A Conversation on Literacy
Thinking Outside the Margins

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Abstract: How can teachers better engage students in literacy? Disengagement in classrooms is one of the greatest struggles faced across educational institutions. In the English language arts (ELA) field, educators are taking immense strides to adapt their instruction to promote all forms of literacy, including visual and media literacy. Through this, students become aware of all the literacy around them. Fostering literacy engagement for students in the ELA classroom has been an ongoing discussion for educators. A chief insight fostered by such discussions has been the importance of using instruction to fuse the two worlds of the student: the academic world and the world outside of the classroom. To succeed as literacy educators, we must remind students that literacy lives beyond the classroom.

Introduction

Literacy not only lives within the margins of literature, it also transcends the bound pages to encompass visual and media literacy. In the present world, it is as important to become visually literate and to gain media literacy, as it is to be able to decode written texts. ELA is built on the foundation of literacy, and as educators, we must integrate the other forms literacy takes into our classrooms. When we allow students to work in different types of literacies students are better supported to become fluent and avid readers and writers. With the 21st century's technological progress, learning about visual and media literacy has become essential for students because they are surrounded by it at all times through online communication. The relevance of such learning also ensures that literacy skills developed in the classroom are linked to their lives outside of the classroom.

Sociocultural theory, defined by Ivey and Johnston (2013), describes learning as a means of fostering student identity development in a culturally inclusive and collaborative classroom environment. Building on this theory, a crucial element of student engagement in literacy is offering students opportunities to share and to develop their own identities and cultures. Students need to feel valued in the classroom, and this feeling is fostered through the creation of a comfortable learning environment where each student feels like they can add to the class discussion.

From Status Updates to Due Dates
Fostering Student Identity Development through Media Literacy

Multimodal Communication

Engaging students with literacy in the ELA classroom is often challenging because the constant evolution of technology can make literacy and literature seem outmoded. To combat this educators must adapt their instruction to incorporate relevant

media and technology to help students better connect to both literacy and literature. Bailey and Carroll (2010) provide one model for how teachers can do this. As part of their study of high school students, Bailey and Carroll sought to combat stereotypes about literacy. They began by holding a box filled with objects that required the application of literacy skills. These items included a CD player, a movie, and a board game. The students reacted by explaining that reading skills were not needed with those objects; in response the educators explained how reading skills were required to use those items, and helped them understand literacy more broadly, as including both visual and auditory skills. For educators, Bailey and Carroll (2010) also clarify the importance of using multimodal communication in the classroom:

> Multimodal communication and representation, including film, written scripts, comic strips, music, and photography, encourage students to carefully select information… analyze it in ways that they may not if they are merely reporting it in a traditional format… the use of multiple genres pushes students to make connections they might not typically make. (p. 79)

By using multimodal literature, Bailey and Carroll were able to engage students to develop their reading skills with a deeper interest and connection to the material. Sewell and Denton (2011) argue for a similar approach, explaining "it may be possible to draw on students' out-of-school literacies to help them perform better in our classrooms" by helping students understand that their reading skills are not only linked to books they can utilize these skills in other aspects such as video games, movies, social media, music, and etc. (p. 61). As ELA educators, it is our job to make students aware of the vastness of the written word.

Social Media

Engaging students means bringing a little bit of their world outside of the classroom into their academics. It is no surprise that social media looms over our students creating a constant distraction in the classroom. So why do we look at social media as an enemy and not an ally? Social media can serve as a stepping-stone into media literacy and there can be several benefits from its use in the classroom. The use of social media in the classroom allows popular culture to be fused with academic learning, and this gives students opportunity to blend their personal lives with their academics. Educators and researchers advocate for bringing social media into the classroom to remind students that what they learn in school is important and can be applied to online communication, and to show them their literacy skills transcend the classroom and are relevant well beyond their academic years. In addition, through the use of social media in the literacy classroom educators foster student identity development by allowing students the freedom to create their own social media accounts where they can post their own thoughts and ideas about the classroom texts.

