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## 21st Century Literacies in the Classroom: Creating Windows of Interest and Webs of Learning

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### Abstract

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By adopting a multiliteracies stance, educators can reach struggling and disengaged students through popular culture texts. Using the comic book hero Spiderman as a vehicle to illustrate the importance of making connections as a strategy for learning and reading, the authors highlight approaches that teach students how to identify traditional literary elements such as characterization and allusion in the non-traditional texts of cartoons, video games and film. Through an understanding of how to successfully integrate these texts, teachers can bridge popular culture to traditional texts, showing students how to make their own connections and move beyond rote memorization and recall into deeper thinking and reasoning.

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*Experienced teachers and graduate students struggled in their discussion of an intensely academic article on Aristotle's concept of the intellectual virtue of phronesis (reflection leading to action). Each one searched for a way to internalize and then verbalize an understanding of the new idea. Finally, one participant shared his insight: "A teacher who embodies phronesis is like the Jedi in Star Wars—not just seeing but also understanding the context of events, and then acting accordingly. A teacher without phronesis is like Darth Vader, who just sees but doesn't act, who lacks virtue."*

In the above vignette, the connection to popular *Star Wars* characters—seemingly out of place in a theoretical consideration of pedagogical reflection—provides the participating teachers with an epistemological leap, allowing the discussants to make meaning from a difficult concept. One may believe that popular culture just saved the day—or at least the discussion. The true saving factor, however, is not the popular culture itself but rather one participant's ability to make connections between popular culture and abstract theory. Through the transfer of one way of knowing (understanding the storyline of a favorite movie and its characters' motivations), the teacher is able to create a new way of knowing (making sense of the concept of phronesis). This example highlights the importance of making connections when readers struggle to make sense of a text. Just as this group of college students needs to tap into prior knowledge of popular culture, so did our students. We share insights from our teaching at Flint Hills High School and Northeast Middle School in Northeast Kansas as we encouraged our students to make meaning from the texts they encountered in our language arts classrooms to their own lives and culture (all school names are pseudonyms; Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Beavis, 2007; Buckingham, 1993; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994; Dyson, 2003; Giroux, 1994; Knobel, 1999; Moje & Van Helden, 2005). By using multiple modes of popular culture texts (i.e. cartoons, video games, movies, music) partnered with traditional texts such as *To Kill A Mockingbird*, our students made important connections that promoted deeper thinking and engaged learning.

### **Why Making Connections Matters**

Decades of reading research highlight the importance of the ability to make connections, whether from accessing prior knowledge (e.g., Dewey, Rosenblatt, and Rumelhart) or through social interaction (e.g., Vygotsky, Gee, and Smagorinsky). Accomplished teachers understand the importance of both of these skills, yet how to help students connect sometimes proves elusive. While there is no right or wrong way to teach for connections, our work with middle and high school students prompted us to adopt a multiliteracies stance. A multiliteracies stance allows students to transfer their knowledge of media texts—both their structure and their content—onto traditional print texts, especially texts that are more difficult to understand, including academic texts and works of classical literature (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). According to Kahn and Kellner (2005), a multiliteracies approach entails "reading and interpreting a plethora of discourse, images, spectacle, narratives, and the forms of global media culture" (p. 246). These authors also note that adopting the skills necessary to interpret media texts helps shape students into "good citizens," motivating them to participate and collaborate in the larger social sphere. The National Council of Teachers of English's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literacies Framework also calls for specific competencies in technology that aid in developing competent readers and writers, including developing proficiency with technology tools, building relationships and working collaboratively with others to solve problems, and critiquing and analyzing multimedia texts. NCTE stresses the importance of multiliteracies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom as a means of developing students who are proficient in these new and emerging literacies. By knowing how to

use technology tools for learning and how to interpret multimodal texts, students are engaged in a multiliteracies approach to understanding literature.

By bringing multiliteracies into our classrooms, we were able to, as Lewis and Ketter (2008) describe it, “tap into the interests and passions of youth as a basis for learning and, therefore, for teaching” (p. 286). Popular culture texts’ forms are often very different than the traditional novels and printed texts typically encountered in English classrooms. Yet through the use of these different texts, we reached our struggling and disengaged students, just as noted literacy scholars have demonstrated (e.g. Alvermann, 2011; Alvermann, Young, Green & Wisenbaker, 1999; Morrell, 2004). Our approach developed into a method for helping students deliberately use connection-making as a strategy for learning and reading. In other words, from making connections for our students, we advanced to teaching them to make their own connections, helping them move beyond memorization and recall into deeper thinking and reasoning.

