another state-mandated learning objective) *The Oedipus-Complex as An Explanation of Hamlet's Mystery: A Study in Motive* by Ernest Jones, the student decided to include the song, using the article as a discussion point during his soundtrack presentation in front of the class. Using music as an entry point, I was able to supervise student-initiated study of Freudian theories about Hamlet, rather than presenting the theories as yet another bullet point within my lecture on the text.

If you wish to add a visual arts component to the assignment, you might consider having students design a cd cover and liner notes to accompany their soundtrack. Some students will leap at the chance to show off their artistic skills; others may opt to use copyright-free images from the internet. Either way, this is yet another opportunity to explore visual images of the Renaissance and deeper discussion of the overall tone of Hamlet. If time permits, you might discuss design considerations, such as layout, color scheme, and script, bringing multiple literacies into your music projects.

### *Diegetic Music*

In addition to (or perhaps instead of) re-envisioning thematic elements in Hamlet through the gateway of contemporary music, I would also advocate a close reading of the musical breadcrumbs dropped by Shakespeare himself throughout *Hamlet*. Whereas the use of non-diegetic music involves bringing students from modern music to *Hamlet*, the use of diegetic music centers on elucidating the music within the play for a contemporary audience. Examining

Shakespeare's use of music within *Hamlet* provides students with a deeper understanding of playwriting in general and, more specifically, the mood and setting of Elsinore. Since it is rare to encounter a student who has viewed a full performance of the play before entering my classroom, they each bring original and varied interpretations of what Shakespeare's musical choices might sound like, providing fertile soil for discussion of the importance of music to shape the tone of a drama.

While there are several references to music within the dialogue of *Hamlet*, there are three scenes where music is mentioned that I typically use to teach this lesson. These are, in chronological order: Act Three, scene Two, when Hamlet requests music as a flummoxed Claudius storms out of the viewing of *The Mousetrap*; Act Four, scene five, which is punctuated by Ophelia's eerie singing; and the opening of the fifth act, when the First Clown sings merrily while digging Ophelia's grave. It should be noted here that there is no single approach for examining music in the play that supersedes another; the following suggestions can be amended to fit any number of interpretations of *Hamlet*.

Hamlet's enthusiastic request for "some music!" (3.2.289) after Claudius exits the play within a play provides an opportunity to show students how the diegetic sounds chosen within a production shape the overall mood of a scene for the audience. Stage directions in this scene offer no hint at what type of music might be called for; while a theatrical audience would have the decision made for them, as readers, students have the opportunity to step into the role of director. Having just witnessed what he believes to be infallible proof of Claudius's guilt, it might be surmised that the music be celebratory. Others might argue that the presence of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, both deeply concerned about Hamlet's fragile mental state, would

move the music toward a more chaotic sound, mirroring the jumbled conversation that takes place while the musicians fetch the recorders.

Given, the recorder is not an alluring instrument. Even my students in the marching band scoff at Shakespeare's choice. Still, the double entendre in Hamlet's dialogue with Guildenstern provides fertile ground for further study. Unscathed by the taunts from students, I use their elitist musical palettes to my advantage. Have it your way, I say to them. Rewrite Hamlet's dialogue in this scene using a more suitable instrument. This short exercise, doled out to a few of my punk rock students, was another example of a win-win. Hamlet's recorder received a much-needed update, and my students were fully engaged in the rhetorical strategies of the scene. Though I will admit it was difficult to picture the Prince of Denmark saddled with a Fender Stratocaster, the way that the students played with the double meaning of words like "fret" and "axe" brought new life to our reading of the play that day. If I had told them they were meeting state standards concerning "recognizing that language has several layers of diction" or "performing literary analysis for language use, patterns, and dialects," they would not have believed me.

Certainly the most well-known scene involving music in Hamlet is in Act Four, when Ophelia's child-like refrains forewarn of her fragile mental state. Much ink has been spilled about what the song-snippets in this scene reveal about Ophelia's motivation to commit suicide. Is she spurned on by Hamlet's rejection? Bereft and bewildered upon losing her father? The fact that Shakespeare offers no clear finger-pointing leaves much room for varied interpretations, yet each critique of Ophelia's characterization must be based on tiny shards of information that surface from her agitated state. To read Ophelia well means that one must listen to her song.

Fortunately for teachers, self-expression through music is not a subject that requires much belabored instruction. Across decades from vinyl records, to MTV, to mp3 player ear buds that seem permanently attached, music has been a way for teens to declare their identity, to break away from the listening choices of their parents, and to align themselves with artists whom they esteem. If their choices seem unintelligible to adults, that is even better. Knowing this, to walk them through the links between her song and the Walsingham poem from which many scholars believe it originates is to, in some ways, miss the point, or at least miss a vital opportunity for them to engage in Shakespeare's characterization of Ophelia.

Instead of centering my focus on fidelity to the origin(s) of her lyrics, I pair a close reading of the text with prompts that invite students to visualize Ophelia's performance of the songs. Since very little stage direction is given other than the fact that she is "distracted," the potential for variation is vast. Working in groups, I have students use the text to puzzle out how Ophelia would be dressed, how her hair would be styled, what her facial expressions and gestures might reveal about her character. Once they have an image of their Ophelia, I announce that they will be turning this vision of Shakespeare's distressed damsel into a modern-day rock star. Gone are the students who merely skimmed the reading. This assignment motivates students to perform a close study of each footnote and stage direction in order to build a believable Ophelia.

For the millennial generation, music is rarely just music. Born into a time when the mainstream medium for disseminating music was through the visual-hybrid music video, today's student has come to expect song performances to be as much about the performance as the song. Because *Hamlet*, as a play, was designed to be staged, their expectation that music should be

accompanied by visual elements is helpful for visualizing Shakespeare's original intent. With script in hand and their own ideas about what Ophelia's image should embody, I ask the students to create a short video that offers an interpretation of Ophelia's singing in Act Four. The rules are simple: the script is sovereign, meaning they cannot vary from Shakespeare's words, but their interpretation is subjective, meaning they can use the visual and physical aspects of Ophelia's characterization to flavor the language in any way they choose.

While my tech-savvy students have, in the past, produced high-quality, edited videos, this assignment can be successful using very little technology. Some of the most entertaining projects I have seen involve students (usually male) choosing to dress as Ophelia and record their performance using a video camera. Still others have painted Ophelia, or composed her using magazine scraps, while speaking her lyrics over instrumental musical accompaniment. For every PhotoShop project, there is a pen and ink alternative. Students with no access to video equipment may choose to perform live. Students without vocal skills may use spoken word renditions. The media used for this project are overshadowed by the message: that Ophelia's character is accessible to our students, and that the music she produces provides an opportunity to engage students in Shakespeare's language, for Ophelia moves out of the realm of the Renaissance and into a space where students identify with her angst and brokenheartedness. This type of student buy-in does not happen each time, but more often than not, students walk away from the play with a deeper understanding of the emotional conflicts at work within Hamlet. From this point, the standard five-paragraph essay comparing and contrasting Ophelia and Gertrude becomes a cinch. Students are more than capable of discussing Ophelia's characterization at length, for they have mastered character analysis.

Finally, the performance of the Clown in Act Five presents an opportunity to play up the juxtaposition between the tragic end to *Hamlet* and the Bard's sense of humor. Sandwiched between Ophelia's death and the demise of the remaining central characters, the gleeful singing of the gravediggers gives a comedic pause that today's students, who are avid consumers of parody skits via television and the Internet, will appreciate. While I typically do not devote as much time toward this scene as I do with Ophelia's singing, a short stint is sufficient to communicate the comedic message.

We start with a close reading of the text, noting how the theme of the First Clown's song starts with young love and gravitates through the aging process toward the grave. While the lyrics contain no outright humor, the paradox implied by the cheerful singing of a grave digger tossing skulls into the air is funny. Or so I thought. Apparently, in the age of Saturday Night Live sketches, Shakespeare's grave diggers do not go far enough in their parody of death and mourning. Therefore, as a short, in-class role play exercise, I have students work in groups to rewrite the lyrics to the songs and perform them for the class, complete with a plastic skull for use as a prop. I require that the students match the rhyme scheme of the original, which provides further practice for determining scansion, but I allow the subject matter of the songs to be revised as creativity demands. Students typically revel in the opportunity to use humor, and the exercise illustrates how minor characters play an important role in releasing tension in this penultimate scene. In fact, they enjoy the humor so much that counting unstressed syllables—a task that is normally met with wailing and gnashing of teeth—happens without complaints.

Perhaps a nod to scansion will suffice as evidence that for me, bringing music into the class does not mean watering down my curriculum. Teachers who opt to use the ideas outlined

in this chapter should do so with an unfailing commitment to rigor for all students. Treating music as diversionary is not what I have in mind. Utilizing the nearly universal appreciation for music to draw students in and reinforce real-life connections to texts, however, should be a tool in the toolbox of every teacher. The activities I have described are not meant to be viewed as an exhaustive list; my hope is that, as iron sharpens iron, they might inspire other teachers to brainstorm their own ways of implementing music within a language arts curriculum.

### *Chapter Three: Eat Dessert First – A New Approach to Film in the English Classroom*

We've all been there. Moments after you have distributed copies of the novel you've assigned, a text brimming with literary brilliance and rich in rhetorical art, you get the question: *Is there a movie of this book?* Those of us who have had the good fortune to volley back against this question more than once are well aware of its implications. Any book that is any good gets made into a movie. Everyone knows that.

Though any antipathy toward reading stings, perhaps what is most painful to teachers is the realization that students make no qualifications about movie adaptations in regards to quality. Film trumps book, regardless of how unfaithful (or just plain awful) the film is. Don't believe me? Ask the sophomore who shows up for a discussion on Homer's *The Iliad* satisfied that watching Brad Pitt in *Troy* has adequately prepared him for a serious discussion of mythology. Or, better yet, imagine my response to an 11<sup>th</sup> grade student who based her interpretation of Hester Prynne on the nearly pornographic portrayal of Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* heroine by Demi Moore. Yet, blasphemous as it may seem, even voracious readers in my classes have admitted to patronizing Blockbuster rather than toughing it out with the text. Much to the dismay of their bibliophilic teachers, students trust film because it is a language they are fluent in. Because film is a medium they enjoy outside the walls of the classroom, it is infinitely more accessible to them than written text. While there are certainly those students who view film as a shortcut or a procrastination aid, there are others who simply desire the multi-sensory experience that film provides within a story.

