

## Multiliteracies in the Classroom: Emerging Conceptions of First-Year Teachers

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### Abstract

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With conceptions of literacy growing beyond the traditional print medium, new understandings of multiliteracy practices and pedagogies are needed to better inform the preparation of secondary English teachers. This article presents the findings of a study examining five first year teachers' understandings of and experiences with multiliteracies. Using a narrative inquiry approach, each teacher's experiences are presented in depth including successes and struggles with integrating multiliteracies into the classroom. The article then concludes with how the teachers' understandings and experiences can better inform English teacher education.

**Key words:** multiliteracies, narrative inquiry, first-year teachers, English teacher education

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As I begin to make the switch from teacher to teacher educator and broaden my own ideas of literacy in my attempts to broaden pre-service teachers' conceptions of literacy, I am taken back to my last few years of teaching and my school's new focus on integrating technology into the curriculum. Rather than suggesting that we find ways to match technology to our English curriculum's goals, means, and outcomes and really stretch the understanding of what literacy means for teachers and students, the mandate was, "Technology is good; use it." At my school and in my teaching, literacy was either regulated to the "old" traditional print-based modes of reading and writing or to the "new" computer-mediated forms where literacy had morphed into something beyond recognition. I lacked the necessary training and insight on how to position my students effectively to be multiliterate to bridge the gap between the old and the new and to meet the technological mandate put forth by my school. This personal experience in dealing with a lack of focus on expanding notions of literacy has caused me to reconsider how to better support pre-service and beginning English teachers in both their understandings of and experiences with literacy.

Beginning English teachers are in a unique position in their careers: While university preparation is still fresh in their mind, their entry into the classroom can challenge what they understand from their preparatory experiences and what they actually practice in a professional setting (McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005; Shoffner, 2011). This situation is particularly true regarding new English teachers' understandings of literacy. Literacy, in general, is a social and cultural practice that is constantly in flux (Cervetti, Damico, & Pearson, 2006), with meaning-making no longer confined to print-based text. Rather, literacy is seen as multimodal in that it is interactive and informative, and occurs in ever-increasingly technological settings where information is part of spatial, audio, and visual patterns (Rhodes & Robnolt, 2009). Literacy and technology continually shape one another (Bruce, 1997; Labbo & Reinking, 1999; Swenson, Young, McGrail, Rozema, & Whitin, 2006) and require new beliefs and goals in the classroom.

Therefore, English teachers must have the appropriate skills, strategies, and insights to navigate the rapidly changing views of literacy successfully and, subsequently, to support their students' achievement in these same areas. Expanding literacy in the classroom could include promoting multimodal anchoring techniques alongside traditional literacy activities (Sewell & Denton, 2011), embedding literacy in localized social practices (Bailey, 2009), and using technology for a specific and meaningful purpose (Rhodes & Robnolt, 2009). Alger (2009) points out that, although beginning English teachers may transfer some university practices into the classroom, bigger ideas are often left out. This omission often follows from beginning teachers adapting to new schools, students, and situations, leaving some practices learned during teacher education behind in the process. How, then, can beginning English teachers navigate the messy waters of literacy?

The complexity of English teaching and learning requires constantly evolving knowledge surrounding literacy, beginning English teachers and English teacher education. A more expansive view of literacy calls for English teachers to constantly redefine what it means to be literate (Cervetti et al., 2006) in order to respond to their students' needs and the requirements of a rapidly changing world. This study examines the understandings of and experiences with multiliteracies of five first year teachers in order to provide additional knowledge in regards to how beginning English teachers come to understand the concept of multiliteracies through both

their undergraduate experiences and their first year of teaching practice. Their emerging understandings of multiliteracies as they transition into the teaching profession offer insight into how enact their personal practical knowledge and, by extension, suggest ways in which English teacher educators may better prepare new teachers to work with multiliteracies.

The research questions for this study were as follows:

1. What are these beginning secondary English teachers' understandings of multiliteracies as pre-service teachers?
2. How do these beginning secondary English teachers' apply their understandings of and experiences with multiliteracies in their classroom teaching?
3. How do these beginning secondary English teachers make sense of their experiences with multiliteracies in the classroom?

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Multiliteracies**

Literacy involves more than a set of conventions to be learned, either through print or technological formats. Rather, literacy enables people to negotiate meaning (Leland & Kasten, 2002). With these negotiations often occurring in technological settings and engaging students' values and identities (Jewitt, 2008), the New London Group (1996) has proposed the concept of *multiliteracies*, which views literacy as continual, supplemental, and enhancing or modifying established literacy teaching and learning rather than replacing traditional practices (Rowell, Kosnik, & Beck, 2008). Multiliteracies recognizes both the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in the new globalized society and the new variety of text forms from multiple communicative technologies. There is also the need for new skills to operate successfully in the changing literate and increasingly diversified social environment. The New London Group (1996) argues that "to be relevant, learning processes need to recruit, rather than attempt to ignore and erase, the different subjectivities, interests, intentions, commitments, and purposes that students bring to learning" (p. 18). They must also respond to the different mediums and modes in which students operate. Teachers need new knowledge that reflects these varying and multiple discourses. This huge shift from traditional print-based literacy to 21<sup>st</sup> century multiliteracies reflects "the impact of communication technologies and multimedia on the evolving nature of texts, as well as the skills and dispositions associated with the consumption, production, evaluation, and distribution of those texts" (Borsheim, Meritt, & Reed, 2008, p. 87). With literacy continually growing and expanding, there remains a need to support pre-service and practicing teachers' conceptions and understanding of multiliteracies.

