Building Adolescent Literacy in Today’s English Classrooms

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If you’re reading this, you might be checking to see if I’ve acknowledged you. Who else would take the trouble to read acknowledgments? So most likely, you already know that I should be thanking you, and in that case, I want to start off by saying thanks right here, directly to your face.

If we spoke, then you’re in this book. If I worked in your classroom, you and your students are certainly here. If I talked with you about something you were writing or reading, then your thinking shaped mine and fed the streams that became this book. If you were in a class or an audience and asked a question or even just looked interested or confused, then you’re here, too. Over the past twenty-five years, I’ve tried thousands of times to make the ideas in this book clearer to people, more acceptable, more reflective of teachers’ real experiences with students, and every one of those conversations helped create this text. This book floats on an ocean of help, and I feel no shortage of gratitude for every bit of it. Though my mind floods with the faces and voices of individuals, I’ll organize them here into the communities and conversations that have been especially influential in the ideas in this book.

My colleagues at The University of Texas at Austin have taught, inspired, and challenged me every day for the past decade, and they have shaped many of the educational values and attitudes in this book. My relationships to doctoral students continually push me into new territories of learning, prohibiting the laziness or complacency I would probably fall into without them, and I thank them for that. My work with the Heart of Texas Writing Project, a site of the National Writing Project, provides a container for my ongoing conversations with a community of inquiring and courageous teachers in Austin, while also connecting that community to a network of hundreds of others across the country.
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This book is about assuming an appreciative gaze, and about the things that become possible in the spaces between people when such a gaze is present. I know about that, at the deepest level, because every day, I become who I am under Katherine Bomer’s loving gaze. If everyone were married to someone like her, there would be a lot more books in the world.
Fixing Attention

The Spotlight in the Classroom

“My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind—without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos. Interest alone gives accent and emphasis, light and shade, background and foreground—intelligible perspective, in a word. It varies in every creature, but without it the consciousness of every creature would be a gray chaotic indiscriminateness, impossible for us even to conceive.”

—William James, Principles of Psychology
There is time enough for everything in the course of the day, if you do but one thing at once, but there is not time enough in the year, if you will do two things at a time.

—Philip Stanhope (Lord Chesterfield) in a letter to his son, April 14, 1747

Sharon is reading *After Tupac and D Foster* by Jacqueline Woodson instead of doing her algebra homework. The trouble is, she can’t stop. She happened upon it last Thursday in her English classroom library and started reading it Sunday. It looked interesting to her mostly because only a few weeks before, her mother had loaded some Tupac songs onto Sharon’s MP3 player, and she’d been listening to them since in almost continuous rotation, telling her friends she was getting into old-school hip-hop. Reading Woodson’s novel, she thinks it’s cool to know that the author has been listening to these same tunes while writing this book, and that Neeka, the main character, and her friends are bonding over those songs. Neeka and Jayjones remind her of her with her friends, so while she’s reading, she feels like she’s with them. When she sits alone with this book, she just feels comfortable, and as a result, she’s read almost the whole thing in the past couple of days—a much more focused and rapid devouring of a book than she has experienced before.

Gerardo and Jay usually go to Jay’s apartment after school, where one of the things they do is post on their shared blog. Gerardo does the typing, while Jay lays on Gerardo’s bed and bounces a tennis ball against the poster on the opposite wall, now dappled with shallow dents. The computer used to belong to Gerardo’s uncle, and it doesn’t really have enough memory for a lot of web-
sites, but it works for now to let them compose on the word processor and then paste it into the appropriate field on the blogging site. After the assembly at school in which all the students were cautioned about online bullying, they’ve stopped writing about their friends on here, though that’s hard, since it’s about half of what they talk about as they walk to Jay’s apartment. At least, on the few occasions when they write about people now, they don’t name them. Today, they are in their usual positions, Gerardo at the computer by the window and Jay on the bed, and they talk in short bursts as Gerardo writes about how unfair it is that this one unnamed friend of theirs keeps getting busted for skateboarding. He’s not actually arrested but stopped and scolded, either by police or by people with stores near the place he skates. This is today’s outrage, and lots of their entries are similar kinds of complaints. Not all, though. It’s the entries they write together that tend to get heated up; when they log in separately, Jay from the library, the entries are calmer and often more personal. For either type of entry, they base what they write on ideas they have developed and preserved in the notebooks they keep in their English class.

These two brief portraits, drawn from interviews with adolescents, have several things in common. They represent self-sponsored literate activity situated within students’ relationships, spaces, and interests outside their English class—but supported by it. The students are highly engaged in what they are doing; the writing or reading isn’t painful, doesn’t involve them forcing themselves to get it done out of compliance with authority, so that they won’t get in trouble. The kids become focused on their literate activity, and time passes almost without them noticing it. They’re developing habits of engaging—ways of becoming involved and invested in literate tasks that are significant to them, not because they were born to love reading and writing but because of the ways the literate activity connects to other things in life that matter to them. Engagement involves motivation, desire, care, and participation, and it is essential to reading proficiency, writing excellence, academic achievement, and college success (Guthrie and Alvermann 1999; Kuh 2009). It is, almost by definition, the central feature of an educated, literate life. The little snippets we have seen in these portraits are not sufficient, of course, to produce either academic success or an intellectual life independent of educational institutions. Those require investment of hours well beyond the brief moments into which we have glanced. But habits of reading, of thoughtful study, of commitment to projects are built upon moments in which a student comes to believe that there is something interesting for them in literate activity. English class should be about making more such moments possible.
Purposeful engagement requires that a person select something out of all the world, then hold her attention there long enough to see more in the object, to develop from one thought to another and to care about it. Attention, as William James said, “implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others.” It involves selective ignoring in order to make space for deliberate attending.

In today’s world, as everyone knows, managing attention is a problem. Our devices bring the whole world to us no matter where we are; nothing is out of reach; every friend is constantly in our face. “Withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others” seems excruciatingly difficult. The email dings, the phone rings, the world beckons, and we respond so as not to be rude, so as not to be out of the loop, so as not to be fully engaged with what was already right in front of us. It’s not really a matter of attention deficits resulting from misfires in the brain; it’s a matter of an attention economy in which we all live our lives. Everyone wants our attention, but it is in limited supply. A person can really only pay attention to one thing at a time. People like to talk about their powers of multitasking, but in actual fact, they are just describing rapid switching and refocusing of attention, and each switch is costly in the time it takes to complete a task, the degree of engagement possible, and the number of thoughts they can develop as contributions to what they are doing. While we may be able to do background activities, talk to someone while we drive or listen to music and eat something while we read, we’re not able to read more than one thing at a particular moment, or to write and read simultaneously, or more generally, to fully attend to multiple meaningful resources at once. What Sharon, Gerardo, and Jay show us in the examples above is that engagement demands that one particular thing occupy their attention while they temporarily hold other agendas at bay. Attention involves selection. This principle guides our ability to construct an intellectual life in this age.

If this difficulty with attention is true of our society generally, it is no less true for an English language arts class. Indeed, our discipline—its history and its position in modern life—presents special problems for our ability to manage our own and our students’ attention. For one thing, English language arts has always been pretty ill-defined as a subject. What is it? Throughout its history, people have wrestled with definitions. Partly as a consequence of this vague definition, English has often become a jumble of particles—literature, drama, art, technology, vocabulary, syntax, literate habits, study skills, reading strategies, composition, creative writing, media studies, filmmaking, literary history, linguistics, research strategies, and academic writing for all curriculum areas. Sometimes, it seems this subject is supposed to teach all the skills required for
all the other subjects, on top of the already too-complex subject matter often associated with English.

The complexity of English language arts has been intensified in recent years by the changing nature of literacy and the changing population in the U.S. (and all other English-speaking countries). Literacy practices on the Internet are not just speedier, more convenient versions of the old literacy practices—people are doing new kinds of things (see Chapter 14), and young people will need to learn about them to be full participants in digital culture. Today’s English classroom should not look like the English classes of the 1940s or even the 1980s, and not just because there are new tools. Literacy in digital environments involves generous participation in communities, construction of innovative texts, selection and pursuit of passions and projects, advocacy and identity work, as well as open-minded civility mixed with critical caution about the advocacy agendas of people whose perspective is different from one’s own. If English class engages with the practices of the digital world, then what to teach becomes even more complex and multifaceted, and making decisions about what matters requires even more wisdom and foresight (Beers, Probst, and Rief 2007).

Older versions of English language arts also seem to have been built for different people than the students in our classrooms today. Today’s English classroom has more diverse students in it than at any time since the early twentieth century, the last huge wave of migration into the U.S.A. Immigrant children are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001), and the adolescent population is significantly more diverse than the adult population (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Most dramatically, the U.S. is becoming more Latino than it has been in the past, especially with Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans but also with Latinos from the Caribbean and Central and South America (Passel and Cohn 2008). More of these students are likely to be multilingual than many of their teachers are, and they are likely to draw upon more varied cultural, literary, traditional, and linguistic resources in their literate thinking. If all our students are to see themselves in the literature they read and to imagine for themselves a meaningful and useful literate life, then the expanding and intensifying diversity in our classrooms will add still more complexity to the planning and design of today’s English classroom.

Finally, American politicians seem to have figured out that education is an easy mark. They can declare it heretofore a failure, install some new accountability system, let the grades rise while people get used to the new system, and then claim to be the savior of the nation’s future—and then start that cycle all over again.

TECHNOLOGY NOTE

Notes like this one will appear in every chapter in this book and offer connections to new literacy practices that have emerged in digital environments. Sometimes, the notes will be about getting work done using digital devices, but more often, they’ll address the ways people are doing things on computers and the Internet and will not focus on the tools. We must think of technology not as cool toys or tools as ends in themselves but rather orient students to forms of participating in these new environments.
over again, repeating, it seems, until the end of time. We are in an atmosphere of continuous policy churn—never-ending reform and redefinition of success. At the time of this writing, a new generation has discovered the agenda of college readiness, which was also the main reform effort of the 1890s. Once again, just as occurred over a century ago, stereotypes and simplifications of college curricula are pressed into the high schools and middle schools. Tests, accountability, and prescribed curricula hold teachers in what policy makers proudly call an iron triangle. Despite these powerful forces, the teacher remains the ultimate determiner of the curriculum that actually reaches students, the classroom the only place where the actual experience of education is created. That means each individual English teacher determines students’ experience of reading and writing as activities; we should take that responsibility very seriously.