To argue against these media-saturated beings seems futile. As I noted in a previous chapter, this generation represents a different breed of reader, accustomed to a certain level of

visual stimulation with their storytelling. *Alright, alright, you say. If they make it through the novel and actually read it, I'll allow them to watch the movie at the end of the unit.* This attempt at compromise, while putting you in line with the way most language arts teachers utilize film in their classrooms, is insufficient—even negligent, I would argue, in that it does a disservice to both the original text and the film adaptation. I argue this with unclean hands, as one who has come to viewing film as a primary text rather than a supplemental activity only after many experiences where my insistence on the insufficiency of film adaptations backfired.

Admittedly, I was once a teacher who devised evil schemes to force students into reading the actual book. Though I'm not proud of it, I remember a time when, in complete frustration with my students' work ethic toward our reading schedule, I checked out the town library's video copy of the text we were reading, keeping it past its due date, to ensure that students would not have access to it. *Cringe.* Looking back, I am sure of two things: first, that I caused at least a few parents a long drive to the next town's library, and, second, that my plan failed – instead of having students who had seen what I deemed to be a watered-down version of the novel, I had students who had only seen short clips (available online) of a what I deemed to be a watered-down version of the novel. Adding to my guilt, I remember a student talking animatedly about a particular scene in the movie that had captivated him. While I wanted to chide his lazy approach to literature, his enthusiasm (which I would now label as the active engagement I had so desperately sought) won me over, and, to my surprise, we had a productive discussion on how that scene related to an important theme in the novel. I wish I could say that this experience caused an epiphany that day, but in reality I suffered through a few more frustrating semesters before a session at a professional conference caused me to question the way I viewed film.

In November of 2006 I attended a workshop at the NCTE conference in Nashville, Tennessee. The workshop was titled “Reading in the Reel World,” and its presenter, John Golden, was a teacher at a high school in Portland, Oregon. Seemingly aware of my potential skepticism, Golden began with an explanation that he was a high school English teacher, not a film teacher. He went on to make a great case for the benefits of using film within the language arts curriculum. In the “Film and Reading Strategies” chapter of his book, *Reading in the Dark: Using Film as a Tool in the English Classroom*, Golden explains that getting students fully involved in a text—any text—is the real work of the English teacher. He goes on to outline parallels between the reading strategies for both film and traditional texts, such as “predicting, responding, questioning, and visualizing” (59). These were the skills I had been trying to foster in each of the texts I had assigned. Could you do that through film? Skeptic though I was, it was hard to deny the success that Golden’s approach had cultivated within his classroom. I left there that day feeling troubled by the film prejudices in my pedagogy. While I was unsure as to what approach to take in altering my classroom practices, I was convinced that both the curriculum I was teaching and my attitude toward film in the classroom needed serious revision. I did, then, what any bibliophile would do – I read a stack of books on the subject (Teasley and Wilder; Golden; Costanzo; Krueger; Hocks). Afterwards, while I had no clear plan in place for film-integrated lessons, I felt confident that I had identified the problem: I was a literature snob.

Looking back, I realized that I had taught this way for years without realizing it—probably because most of my colleagues were literature snobs as well. In fact, as I looked through a critical lens at the approaches to language arts instruction that I saw surrounding me within my school, or even when I considered the way that film had been discussed in my

education training courses, I realized that a large number of English teachers could be divided into two categories concerning their use of film in the classroom: snobs and projector operators. Snobs rarely or never show films, largely for reasons that I will outline in this chapter. Projector operators want a day off from the hard task of teaching, so they pop a movie in the player to appease students so that they can attend to tasks like grading. I have created these two categories with zero judgment in mind, for in my teaching career I have engaged in both flawed strategies. I describe them in severe terms, but I empathize with teachers who fit each mold. I suspect that like me, most language arts teachers are simply untrained in strategies to integrate film studies into their curriculum. While we are perfectly comfortable discussing written texts, film is a genre outside our expertise. What we often don't realize is that our view of film as the "lazy option" is a detriment to our learning goals as much as it is to our students' multimedia preferences. When we allow our biases about film (even those rooted in justifiable concerns) to limit the pedagogical tools at our disposal, we miss great opportunities to engage students in critical thinking with a complex audiovisual medium. In this chapter, I hope to invite critical consideration of these biases by discussing what I believe are the three key beliefs that prevent teachers from making the most out of film in their English curriculum. While the convictions are my own, I am indebted to those whose work in both theory and practical application of film studies shaped my views on implementing film into my lesson plans. I have made reference to them where applicable and would recommend their publications to any teacher who is interested in further research in this critical area of media literacy.

The three misguided convictions that undermine the success of film in a language arts curriculum are as follows:

### *Film as “fluff”*

This belief is motivated, most often, by intellectual snobbery. Since I’ve already admitted to wearing that scarlet “S” in this regard, I will speak from experience to illustrate how this misguided belief operates, and, ultimately, how it limits the possibilities for intratextual connections that foster higher-order thinking. Misguided is a fitting term here, for the motivation behind this conviction starts in a good place. As English teachers, we love books. Ask an English teacher to name his or her favorite book—then clear your schedule for at least an hour to listen his or her response. As literature aficionados, we admire the power that words yield, the way that authors can render characters and their circumstances with such authenticity that we feel as if we have known or experienced them firsthand. Literary works that achieve this receive our utmost esteem, and many of us make it our goal to infect our students with a similar passion.

Though popular among the masses, movies, like pulp fiction and comic books, have historically been viewed by many academics as an inferior art form. This view holds that reading is a highbrow activity, useful for expanding the mind, while watching movies is a lowbrow activity, useful only as entertainment. Visit your local video store and you will find shelves full of evidence to support this belief. Yet, just as we would not judge a Henry James novel by the potboilers published in the same period, we should refrain from excluding film as an art form based on the poor quality of some contemporary blockbusters. For every *Rocky V*, there is a *Citizen Kane*. For every “laugh out loud” mindless comedy, there is a cinematic experience like *Schindler’s List*. While our preferences might lead us to value the aesthetics of great writing over great film making, to reduce film study to mere entertainment is to misunderstand the critical thinking involved in “reading” a film.

Indeed, close analysis of the tasks performed in analyzing both types of texts reveals many parallels between strategies that readers use for film and literary study. By examining texts within each distinct genre, we create a space to expand our students' notions of texts beyond the printed page, inviting them to participate in critical thinking about the multi-modal texts they view inside and outside of the classroom. While I am not suggesting that teachers throw out class sets of novels in exchange for a video library, if we are to meet our students where they are, it is imperative that we give them the tools to analyze all types of texts they encounter. My instructional objectives do not involve replacing one type of literacy with the other. Instead, I seek to create students who are multi-literate, with the ability to analyze texts in a variety of forms and to ask the questions (*What mood does the author/director create? How does the author/director portray Character X? What is the significance of the author/director's use of Symbol Y?*) that successful readers of any text might ask. I do not compromise on my teaching goals, but I am willing to recognize that these goals can be achieved through critical analysis of a variety of nontraditional texts.

Shifting our approach to traditional versus nontraditional texts from “either/or” to “both/and” will be of great benefit to our students, who will (whether we have prepared them to do so or not) enter into a world where they will be asked to analyze and process messages that come from many varied audiovisual media. Film is a great medium for helping our students transfer traditional literacy skills to other texts—if it is approached with consideration of its distinctions, and with the same rigor and enthusiasm as traditional texts. According to Alan Teasley, a graduate professor in Duke University's teaching program, and his co-author Ann Wilder, an English teacher in a Durham, North Carolina high school, the key is to create a space

where literature and film can peaceably, even symbiotically, coexist. “Just as we ask our students to be active readers of literature and to respond to their reading through classroom conversation and composition, we also challenge our students to become active viewers of film” (4), Teasley says. *In Reel Conversations: Reading Films with Young Adults*, Teasley and Wilder contend that their experience has shown that “students do rise to the challenge and that they do read and view at a sophisticated level” (3). Successful reading of films requires that teachers seek out compelling film “texts” and formulate questions that will spark dialogue among students – the same instructional tasks involved with teaching literary texts.

#### *Film adaptations as a bastardized form of classic texts*

Though the instructional strategies seemed similar, the toughest task I faced when first implementing film was the realization that films, even film adaptations of novels, were both separate and equal to traditional texts. This is a key concept, for though it is important to refrain from diminishing the merits of film as text, it is equally important to investigate film as a separate art form, with its own terminology and narrative techniques. To use a sports analogy, we must help our students to develop foundational athletic abilities while at the same time drawing their attention to the distinctions between rules of play and equipment used among various sports. While all athletes need to be able to run, move with agility, and possess physical endurance, the rules (not to mention equipment) for a sport like tennis are distinct from a sport like soccer. With a little training, however, a tennis player can rely on his/her athletic abilities to perform reasonably well on the soccer field. While the sports may differ, the essential required abilities share many similarities.

In our discussion of film adaptations, our conversations too often center solely on fidelity

to the original. Though it is useful for students to compare and contrast the film version with the original, if we as teachers allow the discussion to end there, we have failed to use film to its full potential. Fidelity should not be our ultimate measure of an adaptation's success, for it is often true that in order to be faithful to the original author's overall message in the text, films must change, cut, or create anew. If a good movie adaptation is selected by the teacher, then the movie should be able to stand alone as a subject for literary analysis. Using film terminology, students should analyze the film as an independent narrative, noting how the director's choices mirror those made by authors. With minimal effort aimed at teaching basic principles of film study (see Chapter Two of Teasley and Wilder for a thorough explanation, complete with glossary of terms), teachers can help students view film adaptations as a stand-alone text, not a shortcut.

*Film as a reward for doing the "real work" of reading the book.*

Once the aforementioned myths are dispelled, teachers will be free to pursue the possibilities for film beyond the "dangled carrot" technique. Too often, film is offered to students as a treat, a form of enjoyable compensation for enduring the drudgery of reading the original text. The message this sends is problematic on several levels. First, it implies that film is less important and perpetuates the assumption that visual texts provide only entertainment value. Second, it perpetuates the hierarchy of verbal text above visual text by positioning the film as an afterthought within the lesson plan. Perhaps the greatest missed opportunity, however, is that the approach of film viewing as a "free day" inspires minimal participation from students in what can and should be an engaging reading experience. Teasley and Wilder concur, suggesting that the focus of parents and educators on the amount of time spent watching

television and movies is misplaced. Instead, they argue, we should be concerned with “the way students usually view movies and television—that is, in a passive, trancelike state” (2). When we teach students to evaluate and respond to visual texts, we get them practicing the skills we want them to master with written texts, plus more. The movement from “active recipient of information” to “engaged participant in critical thinking” is the same type of sound pedagogy that motivates teachers to differentiate instruction, with opportunities for hands-on learning. When film is integrated into the language arts classroom with an emphasis on rigor and relevance, a teacher who serves as questioner, model, and guide can forever change the way students perceive the viewing experience. Once students are taught to seek out and analyze the rhetorical strategies and literary elements present in film production, the difference in their literacy skills will mirror that of their early achievement with print texts. They will, essentially, become fluent in the language of film, and, based on media consumption statistics, will have plenty of opportunities to practice their proficiencies. In fact, one of the key advantages to the dynamic use of film in the language arts classroom is that the skills acquired by students don’t stay behind when they exit the school building. Teaching them to question visual texts and to explore the underlying messages conveyed in movies and TV shows gives them an education that extends beyond English class—which, I would argue, is where our pedagogical concerns about engagement and critical thinking should be focused.