To support this mandate for educators, the New London Group (1996) advocates for a multiliteracies pedagogy that includes four components. The first, situated practice, draws on experience of meaning-making in specific contexts. This meaning-making is unique and authentic to the participants and their contexts. The second component, overt instruction, develops an explicit meta-language to support active interventions that scaffold student learning. Critical framing makes sense of situated practice and overt instruction by interpreting the social contexts and purposes related to meaning making. The goal is to enact transformed practice where students, as meaning makers, become designers themselves and not just consumers.

A multiliteracies perspective also adopts a pedagogy of design (New London Group, 1996), where “teachers and managers are seen as designers of learning processes and environments, not as bosses dictating what those in their charge should think and do” (p. 19). This pedagogy includes examining available designs, redesigning them with available and appropriate technologies, and creating the redesigned texts through a process of critical reflection. Individuals in the designing process “are now see as remakers, transformers, of sets of representational resources—rather than as users of stable systems, in a situation where multiplicity of representational modes are brought into textual compositions” (Kress, 2000, p. 160). Teachers need to equip students with the necessary skills to successful participate as transformation agents in the design process. These skills and literacies associated with technologies and students’ out-of-school abilities require teachers and teacher educators to develop “nuanced and critical understandings of these technologies and the literacies with which they are associated” (Swenson et al., 2006, p. 353). Examining these practices is, therefore, crucial in understanding English education in a constantly changing world.

### **Personal Practical Knowledge**

This study examines teachers’ personal practical knowledge that is firmly rooted in teachers’ experiences. In this regard, “knowledge is not something objective and independent of the teacher to be learned and transmitted, but, rather, is the sum total of the teacher’s experiences” (Connelly, Clandinin, & He, 1997, p. 666). Personal knowledge is put into practice in relation to circumstances, actions, and processes that may contain emotional content. This personal knowledge can then be examined in the actions of a person or discourse or conversation. Personal practical knowledge, then, is the “body of convictions, conscious or unconscious, which have arisen from experience, intimate, social, and traditional and which are expressed in a person’s action” (Clandinin, 1985, p. 362). In this study, beginning English teachers’ histories, teaching acts, and personal and professional experiences will serve as focal points. By examining teachers’ personal practical knowledge through these different focal points, a strong narrative unity is formed (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) to connect the many threads and themes that help account for the way beginning English teachers construct their experiences and stories. While limited in actual teaching experience, the beginning English teachers in this study reveal a particular valuable personal practical knowledge as they are still very much influenced by their undergraduate experiences even while their knowledge is being continually shaped by their new school contexts. Studying the tension in these two influences provides the opportunity for new insights into emerging conceptions of multiliteracies.

## **Method**

### **Narrative Inquiry**

This study uses narrative inquiry to examine beginning teachers’ understandings of and experiences with multiliteracies to explore how knowledge is narratively composed, embodied in a person, and expressed in practice (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry recognizes human beings as storytellers who have lived storied lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007; Clandinin, Pusher, & Orr, 2007). Ask teachers and they will have numerous stories to share about their experiences in their classroom. In this regard, narratives are

seen as homegrown, indigenous, and disciplinary, especially in relation to specific educational contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Reissman, 2008). These ideas are explored in this study, as it is important to understand beginning English teachers' stories of understanding and enacting multiliteracies as they provide a more authentic glimpse into what happens in actual classrooms.

As this study focused specifically on beginning English teachers' stories, the stories aided in bringing the teachers into greater accord with themselves and with others (Atkinson, 2007). This alignment involved organizing and creating order out of experiences and allowed for interaction between individual's experiences and beliefs in the past, present, and future (Moen 2006). By highlighting the teacher in this process, narrative inquiry showed how teachers' thought processes are important in the knowledge base of teaching, just as the teacher's social relationships and experiences are important for knowledge development. This practical knowledge is interwoven in the teacher's expertise (Behar-Horenstien & Morgan, 1995), a phenomenon that this study aimed to understand.