An English teacher has decisions to make about how to apportion attention in his particular classroom. Just as each individual must decide how to control her own mental spotlight in daily life, leaving some things in darkness while lighting up other things, so the English teacher has a necessary obligation to focus. I would suggest that that means deciding the best way to create powerfully literate individuals. Professional English educators owe it to their students to use the knowledge of the profession in order to do the best by their students, and that is sometimes slightly different from just following a prescribed curriculum from one lesson plan to the other. We need a vision of a literate life, and we need to maintain that life as our focus, since it’s the goal our students would have if they had the knowledge we do. They don’t want only college, because college is a means, not an end; it lasts a few years and then that education, too, is supposed to be activated into the intellectual life of an engaged citizen with personal and social passions, a desire for aesthetic experiences, and chosen relationships that are maintained by participation through many kinds of texts.

A focus on literate lives offers us a way to take as a motto for our class one of the mottos of the U.S.A., *e pluribus unum*, meaning one out of many, a unity built upon diversity. The agenda of supporting each student in developing habits and projects in literacy allows an English class to be designed as a unified and simple curriculum that can contain much diversity and complexity, as we all learn what a literate life is made of, while diverse individuals pursue projects that are meaningful to them. Teaching in such a complex atmosphere means adopting a new understanding of the discipline of English and its traditions, one that also allows the teacher to reorient to students, adopting a position of respect and caring, one that intends to add capacity to those that students...
already bring to class. The objective is to build habits of engagement and intention, to help students learn to control the spotlight of their own attention.

People in the real world, after all, read and write for a huge variety of purposes. Figure 1–1 maps the Continent of Literate Purposes. Most English classes confine their attention to the very small state of Academia on that map, never voyaging very far into the other territories. In our lives outside of school, however, it’s completely common for people to spend much more of their writing lives in Personalia, Civica, Worklandia, and the rest, with only a few of their early years stopping by Academia. Shouldn’t a high-quality curriculum include more of this map? People’s reading lives, too, span much more terrain than the space given to them in school—over purposes of informing themselves about health, taking pleasure in works of literary art, escaping into other worlds, growing personally, fitting in with a community, participating in spiritual communities and traditions, reinforcing their membership in political

FIGURE 1–1 The Continent of Literacy Purposes
groups, growing professionally, learning about refrigerators, bugs, and other things that keep them company in life, choosing whether to bring their own taste into line with widely shared opinions about fashion and design, deepening their understanding of works of music, art, or architecture, and many other things.

Our students need, in other words, to become independent in their literate lives. Not independent from other people or communities, but independent from their teachers or other authorities that demand literate compliance—the sort of independence that makes it possible to join with others in literate conversations across the many domains of a life history. They need to be able to move flexibly among literate communities in which different reading and writing practices count—those where evidence is the main criterion in an argument as well as those they choose where a particular identity or feeling is what gains respect and audience.

In other words, our students need to be ready for college and/or career, as so many standards movements would have them be, but they also need to be ready to participate in communities well beyond those. It’s essential that they be ready to participate in democratic communities, which means not just reading to become informed about those issues that may require a vote but participation well beyond that. Participants in democracy need to be able to let one another know what their lives are like so that a common good can be arrived at with consideration for everyone’s circumstances. They need to be able to write on the Internet in order to deliberate about possible shared futures as well as debate about the meanings and lessons of a shared past. Large governmental structures like national governments are only legitimate and representative of the people generally when there is a vital democratic culture supporting and informing them. I want students, through their literacy, to have access to that culture and to be able to critique the world as it is, so that they can also imagine new possibilities for themselves and their communities.

Another form of participation readiness is their preparedness to be active members in digital culture. For a significant percentage of the population, the Internet is their chief environment for literacy, and that literacy involves a much more active set of composing practices than made sense in book/print culture. There is an expectation in the emerging environment that people write back more often and more rapidly to what they read, that they will actively connect one small text to another, that they will mix media when they explore or express, and that they will innovate on others’ creations. A literacy classroom that doesn’t attempt to educate for participation in communities, that doesn’t build upon the communities in which students already participate
is likely to be irrelevant to the literacies that students will really need as they compose their lives.

English language arts, as a discipline and as a class in secondary schools, should be a home to students’ curiosity about all these forms of participation as well as some we haven’t even thought of yet. It will take some work to get there. Teachers will have to continue to clear out the heaps of novels that crowd the curriculum. To do that, they will have to persuade their departmental colleagues that such a move is possible. (It really is, mostly, department colleagues who have to be persuaded. Neither the U.S. nor any state has a list of books that have to be read in a grade level. For the most part, English teachers do that to the people right next door to them, so the solutions to that curricular crowding are local.) In recent policy discussions about adolescent literacy, it absolutely never comes up that adolescents already have a class in school that is supposed to focus on building their literacy. That’s because in everyone’s memory, English doesn’t do that, because it’s about Shakespeare and Salinger. I’m arguing that English should, instead, become about reading and writing lives, about participation in literate communities within the classroom and beyond its door. We, as literacy educators, should be passionately interested in those lives and communities, should take a deep interest in what people do when they read, write, design, attend, and create. We need to create our English classroom as a container for exactly that interest.

A Class Is an Organization of People

Though I know a classroom may be a room, an architectural structure, a class is really an organization of people. Any plan a teacher makes involves making decisions about social arrangements in which students will talk and work. The possible social arrangements are pretty straightforward: individuals, partners, small groups, or whole class. Each of these arrangements is good for supporting particular kinds of thinking, motivation, and work. In designing a class period, teachers combine these structures for participation in varying, purposeful ways.

Independent Work

A structure in which students work individually allows each person to be in control as a reader or writer, directing the spotlight of her own attention, listening to her own thoughts, making independent judgments, trying out new ways of thinking. In what I will later call independent reading, students choose their books and build ideas that connect this book to others they have read in
the past or plan to read in the future. This classroom structure is the incubator for an independent reading life. When the class is focused on writing, on the other hand, each writer has to do his own thinking and decision making—what to write about, how it should be structured, what purpose and style would be most appropriate for the audience who will read this. It’s in the nature of most writing situations that people do much of the work independently even when they are working in collaboration with coauthors. These kinds of independent work structures provide the most choice to each individual student and so they are especially motivating; people generally get more excited about things they have chosen to do. Just as important, these arrangements put students in the position of tuning into their own preferences, interests, and impulses, so that we as teachers can connect those individual energies to the more advanced work of the discipline.

Independent literacy practices are, in many ways, the bottom line of instruction for future reading and writing lives. We plan that each student will carry away habits, not as dyads or groups of four, certainly not as a whole class, but as individuals who will enter many new communities and partnerships across a life span. Therefore, the other structures of partnerships, small groups, and whole class have to feed into what students can do independently; something we can only know when we ask students to read and write independently.

Of course, independent work is almost always integrated as well into the other structures. If people are discussing a book in a small group, they are reading it as individuals and preparing for those conversations independently in order to have high-quality conversations. In the midst of a whole-class discussion, teachers ask students to stop and write just to take stock of their own thinking at this point. Any one class period may have varied participation structures, even though the overall session may be designed for a specific kind of work.

**Partnerships**

Partnerships see students combined two-by-two and offer what is usually a fairly easygoing and light way of thinking with someone else. Partnerships can be especially useful in reading, and in them, a pair of students read the same text and discuss frequently as they move through it. This arrangement, more than any other, makes maximum use of the medium of talk, since in a class where partners are talking, at any one moment 50 percent of the students in the room are actually speaking to a listener. In whole-class discussion, by contrast, only one person at a time can speak. Responding to a whole-class text
can be facilitated by partnerships, too, as can responding to ideas the teacher has presented to everyone or to a particular student’s piece of writing. Sometimes, teachers ask students to take on a writing partnership, a research partnership, or a homework partnership, in which students have someone with whom to check in about their progress and developing habits. Partnerships, therefore, can be quick appointments to talk with one other person, or they can be sustained, deeper engagements, such as Leo and Julio reading *The Burn Journals* together. As such, they can be the focus of class time and a main object of teaching—how to be a good partner and have better conversations—or they can be a few minutes long and in support of independent, whole-group, or small-group work.

**Small Groups**

Small groups involve three, four, or five students sharing work—either responding to one another’s writing, reading a book (or many books) together, or collaborating on an inquiry together. Work in small groups is different from partnerships, in that the work usually involves more development of ideas, sticking with topics longer, and less freewheeling moving from topic to topic. The work is thus a little more rigorous, in a way, though each individual’s agenda, choice, and motivation is a little more compromised by having to deal with the interests of more different people. With small groups, talk is well distributed across the room, though obviously less so than with partners; with groups, each person has to wait longer between turns to speak.

Because social interactions in small groups are more complex, more of the teaching has to focus on collaboration and talk strategies. Just putting students into small groups isn’t enough to make them successful, and at first, it will become very apparent that they don’t yet know how to hold an idea in their conversation long enough to think through it, how to listen and respond to one another, how to differ and get past intense disagreements. Chapters 4 and, especially, 8 will provide much more detail about structuring and teaching into small groups.

Like the other structures, small groups can be sustained or quick. In the midst of a whole-class discussion, a teacher will often ask students to get together into groups of three or four to process what the class has been discussing and how it applies to each individual project. Likewise, during independent work, a teacher sometimes asks students to get together in the last ten minutes of a period and share what they accomplished today, or something new they tried in their writing or reading.
Whole Class

Whole class is of course a very common structure in most secondary schools, perhaps the most common. It’s obviously the most efficient way for one teacher to share a strategy, some information, or a new perspective with a whole group of students. And it’s obviously also the one in which individual students are afforded with the least choice and asked the least to self-regulate their literate activity. So it’s important, but it must always be at the service of the other structures, particularly independent work, in order to make a difference in people’s literate lives. Whole-class teaching is the location for demonstrations of and mentoring into things writers and readers do that students have not yet had enough access. It’s a structure for introducing these practices and then pointing students toward doing them in their independent work. Likewise, when we read a novel with a whole class, we ought to be making explicit a few select valued ways of reading and thinking about text (see Chapters 5 and 6) and/or media for responding to text (Chapters 7, 8, and 9) so that students can take these habits back to their independent work and from there into their literate lives.