As one example of how this can be done, Hunter and Caraway (2014) studied how Twitter can be used to create an authentic literacy experience for students:

> We wanted to offer high school students genuine opportunities to write authentically and frequently for real audiences beyond those found within the high school's walls…Young people using social networking sites are involved in

fundamental acts of teaching and learning… Twitter could serve as a medium for providing robust literacy learning moments and powerful literature engagement. (p. 77)

Authentic learning is powerful, and Hunter and Caraway (2014) explain how social media transforms students' understanding of what they learn in the English classroom as they came to see that it can be applied to their personal lives. Within Hunter and Caraway's (2014) study, Twitter was used to develop student identity as well as create a foundation for student motivation. Student identity was developed by allowing students to create their own Twitter account for the class where they shared their thoughts about the text using tweets and hashtags. These tweets and hashtags were personalized by the students and allowed the students to have a voice in their learning. This eight-week study on building student literacy skills through Twitter also allowed students to extend their conversations beyond the classroom to after school hours (pp. 76-79).

Through the course of the study Hunter and Caraway (2014) introduced The Giver by Lois Lowry and used Twitter as a supplemental tool where students wrote their interpretations of the chapters. Each day the students were asked to log back on to Twitter and to read the responses generated from their tweets about their chapter interpretations. As a result, these conversations continued outside of the classroom and after school hours. This led to the spotlighting of student tweets.

> [While we] fully recognize that our students will not experience a world completely similar to that found in The Giver, the more enduring themes present in the novel such as choice, deception, nostalgia, responsibility, and suffering will be recurrent throughout the lives of our young people… by identifying the themes using textual evidence and discussing them in sustained and frequent conversations through Twitter, our students were engaged in… Common Core Learning Standards. (p. 79)

Since Twitter's platform only allows 140 characters of text per tweet, it encourages precise writing. This was the focus of a study conducted by Loomis (2018) which found that using Twitter meant students learned the craft of writing concisely. Loomis found that using Twitter contributed to "the development of sharp editing skills, along with creative uses of punctuation and emoji… It develops student editing skills and encourages critical thinking" (p. 6). Hunter and Caraway (2014) also found that having students use Twitter led to more excitement and classroom interaction. Students started to arrive to class on time and attendance improved. Not only were students encouraged to work and enhance their literacy skills through Twitter, they also learned how to translate academic writing into their personal lives. This gave students the opportunity to analyze texts and to engage with different perspectives regarding literature.

Student Identity

The use of Twitter in Hunter and Caraway's (2014) ELA classroom also allowed students to develop their identities and to express their individuality. Students contributed their own voice through hashtags and tweets not just for their peers but also

for the entire online world to see. This also created accountability in student writing by making their writing public. As Hunter and Caraway write,

> Reimagining the social organization of literacy learning and instruction are essential features for producing transformative classroom environments… English Language Arts and literacy educators are poised to bring forth something different, something new, something meaningful that has the capacity to foster 'authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality. (p. 81)

In taking this approach, teachers, like their students must realize that learning literature does not just live within the bound pages of an article or book but also within status updates, twitter posts, and hashtags. With the rise of social media students are reading more than ever without even realizing. So how can educators help students see that they enjoy reading and writing and that they partake in it every day without realizing it?

In the Eye of the Beholder
Visual Literacy through Movies, YouTube, and Video Games

Movie or Book

The question, "Why do we have to read, isn't there a movie about this?" regularly rings in my ears. As an ELA educator you are often faced with challenging questions and sometimes you find yourself agreeing with your students. After one of my students asked this question, I stood there and thought, "why do they have to read the novel when I can show the movie?" In that moment, I realized how much value movies could provide students in terms of building their ELA skills through visual literacy. I decided to have the students continue to read the novel, but after covering key excerpts, I used the movie as a supplemental tool for students to help them visualize the world the author had created: vivid characters, dialogue, imagery, and other literary elements leapt the page to the movie screen. Students are able to see the words from the page come to life, and at the same time, I am able to teach about visual literacy. This gave students the opportunity to see writing in a different light and considering how texts have been converted into a visual medium allows me to help my students develop a new layer of interpretive and analytical skills.

For example, when the students finished reading an excerpt of William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, they then watched the excerpt come to life and I then had the students write about both, comparing and contrasting what they had visualized from their own reading in comparison to how it was portrayed in the movie adaptation. This specific text was written to be performed for the stage. The students had to think critically about the similarities and differences between the movie and book. This writing exercise allowed students to voice and form their own opinions in relation to two forms of literacy, and as a result, the students developed their own critical voice as writers and readers.

