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Lighting the Fire of Literacies:

Exploring the Influence of Multimodal Writing on Student Engagement

Allison Cline

Spring 2015

University of Mary Washington

Abstract

This research looks at how students engage in multimodality in relation to the writing process, building off of the work from the New London Group, who coined the term “multiliteracies” in 1996. With the continued advances in technology, the idea and scope of multiliteracies and multimodality expands as well. This is a field that requires continued exploration, as this research attempts to do. Students were given an initial survey on their interest in personal and academic writing. The survey included a likert scale and open ended responses. Students then completed two assignments concerning sides in the American Revolution. Project elements included research, student artwork, and both paper and digital presentations. Throughout the assignments, students were interviewed about their process and work. The guiding questions for this research concerned how students engage in multimodal practices during the writing process and what multimodal representations students would create to demonstrate their understanding.

Introduction

It is 9:00am- and the elementary day is just beginning. The teacher tells the class they will be starting with writing. As she begins the lesson, the students are immediately engaged. What does an engaged class look like? Traditionally, someone might think of a classroom with desks in rows. The student seated at each desk is intently watching the teacher, who is describing the writing process at the front chalkboard. The students are quiet while the teacher talks. The classroom has an obvious authority figure, and the students are rapt, absorbing the information.

While this mental image of engagement may have once been the expectation, today classrooms do not mimic this idea. Nowadays an engaged classroom may mean small collaborative groups working on various projects- one group conducting research online about an animal, another group creating a video about the animal's habitat, still another group creating a blog post about the animal. The classroom is bustling with activity. Through it all, the teacher acts as a guide, helping to navigate his or her students. William Butler Yeats (1996) said, "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire" (p. 112). That sentiment has never been truer.

In the field of education, there has been an emphasis on shifting away from the traditional curriculum to one that is more interactive and student-focused. One of the areas of education that has changed drastically over the past several decades is language arts. The New London Group (1996) coined the term multiliteracies, which encompasses two points critical to literacy in the twenty-first century, "the multiplicity of communications channels and media, and the increasing saliency of cultural and linguistic diversity" (p. 63). As a part of multiliteracies, the New London Group goes on to define multimodal meaning as the multiple modes of meaning in a reading,

which can include any form of communication, such as color selection in print-based texts, movement, and images or figures, as well as the traditional expression through writing.

The idea of multimodal writing is similar to the idea of semiotics and finding meaning in every choice made. Semiotics is the interpretation of signs and symbols. To understand semiotics, the New London Group (1996) uses a mall as an example- "reading" the mall includes reading the advertisements as well as reading the spatial layout and placements of signs, lighting, and logos (p. 81). Reading is no longer just an interpretation of written words; it includes all of these semiotic systems. Thus, literacy is broader than just reading and writing; it includes all the various ways in which we communicate with each other. Multimodal writing encourages writing that does not just involve written text, but many symbols that may express the author's intent.

Engagement and multiliteracies should support and enhance one another. Multiliteracies demand a social and cultural awareness that has been lacking in older curricula. This approach to literacy aims to invite learners who may have been neglected previously. Through an active awareness and inclusion of culture, as well as an acceptance and use of the growing field of technology, students have more opportunities than ever to be involved in the learning experience. However, merely having a curriculum founded on multiliteracies is not enough. The various ways of meaning are needed to meld concepts and student learning. Learning is not that bucket; it is not pouring the information into a passive head. Teachers cannot solely lecture and expect students to understand the material. Writing is more than the old five paragraph structure and requires authentic application. Students cannot just be critically literate, in which critical literacy "emphasizes both power and empowerment" as well as "issues of agency and identity" (Perry, 2012, p. 60). They must be multiliterate and multimodal to be prepared to engage in twenty-first century tasks.

Multimodality is a powerful tool for writing; Hasset and Curwood (2009) state, "perhaps the use of multimodal tools in socially situated practice can be considered the heart of multiliteracies" (p. 281). The use of multimodality in writing instruction may influence student engagement because of the complex interaction of multiple sign systems that promote student involvement. Through using multimodal tools and processes, teachers can light a fire and actively engage students in the learning process.

