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iPoetry: Creating Space for New Literacies in the English Curriculum

Within the iPoetry project, we introduced new literacies into the secondary English curriculum to enhance students' critical engagement, increase their awareness of audience, and encourage their innovative use of multiple modalities.

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Lankshear and Knobel (2007) observed, "Within contexts of human practice, language (words, literacy, texts) gives meaning to contexts and, dialectically, contexts give meaning to language" (p. 2). Consequently, literacy practices are best understood by examining the environment in which they occur. In a world where synchronous and asynchronous communication is readily available, digital tools are pervasive, and online spaces offer infinite possibilities, it is critical that educators understand how literacy practices operate in such contexts.

Lankshear and Knobel (2006) drew from Gee (1996) in defining literacies as "socially recognized ways of generating, communicating, and negotiating meaningful content through the medium of encoded texts within contexts of participating in Discourses (or, as members of Discourses)" (p. 64). In this light, digitally mediated practices like writing fan fiction, making machinima, playing videogames, modifying wikis, and creating podcasts are *literacy* practices.

To engage in meaning making, individuals must simultaneously "read" a variety of modes of representation (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001), which may occur in diverse spatial contexts (Leander, 2007). Rather than being static, linear, individually created, and print based, the resultant texts are fluid, dynamic, nonlinear, and very often, collaboratively constructed.

From 2004 to 2007, we (authors Jen Scott Curwood and Lora Cowell) worked together to design and implement a digital poetry curriculum for high school sophomores. We sought to infuse new literacy practices to enhance students' critical engagement, increase their awareness of audience, and encourage their progressive use of multiple modalities. After students read, critiqued, and wrote poetry using traditional print text, they employed digital tools to reinterpret those poems using multimodal elements.

As a secondary English teacher, Jen brought her knowledge of the poetry canon, literary devices, and literary analysis to this endeavor. As a library media specialist, Lora offered her deep knowledge of digital media, technology instruction, and multiliteracies. By working together, we were able to offer our students a comprehensive curriculum that featured traditional forms of literature as well as digital media and new literacy practices. In this article, we examine how students' engagement with digital poetry can facilitate identity expression and multimodal composition. As teacher–researchers, we asked the following questions:

- Within the iPoetry project, what process of instructional design, implementation, reflection, and reiteration did we engage in as educators? What implications did this have for our professional growth?
- By creating digital poems, how were students able to compose in multiple modalities? What effect did this have on their learning and engagement?

Theoretical Framework

In the age of print, books were the dominant textual representations, and literacy skills were primarily defined by the decoding, comprehension, and production of print-based texts. Lankshear and Knobel (2007) explained,

> The book mediated social relations of control and power, as between authors and readers, authorial voice as the voice of expert and authority, teacher/expert and student/learner…. Certain genres of texts were privileged over others and seen as appropriate within particular (institutional) settings. (p. 13)

Today's digital tools readily allow for multiple, multimodal, and multifaceted textual representations (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008). Therefore, while literacy skills are still rooted in decoding, comprehension, and production, the modalities within which they occur extend far beyond alphabetic print text (Gomez, Schieble, Curwood, & Hassett, 2010). Because the ways in which something is represented are shaped by both *what* is to be learned and *how* it is to be learned (Jewitt, 2008), secondary English teachers must consider how this impacts the curriculum.

The "New" of New Literacies

Lankshear and Knobel (2006) argued that new literacies can be seen as "new" in both a paradigmatic and an ontological sense. They suggest that the ontology of new literacies can be examined through two distinct lenses: the "new technical stuff" and the "new ethos stuff" (p. 73).

In essence, the new technical stuff consists of the digital tools and the resultant multimedia productions. The emphasis is on the hardware and software rather than the learning contexts and interactions that occur around it. We can easily see the new technical stuff in the growing lexicon of digital applications: e-mail, instant messaging, social networking tools, blogging and microblogging, audio and visual editing, podcasting, and gaming.