YouTube

The integral role technology plays in students' lives and its immediate presence in all our lives means that it offers a layer of additional supplemental learning for student comprehension. For example, Sewell and Denton (2011) had students read a short story entitled "The Boar Hunt." The students did not realize how dangerous such animals were until they were presented with a YouTube clip that showed the true nature of the boar. The video built on student knowledge and gave the students valuable context for the story. In this way technology acts like a virtual footnote for teachers to utilize during reading. YouTube can also be used as a resource to find audiobook clips which can help bring the rich dialogue of a story to life. Supporting this, many of Sewell and Denton's students reported that the narrative from the audiobook reinforced their understanding of the story because they could hear the characters' individual voices stand out better.

Visual Literacy

Building students' visual literacy can also be an excellent tool for strengthening students' traditional literacy. For example, having students visualize literary elements, breaking them down and defining them in a visual representation can support both types of literacy. In my classroom, I have drawn on visual literacy through emoticon stories to promote student comprehension and critical thinking skills. Emoticon stories are news stories told through only emoticons. This mini-lesson was adapted from James Corden's segment "Emoji News" on The Late Late Show with James Corden (Crabbe & Winston, 2019). Students have to use interpretation skills and their understanding of symbolism to derive meaning from these stories. The class was highly engaged with this five-minute exercise, and students were amazed by the concise nature of storytelling through images. When combined with literary interpretation, visual literacy can fuel student understanding of symbolism in literature because it allows students to discover layers of meaning and build on their interpretation skills needed for reading fluency. An example of this was when my students were discussing the imagery and symbols in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. Together we analyzed the moment when Romeo first saw Juliet and how he described her in comparison to how he described the other characters at the Capulets' party. Romeo compares Juliet to a dove, and the students were able to analyze the symbolism of that comparison, and how the use of this image strengthens the audiences' understanding of Juliet. Shakespeare's dialogue is so rich and dense that it was important for us to stop and break down each word and its meaning. I modeled how to look for imagery or symbols in a sentence and then the students were quick to jump in with their interpretations and understanding of the story.

Video Games

The inclusion of video games promotes active and engaged learning in the classroom because of their popularity among student learners. Ellison and Evan (2016) used games in the ELA classroom in order to bridge the gap between their students' online world of gaming and their classroom world of academics. They write that "When we learn to play video games, we are indeed learning a new literacy and

that video games contribute to learning in principled ways… to learn and think cognitively, socially, and morally" (p. 28). Ellison and Evan's framework for incorporating gaming into their classroom connects the idea that the future of education will center around "cooperative and collaborative learning models which focus on knowledge as a social construct" (p. 29). For a while now educational institutions have been focusing on student-centered learning environments where the students become formally immersed into their learning and become explorers or experts in the core content areas. Therefore, teachers are using creative approaches in their teaching to allow collaborative learning into the classroom, and video games such as Minecraft can provide just that (Persson, 2009).

Minecraft's immersive and creative environment has been used to help students explore symbolism and the many layers a symbol or image in literature can hold. Ellison and Evan (2016) utilized Minecraft in this way to support the teaching of canonical literature:

> In order to enhance students' reading comprehension and visualization skills, students can use Minecraft to recreate different settings and scenes from literature they are currently reading and use the game to offer predictions on what might happen in the texts. (p. 34)

As Ellison (2016) suggests, the video games do not become the focal point of the students' learning but rather function as tools to fuel student learning through increasing engagement and relevancy. In this way, video games are able to transform classrooms from teacher-centered spaces into active and student-centered spaces in which students can transfer what they have learned from the literature into a virtual format. This transfer allows students to see the text from the page come to life.

Conclusion

In the field of education, educators must constantly learn new approaches and strategies to integrate relevant ideas and technologies into the classroom and to keep students engaged. By linking literacy to social media, gaming, and movies. Educators can focus on keeping literacy relevant for their students, and can foster connections between literacy and the outside world. To do so educators must be willing to act as a bridge to bring the two worlds of the student together, the academic world and the world outside of the classroom. Doing so can also foster student identity development and individuality, allowing students to feel valued in the classroom and to have their voice heard. This creates a diverse and engaging environment where students can work together to create meaningful knowledge.

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