Throughout the year, we worked to make reading more accessible and approachable by connecting it first to familiar visual images from popular media sources. Moje and Tysvaer explain:

The linear reading of uninterrupted print—once thought to be the essence of advanced reading—is now complicated by hypermedia texts that can take a reader in many directions and by the coupling of print with images (often moving images), sound, and even opportunities for interaction. Thus, *literacy* in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a complicated concept, encompassing a range of communicative practices coming together in such a way that a reader or writer has to make meaning of print combined with other sources of information. (Moje & Tysvaer, 2010, p. 4)

As language arts teachers who felt pressured daily to increase reading scores, we capitalized on media connections to give students a familiar starting point and window of interest from which to work with reading and literary concepts. O’Brien (2003) noticed that students who have not experienced success through the exclusive use of print literacies often find themselves succeeding in the realm of digital literacies, increasing their self-confidence and motivation in the classroom.

Our own experiences demonstrated that digital and visual texts can also enhance struggling readers’ print literacy skills. One important skill proficient readers possess is the ability to make connections with other texts, themselves, and the larger world as they read (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). These connections allow them to see how the “real world,” a world filled with popular culture, relates to the academic world. An essential part of reading is turning words into pictures. Keene and Zimmerman (1997) stated, “*Proficient* readers spontaneously and purposely create mental images while they read and after they read. The images emerge from all five senses as well as the emotions and are anchored in a reader’s prior knowledge” (italics added; p. 141). Students who have not reached proficiency, then, need reminders and strategies for creating those mental images that they normally get from other media that bring words to life. This need suggested to us that popular culture could serve this purpose.

### **Using Spiderman to teach students to consciously make connections**

In order to plant the importance of connections in the minds’ of our middle and high school students, Robyn and Judy (two of the authors) began the year with a close viewing of a clip from *Spiderman 2*. Students watched as Peter Parker sat with Aunt May, and Doctor Octopus (Doc Ock) appeared, breaking into a bank vault to pilfer bags of money. Witnessing this event, Parker

turned to his Spiderman persona, springing up to save the day, only to discover that his web failed him. He, like all the common citizens, was now at the mercy of Doc Ock. Fortunately, just as Doc Ock began to squeeze Spidey's head, his web-casting power revived, allowing him to escape.

While the clip is short, maybe only five minutes, it provided a message we hoped would permeate the rest of the school year: learning is making connections between the known and unknown. The ideas that are familiar with us can help us to connect to ideas that are less familiar. After watching the clip together, we discussed the scene, imitating his web-flinging motion and asking students why Spidey did this. At first, our students looked at us like we were crazy for not knowing this. He needs to do this to fling his web, of course! But we continued to push this idea, asking them to stop and think about why the web was so important. Finally, students came to the realization that whether it was to swing from buildings or to catch his Aunt May, Spiderman's super power came from his ability to connect with his web. The clip, paired with our discussion, gave students a visual for what could happen if connections (webs) were not made. Students admitted to times when they felt as if their own heads were being squeezed as they read material beyond their skill levels. Yet they, like Spiderman, could escape this torture once they knew how to fling their webs to connect to something concrete or previously learned. In a sense, they could tap into their own super powers.

The film clip offered students an accessible text that allowed them to see the metaphor, rather than reading about it, making it possible for students to better grasp our message (Smilanich & Lafreniere, 2010). We were able to demonstrate to our students the complexity of reading and the importance of connections by using popular culture as a "back door" that led to a deeper understanding of the concept (Luke, 1993).

### **Extending the Spidey metaphor to remind students to make connections**

Because the Spiderman metaphor resonated with our students, we continued to extend the metaphor throughout the entire year, reminding students of the need to work to make connections, especially when faced with a task they might view as rigorous. For example, as students discussed Alfred Noyes' poem, "The Highwayman," they struggled to identify with the characters. To help them make sense of the poem, we prompted them to use their Spidey powers. They began to explore the similarities they saw between the poem and other literature, referencing Edgar Allan Poe, since both his work and "The Highwayman" are "deep and mysterious." Ty, a student, connected the poem's Red Coat army within the poem to *Romeo & Juliet*, suggesting that the soldiers' actions were very similar to those of Romeo and Juliet's families. And Robbie referenced popular culture when he suggested that certain people like the Highwayman in the poem have power over others, "kind of like Brad Pitt. If he was a bad guy, you would still like him." As this discussion demonstrates, knowing about the power of flinging their webs makes tackling difficult texts or new concepts less daunting.

To reinforce the concept, we demonstrated a visual-kinesthetic cue—curling our middle and ring fingers and turning our wrists to imitate Spiderman's flinging of the web—each time we wanted to emphasize the need for a connection to get through a text. We also placed Spiderman's picture on an empty bulletin board as a reminder of the importance of constantly seeking out connections. We encouraged students to actively look for examples outside of the classroom that could connect to the ideas, language and characters we explored within the classroom. Each connection students made that related to our classroom work was placed on our Spidey board so

that by the end of the year, students had built a visual representation of their own web of learning. We conferred the Spidey Award on students who successfully made connections in their own learning. And to serve as a continual reminder of his importance, a life-sized poster of Spiderman hung on our door.