When schools are working to integrate media and technology into the curriculum, the focus is often on this technical stuff (Harris, Mishra, & Koehler, 2009). By privileging the digital tools, as Lankshear and Knobel (2006) suggested, we may overlook the new ethos, or the nature of learning and participation, that occurs within and through technology. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers embrace new literacy practices so that "rigor and engagement are inextricably tied to a curriculum that invites emotional investment, immersion, and intellectual challenge" (Dockter, Haug, & Lewis, 2010, p. 418).

Compared with old literacies that are often individuated and author centric, new literacies are more participatory, collaborative, and distributed (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007). In this respect, time and space function differently with new literacies. Whereas blackboards and overhead projectors focus students' attention on a single, print-based text and emphasize the authority of the teacher (Hodas, 1993), personal computers and online spaces encourage inquiry, communication, and collaboration across time and space (Leander, 2007). As Lewis (2007) concluded,

> New technologies afford new practices, but it is the practices themselves, and the local and global contexts within which they are situated, that are central to new literacies. The logical implication… is that schools would accomplish more if, like new literacy users, they too focused on the practices rather than the tools. (p. 230)

As a result, wikis can be created with collaborators both known and unknown, digital remixes can be shared and feedback solicited on media-sharing sites such as YouTube, and classroom discussions can take place in spaces outside the school walls.

By infusing new literacy practices, students are able to experience poetry in multiple modalities.

Bridging Out-of-School and In-School Literacy Practices

Recent research has highlighted the role that new literacies play in adolescents' lives in out-of-school settings, where practices such as social networking (Boyd, 2007), video gaming (Steinkuehler & King, 2009), and writing fan fiction (Black, 2008) are commonplace. Despite these findings, school-based literacy practices continue to focus on the consumption and production of static print texts, rather than providing students access to the multimodal, nonlinear literacy practices available in digital environments (Rhodes & Robnolt, 2009).

Hull and Schultz (2002) acknowledged that when a school "appropriates these potentially subversive forms [of literacy], there is the chance that they will be domesticated and lose their vigor, appeal, and edge" (p. 48). However, Hull and Schultz pushed back against this kind of thinking, emphasizing that "an important opportunity to address the digital divide comes with preparing teachers to think differently about what counts as literacy" (p. 48). The resulting new literacies classroom can provide more students with access to digital tools and regular opportunities to engage in participatory and collaborative learning through the use of multimodal texts.

Conceptualizing Multimodal Composition

Bezemer and Kress (2008) defined a mode as a "socially and culturally shaped resource for meaning making" (p. 171). Multimodal composition, then, extends beyond alphabetic print to include moving and still images, sounds, color, and animation (Curwood & Gibbons, 2009b). Takayoshi and Selfe (2007) argued,

> In a world where communication between individuals and groups is both increasingly cross-cultural and digital, teachers of composition are beginning to sense the inadequacy of texts—and composition instruction—that employs only one primary semiotic channel (the alphabetic) to convey meaning. (p. 2)

In that light, multiple modalities are often at the heart of new literacy practices. Takayoshi and Selfe (2007) suggested that valuing multimodality in the English classroom can be refreshing, meaningful, and relevant for students. By drawing on modalities beyond speech or written text, students have the opportunity to engage in creative, authentic composition (Hassett & Curwood, 2009; Stein, 2007).

Understanding Digital Poetry as a New Literacy Practice

Student engagement with poetry through responsive construction of students' own original poetry is a common literacy practice in the secondary English classroom. In his book *Teaching Poetry in High School*, Somers (1999) stated, "Teachers use poetry to challenge their students to think, to read with patience and insight, to see connections and relationships, and to write with imagination, precision, and depth" (p. 14). However, he cautioned, "Too many of us never really take a hard, honest look at how we teach poetry. *Unquestioningly*, *unthinkingly*, we teach the genre the way it was taught to us…or the way our textbooks suggest we teach it" (p. 19).

Traditionally, poetry has been taught through two modes: written and oral language. By infusing new literacy practices into the poetry curriculum, students are able to experience poetry in multiple modalities. Classic literary devices, such as mood or imagery, can come alive through sound effects, visual images, and dynamic transitions.