For those who are still undecided about the merits of film, I would encourage further study of the work of Golden, Teasley, and Wilder on film in the English classroom (cited in references). For others who feel as I did on the day of the NCTE workshop – convinced and motivated, but with no clue where to begin – I offer the following suggestions on ways to initiate

the process of integrating film analysis into a language arts curriculum. The lessons I describe were taught to seniors who carried a wide range of competency labels—from Honors to Basic. Though the students reacted to the assignments in different ways, one thing was certain: the level of engagement (again, a primary goal of mine) for all classes was higher than in any of the times that I had previously taught the text without attention to multiple media and new literacies. As for critical thinking (another key goal), my days of viewing film as an inferior classroom tool are over. Watching Shakespeare on screen, either through clips or entire films, yielded many thoughtful discussions about themes within the play. In trying to identify the varying levels to which teachers might be willing (and able, according to administrative restrictions) to commit time and resources to film study, I stumbled upon a food metaphor that I hope will help illustrate the pedagogical approach to using film as well as the practical suggestions for classroom assignments.

Students looking to bypass Shakespeare's language by watching a film adaptation of Hamlet will have many options from which to choose. Hamlet has been described as being 'the world's most filmed story after Cinderella', generating over fifty versions and, in that respect, [it is] in a completely different league from any other play" (Thompson & Taylor 17). When I decided to teach Hamlet using film, I was taken aback at all of the adaptations available to me. There were multiple versions, ranging from a silent film adaptation where the character of Hamlet was played by a woman (1920, directed by Svend Gade and Heinz Schall), to an adaptation where the setting of 16th Century Denmark was changed to 21st Century New York City (2000, directed by Michael Almereyda). In regards to textual fidelity, there were films that placed characters from Hamlet in a brand new narrative (as in the 1990 film adaptation of Tom

Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*) as well as films that kept every single word of Shakespeare's original text (1996, directed by Kenneth Branagh). The lesson ideas outlined below were forged through much trial and error. Though my engagement goals were realized each time, student success with comprehension and analysis varied across different groups of students. Teachers should amend and revise these strategies according to the individual needs of their classes.

### *Film as Appetizer: Strategies for Using Film to Introduce Classic Texts*

One of the concerns I had when initially implementing film into my curriculum was finding time within my pacing guide to put *one more thing*. In hindsight, I see that the fact that I had viewed film as *one more thing* indicated remnants of the type of misguided thinking detailed previously, but it took seeing results before I was able to realize this. I started small. I began using film in the classroom in the hopes of succeeding at bait and switch. If I could win them over by showing clips of films that were enjoyable to them and applicable to what we were learning, then I might be able to transfer some of their excitement about film to the literature we were studying. Because I was teaching a heavy load at the time, I did not invest a lot of time in preparation. I researched a bit, talked with a couple of colleagues to brainstorm ideas, and worked in small clips of film where I found the time. With a shorter turnaround time than I had anticipated, I began to see results. Not in the dramatic, made-for-TV movie about teacher perseverance sense, but there was a noticeable decrease in ranting about the injustices of forced reading. As I transitioned into the next unit, I noticed that in place of incessant complaints about the length of the assigned text, I was instead bombarded with questions (repeatedly, to the point of mild annoyance) about when we would be watching film clips again. A few students who had

scanned the back cover of the newly assigned novel even offered suggestions for titles of movies that dealt with similar story lines (one of which I borrowed and used with a subsequent class). I was stunned. It had worked. I had hooked them.

Another advantage to film in small bites is that clips can be used to whet student appetites at any point in the study of the text. I often pace clips throughout our study, utilizing them to activate prior knowledge and to apply themes from the text to the outside world. To begin, teachers need only consider the text that they are currently teaching. What are its themes? What characteristics define its main characters? With this approach, the entire film does not have to align perfectly with the text; even a single scene can spark discussion that spills over into talk about the reading assignment. Teachers may choose to show clips of a film adaptation of the text or might opt instead to choose a movie that is seemingly unrelated but contains parallels to prominent literary elements within the book. I have found success with each and have, at times, alternated between the two. In my experience, film adaptations are most effective as film appetizers when the text is set in a time or place that is unfamiliar to students. In this situation, students can view and respond to film “snapshots” of the setting, and these snapshots often help them visualize as they continue to read.

When the setting is familiar, but the style of the novel makes it difficult for students to engage in the reading, I will often use unrelated films to bring out parallel themes and bridge the gap between interests. Particularly with texts viewed by the students as archaic and inaccessible, the continuity of universal themes into modern texts creates a space to discuss the timelessness of certain character traits and conflicts. Even combinations that seem to be strange bedfellows can work well while juxtaposed, as was evidenced when I paired the teen film *Mean Girls* with

our reading of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. While a high school cafeteria is a far cry from a Puritan village, the students gained a greater understanding of the actions of the girls in the courtroom scenes by stepping back to examine how groupthink often motivates the actions of adolescents in more contemporary settings. Because the clip was only a small portion of the lesson that day, I did not invest time in having the class "read" the film *Mean Girls* using terminology from the film genre. Yet, the pieces that I clipped from the film were instructive, for they gave students the opportunity to view the problems in Miller's Puritan community (jealousy, gossip, hypocrisy) through a more accessible lens. Suddenly, *The Crucible* was no longer just a story from a historic age of harsh rules and bad fashion. The girls of Salem became real in a way that they had not been before. What's more, the harsh critique that my students rendered toward the girls of Salem was more difficult to sustain when aimed at what many of them argued were inconsequential ("that's just how it is") high school cliques. At the end of that lesson, I surprised myself with how successful the blending of historic and modern, political and pop, had been.

The skills involved with asking students to respond to film clips mirror those involved when responding to pieces of literature. To begin, you might have students answer fact-based questions related to the setting, characters, or plot details. Moving on, you could ask them to support their interpretations of the scene using examples from the clip. When using short pieces of a film, I often allow students to view the clip in its entirety before asking them to write their initial responses about "what's going on" in the scene. Then, as our discussion of film-as-text unfolds, I pace back through the scene, pausing to note and encourage the interpretations offered by students. As Golden notes, it is as important to get them to question the film as it is to get

them to respond to your questioning, for “the act of *asking* questions, rather than simply *answering* questions all the time, is essential to achieving a real connection with a text” (“Reading in the Reel World” 47). From a questioning posture, students can then make predictions about what they expect will happen next. I often use this exercise to pique student interest in the pre-reading stage of a new text, first allowing them to view the opening to a film and make predictions, then having them read the opening of the assigned text and use the same strategies to interpret what will happen next in the story. Selected movies can parallel elements of the text, or not, depending on teacher preference, as the skills exercised will be the same.

While movie enthusiasts will likely need only a brainstorming session to select movies that will pair with assigned texts, those who are less familiar with movies might need to research and/or screen films to determine which movies might be a good fit. The Media Resource Center at the University of California at Berkeley has a website full of relevant resources, including a list of movies organized by theme (see “Shakespeare Plays”). Both *Reading in the Reel World* and *Reel Conversations* offer film suggestions for classroom use, complete with annotations. Keep in mind that while these resources offer road maps for serious film study (with film terminology and other genre-specific considerations), the teacher who is just starting out can allow the use of film to function like any other writing prompt, meaning that films that might not merit full study could be used topically to spark discussion via a visual representation of particular themes that relate to class curriculum. Perhaps the best feature of the “film as appetizer” approach is that it provides a method by which teachers can begin integrating media literacy without any prior knowledge or skills in film study.

### *Film as Main Course: Reading Film as Primary Text*

Those who are ready to sink their teeth into film study at the next level should consider introducing film as primary text. While this approach requires greater attention to planning and organizing resources than the “appetizer” option, it could be argued that it takes no more time (and possibly less) than preparing to teach a new print text, and the results are worth it. Teaching students to “read” film has lasting ramifications. It is both a fresh approach to accomplishing the critical literacy tasks that teachers have assigned them for years and a brand new way of viewing a medium that they once considered “for entertainment only.”

To say that watching my students discover the art and craft involved in creating film narratives caused a breakthrough in my teaching is no hyperbole. In just a few short lessons, I was able to help my students develop a working knowledge of film terminology and technique, information that I made engaging by showing clips to demonstrate techniques. Though I was impressed with how eagerly and quickly they embraced the technical terminology, the real surprise came when I asked them to apply the language of film to a few selected popular movies. It was almost as if I had given them a diversion rather than an assignment. Armed with what they viewed as an insider’s knowledge, they began to see film as a musician sees an instrument or as a surgeon views the human form. Knowing how effects were achieved, they offered surprisingly astute opinions on the success or failure of a director in capturing the authentic mood of a scene. No longer were they docile consumers of the images on the screen. They became instead active participants in film analysis, critique, and ultimately construction. Operation Student Engagement was a rousing success.

I watched them flourish in film studies, doing my best to incite them toward further

investigation of each film text, and then I tilted the lesson toward literature, allowing the feeling of belonging they now felt toward film study to meld into a more confident approach to the texts they had previously dismissed as incomprehensible. I hold no delusions that the literary study was as entertaining, but it was certainly less laborious, particularly as we sought to distinguish parallels between how different effects were achieved through film (*Look at how somber and dim the lighting is in this scene*) as opposed to literature (*Notice the foreboding images in this passage*). My journey from literature to film and back to literature taught me as much as it did my students. I came face to face with the ways that teachers can fail to recognize expedient ports of entry into the exercise of critical thinking that we most desire for our students. How many times had I tried and failed to get students to perform the type of tasks that they were now actively, even passionately, engaged in? My grandfather, only educated through the sixth grade, once instructed me with the adage “there is more than one way to skin a cat.” Turns out, he would have been a sensible choice for a faculty mentor. While I continue to question the genesis of that particular pearl of wisdom, I have certainly found its implication to be true in this instance. There is more than one way to teach reading strategies related to literature, and one of the best ways I have found is to teach film instead.