Given that narratives "make visible the puzzles of the mind—framings, evidence, stances, theories, and questions" (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2011, p. 8), narrative inquiry can play a role in enhancing teaching development or ascertaining how teachers understand their work; for "if teaching is event and action with respect to a curriculum, then story is quite appropriate, if not the only way of knowing teaching" (Doyle, 1997, p. 95). The teaching practice is very contingent upon context and the particular, such that it is difficult to generalize from the knowledge gained through practice. The beginning teachers' narratives presented in this study examined the various social relationships and experiences that led to the development of knowledge of multiliteracies. They further placed "an emphasis on the connections between what humans think, know, and do as well as the reciprocal relationships between the way that human thinking shapes behavior and knowing shapes thinking (Behar-Horenstein & Morgan, 1995, p. 143). The knowledge gained through the sharing and construction of the beginning English teachers' stories provides insight into their emerging conceptions of multiliteracies.

### **Data Collection**

The five beginning secondary English teachers participating in the study were graduates of the same English teacher education program at a large Midwestern research university. They are currently teaching and deployed in a wide variety of schools across the United States. In order to capture their experiences effectively, data sources and collection from the participants consisted of interviews, observations, teacher materials, and a questionnaire examining their understandings and experiences from their undergraduate English education program. The questionnaire (see Appendix A) was completed prior to the beginning of the school year and asked each teacher to define the term multiliteracies, asked how their teacher education courses prepared them to teach multiliteracies in the classroom, how they would describe specific experiences with multiliteracies in their teacher education courses, what role they thought technology played in the English classroom, and why they planned or did not plan to incorporate multiliteracies into their classroom during their first year.

As the lived-experience is of utmost importance in narrative inquiry, I conducted two in-depth interviews (Seidman, 2006) with each teacher participant, one in the fall semester and one in the

spring semester, during their first year of teaching (2012-2013). These interviews provided a more complete picture of their understandings and applications of multiliteracies. The first face-to-face interview occurred during the fall of 2012. Questions for each interview focused on the teachers' prior experiences with and current understandings of multiliteracies, including undergraduate experiences with multiliteracies that have influenced their practice and current efforts to incorporate multiliteracies into their classroom (see Appendix B for interview questions). These interviews took place in classrooms, in coffee shops, and via video calls. Each interview lasted from 45 minutes to 1 hour, and I subsequently transcribed them. The second follow-up written interview occurred in the spring of 2013. Serving as a member-check, the interview focused on experiences, successes, and struggles with incorporating multiliteracies into instruction specific to each teacher as well as their future teaching considerations for the next year.

In order to understand more fully the environments and contexts in which the participants practice, I also conducted classroom observations of each teacher with the exception of one due to time and distance constraints. The purpose of the observation was to see how the teachers' enact their knowledge of multiliteracies in their teaching. Classroom observations examined a typical school day encompassing multiple instructional periods, which included similar lessons taught multiple times as well as different lessons taught only once. I took detailed field notes of curriculum presented, teacher interactions with students, the classroom layout and design, the teacher's instruction, and other features of normal classroom practice. In addition, any teacher materials used in the observed lessons and any other materials regarding multiliteracies were collected from each teacher. These materials included lesson plans, unit plans, student handouts, instructional examples and content, lecture notes, and/or multimedia presentations.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was centered on Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative inquiry space that focuses on interaction, continuity, and situation. Interaction refers to the personal and social nature of the narrative; continuity looks at past, present, and future experiences; and situation takes into account the notion of place (p. 50). The narrative inquiry space analysis method recognizes the temporal nature of stories and experiences, the need for balance between personal and social factors, and the influence of setting and context on experiences.

Data were reduced into manageable and meaningful segments (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2013), and initial analysis focused on the role of multiliteracies within the narrative inquiry space. Data were then assigned names or codes (see Appendix C for all codes generated) that were combined into larger categories and themes (See Figure 1).

Narrative Inquiry Space	Categories and Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interaction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understandings of multiliteracies</li> <li>• Teaching</li> <li>• Struggles with multiliteracies</li> <li>• Student learning</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Situation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School context's influence on multiliteracies</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continuity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Past teaching and learning</li> <li>• Present teaching and learning</li> <li>• Future teaching and learning</li> </ul>

(Figure 1 – Data analysis categories and themes)

### School Contexts

What follows is a brief character sketch that describes each teacher's respective school contexts. All names are pseudonyms.

**Sydney.** Sydney joined an alternative after-school program that assisted a local school in an urban district on the west coast. The program's primary objective was to help students with fundamental skills. As one of the only licensed teachers in the program, Sydney was promoted on the second day to literacy coordinator, working with the school's teachers to create lesson plans for the program in addition to her regular teaching duties. Sydney had to navigate numerous issues such as teacher preparation, student motivation, and aligning curricular goals with the school while trying to help raise student test scores and promoting life skills.

**Robyn.** Robyn taught in a middle school located in a small city in the Midwest. Due to budget constrictions, Robyn was the teacher of record for over 200 students and had upwards of 40-50 students in each of her 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading classes. Her only help came from an unlicensed reading specialist. Robyn started her job during the week that teacher meetings began, and in her words, struggled to stay afloat ever since.