When students use multiple modes of representation, they engage in "aesthetic, self-originated, and self-sponsored" literacy activities (National Council of Teachers of English, 2005, n.p.). We suggest that teachers can promote student achievement and engagement by drawing attention to the multiple modes that are used within digital poetry and that are integral to meaning making.

When students move from passive consumers to active producers—and when they have the opportunity to engage in hands-on, collaborative work—they are more likely to engage in critical and higher order thinking (Alvermann, 2002; Dockter, Haug, & Lewis, 2010). Clearly, these practices are essential components of the 21st-century classroom.

Research Context

Moreland High School is a public school in the Midwestern United States that serves 1,800 students. It is located in a midsized town, surrounded by farmland but not far from large urban areas. From 2004 to 2007, we engaged in practitioner inquiry. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) used the phrase "inquiry as stance" and argued that teachers' learning, knowing, doing, and being are part and parcel of broader movements for social change and social justice.

In their work on practitioner inquiry, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) rejected prevalent transmission models of teacher professional development and validate teacher-conducted research and local knowledge construction. Data we collected during the course of our research included (a) field notes and artifacts related to the process of collaboratively designing, implementing, and reiterating an iPoetry unit; (b) resultant student digital poetry productions; (c) informal and semi-structured interviews with several focal students to uncover their perceptions of using digital media and multiple modalities for self-expression (see also Curwood & Gibbons, 2009a; Curwood & Gibbons, 2009b).

In the following section, we explore our collaborative and iterative process of teaching the iPoetry unit to students in sophomore English classes. We discuss the evolving nature of our partnership and reflect on our own professional learning. In addition, we share anecdotes about students' technical skills, multimodal composition, and critical engagement. We then present a case study of one student, Blair, to understand how he used new literacy practices and multiple modalities in the process of creating digital poetry. By analyzing the textual, aural, and visual elements inherent in his digital poem, we show how he drew on these modes to express his identity and share his lived experiences.

Findings

In 2003, during the course of completing a poetry unit with her 10th-grade English students, Jen approached Lora, the school library media specialist, regarding potential ways for students to engage with the digital tools available in our school's new multimedia lab. We envisioned an opportunity for students to implement what we perceived as visual literacy skills in presenting their poetry to the class. Our objective was to allow students to create presentations using digital tools to infuse additional meaning into their previously constructed poetry. We referred to the project as "iPoetry," in reference to the iMovie software that our students used to complete their work.

Our initial approach to instruction in this unit was skills based. Building on poetry compositions already completed by students in the classroom, we developed a process approach typical of many educators who seek to integrate technology into existing pedagogy. We asked students to visualize their poetry using paper storyboards, and we provided a sequential set of process instructions that students could follow in transferring their ideas from paper to digital format.

From gathering digital elements, to correctly creating project files, inserting images, embedding text and transitions, adding audio, and establishing timing, students were led through the process. Direct instruction modeled this sequence, emphasizing the technical aspects of creating digital poetry. When we assessed the digital poems, we attuned to both the mode of representation as well as the ways in which imagery, mood, and other literary techniques were employed. At the same time, students were invited to provide an assessment of the project instruction and process to us, as educators.

On a technical level, the project was a success. Our deliberate focus on production had prepared us for dealing with the predictable frustration experienced by students of varying abilities when they engaged in a new set of skills. However, on a more critical level, the effectiveness of the project was less satisfying. We were disappointed when our expectation that using digital tools would enrich student compositions with added meaning fell short.

Specifically, our students forgot the importance of audience in the construction of meaning. Choice of visual and audio elements was haphazard, often based on the general appeal of a particular software effect, such as a transition or sound effect, rather than on its representational value.

We directed more attention to the ethos of new literacy practices.

Much of the digital poetry produced represented simple, literal illustrations of students' text-based poetic works, perpetuating a traditional paradigm that defines technology as a tool and integration as an add-on, rather than a complex blending of technical elements and ethos, as Lankshear and Knobel (2006) suggested. Our disappointment prompted us to revisit our methods of instruction, reevaluating not only the way in which we were integrating technology into the lesson, but also our reasons for doing so.