With Spidey permeating their lives each time they entered our classroom, students soon began referencing Spidey in conversations and flinging webs to classmates to encourage them to make connections. The visual and kinesthetic reminders to “make a connection” showed our students how the mythical figure of Spiderman actually parallels our own lives, suggesting that the ability to spin connections would benefit students beyond the English classroom walls as they learn to how to make meaning of the many texts they encounter, inside and outside of school.

We were delighted to discover that as students delved into the various texts we studied over the year, the common language of Spiderman allowed them to “participate in our classes as invested members of literary communities” (Greene & Mitcham, 2012, p. 13). As we celebrated their connections across texts, our students began to feel connected to one another and valued by their peers, as well as by us, their teachers (Schaps & Lewis, 1997). This allowed them to gain the confidence they needed to successfully conquer the challenging and unfamiliar tasks they encountered in our English classrooms (Greene & Mitcham, 2012).

### **Using popular culture texts to teach traditional literature**

Our students’ positive responses to the Spiderman metaphor prompted us to seek out other ways to integrate popular culture into our literature studies. While we understood that a single popular culture text might not appeal to all of our students, the text had prompted an appreciation for our efforts to acknowledge and connect to the texts students interacted with outside the school walls (Alvermann, 2011; Hull & Schultz, 2001). Even our students who ordinarily would not have sought out superheroes found themselves flinging their webs and engaging in the discourse of the class. Spidey became a member of our classroom community.

**Teaching character types.** Suspecting that visuals allowed students to make abstract constructs more concrete, we chose visuals, specifically cartoons, as a tool for understanding character types (Seglem & Witte, 2009; Serafini, 2010). After Judy’s intern struggled for several class periods to explain characterization and the dimensions of round, flat, static and dynamic characters, Judy reminded him of Spidey’s lessons. If, as Frey and Fisher explain, “the primary literacy of the twenty-first century is visual” (2008, p. 5), how could the intern help students visualize and create connections that would allow them to differentiate between these different character types?

Judy’s intern decided to bring in more texts from the students’ outside world (Alvermann, 2011; Hull & Schultz, 2001). From the slapstick comedy of the Looney Tunes to the heroic rescues of superheroes, students began to visualize the traits that made up the character types common to literature. After all, who is more static than Wile E. Coyote, who never learns from his repeated but failed attempts to capture the Road Runner? What better example of a subordinate character than Robin to Batman? The intern mounted a huge poster of student-drawn pictures of various character types. Viewing those familiar cartoon figures under the headings “static,” “dynamic,” and “antagonist” prompted recall of the definitions. We found that by demonstrating character types through their own representations of the cartoon characters (see Appendix, Figure 1), students created mental images of the concept of character and were able to transfer their

understanding to similar characters they discovered in traditional texts such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Giver* by Lois Lowry (Frey & Fisher, 2008; Kane, 2007). We had provided them with a rich “elaboration of activated or mental representations and their defining interconnections,” providing them with a “more ‘meaningful’ . . . response” (Sadoski & Paivo, 2004, p. 1339).

**Exploring allusions.** As teachers, we most often were the ones bringing popular culture into the classroom. This was not always the case for long, however. Almost instantly, we found many of our middle and high school students making the connective leaps themselves, demonstrating how intuitive making connections had become for them. One example of this was during a lesson on allusions. Just as character types had proved challenging, the meaning of allusion had evaded student understanding. This proved frustrating for both teachers and students—until one day Chris popped his hand up to share his connection: “I get it! It’s like the poem in *Fallout 3*.” Unfamiliar with the allusion connection, Judy asked Chris to bring his game to school. He arrived bright and early the next day with his game and player, anxious to show a scene with the abandoned McLellan house, holding only a computer terminal and robot that reads poetry. Soon, the robot recited the words of “There Will Come Soft Rains” by Sara Teasdale and we delighted in Chris’s connection not only to the poem, but also to his assertion to the class that “in case they didn’t know, it is also a nod to Ray Bradbury’s short story called [pausing for effect] ‘There Will Come Soft Rains.’”

Through this experience, we realized that allusions are conventions within literature that cannot be grasped without, as Gee and Hayes (2011) assert, experience. Our students lacked the maturity and life experiences that young people simply do not possess because they have not been exposed to the texts other texts allude to. While challenging texts such as the Bible and classical literature works are valuable in the secondary classroom, allusions to these types of texts can be lost on students who have not yet developed into sophisticated readers (Gallagher, 2009; Rosenblatt, 1995; Kane, 2007; Morris & Tchudi, 1996). Those allusions become just one more mysterious piece of the already impossible literature puzzle the teacher keeps droning about. But once students see an example of an allusion from their own popular culture, their “real world,” they can identify dozens more, allowing them to transfer these skills to traditional texts (Alvermann, 2011). Because video games allude not only to classical mythology but also to movies and other games that students know well, students begin to see the intertextuality that exists between all forms of text—even texts like movies, video games, and comics that students and even teachers often do not perceive as texts. Game titles such as *God of War* are based largely on Greek mythology, with characters and tasks modeled after the myths we have grown to know, while titles such as *Dante’s Inferno* are based on Christian mythology, using Dante’s nine circles of hell as the centerpiece of the game. When students are able to identify intertextuality, they increase their background knowledge and acknowledge multiple perspectives, thus enabling them to identify more connections across texts and to increase their critical thinking skills (Lenski, 1998).