**Nathan.** Nathan taught in a middle school in the Midwest. Many of his students did not have access to necessary resources, and Nathan noted these impediments on their motivation and learning. Nathan's school recently had jumped in school rankings due to the previous year's higher test scores and was focused on maintaining its new higher status. Nathan followed a mandated curriculum outline and test preparation regimen and felt as though he had received very little support on how to put them into practice effectively.

**Audrey.** Audrey taught in a high school in a Mountain West mining town. As she noted, many of her students did not need to graduate in order to start working in the mines or to make money. Therefore, Audrey struggled to make education relevant and valuable. Audrey was cognizant of her "newness" in relation to the other teachers at her school and their various teaching models. She was primarily concerned with keeping her students engaged.

**Emma.** Emma taught in an 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> grade school in the Midwest. The school's curriculum was specifically focused on environmental studies and was connected to a regional zoo to promote this specific focus. Although the subject of English played an important role, it often played a secondary role to the environmental focus. The school was broken into two "houses" per grade level, each of which consisted of three main subject-area teachers: English, Social Studies, and Science. The teachers at her school were very progressive, highly collaborative, and innovative, causing Emma to constantly expand her notions of literacy.

### **Validation**

In order to make stories accessible across various contexts, the beginning teachers' stories are described separately and then further explored by contextualizing each story in relation to the other teachers' stories (Behar-Horenstein & Morgan, 1995). Findings were validated through the use of multiple sources of data, member checking with the participants, and further considering the role of each respective context (Moen, 2006). Findings are organized chronologically to create a narrative unity (Clandinin et al., 1997) to represent the personal practical knowledge for each of the participants in order to construct their lived stories and makes sense of them along a temporal time span.

### **Findings**

Although all were graduates from the same English teacher education program, each teacher emerged with different understandings and ideas of multiliteracies from their coursework. These understandings were then influenced in differing ways by the teachers' respective school contexts, resulting in a variety of viewpoints concerning multiliteracies in classroom practice. Particular influences on understandings of multiliteracies included the availability of school technology, collaboration with colleagues, student demographics, and the goals of the English curriculum. These viewpoints are explored in depth with each teacher below.

### **Sydney**

Before starting the alternative after school program, Sydney knew that she would be dealing with a high population of English Language Learners. Her undergraduate experiences with and understandings of multiliteracies, in her view, would serve her well in multiple areas. Sydney had practice with code-switching and translating Spanish, African American English, and different dialects of English into textbook English. Sydney also spent a lot of time learning different uses of technology, especially in regards to supplementing texts with video or visual representations. This knowledge, she hoped, would be useful in dealing with her future students:

The concept of academic vocabulary and Standard American English are new to my students and they need to become familiar with the different aspects of language. They are also very familiar with technology in a social setting, and it would be nice to bridge the gap between their social world and the world of academic literature.

Sydney hoped that integrating multiliteracies into her teaching would help address this issue, and she clung to these ideas as she confronted what lay ahead in her first year of teaching.



Sydney's first focus was on making sure the after-school curriculum and activities aligned with what the school's teachers taught during the day. While raising test scores and reading comprehension was her program's first priority, Sydney also wanted to expand her students' notions of texts:

I think that my students have learned that the idea of literature expands beyond just a book that they can pick up and read. [My program] has worked hard to expose them to all different types of mediums such as videos, poems, instruction manuals, song lyrics, non-fiction articles to present different ways to obtain information about a subject.

This exposure was often achieved by using technology in conjunction with lessons and activities that supported the skills that the students needed to help raise their test scores.

Even though Sydney highlighted these successes, she still struggled with the language barrier, since 98% of her student population consisted of English as Second Language Learners. She stated that "I feel like there's a lot of advice for teaching English language learners, but yet you still don't really know what to do when your student doesn't know how to speak English. You can't really prepare." Her frustrations also carried over into the lack of school resources to really support more multiliteracies integration:

I often struggled with lack of availability, lack of resources, and lack of up to date technology at school when it comes to using different mediums and have to simply do what is easiest in terms of resources that I provide for students.

These limitations, along with the fact that students did not have access to technology at home, were unfamiliar with basic Internet research, and did not intuitively know their way around the computer, left Sydney feeling limited in her options.

Despite these constraints, Sydney was optimistic for the future of her students and her future in the program. This hopeful outlook was tied to her school's pending shift to the Common Core State Standards and the role multiliteracies would play in that integration. She and her colleagues, she said,

talk about the usual incorporation of technology into our lesson plans, but then we also talk about the idea of anything with words being a resource to promote literacy, from instruction manuals to podcasts. I would like to learn more about the opportunities to break away from traditional mediums and incorporate more modes, genres, and accessible mediums into the classroom.