Beginning in our second year of collaboration, we consciously worked to re-envision the relationship between literacy and technology. First, we simplified the process instructions, creating checklist tools for preliminary tasks (storyboarding and then finding, saving, and attributing images and music), intermediate tasks (iMovie basics, including importing images, adding text, and adjusting time), and advanced tasks (applying transitions and effects, adding music, creating a title page and credits). This freed up our instructional time both to model and to facilitate the transfer of existing literacy practices to the construction of new literacies. This was accomplished through more deliberate instruction on the use of storyboards for conceptualizing ideas.

When, in our first year, we had provided students with storyboard worksheets to use as planning tools, most had completed these by drawing literal representations of the words in their poetry, then setting out to find or create those images specifically. Now, we introduced the storyboard as a means by which students could explore different interpretations of their texts. They were encouraged to list, rather than draw, all possible representations, both predictable and unexpected. In this way, students more readily envisioned the variety of ways in which a message can be communicated and interpreted, as well as the ways in which time and movement impacted their poems.

In addition to this new approach to storyboarding, we used samples from previous student work, along with teacher-authored examples, to engage learners in a discussion of the effects of visual and aural elements on an audience's interpretation of a digital poem. In essence, we directed more attention toward the ethos of their new literacy practices, rather than allowing students to become bogged down in the technical stuff.

These metadialogues around symbol systems beyond alphabetic print text resulted in learning products that were more sophisticated and in student engagement that was more pronounced. One young woman, for instance, learned to use Photoshop to edit and retint stock photographs gathered from a variety of sources, transforming unconnected images into a visually cohesive set. Another student relied on type font and size, rather than traditional images, to visually impact his word choice, and therefore his message.

Audio tracks were, by and large, chosen with more attention to mood. While most students employed the royalty-free selections available through the school's media collections, others remixed tracks to create new compositions, and one used an entirely original composition created using GarageBand software. A number of students included a voice track reading of their poem, either with or without text.

Through integrating visual images, words, sounds, and transitions, students were able to gain hands-on experience in multimodal composition. More important, they were able to understand how the presence, absence, or co-occurrence of specific modes allowed them to better share their experiences, their beliefs, and their thoughts (Curwood & Gibbons, 2009b). The following examples highlight the literacy transformations of two very different students.

Exploring Identity and Modality Through iPoetry

Tim (pseudonym) mastered the technical skills and quickly finished his poetry project. He noted that he wanted his audience "to react" when presented with the implied issues of race, sexual orientation, and bullying. "I wanted them to have a certain feeling after they saw it," he later explained. Response to Tim's poem did not wait for classroom presentation. Several classmates viewed his poems in the process of creating their own. Tim quickly became a peer facilitator in the lab setting, helping his peers incorporate more deliberate tonal elements, while completing a second poem of his own. His second poem was entirely authored in the multimodal environment, rather than beginning with written text or storyboards.

Kaitlin (pseudonym) struggled in the classroom. Economically disadvantaged and functioning at a lower reading level than the majority of her peers, her writing samples testified to unmastered traditional literacy practices. Despite a need for significant technical skills support, in this new multimodal context, Kaitlin was afforded an opportunity to exhibit a set of literacy skills often ignored in the traditional classroom. Using a single scanned image (the only existing one) of a beloved aunt, coupled with a contemplative musical track, Kaitlin composed a simply worded but powerful message of love and loss. Her intent, she told us, was to present the final project as a Christmas gift to her mother, who had lost her sister. Her pride was palatable.

In this second year, student learning more clearly revealed the "ethos stuff" of new literacy practices. In nearly every instance, our students interactively wrote, read, and reinterpreted their work as new modes of representation shifted ideas and meanings. Invited once again to present their work, the deeper and more individualized nature of these reinterpretations allowed the focus of these presentations to shift away from the reviewing teacher and more appropriately to a classroom of peers. Notably, audience reactions and author responses were more reflective and constructive. As one student noted, "It's part of the process. If you don't show it to other people, then what's the point of doing it?"