**Building background knowledge.** Beyond teaching character types and allusions, we used popular culture and media to strengthen higher-level thinking, even as students read traditional print text. Steven Johnson (2005) argues that popular culture provides possibilities for strengthening mental abilities because, he says, the cognitive benefits of attention, memory, and following threads associated with reading have been steadily growing in popular culture texts over the past thirty years. We kept this in mind as we searched for a way to make *To Kill a*

*Mockingbird* more accessible. Although this novel was one of our personal favorites, prior experiences had taught us that the text would be tough reading for many students, particularly our struggling readers, because of its reflective style, slow action, unreliable narrator, and irony. We sought ways to first introduce those concepts in a more familiar, non-print fashion. Additionally, we wanted students actually to experience—to feel—the effects of the Great Depression, which establish the slow pace of the book. “Considerable evidence shows that what is most imaged and felt in a reading is what is most retained over the long term” (Sadoski & Paivo, 2004, p. 1354). Previously, we had students research the era, but the facts they uncovered did little to make them vicariously undergo the anguish the economic bust had wreaked.

We turned to media. *Cinderella Man*, the movie of a one-time boxer who battles back to the championship to provide food for his children, brings alive the difficulties of the Great Depression. We felt stark images such as the father standing in line for work, paired with a strong character determined to provide for his family, provided students with insights into the big picture of what the world was like at this time and into the smaller picture of the emotional impact the Great Depression had on families. Through film, our students were able not just to envision but also to experience an era in our history that seemed only abstract before. As Smilanich & Lafreniere (2010) discovered, “film offers an immediacy and accessibility that the printed text frequently does not,” so *Cinderella Man* gave our students who struggled with the description of the Great Depression in the novel a chance to uncover insights into the Depression’s effects through an analysis of film. This allowed them to recreate the context of the first half of the novel by recalling specific images from the film, providing them with a better understanding of the events that later unfolded in the book. The movie also modeled a courage easily compared to Atticus Finch’s in *Mockingbird*, which aided their understanding of Atticus’s motivation as he defended Tom Robinson and struggled to teach his children right from wrong.

Students viewed the movie, deciding where scenes began and ended, and created DVD-style titles for each scene as a way of practicing summarization. They also listed the varied effects of the Depression associated with each scene. Afterwards, we built discussion questions based on our state-assessed reading indicators. Students chose questions to answer individually before participating in Socratic circles, where they pooled their ideas. One discussion question asked students to contrast the movie’s portrayal of the antagonist boxer to his description from a factual website. Kids quickly recognized that the movie had exaggerated the opponent’s evil reputation to add drama and suspense as they headed into the climax of the story. They were pleased when we praised their sophisticated critical evaluation of writer’s craft and purpose.

When given an assessment with open-ended questions relating to the flashback techniques, characterization, cause-effect relationships, and allusions in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Judy’s students stalled on the questions, believing that they could not think their way to answers. She played Spiderman again and cast the symbolic web, asking them to connect the question to something we had studied (Alvermann, 2011; Gee & Hayes, 2011). Immediately, students began to make these connections and critically analyzed *To Kill a Mockingbird* through the lens developed with Spidey and connected their visual memory from the scenes in *Cinderella Man*, which gave them a visual connection to what it must have felt and looked like to be a part of the Great Depression.

### **Using popular culture texts to teach writing**

**Providing supporting evidence.** Teaching students how to use concrete examples from texts to support their ideas in writing sometimes proved challenging as well. We turned to popular culture. Because we wanted to demonstrate how personal writing can and should be, we encouraged our students to bring their own popular culture texts, in the form of song, to us. For years, we had witnessed the motivation music instilled within adolescents (Caswell, 2005; Goering & Burenheide, 2009; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002). Indeed, we remembered the integral role music played in our own adolescence and reminded ourselves about the power music still has in influencing our moods. How could we tap into this in our classrooms? Upon further reflection, we recalled our own fascination with the once popular television show *Ally McBeal*. Toward the end of the first season, Ally's therapist encouraged Ally to select a personal theme song. This, we decided, offered a perfect platform to get students excited about writing.