While research has focused on multiliteracies, multimodality, and student engagement with various new approaches to literacy, the three elements deserve more observation in conjunction with each other. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between student engagement and the use of multimodal writing in a fifth grade, inclusive classroom in northern Virginia. My research questions are:

- How do students engage in multimodal practices during the writing process?
- If given the opportunity to self-select writing tasks, what multimodal representations would students create to demonstrate their knowledge for a summative assessment?

Literature review

Literacy in the twenty-first century is "a field that is in a profound state of transition" (Kress, 2003, p. 8). Traditionally, literacy has been the ability to read and write, but that is not enough anymore. The world is increasingly more global with the prevalence of and advocacy for cultural acceptance, creating a need for a definition of literacy that is multifaceted. The groundwork to this new understanding was paved by The New London Group in 1996. The work by this group has been critical to research concerning literacy since its publication. From The New London Group's (1996) article came the principles of multiliteracy and multimodality.

These two concepts are intricately linked and have an interesting relationship to writing is facing changes to its processes and uses, being adapted for twenty-first century needs.

Writing, like the rest of literacy, is facing serious changes to its definitions and traditional expectations in the face of multiliteracies. This research examines students' engagement when a multimodal approach is used to writing, within the broader scope of multiliteracies. There is some valuable research on various aspects of literacies, but while the relationship between multimodal writing approaches and student engagement seems to be positive, more research is needed in order to emphasize its importance as we progress toward a new understanding of literacies.

In 1996, the New London Group published "A pedagogy of multiliteracies: designing social futures." The article begins with two points- to extend the idea of literacy to be more culturally and socially accepting in the face of increased globalization, as well as including more text forms that we see in today's society, particularly in reference to expanding multimedia technologies. The group decided to use the word "multiliteracies" to encompass this expanded view of literacy, which, as mentioned in the introduction, was created to include multiple ways of communication as well as to be reflective of cultural and linguistic diversity (p. 63).

In their discussion of designing meaning, the group enumerates on modes of meaning, such as visual meaning, audio meaning, and multimodal meaning, which is the relationship and interaction of several modes. The New London Group (1996) states, "In a profound sense, all meaning-making is multimodal" (p. 81). Their example is written text. The audience is reading my paper, my writing. But the paper is also visually designed. The font, the margins, the spacing all tell you something about what you can expect from this paper. Another good example are

picture books, which are becoming increasingly interesting with the way they emulate visual design for twenty-first century readers, as will be discussed more later.

Multiliteracies

An understanding of multiliteracies and multimodality is necessary to future research. The New London Group's (1996) work is a significant contribution to the modern use of the word "literacy." In fact, many educators and researchers no longer use literacy in its singular form; it is generally recognized that we now live in a world of literacies.

Before going further, it must be acknowledged that multiliteracies is not the only approach to twenty-first century literacies. Perry (2012) enumerates on three different sociocultural perspectives to literacy- literacy as a social practice, critical literacy, and multiliteracies. Like multiliteracies, the other two perspectives are concerned with social and cultural diversity, especially power dynamics between cultures. Literacy as a social practice and critical literacy are interested in how literacy is used, not just in written expression and reading but in how that communication is based within cultural knowledge and how that cultural knowledge is conveyed through literacy practices (Street, 1995). As Perry (2012) argues, multiliteracies also have a sociocultural influence, a desire to understand and promote cultural diversity. The big difference for multiliteracies is that "multiliteracies theorists do not limit their definition of *text* to print only and instead include a variety of form and semiotic systems" (p. 59). All three of these perspectives have become increasingly popular since the New London Group's (1996) publication of "A pedagogy of multiliteracies," encouraging a shift from literacy as reading and writing to literacies which acknowledge and honor cultural diversity, and, for multiliteracies, a definition of literacy that also includes many forms of expression and communication.