What a Class Period Can Be

With those basic elements—独立 work, partners, small groups, and whole class—a teacher designs a class period. The notion of design—of carefully combining elements to achieve a particular purpose—is crucial (Smagorinsky 2007; Wiggins and McTighe 2005). The objective is not to load as many structures as one can into a single class period, adding herky-jerky motion and a number of transitions from one activity to another. In order to accustom students to sustaining attention, rather than just adding to the fragmentation of their day, the class session should be as elegant as possible. That cannot be achieved when people think they have to insert pieces like “warm-ups,” “motivations,” or gratuitous demands that every class start with a very brief reading or writing time that really goes nowhere. Achieving elegance is slightly complicated, though, by the fact that it is sometimes helpful to be able to plan a class with one or two graceful shifts in participation structures from a short, whole-group lesson to independent work, or from small groups to whole-group reflection. Still, there is important work to be done in English class, and we need to remain focused on that work, constantly resisting the jumble of little pieces.

I’m going to describe four important types of class period, though I’ll give substantially more attention to one of them—the workshop structure. Many people, I among them, have found that a workshop structure is especially useful in supporting students’ constructions of highly motivated literate lives. But
everything is not a workshop, and all the purposes an English teacher pursues cannot be best achieved with only one structure. So I’ll also describe, more briefly, three other basic shapes for an English class period.

A Workshop Classroom

A workshop structure (Atwell 1986; Bomer 1995; Rief 1992) takes its name from its similarities to spaces where people work on projects across time. In a workshop, whether in an English classroom or a wood shop, the work is still there waiting when the maker walks in. Every time she comes into the workshop, she knows where the project is, she knows what to do, and she can pick up where she left off yesterday. Sessions of making connect through the maker’s intention from one session to the next.

In a writing workshop, then, the main thing one could see by peering through a window would be people writing, there in the classroom. They would have walked into the room, picked up the project they were working on, summoned up the thinking, planning, and intention that could help get the work back underway, and become engaged. In other words, they would have done what any writer outside school would have to do upon returning to the desk. In a reading workshop, likewise, people read—they pick up the text they were reading yesterday, as well as the intentions and ideas that brought them to this text and will carry them into the next one. Or if they are reading with a partner or small group, they might be continuing a discussion of the book they are reading together, in which case, the conversation itself is the object being made, and it will be the focus during work time.

Though there are several structures that support it, the defining feature, the only nonnegotiable element of a workshop classroom, is that time when students actually engage in literate behavior—right here on campus! I have known people to question this: Why can’t they do their work at home? This isn’t a study hall! From that perspective, pretty common in secondary schools, actual literate activity seems unworthy of the time, and the best use of a class is something other than the very behavior that is the target of all the teaching. In order for the teaching of reading and writing to have some place to stick, however, it’s important for students to be engaging in those activities where the teaching takes place. If we want them to read or write outside school, we have to value it inside school and also give them a chance to get engaged with the work. Banning literacy from the school day is a bad idea. A workshop classroom in English does the opposite; it centers on students’ ongoing literate activity, every day, as the focus of the class.
So the center of the class—the massive guts of the period—is work time. Assuming a forty-five- to fifty-minute class, that’s at least half an hour. On the clock, if the period looks like this . . .

. . . then the class structures look something like this . . .

. . . a structure that makes very clear where the spotlight of attention shines—on students working. Work time takes the lion’s share of the period, framed by two whole-class meetings, which I will describe shortly. During this work time, students engage with long-term projects they have chosen within the curricular parameters the teacher has established (and those parameters will be described at length in this book). In order to facilitate the completion of those projects, this class structure remains in place, the only thing going on, for a stretch of weeks. It is into the ongoing literate work students have chosen that the teacher instructs, through several teaching structures. That’s what makes this very different from a study hall—the teacher’s role as an expert and coach on just the things that the students are working on. The teacher is not just reading while they read or writing while they write; there is important and urgent work to be done here.
While students are working, during that selfsame work time I’ve been discussing, the teacher circulates and confers with individuals, partners, or small groups. These conferences are, in effect, lessons tailor-made for the student, based on where she is in the work right now. It can be a very precise and accurate way of teaching, since it allows the teacher to choose a point to make to this writer or reader, one she may be ready to hear right now. A conference is about one focused idea, something that will not only help with the writing or reading of this text in front of the student, but a lesson that represents a bigger idea or strategy about reading or writing that will help the student in the future as well. A conference is not just a way of making sure students know what they’re supposed to do, a clarification of an assignment; it’s a moment that is designed to change the student’s habits or understandings from now on, if only in a small way.

Though the precise length of conferences vary somewhat, they have to be pretty short, because settling in with one student for twenty minutes is a good way to lose the rest of the class, because there is a need to get around to more than just a couple of students in a day, and because a conference should be about only one idea, not everything the teacher can think of to say to this kid today. In a thirty-minute workshop, I usually make it around to six or seven students. I’ve gotten pretty good at working quickly over the years, but for someone just beginning to confer, it may take a little while to get up to speed. It may help to remember that if you do have one long conference, you have to pay for it with several brief ones afterward, just to make some progress around the room. By the end of this book, readers will have lots of ideas about the sorts of things conferences will be about.

As I mentioned before, whole-class meetings occur at the beginning and end of the period in a workshop classroom. The first meeting is a minilesson (Calkins 1994), a very focused and brief lesson with a single, laserlike objective, something that most of the students need to hear, most are ready to hear at this point in their work, and, as in a conference, that could benefit them not just now but throughout their literate lives. In a minilesson, good teachers usually begin by giving the students some context, a reason why they’ve thought to talk about this today. “I’ve noticed, while you’re working on your poems, that . . .” The teacher then explains clearly what the point of this minilesson is going to be. “So the thing I wanted to talk with you today is . . .” Then, often, he demonstrates the strategy, actually doing it aloud quickly in front the students. Other times, he might demonstrate it by pointing it out in a published text. If the minilesson up until this point has only taken five minutes or so, he might ask the students to try some
quick and dirty version of the objective right now, in the next minute and
a half, either aloud with a partner or jotted in their notebook. He then
pulls the class back together and explains how this little talk relates to what
they are doing now and also when in their future writing lives they might
need to use this learning. If the minilesson is too long, it’s also possible to
introduce the idea and do the demonstration of it one day, then as a part
two, to ask the kids to try something the next day.

It’s crucial, for the sake of the workshop being about the students’ work,
that the minilesson not become maxi, that it not start chipping away at the
work time as the teacher thinks of more things to say. It’s a good idea to banish
“oh, by the way . . .” from one’s teaching vocabulary. If there’s more to say, then
that can be tomorrow’s minilesson. Because the shortness of a minilesson per-
mits the longness of writing/conferring time, it’s a good idea for teachers to
time themselves while doing the minilesson until they get used to this particu-
lar genre. Again, I would predict that by the time a reader has made it through
this book, ideas for minilessons won’t be too much of a problem.

The other whole-class meeting, the one at the end of the period, is the
share time. If the word share seems too touchy-feely, then it might help to
think of it as a time for reflecting or self-assessing. It’s useful as a moment for
students to say, “What just happened? What am I accomplishing? What’s
next?” They can pull back from the forest of their own content and think
about process, direction, and goals. Sometimes, teachers find it useful to ask a
student to read aloud a bit of what they have written. Often, they choose a
particular student as they confer, someone they talk with today who might be
able to spread the word from this conference about a particular strategy. In the
conference, the teacher offers the student a new strategy, then asks her to share
this new idea at the end of the class. As a consequence, the wealth is spread
around and the teaching in conference goes further. Other times, the teacher
asks the whole class as individuals to look back at what they did today—in
their writing or the pages they read—and name their progress, then set a goal
for tomorrow. Still other times, the teacher might ask students to recall the
point of the minilesson and then talk with a partner for five minutes about
how they applied that idea in their work today, or how they might do so
tomorrow. The share time, therefore, used in an instructionally purposeful way,
can become a moment for students to name and claim their learning and
progress, the problems they’re working through, or the strategies they are try-
ing to remember to apply.

As I have already argued, I see the workshop structure as the best collec-
tion of teaching practices for times when the focus is on students getting work
done, and that should be most of the time. As we examine the details of what there is to teach about the processes of reading and writing, it will be clearer why we want students doing them in the classroom right in front of the teacher, where she can talk with the kids on the spot about what they are doing, complicating and transforming their initial work toward more powerful forms of participation in literate culture.

**Some Other Possible Structures**

A few times, certain superintendents, excited about workshop’s potential to build strength for students, have attempted to mandate workshop as the only structure for teaching. Aside from the political and social difficulties that arise from such mandates, there are some kinds of teaching that just don’t fit that well into workshops but that are still worth doing, even if they don’t account for most days in a particular classroom’s life. I’m not including here things like lectures, because I think the utility of a structure that has students just listening to a teacher talk all period would have to be considered pretty limited. On rare occasions, if the teacher is especially good at talking and can break it up so students have a chance to reflect and process what’s being said, maybe lecture is somewhat useful, but it’s not a premium way of building a learning life. I do think, however, an English teacher (or perhaps any secondary teacher) would be hobbled without ever being able to use the structures I am calling *mentored inquiry*, *sustained whole-class discussion*, and *shared aesthetic experience*.

**Mentored Inquiry**

Sometimes, a class is investigating a concept or topic together. Among the concepts that will appear in this book that a class might investigate, for example, are students’ existing literate lives outside school (Chapter 2), dialects in the community (Chapter 15), and the differences between oral and literate language (Chapter 15). Sometimes at the beginning of a genre study, like poetry for instance, there might be a few days in which students investigate what can count as a poem, before the class really gets going as a workshop in poetry (Chapter 13). Between units of study in writing, it may at times be useful to inquire for a few days into the structures of sentences (Chapter 15). In such a classroom, there may be a minilesson followed by small-group or individual work time, but the focus is less on picking up on yesterday’s work and extending it, and the tasks may be more structured by the teacher in the interest of
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building the concepts that are the aim of the unit. There is more of a content focus than a focus on habits, agendas, and dispositions that create a literate life. This is content that is designed to make literacy and language more interesting, but it’s knowledge about language and literacy, not direct use of language and literacy.