To introduce the assignment to middle school students, Robyn began by playing Natasha Bedingfield's (2004) song "Unwritten." This song, she explained, spoke to her because she could connect to the lyrics themselves. For example, she pointed out that the lines "Reaching for something in the distance, So close you can almost taste it," described the work she was doing in graduate school. Robyn also explained that the line, "I break tradition, sometimes my tries, are outside the lines," described how she felt when she experimented with assignments in the classroom. The class worked together to brainstorm details that could be used to develop each idea into a paragraph, and then, students were challenged to identify their own personal theme songs. They could not choose a song simply because they liked listening to it. Rather, they must be able to connect the lyrics to their lives and personalities (Goering & Burenheide, 2009).

As we predicted, our students approached this paper with more excitement about writing than we had seen in previous assignments. Prior to this assignment, students viewed writing assignments as just another chore unrelated to their lives. During writing time, they often sat idly at their tables, spinning their pencils and claiming to be brainstorming when we asked why they were not writing. This was not the case as they wrote about their self-selected songs. Students brought in their iPods and shared their songs with us, taking time to point out specific lines from the songs that they could connect to their own lives. We witnessed students reading each other's writing as they were composing, asking for peer feedback without our prompting. They were excited to share pieces of their worlds with their peers and us, and soon we were learning about how the lyrics relate to our students. For example, "Moment for Life" by Nicki Minaj motivated Sara to live in the moment and to not "worry about everything, all the time" and Tina explained that "'Jesus Take the Wheel' by Carrie Underwood is my personal song because it best describes my life rules, I turn everything over to God." We enjoyed the glimpse into our students' personal lives. More importantly, our students were learning how to use the text to support their ideas. In collecting these songs that held importance for our students, we also found new ways to connect to our students, continuing the web we spun throughout the school year. Now, we possessed a playlist for each class that could be played during passing periods or during writing time, which could serve as a reminder for the importance of using the text to support our ideas.

**Emphasizing revision.** Music was not the only way popular culture influenced student writing. Superheroes played the role of helping our students connect class content to the world outside the school walls. Frustrated by students' lack of understanding about the importance of revision, Robyn's co-teacher stumbled across the extras featured on *The Incredibles* DVD set. *The Incredibles* tells the story of a family of superheroes who were forced to live incognito because of the public's perception of their powers. As the story played out on the big screen, Mr.



Incredible finds himself on a remote island under the premise of an important mission, only to discover that a child he had discounted in his crime fighting days had held a grudge and returned as the super villain Syndrome. Yet, as we discover in an interview with the director, this was not how the movie was originally written and illustrated. Rather, Syndrome shows up in the Incredible's home within the first five minutes of the film, attacking them right away instead of waiting until later in the movie. The original rough draft of the opening scene is interwoven with the director's interview, providing viewers with insight into the creative process that goes into the production of movies.

After watching the original scene, students compared and contrasted it with the version released in theaters. A class discussion confirmed that while students found the first version interesting, the revised version pulled them into the story much faster. This discussion, paired with a discussion about the director's commentary, showed students that revision is an important part of the writing process. While immediate measurable differences in student writing were difficult to identify, it was easy to see that students were motivated to put forth more effort with writing revisions. As peers began to make more suggestions during the feedback stage, there were noticeable differences across drafts. This could be seen in the revised paper that Megan wrote about Lena Horne. During the peer feedback process, her partners pointed out that her first sentence, "What was Lena Horne's life like?" served a similar function as the original opening of *The Incredibles*. It accomplished the purpose of introducing the topic, but did not really pull them into the paper. After trying out other leading sentences with her peers, she finally decided that her real interest in Horne, as well as the hook she wanted to develop, revolved around the challenges Horne faced as a result of her race. This helped her to reorganize her paper, leading with a quote from Horne that emphasized the theme of her paper: "I was unique in that I was a kind of black that white people could accept. I was their daydream. I had the worst kind of acceptance because it was never for how great I was or what I contributed. It was because of the way I looked."

### **Using wikis to pull it all together**

As we continued to integrate popular culture into our classrooms, we were always on the lookout for texts that could help us meet our learning goals. We soon realized that specific texts like movies, television shows, and songs were not the only way to do this. As social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter exploded onto the scene, we began to hear the buzz from students who spent hours connecting with their friends online, posting short blurbs about their lives and commenting on their friends' posts. We could imagine no better pairing for our Spiderman theme than those sites created specifically for building connections. As Vygotsky pointed out, learning is fundamentally a social process, and we knew the Internet had an extraordinary potential to facilitate new kinds of learning relationships (Bruckman, 2002; Witte, 2007). There had to be, we reasoned, a way to harness the energy students used literacy on these sites outside of school with our own classroom objectives. Utilizing technology can foster deeper understanding through collaboration, so we reasoned advanced technologies might overcome some of the barriers to learners' interaction and support collaborative work to synthesize shared knowledge (Huang, 2002). Facebook was blocked from school access, but we knew there had to be a way to bring the student authorship Facebook offers into our class. After researching the possibilities, we settled on PBworks, a site that offered ad-free wikis for educational purposes. Wikis, we soon learned, allowed invited contributors to publish content to the web page. Our students could lead the way in building our new class web presence.