Self-assessment is crucial to practitioner inquiry and became the focus of our third year of collaboration, allowing the nature of our partnership to evolve. Our professional reflections moved beyond an analysis of methodology and student learning and focused more purposefully on the value of engaging learners in new media spaces. Lave and Wenger (1991) argued that individuals can engage in communities of practice that allow them to move from legitimate peripheral participation to central participation (or expertise) as they acquire the sociocultural practices of the community. Our collaboration served as a community of practice that allowed us to gain key insights into the relationship between digital tools, pedagogy, and content-area instruction.

At the start of our collaboration, Jen functioned as a content expert and Lora served as a technology specialist. Our roles were very defined, and as we soon discovered, very limiting. By the third year of our collaboration, Jen was adept at both the technical stuff and the ethos stuff of new literacies, which allowed her to serve as a model for other teachers interested in this kind of learning. In addition, our work together provided a way for Lora to gain content-area literacy, which she was then able to apply to her innovative work with other English teachers.

As our approach to the iPoetry unit evolved, we noticed that many of our students understood the consumption and production of poetry in a new way, too. For instance, James (pseudonym) commented, "Poetry really isn't a poem by itself… If you know the author, then you realize where the poem's coming from." The emphasis on modal choices, audience awareness, self-reflection, and identity expression in creating iPoetry provided students with a way to meaningfully engage with the English curriculum and with one another. In the following section, we present a case study of one student and a multimodal analysis of his digital poem to illustrate this process.

Fostering Creativity and Multimodal Authoring With iPoetry

Currently attending Columbia College in Chicago, Blair Mishleau (real name used with permission) is a young man whose relationships with creative friends encouraged him to dabble as a writer and photographer in high school and later seek a career in media. In 2005, the second year of our iPoetry unit, Blair was a high-school sophomore. In his composition "Your Desires," Blair juxtaposed symbolic images with textual imagery in his digital poem. Conversely, he presented his own voice (in the form of questions) baldly, white over black.

The instrumental in Blair's choice of music, *Hippie Boy* by artist Caroline Spine, set a pensive tone throughout the composition. The short lyrical segment Blair included adds to the message of his composition, which reveals a young man who, in finding himself, senses the disappointment of another. Figure 1 is an analysis of his multimodal

Figure 1 **Analysis of Blair's Multimodal Composition**

Textual	Aural	Visual
Your Desires Free Verse Poem	silence	white words on black
by Blair Mishleau		
Is this really what you predicted?	repetitive musical movement begins	
Is it really what you foresaw?		
Is it really what you wanted in life?		
Tear down the black curtain,		
Break the wall.		image of curtain appears, falls off screen to reveal white words on black
		image of wall appears, disassembles on screen to reveal black screen
Give me a silent shriek		words appear over image of screaming mouth used in *Day of Silence* campaign
Something.	slow crescendo	white words on black
Hello?		
Is there anybody there? Just…shout if you can hear me!	"And he says 'Come sit beside me.'"	
While I spoke, did you listen? Did you even take note?		
I mean, is this what you foresaw?	"Tell me about the things you adore."	
Many moons ago, I was bold… mannerisms in hand		words shrink to reveal image of Blair centered, strong pose
Five years later, a fading sparkle in your belt of achievements.		image shrinks to reveal white words on black
Now I'm a has been.	"Please don't remind me."	white words on black
Now I sit alone.		image of Blair appears, sitting on end of a long bench in a stark setting…a tall performer's stool and a ladder sit next to the bench
The clock ticks …	"That I am not the boy you'd hoped for."	image of a stop watch
Readers read…		image of text, readable phrases include "did I not make" "the end of something" " word for it" "I lost the conviction" "rather passive virtues" "child automatically guaranteed"
Actors act		image of actors on stage in poses of accusation, disregard, despair
Makers make		image of sun in clouds
As do I.		white words on black
My regrets.		

composition, with a focus on the textual, aural, and visual elements.