Sustained Whole-Class Discussion

Whole-class discussions, when they are actually discussions among the students and not recitations from each individual student to the teacher (see Chapter 8), are common ways of structuring class time in English classes, especially when the class is reading a longer text together. It is possible to think of these discussions as workshops, with the teacher offering a minilesson about a particular strategy for being a high-quality discussant at the beginning, then initiating the conversation among the whole class while he circulates and confers briefly, privately, with individuals about ways of gaining the floor or building on another student’s point. But more common is for the teacher to facilitate discussion and participate in it. It’s clearly important for students to have the kind of on-fire discussions that might hook them into an intellectual life and to be captured by their teacher’s excitement in discussing something interesting. These moments are, for many people, an important source of engagement in literacy and thinking. At the same time, because whole-class structures are inefficient ways of distributing talk, they run a risk of turning a healthy number of students passive, so they should probably be less dominant in student’s experience than they now tend to be.

Shared Aesthetic Experience

There are times when the purpose of a class is to share an aesthetic experience—to enjoy a work of art, live with it, inhabit it, and not necessarily, at least at first, to analyze it or do anything with it. This can take the form of looking at and responding to slides of paintings, watching a short film, or participating in an improvised drama that fleshes out the story world of a text that’s being shared. These classes don’t have the usual kind of “instructional objectives” and they aren’t designed to promote productivity. They are, rather, designed as experiences of beauty, perhaps pleasure, for many of the students. Our thinking about shared life should not become so linear, so like a production line, that we can’t imagine such an experience as part of an English class. With the arts in education being under continual threat, it’s always worth remembering that English is the remaining academic subject that does concern itself with aesthetic knowing, and that kind of knowing is important for people’s lives as well as collective life (Greene 1988, 1995).
I don’t pretend that the class structures I have described here are the only ones possible; they aren’t. I also don’t claim that they are equally important; I have found that workshop structures are especially valuable, and they will be the main focus of this book. But teaching well is always a matter of thoughtful, informed adaptation in response to an assessment of what is going on with students (Duffy and Hoffman 1999), not of a monolithic devotion to a single strategy as if it were the perfect method.

In the chapter that follows, I will describe initial assessment that makes thoughtful teaching possible, through leading students into inquiry into their own existing literate lives. In that chapter, the emphasis will be on convincing students that what they bring to school is valuable and deserving of respect in their teacher’s eyes and building teaching upon what they discover about their own practices. The chapter after that will discuss the expansion of literate lives and ways of supporting students in developing committed practices of reading and writing that may help them in all sorts of academic work.
CHAPTER 14

Teaching Toward Participation in Digital Culture

To point out that we’re all seeing new forms of text is not to reveal any astonishing surprise to anyone. Websites, blogs, message boards, video games, software programs, multimedia texts, and cell phone text messages have rapidly become pervasive in most middle-class people’s lives over the past decade or so.

And as many people have pointed out again and again, young people are already at home in this layered textual environment, often more so than their elders. Usually, young people adopt new forms quickly, learn to use them purposefully, and begin transforming them well before many of their teachers are completely aware that the new text forms even exist. Their speed and flexibility has made some youths more experienced than many of their teachers at the new forms of text and new practices of literacy.

Still, all young people do not have equal access to these practices, and those who have always been disadvantaged by literacy practices (the poor and others who are socially vulnerable) are likely to be left out of the newly emerging environments. Moreover, certain traditions of literacy are also important to bring into these new environments, such as evaluating the reliability of a source and critiquing authors’ perspectives in the interests of a fair and just world. So despite youths’ well-known motivation to play with new devices, there is still a need to teach into their enthusiastic practices.
What I will here call *new literacies* refers to the whole set of textual practices that have grown up around changes in technologies, especially the personal computer, the Internet, gaming, and video (Kist 2005). These practices are changing so rapidly that writing a book chapter about them is probably a bad idea, but here I am. Despite my reticence to write a dated book, to ignore these changes would be to misrepresent the literate world we and our students live in. Though some of the practices I’ll describe are as old as literacy itself, new technologies and cultural trends are intensifying some aspects of language and literacy and adding to the repertoire we all need to move comfortably through our literate lives.

Teaching new literacies can’t just be about teaching students to use particular electronic devices. When I was in school, teaching us to use technology as part of our literate lives would have meant teaching us to use typewriters, film projectors, film strips, and the big three television networks along with good old PBS. I suppose it might have involved cameras and laminating machines. And I’m not a particularly old person. Machines change, and people have to know how to adapt to new hardware and software.

What’s more, it is entirely possible to use machines and keep right on engaging in the same old literacy practices. The Accelerated Reader program, for instance, uses computers simply to give students low-level comprehension tests. That’s not new literacies; it’s old literacies on computers.

New literacies are practices—ways with texts—ways of doing reading and composing. And though they are “new” by virtue of their emergence as practices in a digital environment, they are ways of operating that can also be extracted from that kind of environment. New literacies can be unplugged.

Whenever we talk about literacy and technology, we need to remember that literacy is a technology—or it involves a collection of technologies. Writing with ink on paper is a technology, and a reader of a book, turning the pages, flipping back and forth to cross-reference something, is a user of a technological device, too. My argument in much of this book has been that our approach to those rather old technologies

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**The NCTE Definition of New Literacies**

(National Council of Teachers of English 2010b)

Literacy has always been a collection of cultural and communicative practices shared among members of particular groups. As society and technology change, so does literacy. Because technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, the twenty-first century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies. These literacies—from reading online newspapers to participating in virtual classrooms—are multiple, dynamic, and malleable. As in the past, they are inextricably linked with particular histories, life possibilities, and social trajectories of individuals and groups. Twenty-first-century readers and writers need to:

- Develop proficiency with the tools of technology
- Build relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and cross-culturally
- Design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes
- Manage, analyze, and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information
- Create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts
- Attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments
(but young in comparison with speech) is less thoughtful, flexible, situated, and powerful than it should be. We often do the old technologies badly, and we can do the new ones just as badly. What matters are the practices we induct students into.

This is good news for schools—essential news. Even affluent schools will probably never have the hardware, software, and support staff necessary to keep up with the changes that occur every year and a half or so. I spend way too much on electronics, and I don’t come anywhere near keeping up. Schools aren’t going to spend as much as I do. But the affluent schools will come much closer than schools with students from economically disadvantaged homes. It is not unusual in such schools for all the computers to be broken, frozen, missing pieces, or otherwise unusable. And there are often nowhere near a sufficient number for students actually to function on them, to get serious work done, or to develop independent habits in digital environments. It is important to use any resource available to give students some access to the online world, to genres like podcasts, to video production. But my point is that those resources will not be sufficient—teachers need to know how to think beyond the device and to understand practices.

So what do I mean by changing practices in literacy?

**Changes in Literacy**

**Everyone is a publishing company.**

First of all, because of the enormous changes in digital technologies, every individual is now a publishing company. In the past, most authors had to rely on typesetters and professional designers to create the look of a text and to make its elements appropriate to its content. Over the past thirty years or so, every individual has gotten used to formatting documents, choosing fonts, determining color and size, and designing the overall image impression that texts make on readers. It’s also downright easy to add full color photos, design features, diagrams and charts, video, sound recordings, and interactive elements to the texts that we compose, sitting in our pajamas at home. In fact, it’s much easier for individuals working in digital environments to have something like color images than it is for a publisher like Heinemann to do so, since print runs of color photographs are much more expensive than loading a photo into a website (which is essentially free). All of this means that every individual with a computer can do what required a financed and fully staffed operation to accomplish a few years ago.
Everyone is everywhere.
From the invention of writing through the development of the Internet, it has become increasingly possible for people’s thoughts to be expressed where their bodies are not. Now, it seems that it’s possible for any individual to be everywhere at once. From their cell phones, people can upload a statement to a Web page and nearly instantaneously, people around the world can access it. If my friend moves away, I can still know what is “on her mind” by just checking her status updates on social networking sites. It means that I can reach out to anyone I want, anytime I want, rather than going through elaborate publication and distribution plans for paper texts. It also means that others have access to my attention, and that my reading time has constantly competing demands, in ways that are unprecedented in human history.

Text is fast and easy.
It is so quick and easy to produce texts with digital devices and to get them to our intended audiences that we often forget the labor involved in text production in years past. Now, we don’t even have to tolerate the friction of a pen against paper. Our fingers fly over the keyboard, and zip-zap, a text is on its way. Composing is still difficult work, but to an increasing extent, our audiences are just not willing to wait for a pokey composition process to get a text done. We can cut and paste, reproduce and borrow, lift a snippet and develop new thinking from it, collect information from a range of resources, access a huge array of perspectives on a topic, and read libraries full of research at a near-instantaneous rate. Our reading may be limited by our own speed of processing, but it no longer includes even a car drive to a library in many cases.

Every text is connected to other texts.
The Internet is a worldwide network of computers, and the writing that has developed in its environment is a similarly global network of texts. And as a network, its parts are connected, not isolated; that is, every text is connected to other texts. Texts are actually composed to be connected; links are built right into them. They speak for themselves, but they are explicitly located in connection or dialogue with other texts, and sometimes, they are...
only intelligible if the reader follows the links, reads some of the other texts, and then comes back again to the first text. This means that our reading and writing experiences with texts are no longer closed within the beginning-middle-end structure of a single, unified work. This development has great implications for literate structures and processes, as well as the human relationships they shape.