Sydney also hoped to help develop visual literacy competency in her students and help them overcome their huge technological disadvantage so they could be ready for more than just passing a test.

## Robyn

As an undergraduate, Robyn's eyes were opened to new realms of possibilities for new lessons and ways to teach students. This potential included learning multiple ways to integrate technology such as web quests, wikis, and blogs in hopes of helping students look at texts in different ways to change views on reading. Before starting her first year of teaching, Robyn said that she planned "on using multiliteracies within the classroom. I [want to] incorporate YouTube clips into lessons when applicable, utilize websites and resources which promote reading, and incorporate the Smart Board into every day use with my students." With few job prospects, Robyn was all set to become a teacher aid when she landed a job the week before teacher meetings and was thrown head first into a position in which she felt unprepared.

Even with such short notice, multiliteracies were at the forefront of Robyn's mind in planning for classes during the first year:

It's not always beneficial to promote students using pen and paper necessarily. [Teachers] need to incorporate technology and make sure they know how to use computers and blogs and podcasts and web quests because so many things with pencil and paper and traditional teaching styles are kind of outdated at this point.

With this perspective in mind, Robyn designed activities to keep the students engaged, since she felt "they respond a lot better to the computer than tradition means of paper or worksheets." Robyn soon found, however, that despite her students' affinity with technology, oftentimes they were unprepared to handle academic tasks such as Internet research or remembering their audience in the presentation of material. Most of her frustration, however, dealt with the fact that she had upwards of 50 students in her room for nearly every class period, which in turn severely limited what she was able to accomplish. The school computer labs were too small to let every student have a computer, there was no wireless access in her classroom, and in general her old school building was not equipped to handle new technologies or large amounts of students on the network at any given time.

In a perfect world, Robyn would have liked for every student to have had access to a laptop at all times and find more ways to use technology, since, as she said, "I think it is important, and I think it is something that the kids need to be exposed to." After being overwhelmed with the large amount of students and the workload that accompanied them, Robyn would also settle for smaller class sizes. In the meantime, however, Robyn's focus on multiliteracies for the future was centered on student engagement:

I want to find other ways that I can actually embrace the way my students communicate and link this to reading class. I have seen some clever ways in which teachers use texting language, tweets, and Facebook to connect to their students.

Her ultimate goal was find a way to use methods of communication and technology the students were already familiar with to create lessons that they would respond well to and understand.

## Nathan

Nathan's understanding of multiliteracies didn't necessarily manifest until he began teaching and could put his knowledge into action. While he struggled to come up with an outright definition of multiliteracies, he linked his understanding to his experiences as a pre-service teacher. This integration included how he learned about how to supplement texts with a variety of sources, engaging students with technology, and helping students connect what they are learning to the outside world.

This understanding carried over into his first year and Nathan felt as though he had immediate success:

In my seventh grade classes we read *Tangerine*, and I supplemented that with informational texts about muck fires, about lightening, about sink holes, and stuff that [the students] had no idea about. If we would have just read through the text and I would have not brought in those text sources, the book wouldn't have made sense to them.

This success hit a roadblock, however, as Nathan had to contend with school mandated curriculum. After the first quarter, Nathan was required to teach a non-fiction unit, something he claimed he was not prepared to do. While Nathan recognized how multiliteracies fit into the larger picture, one of his biggest struggles was the lack of guidance he received along the way. He was expected

to essentially come up with my own texts and my own support, supplement texts, and my own writing assignments, and then also incorporate all the other stuff as far as grammar and vocabulary. . . . It's been a real challenge to try and come up with that stuff on my own.

Integrating multiliteracies into his classroom also proved difficult when coming up against his school's view on literacy. The new testing focus of his school, he said, created a problem in that "it just comes back to literacy as a focus to get these kids to be able to perform the skills they need to on the test. . . . It's made me feel like the nightmare testing robot teacher." Nathan admitted that he struggled with trying to fulfill the curriculum requirements while trying to focus on test prep with very little guidance on how to do so or on how to integrate multiliteracies into the process.

Fortunately, Nathan viewed these struggles of his first year of teaching and his experiences with multiliteracies as part of the learning process. In the future Nathan hoped to solidify his understanding of multiliteracies while gathering the necessary resources to implement this understanding successfully in the classroom, saying, "I hope to teach a wide array of texts with varying complexities, assign all sorts of writing assignments, continue to supplement, implement technology for videos, online texts, songs, etc." He felt that he was on the right path to incorporate technology, and although he hoped it would get easier with some more experience, he also wanted to make sure to "up the ante" and not become the type of teacher who felt constrained by the accountability school system.

## Audrey

Prior to teaching, Audrey's understandings of multiliteracies were firmly rooted in experience. Rather than gathering knowledge from books or lectures, Audrey first really understood the concept of multiliteracies when she went on an overseas trip and was asked to analyze her environment in addition to reading texts. This reading about, thinking about, and responding to her surroundings then connected Audrey's growing understanding of multiliteracies to what she learned as an undergraduate and what she would eventually teach during the first year.