Blair's journey as a multimodal author (what he referred to as "cross-channeling") did not end with the iPoetry project. During the following year, Blair worked on a number of media projects with Lora. Toward the end of his high-school career, Jen again interviewed Blair regarding his experiences with multimodal composition and its impact on his literacy practices. In this interview, Blair emphasized how his collaboration with Lora was instrumental in his development. As he put it,

> Teachers are supposed to give you the tools you need to learn more but this is the first time where I feel that I really have that…I feel like I can learn just because [Lora]'s taught me the basic theories that she works from.

For Blair, becoming a multimodal author involved learning more than just "new technical stuff." Rather, he needed to take part in a community of practice to learn the "new ethos stuff" that accompanies the composition process with diverse digital tools.

The process of composing multimodal texts is more creatively complex than writing with alphabetic text, requiring extended time for students to analyze an audience and synthesize a message across modalities. When Blair participated in the iPoetry project, we were in our second year and had already restructured the instructional process. Nevertheless, Blair felt pressured by time constraints. In discussing this during his interview, Blair noted the importance of students being offered frequent opportunities to produce multimedia texts to learn to "streamline" processes (an automaticity of "technical stuff"), thereby focusing student attention on the complex concepts ("ethos stuff") that new and emerging mediums allow them to explore.

Blair suggested that learning to author using multiple modalities was both challenging and engaging for him, as a teen accustomed to a mass-media marketplace. A new awareness of the value of semiotics is evident in his observations: "I think everything can convey [a message]… I was watching some of my videos and one of them has undertones about my sexuality and then the other one has undertones about my relationship with my family." This echoes Cope and Kalantzis's (2000) conceptualization of design, in which the outcome is new meaning, "something through which meaning makers remake themselves" (p. 23). Through digital poetry, Blair had an opportunity to express his thoughts, struggles, and beliefs within and through multiple modalities.

Discussion

Our collaboration on the iPoetry project has implications for the nature of professional development in schools and the role that multimodal composition can play in the secondary English classroom. For Jen, her work with Lora was instrumental in allowing her to move away from skill-based technology integration, toward an understanding of the ethos of new literacy practices. For Lora, ongoing collaboration with a classroom teacher allowed her to take a central role in designing instructional units and assessing student work.

It's important to note that this collaboration constitutes a progressive form of professional development. Education scholars have offered numerous critiques of traditional schooling, which often emphasize decontextualized skills, rote memorization, and disembodied learning (Gee, 2004). Ironically, most approaches to technology integration through professional development have simply replicated this ineffective model by focusing primarily on digital tools and technology skills (Burns, 2002) consequently neglecting to address the ways in which technology relates to content and pedagogy or to take teachers' own experiences, values, and beliefs into account. In other words, when new literacies are presented as isolated skills, is it any wonder that teachers, by and large, have been unable to effectively integrate media and technology into their curriculum?

Professional Growth

By collaborating over the course of three years, we were able to move beyond digitally illustrated poetry and gain a deeper understanding of how the addition of multimodal elements with a focus on voice and audience shaped student work. Perhaps more important, our partnership provided much-needed support as we ventured into uncharted territory and invented new approaches to poetry.

Apple Classrooms of Tomorrow's (1995) decade-long research initiative defines a developmental continuum through which teachers progress as they work to integrate media and technology into their classroom as follows: (a) adoption, reinforcing traditional practices; (b) adaptation, streamlining existing practices; (c) appropriation, seeking collaborative innovation; and (d) invention, constructing new knowledge. We argue that in order for teachers to be willing and able to truly integrate

Take Action!

1. *Deconstruct and Reconstruct*—Engage students in a classroom dialogue regarding familiar multimodal texts, such as music videos or commercials. Together, identify the visual and audio elements of these sample pieces, paying particular attention to the ways that visual images, motion, and musical styles shape the message. Discuss other options that might have been used and how these would enhance or detract from the message.

This activity can be tailored to specific content areas. In English classes, teachers can use multimodal texts to foster students' awareness of visual literacy. In a history class, teachers can promote students' critical literacy skills through the analysis of political commercials.