**Purposeful reuse is part of the process.**

Because texts are so connected, and because people have the power previously reserved for publishers, and because accessing, copying, and creating texts has become so easy and swift, an environment has developed in which individual texts don’t seem to be as completely owned by any single author or publisher. There is more reuse, more borrowing, more transformation of existing content as part of a composing process. This isn’t completely new either: people have for centuries quoted, copied out passages, and traced images. But as every teacher knows, the ease of copying has increased to a transforming extent over the past quarter century. Many people are familiar with mash-ups, mixes and remixes, and digital photo manipulation, as well as software functions that help us copy whole sections of text, images, and video for later reuse. There is, of course, much contention about everything from copyright protection to plagiarism, but these literacy practices are with us and are inescapably part of the digital landscape in which we read and write.

These five transformational trends have important implications for the ways people create and interact with texts. Because everyone is a publishing company, the process of composing becomes more than ever a process of visual design, which necessarily means that reading involves understanding, interpreting, and critiquing the assumptions of others’ designs. Because of the speed and ease of making texts and because they exist mostly in connection with other texts, we now write into a participatory network, with each of our contributions more explicitly tied to others’ turns. The increase in speed, along with the fact that everyone is everywhere means that each of us engages with literacy in a crowded and complex world rather than the extended, relatively solitary times that have often been associated with literacy in the past. Those new realities will organize the literacy practices I’ll discuss as this chapter moves along.
New Realities in Our Literacy Practices

We transact with purposefully designed, visual texts.

Designing

As I stated before, ordinary people sitting around in their pajamas now regularly produce their own finished documents, making decisions that were once the territory of publishing companies. With so many options available to writers, we can now see clearly that every text is designed. There is a background with a texture and color, a particular font, size, and color for the print, decorative features alongside print, images that carry meaning, embedded video, music, or other sound playing. The text may even be delivered entirely via a sound or video recording (currently called podcasts or, sometimes for video, vodcasts). In digital environments, all of these things are extremely easy to do—and getting easier.

Sometimes, a writer may choose to make a text look “plain,” and that’s a design, too. A setting, such as school, may require a standardized design—black ink on white paper with headings on the tops of pages—and that decision now speaks as loudly and clearly as an innovative one. (And it’s worth wondering what that message is, and why a school might insist on sending it.) The arrangement or organization of a text is also an aspect of design, a set of deliberate decisions that predict the experience the reader will have—just as much as a Web designer predicts users’ experience of a site. As Wysocki and Lynch write, “Arrangements arrange the pieces in a composition, but they also arrange our needs, expectations, and desires. Take seriously the needs, expectations, hopes, and desires of those who read your writing or use what you design” (2007, 47). This emphasis on the readers and what their use of the text will be like becomes central in thinking of composing as design. How and where will readers be engaging with this text? What is likely to be their body position? How will they hold the text physically, and how will that condition their way of responding to it?

These design principles apply very obviously to digital compositions, like websites, slides for presentations, and digital documentaries. Indeed, people who compose extensively in digital environments are focused at least as much on the visual and material design of a text as on its language, and they understand that the overall look and operation of a text is part of its meaning.

However, like everything we will discuss here, these principles apply as well to nondigital texts—those that appear on paper, in handwritten or printed
ink, on skin, wooden signs, or the sides of buildings. Each notebook entry can have a design, if the writer intends it. Each piece written for readers should be designed and tested on readers, then revised not just in language but in its visual and material elements. To go further with this idea of composition as design, one that could help us rethink composition in important ways, let me suggest Anne Wysocki and Dennis Lynch’s book *Compose Design Advocate* (2007).

Though actual designing is the main point I want to push here, it’s also important that students learn to respond to design, to think about what it says and whether its claims fit with other dimensions of the text. If a text has a very clean and rational look to it, an astute and critical reader should weigh those design elements against the text’s linguistic content, to be on guard against a cool appearance that dresses up muddy, wasteful, or indulgent thinking. Being critical, as we discussed about reading, involves being able to resist a text’s power, and that’s certainly as true of visual and material elements as it is of words and sentences.

**Composing with Images**

In digital environments, many texts include images or may even be built around images that do more work than the text itself. It is easier than ever before to include images in texts, and so they have an increasing presence in all kinds of compositions, including academic work, personal literacy, political discourse, and interpersonal interactions. We use photos, drawings, and other media to complement or extend meanings. It has become a regular expectation for websites, posters, blog posts, and other common genres to include a picture. To do so, an author has to either find or create one that is logically appropriate, as well as emotionally, politically, and personally fitting for the purpose, audience, and meaning. Like the choices a writer makes of words, the selection of an image contributes to the formulation of what you mean. Pictures are rejected for a wide range of reasons—the car is from too early a period, the black people are at the margins of the photo, the person’s face looks glum, there is too much of the green that won’t look good with the blue border we have. Images often suggest some kind of power relationship, some point of view, some identity, and these meanings will either be right for the whole text or not. That requires that writers build habits of thinking visually—of considering elements of visual composition as part of a vocabulary of meaning.

Since visuals have become an increasingly important part of literate practice, it really won’t do for English teachers to pass off responsibility for this...
modality to art teachers or to say that they’ll wait to engage images until the art teacher can be involved. First of all, these visual elements in composition aren’t necessarily “art”; they are images integrated into all texts. Secondly, the whole point is that writing and images are integrated into a single text. Since the students have to learn how to do both, it seems reasonable that the modalities need to be integrated into a single teacher as well. Someone especially expert at visual media might serve as a resource, but that shouldn’t exempt the English teacher from dealing with visuals.

It’s not only the making of visual texts that requires attention in our curriculum. It’s arguably even more important that students learn to be critical readers of images, able to interpret their meanings, take those meanings seriously as deliberately designed, and critique their assumptions. Images may be especially persuasive precisely because they purport just to show us the world rather than making explicitly verbal claims. A picture is worth a thousand words, the cliché goes, but all those words may be lies. When human beings are represented in images, certain genders, races, attitudes, and social types are represented as dominant. That should be noticed, and readers/viewers should be able to think carefully about whether such a representation is accurate and fair, or whether it contributes to a stereotype that freezes individuals into particular social positions by reinforcing everyone else’s assumptions about them. So even as they are becoming writers with images, our students need to become readers of images, applying many of the same sorts of thinking they do when they read texts.

**Using Sound and Movement**

Part of the design of a document may include sound. Some Web pages have music, voice, or sound effects when the user does a particular action. Planning the sound that appropriately accompanies text, or carries meaning on its own, is a form of literacy. We think immediately of this as part of media literacy—the ability to be critical participants with television and film. The craft of affecting viewers, even manipulating them, with music that tells them how to feel about what they see, has been developing for a century in film and longer than that in the theatre, where opera became the first art form to integrate as many modalities as we deal with in contemporary digital contexts. Digital texts sometimes integrate this craft with traditional print forms of writing, so that a digital text might have music accompanying videos, static images, and

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**Other Critical Questions to Ask of a Visual Text**

- What is the point of this picture?
- Who benefits from that point being made?
- What assumptions about power are represented?
- What social groups are represented as central or dominant in this image?
- What social class perspective is reinforced in this picture? What is the role of money?
- How might this picture be revised if it were to be remade in the interest of justice?
print. I’m not just talking about putting one’s favorite song on a website. I’m
talking about sound—sometimes music, sometimes voice-over, sometimes a
sound design like you’d find in a film—that is actually integrated into the
meaning of a text. Electronic artists have led the way in these advanced forms
of text, and you can see some examples at The Electronic Literature
Organization’s website (www.eliterature.org/).

Looking at the texts on that website, one learns that some elements in a
text may move. The transitions between slides or pages, the movement of ani-
mated text, the inclusion of video and other moving elements in a page—all of
these call for choreographic or cinematic thinking, the design of movement. A
transition can be sudden or gradual, can remind the viewer of a physical phe-
nomenon in the real world (a windshield wiper, a spinning cube) or just the
shifts of a dream. Animated text can seem playful and silly, or it can be poetically
graceful. An embedded video can serve as an illustration of what is described in
the text, but it’s often more effective (as is the case with images in a picture
book) as an extension that further develops meaning, contributing ideas that are
not in the words. Most often, perhaps, such videos actually serve as parallel texts
that lay thematic content alongside the writer’s ideas in print. What is most
important here is to realize that sometimes, writers in digital environments need
to think about the meaning of movement, the way a choreographer or theatre
director does, just as they need to be thinking like a sound designer or musician.
Composing multimodally draws upon more different parts of the writer’s being.

Redesigning

Even though people are making new visual images, music, and moving images for
Internet-based composing, it’s still more common for writers to draw upon the
vast reservoir of existing images, music, and video and to redeploy those resources
into their own texts. Making texts, in other words, often involves purposeful
redesign, which is also called *mash-up* or *remix* (Knobel and Lankshear 2008;
environments involves taking pieces of what other people have done (or what the
writer herself has done) and reusing it for a new purpose, to serve a new meaning.
Images, fragments of text, connections to previous writing, pieces of recorded
songs may be combined to create something new—like a written collage. Digital
technology has just intensified what has been a practice in art for centuries, espe-
cially the twentieth century (think of Joseph Cornell’s boxes, his sculptural collages
made of found materials, and the reuse of many texts in *Ulysses* and “The Waste
Land”). Hip-hop culture produced sampling and remixes (at first using turntables
and later digitally sampled snippets from famous musicians’ hits); the online video
culture that presently coalesces around YouTube has produced mash-ups. And the
principles of redesign have become extremely common among individuals writing as bloggers, designers of personal websites, and many other Internet genres.

This remixing practice hardly needs teaching, if we just get out of the way. Working with digital tools, students will be very happy to drag images into their own pages and link to YouTube videos. They will need instruction, though, on ways to edit images and cut snippets of sound files (sometimes converting them from one format to another) in order deliberately to use pieces of texts in a new work. Often, tools to do these tasks will be available at no cost on the Internet, if the school network will allow software to be downloaded. In a school that has sufficient resources to do this kind of work, there are likely to be some students who have been doing it at home and will have some strategies, though this level of manipulation of files will need support for most people.