“*But... but...*” “I can hear it now. Film as an appetizer might be a nice substitute for the daily writing prompt, but let’s not get too hasty. Surely I don’t mean to infer that popular movies are equal to the classic texts within the literature canon? Absolutely not, I would answer. I think movies are superior. Not superior in aesthetics or historical importance – those arguments are both subjective and irrelevant to my purpose. I will say, however, based on my experiences in the classroom, that, when passionately pursued, teaching reading strategies (predicting,

responding, questioning, etc.) and literary elements (characterization, tone, foreshadowing, etc.) through film is a superlative way to engage students and activate learning.

In order to prepare students to read film, teachers must first ensure that students have enough knowledge of the language of film to participate in the conversation. As such, I always begin with a general study of the genre, helping students become comfortable with film terminology and technique. For an overview of film terminology and cinematic effects, see the first chapter of Golden's *Reading in the Reel World*. In this chapter, Golden gives a teacher-training course in the basics of film terminology, from lighting and camera angles to sound and editing techniques. I have found it most helpful to offer definitions of the terms to students, then follow up with scenes that demonstrate each technique. Seeing the effects performed is essential to teach students to recognize the effects in subsequent scenes. Teasley and Wilder recommend having students keep a glossary of film terms handy during viewing of the film (21). Once students have a basic understanding of the art of film making, you are ready to begin studying a particular film.

When studying print texts, I never begin without trying to activate students' prior knowledge and experience with a particular theme or subject that our reading will cover. Film study, for me, follows a similar trajectory. I like to begin study of a film with pre-reading (or, in this case, pre-viewing) strategies. I ask the students to respond to general questions related to the tone or conflict in the film. *Who, in your life, inspires you to succeed? How important is honesty? Describe a time when you had a difficult decision to make. How would you react if you found out you had been betrayed?* With questions like these, I try to activate their prior knowledge and experiences so that each of them will have a point of reference by which to judge

the actions of the characters in the film. We discuss their responses as a class before viewing the film and pause as the film progresses to comment on how the characters answer these questions in their own ways. As with novels, students must understand that film makers choose specific techniques and locations in order to convey a message to their audience.

From this point, “reading” a film mirrors, in many ways, reading a book. Though film makers are more apt to use lighting or visual effects as rhetorical strategies, the art of storytelling in film involves utilizing different tools to achieve similar goals. As with my dog-eared copies of classic texts, I make extensive notes on films that I screen for classroom use, highlighting places where I want students to zoom in with their critical lenses. As we progress through the movie, I keep pace to meet my objectives for our study, but without fail, my students (millennials through and through) notice elements of the film that I had missed. Empowered by their view of film as something they “know how to do,” I rarely have to prod them to respond.

While a simple reader-response approach to analyzing a film is certainly a productive way to spend class time, there are many other ways to supplement reading film as text in the classroom. One teacher I know has students choose a particular character in the film and requires them to journal the inner thoughts of that character throughout the film. Another stops the film before the ending and puts the students in groups to allow them to perform skits, predicting in either serious or humorous ways, their guesses at how the film will end. Many teachers will find that, with a bit of tweaking, your favorite assignments for written texts will transfer easily into assignments that accomplish objectives for critical thinking, reflection, and description/narrative skills, with film.

Whatever your course of action, it is important to remember to keep students actively

engaged in thinking and writing during the viewing of the film by encouraging them to “talk back” to the screen frequently. Questions can range from basic interpretations of key characters to predictions of what will happen next—the important thing is that students perceive that you are engaging the film text on a level deeper than mere diversion. Letting the film play for extended periods of time with no interruptions for discussion can be dangerous, as students can easily shift from actively reading a film to passively watching a film. The role of the instructor while reading a film is to find balance: too many pauses for discussion can disrupt the flow of the film and leave students confused. Stopping for too few pauses wastes valuable opportunities to engage students in the film. As such, I pause the action of the film periodically (with no breaks longer than 20 minutes, as a rule) and prompt students with questions that I have outlined beforehand to spark discussion, encourage predictions, and help students connect scenes to overall themes of the work. This type of activity is the very essence of formative assessment: with frequent check-ins, I am assessing my students’ comprehension of plot events within the text while guiding their inferences toward critical thinking about how these actions might relate to broader themes and considerations.

Film can also be useful in the teaching of writing. In my experience, teaching my students the importance of writing descriptively was helped tremendously by “reading” films with great cinematography. How might you capture the icy remnants of the sinking *Titanic* using words? Paying close attention to how film makers use lighting, visual and sound effects to create a mood help my students aim for a visual response from the audience in their descriptive essays. For students who find it difficult to verbalize an author’s use of characterization, imagining (after “reading” film examples of actors crafting believable characters) how they

would view the character performing the actions in a movie is often helpful. With persuasive writing, Golden's suggestions for using documentary (*Reading in the Reel World*) to highlight the director's editorial position provide great discussion about elements of persuasion outside the confines of an English class writing prompt. The results are win-win, as teachers use film to take advantage of the critical literacy opportunities to satisfy educational objectives, while students, engaged in the visual medium, perform literacy tasks under the guise of entertainment.

### *Film as Vegetarian Option: Strategies for Using Film as Co-Text*

While within a food metaphor it might seem fitting to call this mode of film analysis the "side dish" (as it relates to the use of film as a cohesive accompaniment), I am avoiding that turn of phrase because of the connotations of inferiority it carries. Serious film study in the language arts classroom should not be treated as a McDonald's hamburger afterthought: *You want fries with that?* Instead, I find it fitting to describe film being taught alongside its literary counterpart as a vegetarian option – every bit as satisfying as the traditional main course, yet with its own distinct flavors. I imagine a couple enjoying a quiet dinner together; he wants something a little lighter and chooses the linguini marinara, while she orders the veal. The meal progresses with each of them experiencing different tastes, yet savoring in the shared experience of the meal. Each, in turn, offers an opinion about the quality of their selection. They share bites, perhaps even comparing this food to other similar dishes that they have experienced in the past. In the end, they have sampled both selections, the two distinct tastes commingling on their palettes. As they critique the chef's creation, discussing the nuances conveyed in the flavors of each dish, they brainstorm ways to recreate this meal at home.

Those who are interested in providing students with the experience of both the film and

the literary version of a text have a unique opportunity to challenge students through multimodal literacy. By allowing the study of film equal status (even if relegated to limited time) in our lesson plans, we enrich the pleasure of reading in general by varying the tastes available to our pupil's palates, specifically their appetite for the visual. Film, as a medium, is both engaging and unfamiliar (in the sense of an academic focus) to our students. Thus, to position film alongside a literary text within a unit plan allows for both "appetizer" engagement and "main course" critical thinking. In regards to enrichment for our advanced students, the challenge of reading two modes of text simultaneously engages higher order thinking and opens doors for making connections between the two genres. For students who are struggling readers, the co-existence of film and verbal text scaffolds literacy objectives by appealing to the needs of diverse learners.

Because of time constraints, approaching film as a "co-text" will mean limiting the number of scenes so that the overall message of the film is intact. Just as when film is the primary text, teachers will want to be sure that students know enough basic film terminology to participate actively in discussion, especially comparison and contrast. Since reading both genres simultaneously will require additional time, teachers should direct learning activities toward pivotal scenes. In the past, I have opted to utilize film more frequently at the beginning (for exposition) and the end (for resolution) of films, selecting only the scenes in the middle of the film that help bridge the narrative or apply to themes.

One approach that has worked well when co-teaching a film and a novel is storyboarding. After reading a particular passage, I ask students to draw on story board worksheets, setting up the scene exactly as they would like it if they were to be responsible for directing. If we are working with an adaptation, we then compare their results to the choices made by the director in

the film version. If we are using a film that is not an adaptation, I ask the students to perform the scene themselves, prompting discussion among the rest of the class about how realistic the interpretation is. Another approach is to divide students into groups, assigning each group a specific literary element to consider. While working together, have the students list scenes where the element can be found in the book as well as in the film. Then prompt them to discuss: in their opinion, which text did a better job of showcasing that element? Were the approaches similar or radically different? This can be an excellent way to review film terminology (lighting, camera angles, sound) and literary elements (characterization, tone, foreshadowing) in ways that help students to make connections between the two genres.

Wherever you place film on your pedagogical plate, there is one spot that I hope teachers will shy away from: film as dessert. By placing film at the end of the unit as a “treat”, we are perpetuating the notion that film exists only to be a visual form of Spark Notes. By allowing the film to run from start to finish without guiding and instructing our students to analyze parallels between the two genres, we miss a valuable opportunity for giving our students eyes to read multiple media. If we can leave our preconceived notions about film behind, we can achieve our language arts objectives while appealing to the visual preferences of our audience. With a bit of effort, students can be re-trained away from their “movie as free day” mindsets, and both students and teachers will find reading film in the classroom to be a rewarding experience.

### *Hamlet on Film: Three Approaches*

Bringing Shakespeare’s Hamlet to center stage for the moment, I hope to further illuminate the distinctions among these three approaches by applying each of them to a single text. Because Hamlet is a staple for 12<sup>th</sup> grade literature in my high school, I have had the

opportunity to teach it many times. As I am sure is true for many teachers, I have never taught it the same way twice. From my days as a “print text only” purist to a recent grading period where I taught a film version as the primary text, the success I have discovered in increased comprehension and critical analysis among struggling readers, as well as the challenge presented to my gifted students for responding to similar subject matter in varying genres can attest to the incredible versatility of film as a classroom tool. It is my hope that this section will put practical roots beneath the ideas expressed in the previous section. I have outlined it as a menu of lesson plan options, with brief descriptions of time and resources required.

#### *Appetizer Menu*

- Compare and Contrast: Choose a specific scene from Hamlet and allow students to compare and contrast it across several film versions. Encourage students to pay attention to lighting, camera work, setting, etc. After writing down impressions about each clip, have students return to the text to discuss the merits or shortcomings of each interpretation.

Encourage them to pay close attention to the following: the setting of the scene, the presence of props, the use of special effects, as well as the actor’s voice (inflection, pacing), his/her facial expressions and bodily movements. These considerations can later be transferred into talking about how writers use visual elements (tone, irony, foreshadowing) to achieve the same effect. This idea works particularly well with the Ghost scene, Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy, and Ophelia’s mad scene, as each director makes staging decisions that change these pivotal scenes from version to version.

- Soliloquy Study: Having an apathetic adolescent stumble through Shakespeare’s

language is no way to experience some of the most famous lines in the history of language. Instead, choose a particular soliloquy and have students listen as it is delivered in one or more of the film versions of Hamlet.