Burke, Butland, Roberts, and Snow (2013) wrote a very interesting article that works to examine multiliteracies through classroom inquiry, with the expectation that educators can "empower learners through a critical understanding of the transformative experience provided for learners, when our definitions of literacy and pedagogical practices are widened" (p. 42). The research included three teachers who used different applications of technology to engage their students. Two teachers used digital media, like Photostory 3 and shelfari blogs, which they found to be beneficial. The other teacher allowed students to use role play to help develop comic strips, which used multimodality to teach multiliteracies as students moved through different modes, such as gestural to drawing. All three teachers found that students were more enthusiastic about their learning when it incorporated multiliteracies.

Multimodality

The term "multimodality" seems like a complex concept, but it is really just defining something most of us see every day. Similar to reading a mall's layout, Kress (2010) uses the example of road signs- "*writing* and *image* and *colour*... each mode does a specific thing: images *show* what takes too long to read, and writing *names* what would be too difficult to show. Colour is used to *highlight* specific aspect of the overall message" (pg. 1). Multimodality is used unconsciously in the world by adults, and children. Hasset and Curwood (2009) state that "children have always been multimodal" when we define a mode as ways of making meaning (p. 271). Mills (2011) expands, "Children combine multimodal symbolic systems, such as talking, drawing, singing and role-playing, long before their communicative interests can be served by the written linguistic forms of their culture" (p. 57). If you have babysat or spent any amount of time observing young children, this seems like a very simple truth, but it has taken years to

realize and appreciate children's ease within multimodality, and to use this natural propensity in their education.

Hasset and Curwood (2009) examine multimodality in relation to picture books, which have become increasingly dynamic for young audiences in our digital age. This is particularly true for postmodern picture books which sometimes include font choice that conveys a feeling like excitement or stability, much like the size or color may convey emotion. Children love to interact with these books, questioning the text and each other, drawing from their own experiences, and applying these features into their own works.

While Hasset and Curwood (2009) examine multimodality in children's books, Mills (2011) observed students moving within multimodality using transmediation or moving from one sign system to another. Students in her research illustrated scenes from a book read to them, wrote scripts and adapted them to video, and drew comics, then translated them to online comics. Throughout it all, students moved between multiple sign systems, discovering the unique qualities each system offers, including the positive and negative attributes. Much like how Burke et al.'s (2013) Photostory activity found multimedia to be beneficial to student engagement and helped students "go beyond the simple reproduction of literary content to the transformation of meaning and knowledge;" these multimodal tasks allowed students to draw on their own experiences, creating deeper insights (p. 64). Hasset and Curwood (2009) propose multimodality might be the "heart of multiliteracies," and Mill would agree; multiliteracies is the concept and multimodality is the vehicle through which we teach it (p. 281).

Writing

As with the rest of the literacy landscape, writing is changing. Edwards-Groves (2011) highlights the evolution of writing in her article, "The multimodal writing process: changing

practices in contemporary classrooms." She discusses the view of writing as "process writing" in the 70's and 80's when students were taught writing in stages, such as prewriting, revising, and creating drafts (p. 50) In my introduction, I emphasize the traditional concept of writing which follows this understanding of writing as process writing. However, in the twenty-first century, process writing may not be the most engaging or relevant way to teach students. Dyson (2003) states that students enter into literacy with "interrelated communication practices, involving different kinds of symbol systems (e.g., written language, drawing, music), different technologies (e.g., video, radio, animation) and different ideologies or ideas about how the world works" (p. 103). If we accept these symbol systems to be modes, then children enter literacy already multimodal. Furthermore, Kress (2010) argues that writing in itself is multimodal; "it is spatially displayed, yet it 'leans on' *speech* in its logic of sequence in time" (p. 81). The form and use of writing, like other elements of literacy, needs to be multimodal, and the use of technology can be a powerful tool for writing education.

Edwards-Groves' (2011) research incorporated technology into writing by having students create animated diagrams in their Power Points that focused on climate change. In this project, the students adjusted "to the multimodal and multidimensional nature of the task and text (to present an *oral as well as an animated presentation*), with each one serving the other" (p. 55)." As Burke et al. (2013), Mills (2011), and Dyson (2003) have asserted, teaching with a multimodal or multiliteracies approach deepens students' understanding and involvement within the learning process.