2. *Storyboard Through Brainstorm*—Select an existing poem (either original or canonical) and brainstorm within the frames of a traditional storyboard. With students, discuss questions such as

- What visual images does each line of the poem bring to mind?
- What role might different colors or artistic styles play in enhancing the message?
- What motion or transitions support the mood of the piece?
- What musical genres may lend greater emotional impact to the piece?

This activity can be used across the curriculum to encourage students to think critically about multimodality, literary techniques, and audience.

media and technology, membership in a community of practice is critical. To effectively use digital tools in their classroom, they must reconceptualize their role as a content-area teacher. Such change is only possible through ongoing support and open dialogue with other educators.

Knowledge Construction

Teachers may be reluctant to integrate new technologies unless they believe that they enhance student learning and foster critical engagement. In secondary English classrooms, teachers are sometimes hindered by the traditional definition of literacy as it applies only to the reading and writing of print texts. While many teachers have access to media and technology within their classrooms or library media centers, "the day-to-day business of school is still dominated by conventional literacies, and engagement with 'new' literacies is largely confined to learners' lives in spaces outside of school" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p. 30).

By choosing to integrate digital tools—and by transferring traditional writing concepts such as audience and voice to multimodal composition—our iPoetry unit can be seen as a *reinvention* of the curriculum. Rather than focusing solely on "poetry as a genre (and on poetic devices), on historical periods and movements, and on great poets" (Somers, 1999, p. 15), we were able to bring students' voices and experiences into the classroom in a way that was personally meaningful to them. Instead of being relegated to the position of "watchers, waiters, order-followers, and passive receptacles for the depositing of disconnected bits of information" (Cusick, 1973, p. 222), students became active producers of their own knowledge.

Identity Expression

When youths apply traditional literacy practices, including audience awareness, word choice, and construction of meaning, in new and popular venues of communication, transfer of knowledge is practiced in very meaningful ways. As noted, the project was originally called iPoetry in a nod to the software (iMovie) used in its production. The title took on additional meaning as assessment revealed unexpected affordances of the project related to identity expression. As Alvermann, Moon, and Hagood (1999) noted,

> Adolescents, in particular, engage in more fluid, intentional, and often more passionate identity play in their encounters with texts… These symbolic resources not only help adolescents to make sense of their experiences, but they also offer opportunities for trying on or taking up often multiple and conflicting roles or identities. In this way, a text is both a window and a door. (p. 4)

Through engaging with digital poetry, our students were able to share a piece of themselves with their friends, classmates, and teachers. Far too often in secondary schools, such narratives either come secondary to the official content-area curriculum or they are expressly forbidden.

Over a decade ago, the New London Group (1996) challenged teachers to engage students in multiliteracy learning, a practice wherein young people are empowered by the evolving textual representations inherent in the world around them. Within the iPoetry project, our students were given the tools to demonstrate their understanding of the genre while simultaneously exploring and expressing their identity to an audience. In negotiating a multiplicity of modes, including linguistic, visual, aural, gestural, and spatial, students recognized and used dynamic patterns of interconnection within and between modalities. Consequently, they had the opportunity to design and express their social identities.

iPoetry provided students with a means to acquire the new literacy skills that are essential for knowledge acquisition, collaboration, and critical engagement in the 21st century. The project's success was a direct result of the ongoing, evolving collaboration between a secondary English teacher, a library media specialist, and the students themselves.

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More to Explore

ReadWriteThink.org Lesson Plan

- "Defining Literacy in a Digital World" by Traci Gardner

IRA Book

- *Literacy Remix: Bridging Adolescents' In and Out of School Literacies* edited by Jesse Gainer and Diane Lapp

IRA Journal Articles

- "e-Reading and e-Responding: New Tools for the Next Generation of Readers" by Lotta C. Larson, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, November 2009
- "Portals Into Poetry: Using Generative Writing Groups to Facilitate Student Engagement With Word Art" by Linda Young, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, September 2007
- "Shrek Meets Vygotsky: Rethinking Adolescents' Multimodal Literacy Practices in Schools" by Kathy A. Mills, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, September 2010