Ask the students to respond to key phrases within the soliloquy. Another idea is to begin by having students mark areas of the soliloquies that they do not understand, asking again after the viewing to see if the visual aid was helpful.

Compare a particular soliloquy across two or more versions of the film. Encourage students to note changes in the setting of the scene, the presence/use of props, the use of special effects, as well as the actor's voice (inflection, pacing), his facial expressions and bodily movements.

This idea works well with the Laurence Olivier (1948) and Almereyda (2000) versions of Hamlet, for the sharp contrast between the two. Olivier's portrayal of the soliloquy is in black and white, speaking in voiceover as internal dialogue, while Almereyda's version is quoted by Ethan Hawke as Hamlet paces through a Blockbuster video store. This is an excellent opportunity for discussing tone and characterization, as well as how the performance considerations of film (setting, lighting, camera angles, etc.) help shape our view of the original text.

- Themes and Scenes: Use clips from a film version of your choice to draw attention to thematic concerns, both from within and outside the original text. Drawing from universal themes like family, the Oedipus complex, vengeance, young love, masculinity, and femininity, ask students to view selected film clips as Shakespeare's thesis on the issue.

This lesson can be presented in several ways, depending on time and available resources. The first option, if time is limited, is to use a single film adaptation, selecting scenes that fit each theme and spreading the lesson out over several days. Student responses can be completed as bell ringer or journaling assignments.

If you can find two or three different versions of Hamlet adaptations, you might compare and contrast the way different actors and actresses portray their characters' attitudes concerning these themes. For example, you might have students focus on the ways that different actresses convey Gertrude's love for Claudius or Ophelia's innocence as a take on 16th century embodiments of femininity.

If you have access to multiple television screens (or if you can structure class time so that students can rotate using one screen) you might divide students into groups and have each group "read" a clip in relation to a theme, making notes and having small group discussion. Each group would then report its reading for the class.

Yet another option is to select films that address a particular theme but are seemingly unrelated to Hamlet. Choosing contemporary films that students find accessible and then linking these films to themes present in Hamlet is an excellent way to "teach for transfer" as well as engage struggling or unmotivated readers.

### *Vegetarian Entrees*

Whether your aim is for greater engagement, more in-depth critical thinking, or simply less whining, lesson plans designed around dividing time equally between the written text and film study should aim to play to the strengths of each medium. Scenes where dialogue serves to explicate the plot (e.g. the conversation between Claudius and Laertes in Act Four, scene seven)

are straightforward and can easily be tackled as independent reading, while scenes involving spectacle or difficult language (e.g. the ghost scene, Hamlet's soliloquies) are mediated best by film. As such, the first step in this dual-text model should be to draw out a plan that integrates both media into the study of Hamlet in meaningful ways.

Rather than try to accommodate all film versions and all possible schedules for integrating the two, I will instead offer my list of "must see" scenes. Each of the scenes listed below, in my opinion, provides students with a visual representation of the text that is beneficial to understanding the subtleties in Shakespeare's art. My goals when using these scenes are to engage students in an analysis of the performance itself (a very different animal than simply reading aloud) of Shakespeare, as well as to help them analyze the ways that the elements of performance (staging, lighting, actors, costumes) can shape our interpretations of the play to the point where the same print text can be represented in two very different ways. Each of the scenes listed below provides an opportunity for critical thinking about the common conventions that fill our classroom discussions on print texts (setting, characterization, themes, etc.), with the added layer of examining how visual effects interplay with our interpretations. While my favorite adaptation to use in the classroom is the 1996 *Hamlet*, which was directed by Kenneth Branagh (see next section for further explication), there are many film versions that play these scenes well. The scenes that, in my opinion, represent the most fruitful places for engaged class discussion are as follows (in chronological order):

- Act One, scene one: This scene is beneficial for establishing setting, and the foreboding early sighting of the ghost sets the tone for the play.
- Act One, scene two: From the speech by Claudius to Hamlet's first soliloquy, this scene

is powerful in its staging of Hamlet's plight. The Branagh version, in particular, is an aesthetic marvel, with a dramatic pan away from the coronation to an isolated Hamlet whose black garb is a stark contrast to the reveling.

- Act One, scenes four and five: Hamlet's dialogue with the ghost of his father is of great import to our reading of him for the rest of the play. The ominous imagery used in this scene makes for a heart-pounding film scene.
- Act Two, scene two [lines 549-606]: Hamlet's "what a rogue and peasant slave am I" soliloquy gives the audience another glimpse of his self-doubt.
- Act Three, scene one: Hamlet's conversation with Ophelia is laden with speculation about their past; several versions use flashback to fill in details.
- Act Three, scene two: In addition to the reaction of Claudius, the performance of the players provides a glimpse into theatrical performance in the time of Shakespeare.
- Act Three, scene four: Hamlet's interaction with his mother in this scene is pivotal in characterizing her involvement in/knowledge concerning the death of King Hamlet.
- Act Four, scene five: Ophelia's descent into madness is best enjoyed in performance.
- Act Five, scene one: Although focused study of the footnotes may be required to elucidate Shakespeare's play with words, the comic overtones in this scene work best when students can view the back and forth between characters.
- Act Five, scene two: While the actions at play's end are easily understood using the text alone, the intensity of the play's climax on film makes for an adrenaline-fueled post-reading discussion.

Teachers using this approach to teaching with film should look for every opportunity to

create connections (or outline disparities) between the two genres. Among the different versions, the choice of setting, casting of characters, and editing choices provide fertile ground for discussing how interpretations of a single source can vary significantly. To keep students engaged in the lesson, plan activities that will allow them to be an active participant in the process of film adaptation. In one class, I had students work in groups to cast their own film adaptation. Using a prompt, the students were required to submit plans for costumes, set design, and level of fidelity to the original. While some of the responses were more comic than tragic, the students reveled in the opportunity to play director.

For a class that featured several struggling readers, I had students create life-sized silhouettes of the main characters using a large roll of butcher paper. The students labeled the silhouettes by character name and hung them on the wall in our classroom. Using the written text, we examined dialogue between the characters to determine fitting adjectives to describe each character. Throughout our viewing of the film, the silhouettes served as a reference point. During definitive scenes, the students were asked to compare the performance of key characters in the film to their estimations of each character. This assignment sparked great discussion about individual actors and their perceptions of Shakespeare's vision. One student, the lone defender of Gertrude in the class, was incensed by Glenn Close's lascivious portrayal of her. As students argued back and forth, I required that any opinion be coupled with a textual reference. In this instance, using film as a parallel text provided a lightning rod for critical thinking about the character of Gertrude.

It is certainly no secret that each class of students is different. As such, teachers should test the lesson ideas above to determine which adaptations or scenes are most effective for

motivating and engaging students. If resources are scarce and only a single version is available, have no fear. The critical thinking inspired by reading between two different types of texts is by different activities than the last. Thus, many of these strategies will need to be tweaked according to the needs of specific students. Across the board, however, teaching film as an equal text requires a keen eye for relevant intersections between the two genres.

### *Film as Main Course*

Because my overall strategies for teaching a full-length film are quite close to the vegetarian options outlined above (with a more in-depth, comprehensive approach), the only thing I will add in this section is a recommendation and a forewarning. The recommendation is that you use Branagh's 1996 film adaptation of *Hamlet*. Of all the versions I have seen, Branagh's is unparalleled in its art. As the most comprehensive (every word is verbatim from both the F1 and Q2 texts) production yet, Branagh's version is also likely to be the most compelling for contemporary students, with sharp cinematography and vibrant action scenes.

Shakespeare did not write plays so that audiences would recline on benches and read them silently. Shakespeare wrote plays to be performed. Now for the forewarning: when you decide to teach film as primary text, be sure you know why you are deciding to do so. While there is much ink being spilled about the benefits of media literacy, you will likely encounter opposition (either from colleagues or parents) about your decision to replace a traditional text with a less-traditional one. If and when such opposition comes, it will benefit you greatly to be prepared for it. I suggest that you keep your primary goals close at hand. For me, as each lesson unfolds, I ask myself if the way we are viewing the film is truly engaging students. I question whether the technology we are using is instructive for our literacy goals. I also hold myself

accountable concerning my leadership/modeling of “talkback” to the screen, making sure that students are participants, not observers. Answering in the affirmative to such questions puts me on firm pedagogical ground to defend my instructional choice to use film and other media in the classroom.

Finally, I would instruct teachers who wish to use film in the classroom to engage in the type of film-literate practices that we desire for our students. Strengthen your media literacy muscles by viewing and responding critically to films and television shows—from hard-hitting foreign dramas to reality TV shows. Some of my best ideas for in-class analysis of popular culture have come at times when I was enjoying film for entertainment purposes only. By inadvertently embodying my own pedagogical goals, it has become difficult for me (much to the chagrin of my husband-and-movie date) to view “film as text” without immediately wanting to dissect it and discuss the film techniques and literary elements within it. Just as teachers clip editorials from the newspapers and snap pictures on vacations to historic landmarks so that we can use these in our classrooms, we should also be tuning our antennae to films and other visual media that would be engaging or enlightening within our curriculums. While an academic appraisal of your favorite new romantic comedy might impinge on your leisurely enjoyment of it, there are a myriad of potential classroom gems waiting to be found on the silver screen.

## *Chapter Four: English Instruction Finds a New G.I.G.:*

### *Gadgets, Internet, and Games in the Classroom*

So far we have looked into ways to foster student engagement and critical thinking through the vehicles of music and film, two areas where most of us have plenty of experience as patrons. The challenge in these areas has been to take a familiar form of entertainment and strategize ways to approach it in the classroom: to move from a position in which we are comfortable (listener/viewer) to a position which places some responsibilities upon us (mediator). Easy enough. Yet, for those who would mark Flickr as a misspelling and who think tweeting is only for birds, this chapter might seem a bit more intimidating. Fear not. For while the types of media described in this chapter might be new, each medium described in this chapter is simply a means to a pedagogical end. While the techniques and tools have modern appeal, the instructional goals (reading comprehension, textual analysis, critical thinking, argument formation, etc.) are the same. While I did not start my classroom teaching familiar with these tools, I shifted toward them for one reason: my students. As the research provided in Chapter 2 reveals, the gadgets and games described in this chapter represent our students' interests in the present and where education is headed for the future. The reason I continue to trial-and-error my way through these new technologies is because they work.