**Creating a space for personal connections.** The creation of our class wiki shaped a classroom dynamic that impacted both our virtual and physical spaces. Although we provided links for homework and class announcements, the centerpiece for the site became our students' individual pages. Each student delighted in choosing fonts, colors, photos and songs that would personalize their pages. Through the creation of a personal space, students now had a forum to voice their opinions, and they were excited to do so. For us, their enthusiasm provided us with a means to bring everything together in the form of book blogs. We asked students to discover novels they could connect to through characters, experiences, and ideas. They would bring these discoveries to their own pages each month, sharing their insights and dialoguing about books with their classmates.

Although students took to the assignment with an enthusiasm we had never before seen, their first attempts at writing about books disregarded all the Spidey connections we had made previously. They fell back on summary writing, often giving away the ending of the story. We reminded them of the richer understanding they gained from texts when they exercised their Spidey powers and made connections to themselves, other texts, and the world around us. We also demonstrated how disengaging summaries were to read. What kinds of comments could their peers post if their entries simply recapped the book? And who would want to read it if they already knew the ending? After modeling how to write a response that connected to a text we had studied in class, we had students practice commenting on the response, illustrating the potential digital conversations could have in creating interest about books. Each month, we watched our students improve in their production of texts that dug deeper into their analyses of books than traditional book reports had in the past. We learned about the importance of continual practice as students began focusing on characters, exploring their roles in the novels and how they faced the challenges presented to them. They incorporated specific examples and lines from the books to support their ideas.

Most importantly, we watched them enact the lesson of Spiderman as they continued to develop their own webs of connections, developing into stronger readers in the process. For example, Joe linked the books *London Calling* by Edward Bloor and *Mister Monday* by Garth Nix, connecting the strange occurrences that teach both main characters about what matters most to them. Maria's connections were to herself rather than another book as she related the book *Brothers in Arms* by Paul Langan and Ben Alirez to her own life because of her early years in a gang-ridden environment that was similar to the setting described in the book (see Appendix, Figure 2). We also began to see students use popular culture to better understand character development. With the popularity of the Twilight series in full swing, Claire began to connect Bella (the main female character in Twilight) with the Jordin Sparks song "No Air." She noted that Bella's feelings of emptiness, especially when Edward left her in second book *New Moon*, reminded her of the lines in the song that said "Losing you is like living in a world with no air" and "Cause my world revolves around you; it's so hard for me to breathe." Her familiarity with the song helped her better understand the depth of Bella's despair.

**Extending beyond the digital space.** While the wiki provided a place for students to share their own thoughts about the books, it also gave students a platform for asking each other questions and responding with their own opinions about the books their classmates blogged about. And because the wiki was available to them at any time, we began to see our students extend their learning beyond the school day, with comments and posts occurring at all hours of the night, as well as weekend. We had created a system that supported the notion that groups of online

learners can motivate and support one another's learning experiences (Bruckman, 2002; Tsai, 2010; Witte, 2007). We also began to see the communication that they were engaging in online infiltrating our classroom environment. More than once, we had students come to us in pairs as one student wanted to return a book checked out from our classroom library and the other wanted to check it out before someone else could nab it. By working together on this wiki, students were able to "seek diverse perspectives, gather and use information ethically, and use social tools responsibly and safely" (American Association of School Librarians, 2007, p. 2).

Through wikis, students can learn how to seek out information and synthesize ideas through the use of multiple sources and an exchange of ideas between networked members, which is the first step toward developing the critical literacy skills required in today's global information age (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). By tapping into this piece of popular culture, we were not only seeing students develop their critical reading skills (as was affirmed by the state test scores), but we were also seeing students connect as learners and read more than we had ever seen before. As Richardson (2010) notes, "The collaborative environment that wikis facilitate can teach students much about how to work with others, how to create community, and how to operate in a world where the creation of the knowledge and information is more and more becoming a group effort" (p. 69). To us, this just confirmed the lesson Spidey had spun for the class on that very first day: success in learning relies heavily on the ability to make connections, and for our students, popular culture provided a viable route to do just this.

### **Final thoughts**

We believe that our struggling readers approached difficult texts and tasks more readily when they were partnered with popular culture multimodal texts. Our connections to popular culture, like O'Brien's work with digital literacy, "led to . . . the development of strategies, self-efficacy, confidence, and self-regulation not experienced in years of struggling with print literacies" (2003, Transference of Competence section, para. 1). O'Brien's work highlights that motivational research reveals that students' perceptions about their abilities is one of the most powerful aspects of motivation. Readers who struggle see ability and task difficulty as beyond their control and consequently often give up. O'Brien discovered that students who lacked confidence in their ability to read print texts often refused to engage themselves in print.