This new understanding was very evident as Audrey particularly focused on making classwork relevant to students who did not find much value in education in general. Instead of simply asking her students to write an essay, Audrey had them analyze their favorite music and build an essay around songs. While reading *Animal Farm*, Audrey focused on how the propaganda in the book is connected to current advertisements and helped her students learn how to critically read images:

I want to be able to do it more because the students are so prone to images. They see a full thing of text and they are like, "Oh gosh, I hate this already. I don't even know what it is." I think that multiliteracies really go hand in hand with that. [Images] are just so much easier for them, but they don't realize that they are still doing all the work.

When students argued that Shakespeare had nothing to do with their lives, Audrey tried to bring out the finer points of language and using it to stand out in a crowd, saying that language

is something that you have to think about. . . . I talk to my kids about Twitter and Facebook all the time because it's a huge part of their lives . . . and you hear this stuff all the time, and it's said over and over again, and you're like, "Gosh, I'm getting tired of this account because they keep repeating themselves or what everyone else says." I try to tell them, "Do you want to sound just like them? You're going to sound like another voice in the crowd. Do you really want that?"

Just as Audrey's understanding of multiliteracies in relation to technology, images, and the world was grounded in her experiences, she tried to help her students ground their understandings in their own experiences as much as possible.

Even though Audrey felt as though she had success with students, much of her frustration and struggles with multiliteracies were found in her co-workers. Audrey was surprised at her older co-workers' unfamiliarity with the concept and their unwillingness to even try to incorporate activities into their classroom. She recognized that she had a different type of knowledge, and while that was neither good nor bad, "it just makes it harder to do activities like this because people haven't done it before." Audrey felt supported by her administration to keep experimenting with multiliteracies, but also felt isolated in her department and unable to make any headway in getting other teachers to join her.

This struggle influenced her future directions as to better to explain herself to others. In seeking to teach multiliteracies as part of her curriculum, she acknowledged that, as she said, "I tip-toe

around what multiliteracy skills I teach to students. I should have a very clear vision in my head of what skills I'm teaching and when. I need to define exactly where I use multiliteracy in my lessons." As her school moved ahead with more technology integration, Audrey was ready and willing and simply hoped to get everyone on the "same page."

### **Emma**

The best part about Emma's undergraduate experiences was getting a broad introduction to all things multiliteracies. Emma could still pick out specific concepts she had learned such as integrating multiple texts into lessons, using film and video clips, getting kids to use technology, using graphic novels, and providing other such opportunities. Most importantly, though, was the fact that Emma really picked up on the idea that "just because it's a hot topic in education doesn't mean it's always a direct go-to. Careful evaluation of why you're using a certain literacy method is always crucial to a learning outcome." Therefore Emma became a critical consumer of multiliteracies and paid careful attention to how to use them effectively during her first year of teaching.

This focus primarily included providing the necessary background knowledge for her students so they could be critical consumers as well. Emma taught her students how to read textbooks, for example, something she noted they had never thought about before. Then to grasp the overall concept of "how do you read science," Emma brought in numerous sources and used jigsaws to convey as much information as possible. At the very basic level of multiliteracies, Emma wanted her students to understand how to read just about anything and have the students be able to "take something as input, analyze it, interpret it, decode it, and compute a response that somebody else will be able to understand." The texts could include anything from images, video, books, poetry, and because she was at a science-focused school, even the environment.

Being in a nontraditional school, Emma was forced to reconsider what it meant to be an English teacher. While her district was advocating for other content-area teachers to integrate more literacy practices, Emma had to learn how to teach graphs and charts and other forms of texts that might not be considered traditional English Language Arts materials. The same could be said for the school's focus on reading the outdoors:

I do realize it sounds crazy to say "We're reading trees," but then again, my own definition of what I teach is no longer held to "Language Arts" or "English" so that would make sense that my boundaries for these things is expanding.

The school's focus was challenging Emma's conceptions of English, yet she also noted that integrating multiliteracies into her teaching practice was forcing her to consider new understandings of literacy that she had not been accustomed to before.

Emma was ecstatic at all she had learned during her first year in the classroom, but claimed that she was still learning. Her focus for the future was solely on the students and helping them recognize how to understand multiliteracies more effectively:

I think I'd also like to learn more about what students need, what they are lacking or has been taken for granted that they know, from their previous years in education. . . . I hope to teach more of the metacognitive piece so that the students can see multiliteracies and how to evaluate how to read something best or through a different lens.