Growing in my knowledge of digital literacies has caused a dramatic shift in my pedagogy, giving me access to my students on a level that I hadn't previously been able to reach. Though I had noticed the influx of digital gadgets that my students carried around with them, I had never considered using them as a tool for transporting learning objectives out into the "real world." In addition to increasing student engagement, learning to be content with the knowledge

that there were students in class who knew more than I did about these tools was ultimately freeing. Looking back, I am not sure that I fully understood student-centered teaching until I found myself being taught by my students. Allowing them to use their own tools while actively guiding them through critical thinking about the rhetorical situation present within these new media was a great success, and I cannot imagine going back to the pencil-and-paper-only days of English instruction.

Realizing that this might not be the case in most classrooms, I would like take a brief detour before engaging in classroom practices to examine the question: *why*? The answer to this is more complex than I had originally supposed. Though I had assumed that all classrooms must lack integrated technologies because of inadequate funding, I soon learned that the issue was not so simple. In fact, I learned that during much of the time that I had failed to utilize technology in the classroom, there were resources available from within my school—and grant money available through outside sources. Though my district was not state-of-the-art by any stretch of the imagination, I wasn't using the resources that were available to me. Though there were areas where lack of funding for technology hamstrung tech-savvy educators, my failure to use new media was due to a lack of awareness on my part. Research shows that my lack of interest was not unusual. In fact, due to funding from federal, state, and local initiatives, “schools spent an estimated \$6.9 billion in 1999 on desktop computers, servers, routers, wiring, Internet access, software, and everything else involved in making modern technology available” (Kleiman, “Myths and Realities,” par. 1). Yet, despite efforts to increase the technologies available to students and teachers, research compiled by Cuban, Kirkpatrick, and Peck found that greater access did not translate into greater usage, citing that “nationally, most teachers and students are

occasional to rare users (at least once a month) or they are nonusers of these machines in classrooms for instruction” (815). In her book *Toys to Tools: Connecting Student Cell Phones to Education*, Liz Kolb contends that the ways in which technology is introduced to teachers might be a source of the problem. When technology is handed down from administrators in what Cuban (1986) described as a “top-down” approach, the result is a forced usage of specific technologies that are chosen by the powers that be. What students want most is to use their tools in their own ways. Reversing the trend of technological mandates, Kolb argues, “constitutes a bottom-up approach to technology in the classroom, in which the students (not the teachers) are the community of learners who are ‘proposing’ the technologies used in the classroom” (9). As teachers, we must be attuned to the tools our students are already engaged in using, and then find ways to use those tools to accomplish our purposes for multiple literacies.

Going forward, the shift toward the multi-modal literacies described in this chapter requires teachers to progress from being attuned to being involved—even with tools that we might have previously viewed as inappropriate for classroom use. “Our students’ realities in terms of the way they communicate and learn are very different from our own,” says Will Richardson, a former teacher and successful blog author, and “by and large, they are ‘out there’ using a wide variety of technologies that they are told they can’t use when they come to school” (5). In an effort to entice teachers toward bringing those literacies into the classroom conversation, this chapter will address a number of gadgets, internet sites, and games that can be used as more than distraction from the “real work” done in schools. In addition to a brief description of the tools themselves, I will provide examples (again using Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*) for ways in which these tools can be implemented within standards-based instructional practices.

A primary concern (and rightly so) for parents as well as educators when using digital tools is student safety. Richardson, who wrote *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms*, offers several suggestions for keeping students safe. First, teachers should make sure that students, parents, and even administrators have been informed of the expectations for the using the web tools in the classroom. Identifying your purpose and providing reasoning can go a long way to assuage parental concerns. When online, encourage students to use only first names and to refrain from revealing personal information. In addition, many of the web tools I reference in this chapter have options that feature privacy settings and/or allow students to participate in a closed network. Above all, keep students safe by remaining a constant presence in monitoring their digital usage.

#### *Gadgets: Silent Phones and Speaking Photographs*

Want to raise the blood pressure of a teacher? Ask him/her to offer an opinion about cell phones in the classroom. They ring. They sing (often blaring classroom-inappropriate music). They vibrate, beep, and buzz teachers into a frenzy and cause the students who can't live without them to suffer disciplinary consequences. At my high school, there is a worn path from teachers carting the phones up to the principal's office, only to be interrupted by the same incoming calls and messages again the next day. The situation would be comical, if not so unnerving, as it seems that these tiny mobile devices have exposed serious gaps between existing school policies and what—in a post-Colombine era where parents are as adamant about students' rights to carry cell phones as the students themselves—can actually be done about the problem.

I have no ingenious solutions to offer, just a controversial question: what if we were to put these mini-computers to real academic use in our classrooms? Rather than trying to stem the

tide against the 73% of students in grades 9-12 (“Project Tomorrow”) who use a cell phone daily, teachers should turn all that buzzing and beeping into curriculum fodder. As the old adage about “idle hands” instructs, the key to preventing misbehavior with cell phones might just be to sanction relevant activities for cell phone usage. Just as teachers have learned that it is better to put the “can’t sit still” student to work passing out papers and transcribing notes to the board, good classroom management seeks to find alternative ways to handle recurring discipline issues. If cell phones were not viewed as contraband, possession of a cell phone could be documented, so that teachers could dictate when they would be used (for quick “txt” assessments or podcasting) and when they would be stored (to eliminate cheating on tests). Parents would sign off on a list of usage rules for cell phones, and students caught breaking rules would lose cell phone privileges.

The pedagogical possibilities for cell phones are varied, and their potential grows with advances in technology. No funding to buy proprietary clickers, the hand-held rapid classroom response gadgets with the hefty price tag? Try using Polleverywhere.com, a free service that provides multiple choice and free response polls that students can answer by texting from their cell phones. Are your aural learners having trouble with the poetry unit? Record select poems on a podcast using their phone or a computer with a program like Gcast, and students will have audio accompaniment to homework reading. All of this – without the distraction of the sudden, clandestine ringing.

Sill not convinced? If having students use cell phones in the classroom is either against administrative rules or simply more than you can stomach, there are ways to access the interest sparked by student cell phone use without bringing phones out in class. One of the first (and still

superlative) of my experiences transferring students' love for technology into interest in (or at least tolerance of) Shakespeare was an assignment that not only allowed but *required* students to use the abbreviated language of text messaging. After hearing nonstop complaints about the opacity of the language in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* from a group of remedial English IV students, I presented them with a challenge. "You think Shakespeare's language isn't hip enough for your modern vernacular?" I questioned them. "Then fix it." Once they realized that "fix it" meant they'd be able to use "txt" language (normally forbidden in their formal papers) for a class assignment, I had them hooked.

I told the students to choose either Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy or the conversation between Hamlet and Ophelia that follows it in Act 3, scene 1. They were to transcribe either text, moving from Shakespeare's language into the language they would use to text message a friend. The results were nothing short of shocking. Even *that* guy who always sleeps (and every class has one) raised his head to mumble a few suggestions for how to "trick out" Shakespeare's poetic prose. Though I am certain there was a cemetery plot churning at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford when I read the line "Grrl u 4 real? i nvr lovd u" (3.1.119-20), I felt a sense of pride knowing that my students, motivated by their penchant for texting, had engaged in "real" critical analysis of the play. Sure, the real reason that they were actually reading the footnotes, asking me questions, and performing "close reading" was so that they could vandalize the prose of the world's most famous writer, but I'll take what I can get. After all, my objectives are to teach them how to "improve comprehension by interpreting, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating written text" ("English IV", 2.04). I don't see anything in that statement that implies said comprehension need result in exaltation of the assigned text. The

important thing to note about this exercise is that Shakespeare didn't become more exciting. His language didn't become more accessible. The students bought into the assignment because it validated their 21<sup>st</sup> Century experience while challenging them to speak the language of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Additionally, it sparked a great discussion about discourse communities and the rhetorical triangle. Sanctioning text message lingo on this assignment helped me to instruct them on the importance of tailoring your language to your audience and occasion. This continues to be one of the favorite assignments of the unit.

Though not as abundant as cell phones, digital cameras are another must-have gadget among high school students. Between 60-70% of students own a digital camera (Rainie), and even those who do not own their own camera often have access to a family member's camera or own a cell phone with a built-in camera. The prevalence of cameras in the classroom is a great opportunity for teachers, who can engage students with digital technology at little or no cost. Furthermore, placing students behind the camera as creators of an image reinforces how elements of "composing" in visual literacy (e.g. paying attention to framing, lighting, perspective) mirror elements of written composition (e.g. structure, diction, tone). Though students are presented with a barrage of images each day, many of them are unschooled in the elements of visual and graphic design. Using journalistic photographs, I begin teaching students to analyze visual elements within a photograph by asking them to "tell me the story" of a particular snapshot. We then focus on ways that photos can achieve other purposes of composition, from description (with lighting and color mimicking sensory details) to persuasion (with close examination of perspective, framing, and editing).

Photo essays are also a great way to emphasize thematic elements within a text. I often

present students with open-ended questions relative to the theme of a text and ask that they craft a response in the form of either a single photo or multiple photos arranged to communicate a message. At the beginning of a literature unit on love and romance, I once unleashed my student photographers with the assignment to find “a scene that communicates love without words.” We practiced “reading” images of love that I had selected from photo archives for classroom use until students felt confident enough to go behind the lens. It was remarkable to see how the students, even those who were shy about presenting in front of the class, took pride in the pictures they had taken. From an extreme close-up of a dog lick in progress, to elderly grandparents holding hands, to a graffiti display on an abandoned building, the students were composing images that communicated resonant messages. Listening to them analyze and explain their interpretations of the photographs to the class was an excellent substitute for the standard five-paragraph essay assessment.

To move toward digital photography, students can publish and store the photos that they have taken by using Flickr.com. Deemed “one of the best sites on the web” for its educational potential (Richardson 100), Flickr combines photography and social networking. Teachers create a class “group” (either public or private) where comments and connections between images can be made. Registration is free, and in addition to their own photos, students will have access to view any of the 25 million photos stored by others in the Creative Commons areas. All images can be searched, and many of them can be downloaded (with attribution) and used for other class projects, such as blogs or wikis. Even if you don’t plan to use your own cameras, Flickr can still be a useful resource. Students can search through public photos, many of which could be useful in a literary unit. A search for “Stratford-upon-Avon” would allow students to

view, share, and comment on images from Shakespeare's birthplace. A more creative assignment (sure to provide *interesting* interpretations of Shakespearean characters) is to ask students to use the candid photos and self-portraits that are posted in the Creative Commons area to "cast" a film version of Hamlet. The students should choose a photo representation for each of the main characters, using the annotations feature to describe how aspects of the photo match attributes of the character. Classmates can then view the photos of their peers and respond using the comments feature. While students are seemingly "playing" online, you get the benefit of assessing their interpretations of Shakespeare's characters.