Images.

In his book, *Literacy in the New Age*, Kress (2003) also addresses the change in writing and literacy. Much like the shift in writing that Edwards-Groves (2011) discusses in her article,

Kress (2003) sees writing as changing in relation to the rise in "images"- the increased prevalence of internet and TV, considering us to now live in a world dominated by images. He states, "the pressing use of image is forcing a reassessment of what writing is, what it does and does not do, and what it can and cannot do" (Kress, 2003, p. 10). Kress (2003) finds that it is hard to define terms like "literacy" and "writing," and the future of writing. He states, "My assumption is that syntactically and textually writing may be becoming more speech-like once again, while in its visual/ graphic/ spatial dimensions there is a move in the opposite direction, away from speech" (2003, p. 73). Writing is changing, and students are living in this transitory time. Multimodality may help them bridge the world of images and the world of writing.

Engagement

Literacy and writing should engage students. Literacy is a huge field with many different forms and functions for expression. Writing gives the writer a voice, which students often lack in school settings. However, students are not engaged in writing when it follows the tradition of process writing. Instead,

The children... illustrate the way in which engagement in writing entails, at heart, engagement in a practice. In learning to write, young children are energized by writing that is effect speaking to, yelling at, telling a good story to, or explaining how it really is to people. (Dyson, 2006, p. 151)

In her observation of students' early use of writing, Dyson (2006) finds that engagement in writing springs from other platforms. Process writing does not excite students, but writing as an extension of a practice does, such as how writing as a continuation of their conversation did for these students. It is not just true for young children- all students are more likely to be engaged

when a task uses multimodality and allows for movement between systems (such as verbal discourse and writing).

Edwards-Groves' (2011) research nicely ties together writing and student engagement. When asked about how her animated power point on deforestation differed from what she usually did, one student stated, "It's just a way to put all your information together, in a way that's interesting... it's a way of involving the audience" (Edwards-Groves, 2011, p. 55). Through her multimodal project, the student thought about visual and written representations, as well as the audience. She found the authentic assignment to be engaging and presented a report that was meaningful. She was cognitively engaged in the task, and her understanding of the concepts seems to have benefited.

The teacher-participants in Burke et al.'s (2013) article also found that students were able to make meaningful connections between their lives and text using multimodal approaches. Technology allowed older students "to adopt greater control and ownership over their own learning" (Burke et al., 2013, p. 50). As well, students went above and beyond the requirements for assignments. Students seem to engage with multimodal approaches.

Linking reading and writing.

Gambrell (1996) has done extensive research on the link between reading and motivation or engagement. In "Engaging Readers: Research-based Practices that Nurture the Motivation to Read" Marinak, Malloy, and Gambrell state, "If motivation "makes the difference between learning that is superficial and learning that [is] deep and internalized" (Gambrell, 1996, p.15) it is critical for literacy professionals and classroom teachers to engage in practices that support not only the skill to read but the will to read" (2010, p. 509). Gambrell (2011) also published an article on rules for engagement, which include relevancy to students' lives, a range of materials

or options, choices, social interaction, and moderate challenges. The same argument for reading and motivation should be applied to engagement and writing; if, as the research indicates, engagement makes a difference in the quality of learning, then practices that lead to engagement, such as multimodality, should be used in writing and other content areas.

It would be hard to deny that the world of literacy is changing in reflection of an increasingly global society and huge leaps in the use and ability of technology. But this is not necessarily a problem. The research suggests that embracing a multimodal approach to different facets of literacy can increase student engagement and create students who are more aware of the world around them. This indicates that more research on the relationship between multimodality, writing, and student engagement needs to be conducted.

Methodology

My action research used a qualitative approach, wherein I was a participant-observer. The research was conducted in a fifth grade, inclusive classroom. The site and students were chosen by a nonrandom, convenience sample. My research was carried out during a full-time student teaching internship and was conducted between mid-February and mid-March. The research was conducted during the third nine week's period and reflected appropriate standards of learning (SOLs).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between student engagement and the use of multimodal writing. My research questions were:

- How do students engage in multimodal practices during writing processes?