### **Discussion**

To address the constantly changing classroom, teacher education programs must consciously consider how they prepare their English teachers to meet the challenges inherent in the teaching of English (Dickson, Smagorinsky, et al., 2009). Preservice teachers require numerous opportunities to develop the necessary knowledge and skills needed for their future classrooms, especially for complex concepts such as multiliteracies. As Emma indicated in recalling her undergraduate methods course:

I remember each of the class members had to research a certain type of literacy and how and when to use it in the classroom. We talked about how sometimes using technology just to use technology isn't worth it. . . . After we presented our research, I had so many more ideas about how to use multiliteracies in my classroom, especially graphic novels and film. I started using film clips for establishing shared prior knowledge and a common entry to many lessons and units.

To these teachers, the definition of literacy has expanded to being adaptable to different situations. Some of these situations may call upon new technologies (Jewitt, 2008), and in such cases it will be important to prepare students to use and understand these as well as understanding how multiliteracies require preparing students to use different literacy strategies in different contexts (Cervetti et al., 2006). Therefore, where do I as a new teacher educator and where do we as a field begin to make changes to promote this type of understanding and learning?

### **Bringing Adolescents In**

Although these teachers come from contexts as varied as the next, multiliteracies is a universal concept that can adapt to any given situation. First and foremost in these teachers' stories was a concern for their students and how using the tools students interact with on a daily basis could effectively boost student engagement and promote a multiliterate point of view. The ultimate goal of any literacy teacher is to "guide students to sophisticated engagement with a variety of technologies, literacies, and pedagogies" (Borsheim, Merritt, & Reed, 2008, p. 90). Sydney found that when students took over ownership of their projects, they were more likely put more time and effort into their work, especially when presenting in authentic contexts. Both Robyn and Emma used multiliteracies to throw their students off their game and almost trick them into learning. As Robyn reflected,

I think they respond really well just as long as it's something different and that they can get engaged in, and if you can kind of hide the fact that they are learning, they usually do a lot better than if you give them a packet or something when it's strictly questions and they just turn off.

Emma agreed in that she used multiliteracies to help her students think differently and critically: “I found [using multiliteracies] to be really effective because maybe it just throws them off their game a little bit and they are not used to it. It makes them work a little harder.” Keeping adolescents as the main focus of teaching should remain a key focus on teacher education programs.

Teacher education programs should seek out multiple ways to include adolescents in multiliteracies teaching and learning. Involving adolescents could include having pre-service teachers complete multimedia projects with students in practicum experiences (Doering, Beach, & O’Brien, 2007), which may allow for teacher educators to model ways to create multimodal texts and demonstrate how to scaffold the process to assist students’ learning. Doering et al.’s pre-service teachers also used digital concept mapping to discuss ideas of how to integrate technology and, by extension, potentially how to use it with their future students as well. If restricted by time and distance constraints, education programs could use virtual practica (Karchmer-Klein, 2007) in which pre-service teachers could interact with students in authentic classrooms by creating technology-based extension activities and sharing and evaluating them with students. Even observing and listening to students about their literacy practices in fieldwork and practicum experiences as I do in my methods class can help pre-service teachers document and conceptualize what is motivating and engaging while also relating it back to readings and discussions from their coursework.

### **Multiplicity of Texts**

All the teachers were very aware of the importance of helping their students realize that literacy was more than just print-based texts. This emphasis showed through in their lessons and the way they structured learning opportunities for their students. For Emma, this exposure began on Day One:

The first day we talked about the summer reading. We talk about the questions, “What is a text? What is literacy?” Every single student responds that it’s like the book that they have in front of them. Then we talk about how literacy is being able to make use of data in front of us, and that data is normally with words, but then we have pictures and images and charts. . . . We really work with the students to help them see that they need to be literate in those different ways of reading and gaining knowledge.

This idea then carries through as students take this understanding and apply it to different circumstances such as reading a textbook, reading images, or even reading the environment.

In addition to students learning about different types of texts, teachers will also need to consider what a text is, as was the case with Sydney. As Sydney used a variety of texts such as videos, articles, and images with her students, this understanding carried naturally over into her conversation with the teachers with whom she worked:

That’s actually something we talked about at the professional learning community with all the English teachers too. What is a text? What is reading? It can include a lot more than just books, and teachers were encouraged to think outside the box with that.

To Nathan and many of the teachers, a variety of texts didn't have to be something grand in scope. It could simply be a way of considering different learning and teaching strategies.

Teacher education programs continue to expand the notion of texts in multiple ways. They might employ online tools such as blogging where teacher educators have specifically highlighted different affordances, social capabilities, and the manner in which the design and format of different technology platforms can lead to increased literacy understanding (Hutchison & Wang, 2012). They might use multimedia tools such as VoiceThread (Smith & Dobson, 2011) and have pre-service teachers learn how to integrate reading and writing with features such as audio, sound, and pictures. However, more explicit instruction is needed to guide pre-service teachers to make deliberate connections between these types of texts and an expanded view of literacy. By integrating digital texts into the curriculum, pre-service teachers, practicing teachers, and students may recognize their similarities to and differences from print based texts, thus challenging the notion of what constitutes a text (Swenson et al., 2006). Digital texts allow for nonlinear forms of reading and potentially provide a more richer and multimodal meaning-making opportunity.