#### *New Verbs on the Internet: Blogging, Friending, Tweeting*

Blogs. Wikis. Tweets. The latest fads on the internet seem more like science fiction creatures than classroom tools, and their exotic names make them an even tougher sell to technophobic teachers. However, if we really mean what we say when we claim to want to "meet students where they are," then we need to be prepared to visit an IP address. More than 70 percent of our students use social networking sites. Fifty-four percent read blogs regularly, while 30 percent write regularly on blogs (Rainie). And this activity is coming from students who will often not read or write *one word* of a homework assignment. Anyone else thinking "the time is out of joint" here? Any time my normally apathetic students are reading and writing for fun—regardless of where it takes place—I am interested. And while I understand (and have come up against) the pitfalls of unleashing students into the wild world of the Web, savvy teachers can use these online tools in ways that engage students *and* enhance learning. In this section, I will offer a brief explanation of each web resource, followed by a list of one or two relevant activities that teachers could immediately put to use in their classrooms.

### *Web Logs (also known as Blogs)*

In its simplest form, a blog is a website that allows its author to easily upload and update information instantly to the Internet. Blogs have become popular sites for personal journaling, news reporting, political commentary, product reviews, and just about every other topic one might write about. A key feature of blogs is the ability for others to comment on the writing you publish—which is where the educational possibilities for blogs begin. First, because many hosting sites like Blogger.com make publishing your writing so easy, blogs are a perfect tool for teachers who want to wade into the waters of technology in the classroom. Secondly, because blogs are so popular—two new blogs are formed every second (Richardson 19)—your students feel as if they have an authentic audience for the work they create. And because hosting sites make it easy to password-protect your site (which can be good or bad, depending on how much you value reason two), teachers can have as much control as they choose to have over what gets published and who gets to read it. Blogs are also a great way to communicate class policies and assignments to parents.

Many teachers who use blogs, however, say the best feature of blogs is the added sense of community that sharing thoughts online can bring. Blogging allows discussion to continue outside the classroom, with daily classroom discussions spilling into homework posts about new insights into the assigned text. “Maybe it’s because on a blog, the loud ones can’t dominate and the aggressive ones can’t interrupt,” one teacher says, “and yet there must be more to it, because even the shy kids tend to contribute to these blogs, even the sullen ones, even the alienated students who hate school” (Ansary, “Blogs Invade Classrooms!” par. 8). Often, students report that the perceived distancing of the audience on a blog frees them to say what they really think,

while the extra time to write out their opinions helps them to better articulate their thoughts.

In addition to the more common uses of classroom blogs (answering response questions for a work of literature, journaling a reaction to a reading assignment, etc.) teachers should brainstorm ways to allow students to express creativity through their blogs. Allowing them to change colors, fonts, to specialize the background on their blogs gives them a more personal feel. Uploading pictures and video can be a way to integrate the students' writing with activities from the previous section on digital photography—providing a teachable moment to instruct them in the ways that words and visual images can overlap in making meaning.

Drawing from our reading of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, I created an assignment where I ask students to blog "in character." They choose from a list of characters, and then they select a scene from a list of interesting moments from the play. Writing from within the play gives students a new conception of characterization, as well as an outlet to take creative license with Shakespeare's storyline. What might Claudius have said if he had been blogging during the weeks leading up to the first scene? How might Gertrude's blog on the coronation reveal her complicity or innocence? What if Ophelia had rushed to her laptop instead of that fated pool? While these assignments could, of course, be completed with pencil and paper, there is a quality to the online posts of my students that I can only surmise must be related to the knowledge that *anyone*—not just their nerdy English teacher—might read what they have written. Student compositions go from blasé to blog-caliber, with just a few clicks of the mouse.

#### *Wikis: Where Everyone Is In On the Fun*

While many of the English teachers I know are unfamiliar with wikis, I have learned that their interest or aversion in this technological tool relates directly to the way I present a

definition of the tool. If I simply explain that a wiki is a collaborative space on the web where any user can add or edit content, I will usually get a vacant stare, a slight smile, and a nod. If, either because I mistakenly offer it or because the person asks, I offer Wikipedia as an example of a wiki, I get an altogether different reaction. The face contorts, as if in some odd spasm, the eyebrows furrow, and the lips purse in disdain. “Wikipedia?” they shriek. “What kind of English teacher are you?” And I deserve it. Because I know better. Everyone, or at least everyone within the inner circle English teachers, knows that there are three evils in the world that are to be avoided at all costs: Wikipedia, Spark Notes, and superfluous punctuation!!! Most of the time, I realize the folly in trying to change such deeply held beliefs, but the Denver Post offered a response to the charges of inaccuracy by conducting a field study in which experts “graded” Wikipedia after reviewing sites within their respective fields. The result? “Four out of five agreed their relevant Wikipedia entries are accurate, informative, comprehensive, and a great resource for students” (Booth, “Grading Wikipedia,” par. 5). Another experiment conducted by University of Buffalo Professor Alex Halavais sought to test how effective the collaborative site would be at correcting misinformation by vandals. Halavais created thirteen errors on various sites on Wikipedia, all of which were corrected within a couple of hours (Halavais, “The Isuzu Experiment”). While these endorsements are certainly not irrefutable, I would argue that teachers should allow students to begin their research on Wikipedia, then train them to use information found there to seek out more scholarly sources. Rather than taking the easy road of banning Wikipedia “because I said so,” using this option allows me to explain to students why other sites have higher credibility. Knowing how to identify a scholarly source (rather than just avoid a questionable one) is exactly the type of digital literacy skill that will

benefit our 21<sup>st</sup> Century learners.

Ironically, the arguments against Wikipedia as a valid source of information are the same reasons that wikis make a great resource for English classrooms. Wikis allow each and every student to alter content, giving even the most timid learners the power to alter the outcome. The collaboration takes place within virtual space online, opening doors for your students to share space with students across the hall or around the world. Working together, you can create an online text for your classrooms that both you and the students will be able to modify. Just like with blogs, students can upload videos, Power Point presentations, and spreadsheets. Yet, unlike blogs, students share space, creating an opportunity for collaborative discussions about what should be included, as well as spontaneous peer editing. “In using wikis, students are not only learning how to publish content; they are also learning how to develop and use all sorts of collaborative skills, negotiating with others to agree on correctness, meaning, relevance, and more” (Richardson 61).

How might a wiki work in a unit on Shakespeare? What if, instead of a unit test on Hamlet, you were to give students the option to create a wiki page on the play? You could divide them into groups, assigning each group a specific aspect of the play (or, if you choose to divide it sequentially, a section of the text) to develop expertise in. Once completed, you would have a highly accurate resource on the play which could be used with subsequent classes—or even shared with other English classes around the world. This type of assignment encompasses the multiple literacies that our students need, while producing an “end product” that is certainly more impressive than a bubble exam.

*Social Networking Sites: Tweet Your Students As You Would Like to Be Tweeted*

While one need only look to the 6 o'clock news to find reasons why teachers and students interacting on social networking sites is a bad idea, we must resist the push to toss the proverbial baby out with the bath water. While navigating potential hazards is perhaps more difficult with social networks than with wikis, many of the activities that students engage in on these sites can be transferred into the serious work we want from them in the classroom.

With more than half of our students as registered users, social network sites like MySpace and Facebook have taken the teen social scene online—a fact that has many parents and teachers concerned about privacy and safety. As English teachers, we try to help our students express themselves. As teachers who try to promote media literacy, we try to help our students become active and perceptive readers of online content. As such, we must not fail to address the space in which those two entities collide. We owe it to our students to foster critical thinking about the content they create online, for this is a place where all of that talk in Composition classes about audience and tone is a real-world issue. In my class, I try to help my students become “critical readers” of the sites themselves. What tactics do the sites use to target teens? What persuasive techniques are employed by the advertisers? What rhetorical strategies do members use to give an impression of themselves? Because I am aware of the connectedness many students feel using these sites, I am careful not to disparage them, but I do try to get students to think critically rather than participate mindlessly.

For those who want to use the social network format without the risks associated with public social networks, sites such as imbee.com and Learning Landscape for Schools (<http://www.ll4schools.co.uk/>) offer many of the same functions as MySpace and Facebook, but

on a closed network that protects students. Once safety is in place, teachers can present many opportunities for students to showcase creativity in a format that they take ownership of. With the potential to upload music and pictures, multiple literacies come in to play using social networks. Students might create a page “in character,” selecting a character and modifying the page according to their interpretation of Shakespeare’s creation. What music would Hamlet have playing in the background? Who would be in his “Top 8”? What might Ophelia have posted on her wall? What might Claudius choose to reveal in a “25 Things About Me” meme? Once the pages are created, students can visit friends’ pages and post comments. Teachers could also ask students to respond via comments to questions posted on the class page.

If you’re looking for a social networking site with “more matter and less art,” then consider Twitter. At Twitter.com, students can send quick updates to anyone who has signed up to “follow” them. The posts are limited to 140 characters (since, after all, brevity is the soul of ... nevermind), which are called “tweets.” The character limitation is a great challenge for students, as we are perpetually asking them to be clear and concise, cutting messages down to their purest form. While a network like this could get out of hand in the classroom, this tool might work well for keeping students in community while they are at home completing homework assignments. Imagine sending your students home with instructions to post a tweet that adds one line to a scene in Shakespeare’s play. One line can easily be written in 140 characters (with room reserved for act and scene references, of course). Furthermore, the process of coming up with a line to tweet (as in the “Shakespeare into txt language” assignment) would engage students’ critical literacy skills as they perform a close reading of the text.

A quick search of the web reveals that businesses and teachers alike are finding ways to

use this new (introduced in 2006) micro-blogging tool. A professor at University of California, Berkeley requires that his students tweet via SocialText.net during class—creating a space where they can ask questions and archive insightful comments from classmates as an addition to their notes. The *Los Angeles Times* covered a Copyblogger’s Twitter Writing Contest in which participants were required to write a short story (TwitLit, as it is called) in 140 characters or less. Ron Gould won the prize for this piece:

*"'Time travel works!' the note read. 'However you can only travel to the past and one-way.' I recognized my own handwriting and felt a chill"* (Guynn “What a Tweet It Is”).

I immediately entered the assignment on my lesson plan for next week.