In low-tech environments, we can just invite students to stick other texts to their own, either literally or figuratively. To be ready to participate in digital culture, students need to adopt the agenda of finding images, sound, and video that can accompany their text. They can find those resources as ways of thinking about what they are writing, even if they don’t have the technology to manipulate the resources into one digital text. They can also invent ways of attaching them to their writing, either through simple citation, by physically cutting and pasting, or by setting up headphones playing music at a physical location where they display their finished writing. These activities were fairly common in writing classrooms before the Internet, and the fact that they have since become digitized doesn’t make them completely out of reach for classrooms that are not as privileged with machines.

Of course, the practice of redesign, common as it is in Internet environments, leads inevitably to worries about copyright. Many teachers tend not to want to ask students to make things that actually turn them into outlaws. On the other hand, fair use guidelines do cover most educational uses of copyrighted material (though it won’t apply to things permanently posted on the Internet), and students can learn about Creative Commons licenses, in which photographers and others have given advance permission for the reuse of their work. There is no solid answer to these issues, because it is contested terrain in the world of intellectual property law and emerging artistic and literate practices. The most educational answer is, as is so often the case, to teach about the conflicts (Graff 1993) and not to allow corporate bluster to keep us from acquainting our students with important new composing practices (Hobbs 2010).

Attending to Materiality
Texts in the new forms of literacy often call attention to the way they are made, or to the things that the user can do with them. They point to their own
material existence, and they call for the user to interact with their parts. The materiality of school assignments through the twentieth century could be taken for granted. Students would turn in their compositions either in notebooks or on loose-leaf paper. Newer technologies and expanded options, however, have made writers and teachers pay new attention to the material options writers are invited to consider in constructing textual objects (Wysocki 2004).

Because digital texts seem to be made only of ideas and pixels, their makers seem even more self-conscious about the pieces they are made of and sometimes even provide an illusion of substance—sheets of paper, chalkboards, other reminders of the body’s interaction with material forms of text. Digital texts are material, too, of course, relying upon electrical signals, light of a particular intensity, means of projecting color. And these elements that might, during the age of print, have been the concern of a publishing elite are now everyone’s business.

Developing awareness of materiality away from the computer involves having students think about the size, shape, weight, and configuration of the literate objects they make—and planning them so that the user moves them around in meaningful ways. I have worked with Melody Zoch, Ann David, and Hyounjin Ok to develop a unit of study that gets students making new literacy texts out of ordinary, concrete materials (Bomer, Zoch, David, and Ok 2010; Bomer, Zoch, and David 2010). We integrated this new literacies work into a unit of study on memoir, and we just heightened the possibilities of multimodality, design, linking, and attention to materiality. Many students made their memoirs out of boxes, slips of paper, scrolls, windows the reader could open, flip books, spaces for the reader to write back in response. Thinking deliberately about what their texts could be made of allowed students to take up the practices of high-tech composing with low-tech tools.

In high-tech environments, students can learn to strategically, explicitly direct the reader to click in particular places, or else they bury their links in the interactive surface of the text, forcing the reader to hunt around and find them. They can plan the texture of their pages and what materials in the user’s experience this text should invoke. They encode into their texts self-conscious attention to their construction and the substances of which they are (and are not) made.

Planning Delivery and Circulation
Designers of texts (also known as authors) in contemporary environments think about the form in which this text will reach the reader and how the reader is going to use this thing—where they will be when they read it; how the text is (or is not) going to move around with the reader. Will this be a PDF file that
users download from a website, or will it be a sequence of html pages that readers click through? The experience for a reader receiving those two texts is very different, and writers have to think carefully about which form says what they mean. A PDF is more of a commitment for a reader, easier to print out but slower to load in a browser. An html file, which appears in a browser window as a Web page, is quicker and sometimes more colorful and interactive, but more transitory, a bit more cumbersome to save and archive. Should this text fit into a small window or would it be better as a large layout that readers scroll across? Would it be better if a recorded voice read the introduction aloud as soon as the page loads, with music behind it, or should the text be silent and up to the reader to voice? Should some of the text be represented as a video, even if it’s essentially read aloud like the news, rather than as print?

These are issues of delivery, as Aristotle called one of his canons of rhetoric. He was talking about a different communications technology—the delivery of speeches. Then “delivery” wasn’t that interesting during the age of the printing press, the five centuries or so that have been called the Gutenberg parenthesis because the print age brackets off concerns, like delivery, that were more interesting in oral cultures than in digital ones (Pettitt 2007). Everything during the Gutenberg parenthesis tended to be delivered in pretty similar ways—as a bound set of pages. Now, with so many decisions involved in the way texts come to readers, delivery is back.

Teaching in low-tech environments, it should be clear from the foregoing discussions, does not exempt students from thinking about delivery. How should this text come to readers? As a poster on the wall? A play enacted on a stage? A handheld pamphlet? A scroll or folio? The fact that students aren’t making such decisions in digital environments does not deny them access to the thinking; only their teacher can do that.

In digital environments, composers are also very conscious about how the text is going to move from one reader to another (or how the readers will come to the text). The circulation of texts is a matter of special concern to anyone in a contemporary environment who wants their writing to have a substantial public impact (Matthieu and George 2009; Trimbur 2000), though how a text will make its way through networks of readers is a concern as well for poets, bloggers, cartoonists, fiction writers, and essayists. Bloggers, for example, know that, to get readers, they can post comments on others’ blogs, use their social network updates (microblogging) to direct readers to their entries, and work actively in varied strategic ways to increase their traffic so that readers will encounter their ideas. If we want our students to develop practices that make them effective participants in digital culture, we need to keep track of current ways people are circulating their texts and make those ways explicit to students.
We can attend to circulation in low-tech environments as well. What is going to bring people to read a poster hanging outside the classroom? What adjunct signs in other locations could point to that poster? How will a pamphlet be handed out in a way that is going to get people to actually read it? Who do we want to get it, and how can we most effectively get it into the right people’s hands and keep others from diverting it away from its intended audience? How many copies do we make of the class magazine, and how can we get other teachers and community members interested in subscribing to it? What resources (as in money) will we need for being able to produce that many copies? Would it be better as an email? Every organization has these questions to consider, and we should teach students as writers to plan for the circulation of their own texts, too.

We transact with texts by participating in a network.

*Composing Responsively*

Since everyone is writing into a network, there is a more explicit sense that readers are responders, and writers get ideas about what to say because of what they have just read. Reading with an expectation of answering and writing in response to others’ texts is certainly nothing new; in many ways, it’s the nature of scholarship. But in digital environments, there is a nearly universal expectation that readers are responders. Even online newspapers (which, as of this writing, still exist) have space beneath just about every article for readers’ comments. In an online reading environment, one participates much more by writing back than could ever have been the case in a printing press world. That means that the world that is emerging at present calls upon literate individuals to compose responsively.

Many typical classroom practices support this habit, including much of what has appeared in this book up to now. Teaching thinking devices to invite students to respond to what they read is one way. Another is asking students always to consider themselves as writers, so that their notebooks are full of responses to the world around them, including other people’s texts. In addition, to pump up the responsivity of the classroom environment, we might need to get students responding to one another’s writing more often. There may need to be sections of the classroom wall covered with butcher paper and sticky notes in which students carry on dialogical writing about academic and personal topics, as adjuncts to their writers’ notebooks, which can be much more isolating and solitary. It may be useful for students to use one another’s notebooks as springboards for writing in their own notebooks, by swapping notebooks for the first five minutes of writing time before getting started on their next entry.
When we have students writing in digital environments, it’s important that they be responding to one another, taking the teacher’s response out of the central position it too often occupies, and making students more dependent on one another to know the effect of what they have written. Of course, in order for this to have an effect on the writer’s composing process, they’ll have to know from the beginning of their writing process that the publishing environment will include space for others to talk back, people from inside and outside this classroom.

**Composing with Velocity**

One of the main features of newness in literacy is that texts are produced more rapidly and are instantly out to readers. You write something and click “Publish” and there it is for all the world to see. Compared to the slow, laborious processes of composing in print culture, this speed makes a writer’s writing and someone else’s reading of that text almost simultaneous. Bloggers like Andrew Sullivan post ten to twenty times per day, sometimes just a sentence, a quote, an image or video, but sometimes something very nearly like a short essay (Sullivan 2010). That means that not everything he writes is going through an extended process of revision and editing. He is, most of the time, doing what James Britton called “shaping at the point of utterance” (1982, 139)—designing his text once and for all as he says it the first time. He is publishing his first draft.

I believe revision is an important thing to learn about writing, for many reasons I detailed in Chapter 12. At the same time, we need to recognize that extended processes of revision are part of an ecology where a manuscript is being sent to a publisher, not always where a writer is publishing directly to an audience. Moreover, if you are trying to participate in the discussion in a comments section of a blog, you’d better get your response posted quickly or no one will ever see it, because the conversation will move on to something more current. In a digital world, not all texts have extended shelf lives. Consequently, there is a constant tension between speed and carefulness. One wants to think well, to sound good, to be persuasive, to assemble reasons and evidence, to seem educated. Yet one needs to get the thing out, too. Dealing with the need for velocity has to be part of students’ literacy education, therefore. Of course, as long as a good deal of their writing experience consists of being prepared for one-shot writing tests, there will (sadly) be no shortage of this kind of composing, whether or not it bears much resemblance to the conditions under which people write rapidly on the Internet.
Linking

As I have been describing, the fragments that comprise texts in digital environments are connected not by linear transitions (like this sentence) but instead by links. Indeed, links are a kind of argument, evidence, subtext, and allusion. They are a much higher-quality citation practice than traditional forms of citation, because a click takes the reader directly to the reference, evidence, or expansion of the writer’s idea.

To write with the conscious intention of connecting explicitly to other people’s words is not brand new, but it is new for it to be the assumed way of writing everyday texts. Among forms current as I write this, blogs and certain kinds of wikis are often understood to be built as collections of links within prose. Often, a link—the desire to point something out in a different text elsewhere on the Web—is the originating idea for the post or fragment. The sentences are really built around that initial link. As an extension of writing the text, the writer either inserts additional links as the sentences unfold or he goes back through the text before posting to see if there is anything else that can become a link, sometimes for evidentiary purposes, sometimes just whimsically—because linking these words to this picture will be funny.