Ironically, struggling readers are less likely to develop strategies than competent readers when working with texts (Pressley 1998, as cited in O'Brien, 2003). Because of their frequent use of media outside the classroom, students do not approach working with media in the classroom with the same perceptions of inability and task difficulty as with print texts. Therefore, they are less likely to attribute failure to these categories. Rather, they believe that they must develop strategies to help them work with the media. These strategies, often more complex than those used in reading printed texts, lead to an increased self-efficacy (O'Brien, 2003). The visual-kinesthetic Spiderman cue reminded our students to spin their webs and make connections when they found themselves struggling, giving our students confidence to continue working toward make meaning with a variety of texts. The integration of the wiki built upon these successes because our students felt confident in an online forum that mirrored the social networks they regularly engaged in outside of school, and they were excited to share their ideas in their own personal spaces. The comments from their peers helped bolster their confidence, encouraging them to continue to read and share their favorite novels (Witte, 2007; Sweeney, 2011). We found that our students who began the year intimidated by reading found print text less daunting, and all of our students embraced a community that celebrated reading. This was most apparent by

classroom observers who expressed disbelief at how engaged our students were during free reading time.

Integrating popular culture aided us in achieving our goals for our students. Yet, we were always cognizant of the need to continue to stay abreast of what our students were interested in. A text such as a video game or television show that engages students one year may bore them the next. It can be difficult to predict from year to year. As a way to counter this, at the start of each school year we asked students to bring in an artifact or sample of their favorite popular culture texts. Reading favorite novels, watching favorite shows and movies, and playing favorite video games can provide us with multiple launching points for teaching the skills we value in the language arts classroom.

Yet, Lewis and Finders (2002) found that many teachers resist incorporating youth and popular culture texts into the classroom because they believe these texts do not qualify as the rigorous texts required by academia. This idea seems to become more and more prevalent as districts increase the pressure to achieve higher test scores. We must remember, however, that learning always bridges from the familiar to the unfamiliar (Vygotsky, 1978). Cartoons, video games, web sites, and movies, although not typical “texts” in English class, helped our students make the connections required for deeper understanding and learning:

[T]o make learning available for students, instructors must bring new material and skills into a zone of intelligibility, possible participation, and motivated interaction. Students recognize and incorporate the new tools only insofar as they help direct and shape attention and motives already forming in pursuit of some desired object. (Kennedy, 2006, p. 334)

As Smith and Wilhelm (2006) pointed out, teachers can use popular culture to open windows of interest that bridge the disconnect that students often perceive between school and the world outside of school, or between academic and popular texts. Popular culture can help teachers create concrete, shared learning experiences for their students, providing multiple contexts for students to experience an idea multiple times, which will help learners develop a more generalized understanding of the idea (Gee & Hayes, 2011). Thus, students become more aware that the author constructs worlds of meaning in all texts, including those consumed in popular culture (Lewis & Ketter, 2008). This teaches them to become critical readers as they intentionally search for and make connections as a strategy for reading and learning, transforming them into lifelong learners, Spiderman learners, who ceaselessly cast their webs of meaning into the unknown, “until the ductile anchor holds” (apologies to Walt Whitman).