#### *Video Games: Not Just for Avoiding Homework Anymore*

In an effort at maintaining transparency, I will admit that video games are a subject that I know very little about. Blogging—sure. Social Networks—been there, done that. Yet, as a professed bibliophile, I simply cannot imagine that, if given a choice as to how to spend my Saturday afternoon, I would ever choose to play a video game rather than read Annie Dillard—for the third time. I do not understand the whole video games thing. *But*. My students do. Not only do they understand them, but they explain their understanding of them with such complex narrative schemes and technical jargon that I was curious enough to research video games for this project. As I researched, I was taken aback at all the teachers and researchers and non-gamers like myself who have had their opinions changed about the utility of video games to enhance student learning.

Again, I will be honest. I am not a total convert. I am not prepared to say, for instance, that playing *World of Warcraft* is just as important to the intellectual development of a student as

reading Shakespeare. There may come a day when that is the predominant view in education, and if so, I hope that I am long gone when that day comes. What I am prepared to say is that video games are far more complex than I had given them credit for. I will say that the critical thinking skills required in some of the upper tier video games would be useful in varied areas of schooling. For my own purposes, I will also attest, based on classroom experiences, that video games are an excellent tool for engaging students in the study of fiction. While I haven't been converted to a gamer, I have used the language of video games to communicate messages to my students that I fear they might not have heard otherwise.

James Paul Gee, a professor of literacy at Arizona State University, has written many books in praise of video games as tools for learning. With a critical eye toward the absence of technology in today's classrooms, Gee argues that "kids today are seeing more power-performanced learning in their popular culture than they're seeing in their schools" (Foreman, "Game-Based Learning"). Gee's argument echoes in the complaints I hear from students. They insist that school is boring, that they simply cannot learn in the school environment. Marc Prensky, founder of the e-learning company Games2Train, agrees. "Lectures are just one tape recorder talking to another," Prensky says. "Some people can learn that way ... but I think we are going to wind up with other methodologies, and I just hope that any class with more than ten people will become a thing of the past" (Foreman, "Game-Based Learning"). While I doubt the educational system will undergo such a radical change in the span of my career, I do agree with Prensky's assertion that, as teachers, our methods need revision. Though I do not allow games to take the place of canonical texts in my curriculum, I do encourage students to bring their knowledge of games alongside the texts that we read. I offer games as "digital literacy options"

on class projects. And though I am, as I have said, largely uninformed about the games themselves, I use my lack of expertise as yet another opportunity to put my student-centered philosophy to the test. So far, I have found that students are so enthralled by the opportunity to work in a medium they are passionate about that they use that passion to produce work that shows considerable critical thought. Therefore, my appeal to English teachers is not as revolutionary as Gee or Prensky, but I would urge colleagues in the field to at least give games—or game-themed assignment options—a try.

On a practical level, games work well in several areas of English pedagogy. In the past, I have had students submit gaming presentations instead of speeches alongside process essays, which worked well and were much more interesting than endless stream of cookie baking presentations. I have also used the subject of games in persuasive essays, asking students who were gamers to argue the validity of games to me, providing evidence of their educational value. Not only did I receive well-written arguments, but the students were asked to think about games in a critical way that had not occurred to them before. They certainly did not play games for educational value, but the process of creating an argument allowed them to pursue that line of inquiry. This assignment could work with other persuasive topics that might interest them as well—for example, an argument explaining why a particular game is better than another, or a position on whether the violence in video games is damaging to the kids who play them. In each of these assignments, the expectations for writing (attention to organization, central thesis claim, support/evidence, tone, diction, etc.) do not change, but the level of engagement certainly does.

In units on literature, teachers might consider ways to use games to aid in discussions of characterization. Most games today require that players create an avatar, a representation of

himself/herself or an alter ego used to participate in the game. The decisions made to create these avatars mirror, in some ways, the author's intent with building characters in a work of fiction. In a multi-media assignment, you could ask students to create avatars for the cast of *Hamlet*, requiring that they think through the choices that they make and explain how those choices fit Shakespeare's characterization. Or, in a short writing assignment, you might ask students to freewrite about a difficult choice they faced in a game that mirrored Hamlet's predicament. When discussing a pertinent theme, such as revenge, you might require students to draw parallels between Shakespeare's play and a game of their choice. Or better yet, have students create a skit (complete with costumes, props, etc.) that turns Hamlet into a video game. Students could make up a new game or spoof an existing game. Each of these assignments requires that students think critically about a canonical text so that they can transfer knowledge from games to fit the goals of the assignment. Students get the benefit of using their interests (which provide engagement), while teachers get the benefit of having students become active readers (through their search of character descriptions, plot parallels, etc.) of the assigned text.

While it is obvious that the ideas presented in this section, or this chapter for that matter, are not exhaustive, I do hope that they push teachers to perform the same type of critical thinking we ask of our students. If we can turn a critical eye toward the digital lives our students lead outside the classroom, we will discover new ways to integrate the 21st-century multi-modal reading and writing that they are already engaging in into our "tough sell" canonical texts. While we cannot expect students to shed the skins of their texting, social networking, and gaming selves when they enter our classrooms, with a little planning and a willingness to be open to student-centered practices, we might make pedagogical allies of our former sworn enemies.

*Concluding Thoughts: No New Literacy or New Media Left Behind*

Somewhere in a classroom right now, students are texting. Huddled over copies of Shakespeare, they are texting. Amid the noise of blaring pop music, lit by the glow of a Wiki page, they are texting and talking and gaming—and analyzing and thinking critically and composing. This classroom is my classroom. And it looks nothing like the one Rockwell painted. Instead, it is filled with millennial creatures—and their digital accessories—who are being guided by a teacher trying to implement English 2.0.

My hope is that other teachers will join me in that mission, will answer what NCTE past President Kathleen Blake Yancey poses as a call to “research and articulate new composition, a call to help our students compose often, compose well, and through these composings, become the citizen writers of our country, the citizen writers of our world, and the writers of our future” (1). In order to accomplish this we must realize that we have “moved beyond a pyramid-like, sequential model of literacy development in which print literacy comes first and digital literacy comes second and networked literacy practices, if they come at all, come third and last” (Yancey 6). Indeed, if we are to effectively teach the language arts—reading, writing, and rhetoric—to millennial students then we must teach them in the context of the 21st-century forms that they will take. Though many of these technologies challenge our traditional modes of instruction, though using student gadgets might place us in a position of knowing less than our students, we must privilege their development as readers and composers in the digital age more than our own comfort. And we must give them room to explore, to learn as they go, and to surprise us with their findings. We must push them forward into new challenges through new media and new, multi-modal literacies.

If you believe what you read in the newspapers, you might think such a goal impossible. How can we prepare students for 21st-century technologies when American students are already behind the curve? According to research conducted by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and Institute on the impact of No Child Left Behind, American schools (and their students) failing grades:

Today, some 4 million American children attend over 8,000 public schools that are not educating students to meet state academic standards. In many of these schools, fewer than half of the pupils pass state tests, and in some cases fewer than one-third do. In many, failure has become a habit, even a norm, lasting many years and denying educational opportunities to generations of youngsters. (Brady 1)

These statistics cause concern among all of the stakeholders in our educational system, but the numbers are of special import to teachers, who find that many of the blaming fingers get pointed in their direction. Much of the energy put into arguing both the merits and failings of NCLB is wasted, as pundits on both sides dig in their heels, shift blame, and offer no real suggestions for how to fix the problems that plague public education. Meanwhile, those four million children show up to school, in need of skills that will sustain them in a global economy. Though these children are different in many ways, it is important to note that they share one thing in common: each has a teacher who stands before them in the classroom—a teacher who is capable of making a difference.

While the information presented in this project does not aim to fix all of the problems in each of those classrooms, the approach for solving the problems of the American system of public education and the approach for implementing a pedagogical shift toward new media and

new literacies are the same in one regard: each task will have to take place one teacher at a time. Ronald C. Brady, who researched the effects of intervention programs in failing schools said that although no single strategy “can be counted upon to succeed in all contexts,[in] most cases, solid school-level leadership seems to be critical to success—yet that is precisely what’s missing in many failing schools” (Finn, Jr. iv). Rather than allow these front-page failings to demoralize us, I hope to encourage teachers to take a step back, a deep breath, and follow the instructions that we so often give to our students when they have something to say: Consider your audience, think about your purpose, and choose your words accordingly. Simplistic? Yes. And yet some of the most powerful lessons we teach (and learn) are simple ones. We are, in fact, beset with challenges that will not be easily solved, and the stakes are high, but teachers can begin to effect change simply by asking the right questions: *Who are these millennial students? What skills will they need to be critical readers of the multimodal texts of the future? How might we employ their affinity for new media in the teaching of our standards?* Answering these questions may lead us to places outside what we were taught in our education classes, might push us into places where we feel uncertain. Yet, as literacy theorist Gunther Kress states, teaching millennials means stepping into the unknown:

The idea therefore of making the young in the image of what we know today, which is itself a version of what has been handed down to us from yesterday, will no longer do. Curriculum now needs to be focused on the future ... one urgent task is to try to understand what skills, aptitudes, knowledges, dispositions concerned with representation and communication young people will need in the world of the next two decades or three. (Kress 66)

So we begin by asking questions, and in answering those questions, we open our minds to the possibilities that the answers may be found in nontraditional texts or through unconventional media tools. And this is how education moves forward.

Somewhere in America right now, teachers are talking, and these conversations are fertile ground. Talking is necessary and beneficial, for it creates a space for the type of grassroots initiative that will succeed on the basis of what it has to offer those who will share in its success. From those conversations, however, we must develop strategies to ensure that we accomplish more than just talk. In the face of challenges presented from those over us (through federal and state mandates) and those who have been placed under our tutelage (millennial students), teachers play a pivotal role. If, through shifts in our pedagogical approaches, we can labor to plant the seeds of critical thinking across multiple literacies, if we can nurture those seeds using the tools of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, then we will yield, within our students, a harvest of proficiencies that will serve them well as they move forward to be the educators of generations to come.

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### *Vita*

Keli Woodard Weed was born in Nashville, Tennessee, on January 12, 1980. She graduated from the University of Tennessee in 2002 with a degree in English, and then returned to pursue a master's degree in 2003. Much of her graduate research focused on composition theory, and the seeds of that research came to fruition in the classroom when she accepted a position teaching English in a rural high school in Dickson, Tennessee. It was there in her early days of teaching that she became interested in using film, music, and popular culture to engage her students. In 2007 she co-presented a project entitled *Worth a Thousand Words: Mapping Literacy Through the Lens of a Disposable Camera* at the National Council of Teachers of English Conference in New York City. When she is not busy grading papers, she enjoys writing sappy love poems to her husband and deconstructing Dr. Seuss with her son.