For low-tech teaching, these changes may mean teaching students to focus on objects that help them change the channel in their own minds. In memoir or poetry writing, if students bring in objects and then look at one object in order to write about it, then change to another object, there is a kind of mental hyperlink they click that moves them from one domain of thought to another. It’s useful to realize that this is what links do—they change what you’re thinking about. We also need to give more attention when students are writing in notebooks to the connections they can find across entries, and even to connections between their own notebook and those of others in the classroom. Using sticky notes within notebooks, with one- or two-word labels that name the topic on a particular page and connect it to another spot in the notebook can, if we bring out this theme, be connected to the new literacy practice of building writing through links.

For our opportunities to work on literacy with high-tech devices, it is important at least some of the time to get students to create their postings or entries on the Internet around links—not as a digital version of text that might have appeared in print culture.

Composing Fragmentary, Decentered Texts

In order to understand what’s changing in the structure of texts, it’s useful to think a bit about how texts have worked in the age of the printing press, from the fifteenth century to the present. Mostly, a book, article, or essay has to stand on its own, apart from other texts. There may be references to other texts, even quota-
tions, but readers assume that the text they hold in their hands has a certain amount of closure and completeness, bounded by its own beginning and ending. These days, because a text is composed into a network, an individual piece is just a fragment of a complete line of reasoning, which is extended in the links to other texts. Though there are plenty of exceptions, Internet-based texts that take real advantage of the network features are intended to be partial, incomplete, and subject to replacement later on. A text is relatively fragmentary and decentered. As a result, texts are structured like webs, not like linear narratives or arguments we’re used to in print culture (or even speech). A reader makes her way through a set of text fragments by designing pathways of interest, intention, and curiosity, often slipping free of a particular author’s control before even finishing the whole thing. That means a reader has to learn how to form cohesive thoughts out of texts that are not always structured with the kind of cohesion that experienced readers have become used to. And writers have to think in small units of loosely joined parts, like shapes on a Calder mobile.

For us as teachers, such changes may mean that, in addition to all our attention to teaching students to make elegant transitions across the sections of their expository writing, we also have to show them how a text can work without such transitions, with the pieces just hung together with links embedded that might connect to several other possible pieces. We certainly need to be teaching them how to read across text and form ideas that are not bounded within the pages of a single book or article.

If we are actually using digital tools in our teaching, then it’s important not to use them simply as publication machines to make traditional forms look prettier. Rather, we need to teach students to plan their texts as small units with a complex pathway structure, more like mapping a journey with interesting possible side trips than planning a traditional paper.

We transact with texts in a crowded and complex world.

Managing Attention
Living in the information age means that there is information everywhere, constantly pushing at us. There was a time, a few years ago, when if you couldn’t remember the name of that actress in that movie, you just had to wonder for years until you saw the movie again. Now, we don’t wonder anymore. In fact, we have to push most information away in order to pay attention to any of it. That means that every person in a digital environment participates in an attention economy (Goldhaber 1997), where attention, rather than information, is what is in scarce supply. It’s very important to learn that each of us has a limited...
supply of attention, and we have to plan where and how to use it. As more information is available, our problem becomes how to find the information that is truly useful to us, access it at the right moment, and avoid all the information that is not useful, that is merely a distraction.

People will often say that they are multitasking when they’re not quite paying attention. And it’s possible to multitask on some things; you can eat a sandwich, file some papers, and talk on the phone at once, for instance. But that’s because eating and filing don’t demand much continuous attention. For tasks that are more cognitively demanding—like reading, writing, talking, listening to a lecture—there really is no such thing as multitasking. What people call that is usually really switch-tasking—rapid refocusing from one task to another (Crenshaw 2008). Every switch of focus, however, has a cost. It takes both time and mental energy. There is no substitute for being rapt, engaged, concentrated, even in digital environments. It’s just harder to achieve because so much of the world is available to us at once. Outside the digital world, such a state of being plugged in is a rarity, and it’s safe to say that many students have not often experienced it, at least not when engaged with text. We need to talk to them about the experience of full attention, or flow (Czikszentmihalyi 1990), and let them know that that is what they are after, then help them make progress toward it.

As a teaching agenda, attention management requires that we draw students’ awareness to the ready distractions of not just the Internet and cell phones, but of friends in the hall and across the room, interesting stuff out the window, and the myriad other distractions in school. We don’t require a virtual crowd to be distracted, since we have an actual crowd right here. Mind you, I’m not talking about students paying attention just when their teacher talks. Sometimes they don’t do that because they really don’t want to, or because the teacher is in fact boring, and not because they are easily distracted or have difficulty returning to a focus once they have departed it. I’m talking about being able to focus on the work they have chosen to do—reading, writing, sustaining focus on projects. For that kind of focus, they will be receptive to teaching. For “Pay attention to what I’m telling you,” teaching about attention would just seem self-serving.

It’s extremely important, first of all, for writers and readers to be engaged in the content of what they are dealing with. If they have been distracted into the form of the task or the surface of the text, then distraction is going to be much more of a problem. They need to know that in order to remain engaged and to reattach themselves to what they’re doing, they should think about what the book is about, not how many pages are left in the chapter. To keep writing, they need to fill their mind with what they are writing about, not with handwriting, paragraphing, or what the grade is going to be.
Secondly, one advantage to literacy is that, when your mind wanders, the text is still there, right where you left it. It’s possible to get going again just by backing up and reading a bit before you left off reading or writing. Thirdly, we need to create an ethic in classrooms where it’s not taken as rude or antisocial to be uninterruptable. One difficulty in the world at large is that people really don’t want us reading or writing right now; they want us paying attention to them. Learning to resist the pull of face-to-face engagement is hard, but it’s necessary for a writing or reading life.

Managing one’s own attention is essential to any complex task, and so it has become an obsession for people whose work involves digital composing—whether that’s writing text or writing code. Follow any long-term discussion about getting work done in cyberspace, and you will see people worrying about attention, concentration, sustaining work on important projects, and an array of positions on the notion of multitasking. William James wrote a century ago that “My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind—without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos. Interest alone gives accent and emphasis, light and shade, background and foreground—in intelligible perspective, in a word” (James 1890). And as important as it was a century ago, it’s hugely more salient now and is likely to be an inescapable part of a literacy curriculum from now on.

Managing Activity

One of the important uses of writing in the midst of complex projects is to manage one’s own activity. To-do lists, next actions, project plans, calendars, and contextualized prompts help composers move planfully and productively through their work. When a writer sits down to work on a particular day, it really helps if she is clear about the next well-defined, achievable action. I take this idea of well-defined next actions from David Allen, whose book Getting Things Done (2002) is hugely influential among people whose bread and butter involves making steady progress on complex tasks. If a writer is confused about what he needs to do next, if his task definition stops at just keep working on the piece until it’s finished, then it is much harder to get started each day. It’s much better to be able to say, for instance, “Begin the section on how the house looked.” Telling yourself that the task is just to begin is one way to avoid procrastinating (Fiore 1989); once people get started on something, it’s usually easier to keep moving. Dividing long-term, complex tasks into achievable, bite-size chunks is one habit in managing activity that is possible to teach student writers;
it's basically a very thorough kind of task analysis. While it's no sure way of completing those little tasks, at least it makes them clearer.

It's also important for writers, or anyone else, to write things down as they come to mind. You realize that you should add a section on how the house looked while you're writing the story of how they came to live in that town. Because you need to stay focused on the present task, there needs to be a ready place to write this other task. How about a writer's notebook? While you're eating dinner, the lettuce in the salad makes you think of the garden at the back of the property, and you grab your notebook to remind yourself to throw that in there, too. Then, at least once per week, it's important to assemble all the little caught ideas and put them somewhere else in the notebook, so that when you actually sit down to write, your tasks are there for you to look at and then just obey.

This use of literacy—planning, reminding oneself of the things one wants to do so that an agenda can have legs—is one of the most practical ones in a literate life. Most of the teachers, leaders, and graduate students I know, despite their considerable success with school-based literacy tasks, still struggle with their lists and systems of getting things done. It's not that there should be a single way for everyone, or that there is an answer that will work for all students in a given teacher's classes. I wouldn't advocate imposing a single system on every student, because any user can subvert a system. Rather, like so many things about a literate life, management of activity needs to be an inquiry the class undertakes together in order to provide resources and focus attention so that individuals can work out what makes sense for them.

Archiving

In an information-rich environment, participants have to know how to save a lot of pieces of text, image, and sound, and to retrieve those bits for purposeful work. Developing habits of saving, storing, and retrieving, habits that are predictable to the user, is becoming increasingly important, especially as it becomes easier to save everything. There are several phases to this practice. First, the user must regularly have the impulse to save things that seem interesting or potentially useful, while at the same time being selective enough so she is not saving everything in the universe. Developing this filter takes some experience, and we should expect students not to be very good at it right at first.

Second, the saved things need to be put away in a place that is easy to get to; otherwise, they'll sit in disordered piles, either figuratively on the user's desktop, or literally, all over his bedroom. If the system of storage is too fancy or takes too long to get ready or is a big mess, then the user is likely to avoid filing, which means things won't get put away. Things being put away is important for several reasons—not just a motherly injunction to clean one's room. For one
thing, visual clutter creates distraction from the passionate and important work upon which a writer needs to focus. In addition, the point of archiving is the ability to retrieve the stored material and use it for inspiration, reference, and redesign.

Clearly, this is not a curricular agenda that should be limited to digital tools. The terms clipping and filing in digital environments are metaphors for the concrete activities involving scissors and paper. And even when people do use digital tools, they still, at least at present, have paper archival requirements. But digital tools multiply the possibilities for archiving and therefore the problem of storage. In either environment, it’s another crucial dimension of a literate life in a digital culture.

**Strategizing Processes**

When someone undertakes a new project, she has to figure out tools and processes that will move her from start to completion. In digital environments, this means, in part, determining what software one needs to do a job. Can it be done with the usual word-processing program? Does it require drawing? Would it help to array the information in a dynamic matrix like a spreadsheet? Do images need to be edited or pieces of music or video cut? What can be used most cheaply to get that done?