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## APPENDIX

Figure 1

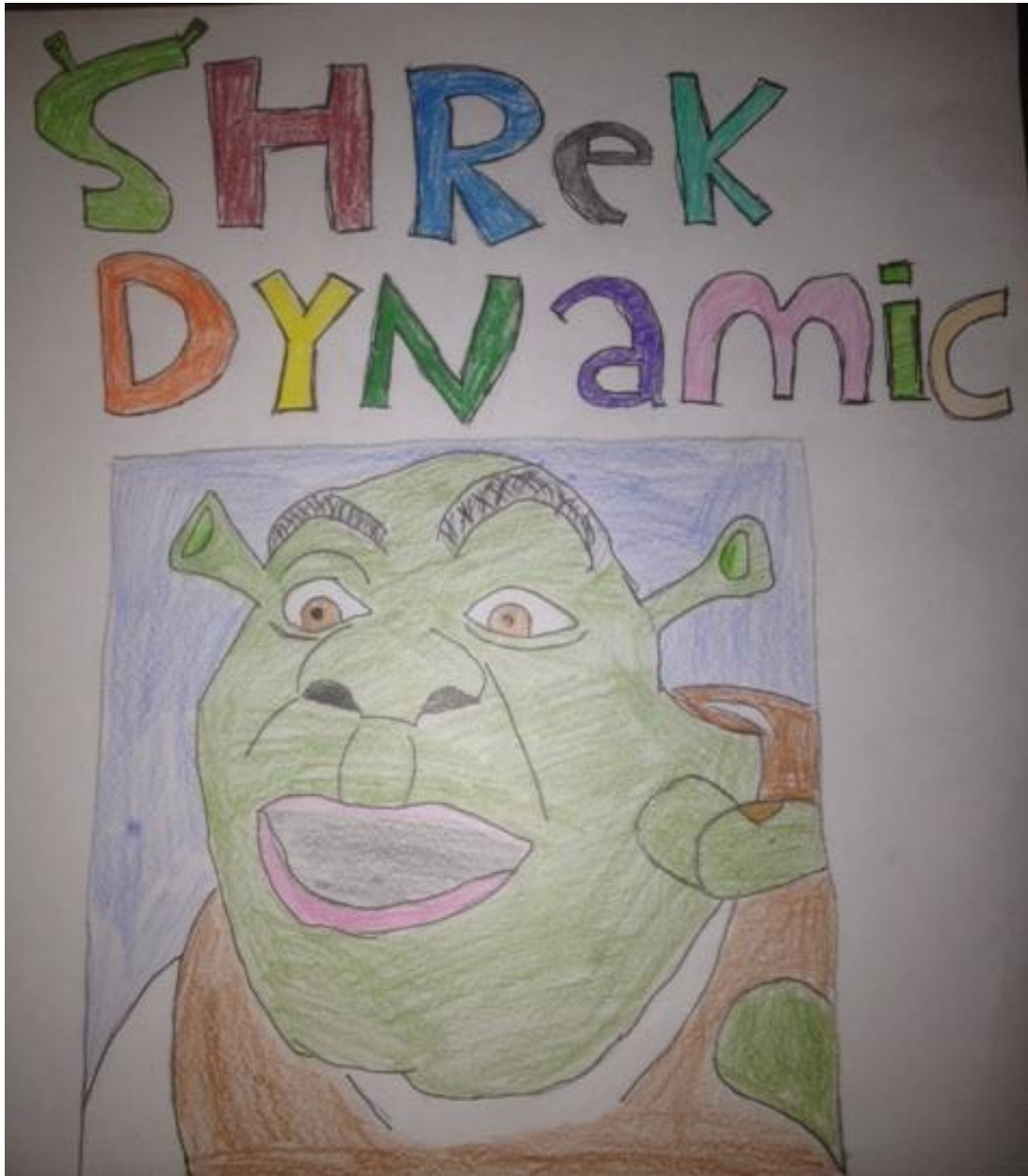


Figure 1 After a discussion of character types, students identified and illustrated various cartoon figures to represent each of the character types. Their illustrations helped students to distinguish between types of characters. Posters, like the one above, were mounted on the wall, serving as a resource to help students transfer their knowledge of character types as they were studying different characters in literature.

Figure 2

*Brothers In Arms*  
by Paul Langan & Ben Alirez  
12/16/07  
book blog

This book is the best since my last Sara Dessen book. I love it because it kind of connects to me and my life. About three years ago I lived in a gang relative enviroment. It was down in were they call the West Side and we lived with my grandma. I loved my life,so many friends and family went to school with me. I was friends with people in the West Side gang,and so were my brother and sister. When my mom found out we were going to be what they called jumped in(doing something a member of the gang asked you to do or just get beat up to be in the gang)she was frightened. She was worried one of us would go to jail,another would end up dead or maybe just pregnant. So she moved us. All of us were really agreee of her because we wanted to stay with our friends and family. I still see my friends over there today, but now that im older i do think she made the right decision. This book also reflects back to me because he is mexican and so am I. I am also catholic.

Martin Luna is a member of a gang who loves his family,but he didnt know what he really had until it was gone. His little brother huero died from a gang shooting,Martin Luna had soon lost his whole world,even his mind. He hates his new school,house,and even hates his mom for making him move. Now he is on a new journey were he meets bullies and a beautiful girl while trying to find the person who killed his brother and trying to find a way out. What will Martin do? What road will he take?Will he choose to kill or live?

I give this book a 10 out of 10 because it connected with my life and I also cried. I loved this book so much. It was a really good book and I recommend this book to boys and girls. So many memories filled my mind as i read it. I just love how it connected me in a way. Sometimes little things in life that you dont reconize will appear when you left them. And I know it from experiance. Trust me don't do anything you will regret and don't regret anything because at the time that was the decision you made when it happened.

*Secrets in the Shadows*

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**Figure 2** The blog above was written by an 8th grader in Robyn's 7th grade English class. After failing English the previous year, the student found herself repeating the course. Although she had completed very little work the previous year, she became one of the most prolific readers and writers in the class. Here, she talks about the connections she made to the novel *Brothers in Arms* by Paul Langan and Ben Alirez. Despite grammatical errors, the student exhibits an increased understanding of the novel, as well as engagement, because of her power to make connections.