### **Practical Applications**

What these beginning teachers sought and what the pre-service teachers I currently teach desire are practical applications of multiliteracies they can put to use immediately into the classroom. Rather than having a class period or specific assignments devoted to the use of technology in English curriculum, digital learning should be integrated into every component of literacy education. Technology has its own affordances and constraints, and deciphering among these can be difficult all by itself, especially as teachers and teacher educators contemplate how, when, why, and to what extent to integrate them into classrooms (Koehler & Mishra, 2009). Following Wetzell and Marshall's (2012) argument, I had my pre-service teachers start with standards, learning goals, and activities in a specific grade level and focus (such as reading or writing) and then had them select digital tools to help in achieving those learning goals. The goal is to have technology be an integrated component with content areas, not in isolation.

The other main concern of these beginning teachers was the need for assistance in the creation of a multiliterate view of curriculum. Having the background knowledge and familiarity with available tools, programs, and ways of thinking can contribute greatly to this process. My pre-service teachers have created their own textbooks and assignments that not only incorporate traditional before/during/after reading strategies, but also include multimodal features of images, sounds, and interactive components. This deliberate focus on such creation along with explicit discussions of the affordances and constraints of such work will, I hope, continue to expand their notions of literacy so as to motivate them to expand their future students' notions and experiences as well. Addressing these challenges in teacher education programs may help when new teachers want to extend the conversation of literacy learning with both colleagues and students in any given school setting.



## Conclusion

These five beginning teachers' emerging conceptions of multiliteracies raise the question of what it means to be multiliterate in today's society. The National Council of Teachers of English (2013) argues, "Because technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, the 21<sup>st</sup> century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies: many literacies. These literacies are multiple, dynamic, and malleable" (paragraph 1). Fourteen years into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, these many literacies continue to evolve and change, and educators need continual understanding of how they are enacted in the classroom.

This study examined the concept of multiliteracies from five beginning English teachers' understandings and experiences in order to better frame and validate their understandings and pedagogical practices (McLean & Rowsell, 2013). Much of this inquiry centered on the way new and multiple communicative technologies intersect with literacy and the impact that this integration has on teaching, learning, and conceptions of literacy. Continued research is needed to see how more practicing teachers make sense of shifting views of literacy, and this study is just a small part of what I hope will be an evolving conversation of where English teacher education needs to move in order to refine our practice to support pre-service teachers to be successful in today's schools.

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### Appendix A: Questionnaire

1. How important are the following elements as you prepare for your first year of teaching? Rank the elements from 1 to 5 by, with 1 being the most important and 5 being the least important.
  - a. Using technology
  - b. Creating lesson plans/units
  - c. Interacting with students
  - d. Choosing curriculum materials
  - e. Making interdisciplinary connections
2. What does the term *literacy* mean to you?
3. What does the term *multiliteracies* mean to you?
4. How did your teacher education courses prepare you to address/teach multiliteracies in the English classroom?
5. Describe a specific (positive or negative) experience you had with multiliteracies in one of your teacher education courses.
6. Do you plan to incorporate multiliteracies in your classroom this year? If yes, why? If not, why not?
7. In your view, what role does technology serve in the English classroom?

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

### Sample interview 1 questions:

- How would you define the concept of *multiliteracies* at this point in your teaching?
- Tell me your experiences with multiliteracies in your teaching so far.
- What has been helpful from your undergraduate experiences regarding multiliteracies in your teaching practices?
- What do you wish you knew more about in regards to multiliteracies that would be helpful in your teaching practice?
- Describe how you might go about incorporating multiliteracies into a lesson plan/unit of study.
- What have been some successes with multiliteracies in the classroom?
- What have been some struggles with multiliteracies in the classroom?
- What factors are influencing literacy practices in your classroom?

### Sample interview 2 questions:

- Now that you're into the second semester, how have things gone in regards to integrating multiliteracies into your classroom?
- How does your school view technology/technology use? How would you say that has impacted your teaching?
- What do you think your students have learned about multiliteracies this past year?
- Have there been any struggles with multiliteracies that you care to talk about?
- Now that you're almost down with the school year, what do you hope to learn in regards to multiliteracies for the future?
- In the same regard, what do you hope to teach in regards to multiliteracies for the future?

## **Appendix C: Analytic Categories**

### Interaction

- Understandings of multiliteracies
- Multiliteracies as a variety of texts
- Teaching
- Student understanding/learning
- Student engagement
- Struggles with multiliteracies
- Technology
- Curriculum organization
- Testing/Accountability

### Situation

- School context influencing multiliteracies
- Technology
- District mandates
- Students
- Testing
- Different forms of text

### Continuity

- Past (learning)
- Past (teaching)
- Present (learning)
- Present (teaching)
- Future (learning)
- Future (teaching)