Whenever I start a new research project or a new piece of writing, I think through what I’m going to need to do in order to build the content and store the data for the work. I use several different database applications, depending on the nature of the analysis, the way I want to be able to see pieces of data in relation to other pieces, and the people I’m working with on the project. Sometimes, I use a solution that is cheaper, sometimes I need exactly the right process in order to get the work done. Many people engaged in complex tasks in a digital environment have to evaluate processes and tools in a similar way. And when collaborating, sometimes the versions of software programs need to be taken into consideration.

When working away from electricity, one still needs to get—or make—the tools that will help to get this specific job done. Making a notebook, preparing a folder, lining up an interview—any of these may be part of the work of creating the workspace in which the job will get done. And the fact that I use digital tools doesn’t mean I don’t do these things, too. Most people use a combination of digital and paper tools and processes. That’s why, once again, when students tell me they’d rather write on their computer at home, I tell them the good news that they’ll have a chance to learn something here about working between page and screen, something they’ll often need to be able to do, by printing a draft for each day and bringing that to class. Situations,
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including this one, often demand it. Being able to plan the tools and processes that fit with one's practical conditions at the moment is part of being technologically astute.

**Collaborating**

As technology helps to close the distance between human beings, fewer and fewer texts are composed by a single author. In organizations, businesses, politics, and the arts, collaborative composing is the usual means of getting things written. Web-based documents, such as those (presently) on Google, make it possible for two authors to work on a single document, to keep up with the most recent revisions, and to comment to one another about ideas, even simultaneously. While there are plenty of writers still working on their own on the Internet, digital tools have made collaborative writing much more common than it has ever been before, and they have made more visible and powerful the collaborative processes of producing finished text that up until recently would have been known mostly to professional writers, editors, and designers. It is much more common for a community to come together around everyday texts now than has been possible in the past.

Collaborating on texts involves different skills than writing alone. One's attitude toward a draft should be tentative and full of expectation of revision even when writing alone. But a draft that's going to be revised by someone else needs even more of an attitude of *just throwing it out there to be destroyed, transformed, and amended*. Furthermore, one learns, writing with someone else, to be very grateful for an early draft, just as something to work with, just so you don't have to start from nothing. Even if you end up changing almost all of what the other person wrote, it's still part of the process that they moved you from silence to speaking. At the same time, in order to keep collaborative energy moving forward, it's sometimes worthwhile to reign in one's own impulses to change material if it could possibly be considered good enough to remain as it is. One's actions help to determine whether one's collaborators feel like continuing to work. Though that lesson may only be learned from experience, it's worth pointing out to students who are working on a project together.

One common way of collaborating on writing is first to plan the sections together, then for each person to be in charge of drafting a particular section, which is then revised by the other author. There will probably need to be a conversation sometime after the first revision to talk through discrepancies in the writers’ judgments. If writers meet for a few days to plan the text, then work independently, then get back together to talk through differences, then they will, in most cases, be well on their way toward a completed text. There are of course many processes for collaborating, but this one provides a way of
working together without getting completely gummed up in talk about every single word that is to be placed on the page.

Even in online writing communities for fan fiction and other self-sponsored writing (Black 2007; Lam 2007), adolescents have become accustomed to putting a draft out for comment and using the widely distributed thinking of a literate community to help them design texts that will appeal to a reading public. Classrooms have much to learn from such environments, and yet similar kinds of structures have been part of serious writing classrooms for decades. Many teachers have already begun to create more collaborative environments, at least more social spaces for writers, long before the Internet was the Internet. As with many of these practices I have been describing, a digital culture provides a new way of looking at many things that have already been common literate practices.

What is very new, however, is the degree to which students can, in a very short time, collaborate with fellow writers at a great distance. There is no reason for students in Florida not to be collaborating with students in Alaska or Singapore, as long as teachers can create the contexts and the common purposes for writing. I’ve heard Kylene Beers say that our students should be collaborating with someone in a different time zone. That seems an especially good idea if the time zone is quite a few hours different, since it means that once the Florida kid has worked on the text, the Alaska kid can pick it up about half a day later, and then the Singapore kid later still. By the time the Florida student returns to his text, two collaborators have taken their turn. Such an experience brings a globalized world up close, and truly takes advantage of technological developments—without that much specialized knowledge about devices and software.

Evaluating Content

Digital technologies have helped to produce an increasingly participatory culture, including a political process that asks for more than just a vote from citizens. People can and do speak out about particular issues or politics generally. Increasingly, ordinary people have a voice. That sounds good, but ordinary people also include those with undemocratic, racist, sexist, and socially violent views. Because everyone is speaking out, because there isn’t even the institutional filter there used to be on what gets published, it’s more important than ever for students to judge the social and political perspectives of the texts they read and to consider the other perspectives that might be available.
In digital environments, we have to read with the knowledge that the world of texts is full of people advocating particular positions. Sometimes, their advocacy is more important to them than the informational quality of what they say. Users of literacy must be well informed about the characteristics of high-quality information, and they should attend to evidence, reputation, authority, credibility, reasoning, and the explicitness in the text about its purposes. They should also be able to apply some critical lenses to any text, and the next chapter will further develop this notion of critical concepts as lenses.

**Literacy as Participation**

I have called this chapter “Teaching for Participation in Digital Culture,” and not something about technology skills or twenty-first-century literacy for a reason. Literacy is participation, and the most important features of new literacies involve acting in response to and in concert to others within digital environments and the cultures they produce and foster. To become a more literate person involves extending oneself into ways of doing in particular environments, and in our era, literacy is most importantly expanding in online environments. That means that the forms of literacy we teach ought to make such participation available to increasing numbers of students. But as I have argued, participation is not mainly about switching on and operating electronic devices; rather, it concerns particular habits with text.

Literacy also involves participating in other contemporary environments, as well, and a high-quality curriculum in English needs to orient students to some of these environments. Chapter 15 will examine participation in the study of language itself, the discipline of linguistics, a study that can itself have democratizing impact, as it shows people how to think about others and their language, even when it diverges from one’s own language or that of people in power. After that, in Chapter 16 we will look at ways of helping students become powerful participants in a system that threatens to disempower them—the accountability and testing system—as we examine some approaches to testing that may be consonant with the values for which I have argued in this book—values that have been important in our profession for a century. Finally, in the last chapter, we will attempt to bring things together in a chapter about planning an entire school year.
Likely Genres and Possible Goals Within Them

**Short Story—At Least 6 Weeks**
- development of character
- creation of a full world around the main character
- consideration of varied plot possibilities
- control of time

(See *Time for Meaning*, Chapter 8 [Bomer 1995].)

**Memoir—At Least 4 Weeks**
- selection of telling incidents with special significance
- reflection on the meaning of memories
- generous reconstruction of scenes
- control of time

(See *Time for Meaning*, Chapter 9 [Bomer 1995] and *Writing a Life* [K. Bomer 2005].)

**Poetry—4 Weeks (Multiple Poems from Each Student)**
- control of image
- design of lines and stanzas as reader experience
• attention to sound of language
• intensity of meaning and purposeful exploration of truth

(See Time for Meaning, Chapter 7 [Bomer 1995]; For the Good of the Earth and Sun [Heard 1989]; and Crafting a Life [Murray 1996].)

Essay—At Least 4 Weeks
• control of governing idea or concept drawn through text
• transitions in the journey of thought
• relationship of big ideas to concrete information and observation
• reflective thinking and interpretation

(See Time for Meaning, Chapter 10 [Bomer 1995]; The Essay [Heilker 1996]; and Crafting a Life [Murray 1996].)

Picture Books—At Least 6 Weeks
• images that extend meaning beyond words
• pages and page turns as interactive design
• overall design of the book
• vivid, concrete, compressed language

(See In Pictures and In Words [Ray 2010].)

Drama (Single Scenes)
• dialogue that matches style, character, and purpose
• expression of meaning through characters’ actions toward one another
• exposition embedded in dialogue
• setting and action amenable to visually interesting staging and movement

Comic Strips and/or Cartoons (or Graphic Stories)—At Least 4 Weeks
• identifiable characters across frames
• visual representations of time passing and movement
• dialogue appropriate to style
• abbreviated drawing style

(See Understanding Comics [McCloud 1999].)

Public Argument (to Change Minds and Behavior of the General Public)—At Least 4 Weeks
• a written personality that is credible and engaging
• anticipation of readers’ questions and objections
Appendix: Likely Genres and Possible Goals Within Them

- evidence that is explicitly relevant to claims
- design for delivery and circulation of the text

(See Writing to Persuade [Caine 2008]; For a Better World, Chapters 7 and 8 [Bomer and Bomer 2001]; and Compose Design Advocate [Wysocki and Lynch 2007].)

Policy Argument (to Change Rules or Laws Governing Communities)—At Least 5 Weeks
- explicitness about the policy problem that needs change
- address to appropriate audience to affect policy
- explicit answering of opposition claims
- specificity about how the policy affects particular people

(See For a Better World, Chapter 8 [Bomer and Bomer 2001].)

Textual Argument—(to Affect How Others Think About Texts and the Issues They Talk About in Response to Texts)—At Least 6 Weeks
- clear framing of an interpretive purpose
- evidence from text that is relevant to claims
- analytic, interpretive explanations about the text
- clear subsections to the argument, arranged logically, with clear relationships among sections

(See Rewriting [Harris 2006], They Say/I Say [Graff and Birkenstein 2006], and Writing About Reading [Angelillo 2003].)

Posters—At Least 3 Weeks
- visual design that makes an argument
- clarity of message
- purposeful selection and compression of limited visual and textual evidence
- reasoned plan for delivery and circulation

(See Compose Design Advocate [Wysocki and Lynch 2007].)

Feature Articles—At Least 6 Weeks
- information from direct observation, reading, and interviews
- engaging style that makes topic interesting to readers
- moves between everyday, familiar life and special knowledge
- clear design along with reasons for multiple sections of article

(See Time for Meaning, Chapter 10 [Bomer 1995].)
Websites—At Least 4 Weeks

- visual design that is appropriate for purpose
- ease of navigation and logical link structures
- depth of content to keep reader at site
- design of activity to get hits at site

(See Don’t Make Me Think [Krug 2000].)

Also consider these genres: radio documentaries, video documentaries, short films (fictional).
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