- If given the opportunity to self-select writing tasks, what multimodal representations would students create to demonstrate their knowledge for a summative assessment?

Site and Participants

The site of my action research was a public school in northern Virginia. The school is several miles from a main highway in a fairly rural setting and serves students from pre-k through fifth grade. The classroom in which I conducted my research is a fifth grade classroom that was co-taught by a general educator and a special educator. The potential participants were the 31 students in the class with whom the teachers and I worked with on a daily basis. Six of the students were in SCOPE, the gifted program, and sixteen of the students received special services in the form of an IEP or 504 plan. I obtained assent from the students and consent from their guardians before beginning the research.

From the consent forms, assent forms, and through conversation and a survey on writing interest, I narrowed the focus participants to six students. These students, three boys and three girls, ranged in the value they held for writing, grades, and ethnicity, and represented the diversity in our classroom. While all students completed the project assignments, these six students- Michael, Danny, Marc, Rosalyn, Emily, and Anna, (all names are pseudonyms) were the focus group and were interviewed about their processes and opinions throughout the research.

Michael is an 11 year old, Caucasian male, who disliked writing and in his survey disagreed with statement “I think writing is important.” He received SCOPE/gifted services.

Danny is an 11 year old, Caucasian male, who was also against writing, though in his survey, he stated, “ I do not like writing. It hurts my hand sometimes,” indicating the physical act of writing was disagreeable rather than the value of writing. Danny received special services.

Marc is an 11 year old, African American male who enjoyed for writing. In an interview he stated that he “loved writing and writing” including outside of school, saying, “I make up a bunch of stories, and um, I write about some stories my dad tells me about when he was a kid.” Marc did not receive any services.

Rosalyn is a 10 year old, Hispanic girl who “somewhat agreed” that she enjoyed writing. She also enjoyed other forms of artistic expression, including drawing and painting. She did not receive any services.

Emily is an 11 year old, Caucasian girl who liked writing and stated that she wrote outside of school “because it is a way to get my feelings out.” Emily did not receive any services.

Anna is an 11 year old, Hispanic girl who agreed with the statement “I think writing is important” but did not like writing. Similar to Danny, Anna felt that writing was physically uncomfortable, making it undesirable. Anna received special services.

Methods and Procedures

Methods for my research included using field notes, surveys, semi-structured interviews, audio recording interviews and conversations during projects, and transcriptions of interviews and conversations in order to assess student engagement with projects that are multimodal. I also used technology, such as iPads, laptops and computers, doc cams, the Smart Board in the classroom, and GApps (Google apps). Technology was contingent on availability and was used to as a platform for multimodal composition. It helped me to assess how students engage with technology, and if they benefit from technology in regards to engagement and understanding.

Student writing, drawing, and other visual representations were collected to assess multimodal activities. Books, like the technology, were provided as supplemental information to the text book and students' notebooks and included leveled readers from the classroom library, the school library, the school's reading series (Benchmark Literacy), and student interest when possible.

Students created two projects over five weeks. Both projects were to be based off of the SOL content regarding the American Revolution and required that students pick a side to support and defend their choice, demonstrating an understanding of the causes and results of the American Revolution and differing perspectives (USI.6). For the first project, students used their textbooks, notebooks, supplemental books, and the internet to research Patriots and Loyalists during the American Revolution. For the assessment, they were to create a travel brochure (by hand or using the computer), a poster, or write a persuasive essay. All projects were to include: text and pictures (one of which must be done by hand), five facts, and persuasive elements. Some students received permission to create a Power Point. All students were also instructed to locate a book through the library or online books sites to recommend.

The second project built off the first assignment and used an online format. Students were allowed to work in groups of no more than four, or by themselves. As a team or by themselves, the students were to create a character from the time period, personify a character from then, or imagine if they traveled back to the American Revolution. Using the information from the first assignment, the teams were to create either a comic (may be drawn and uploaded or created using online tools), a PowerPoint if not previously done, a video skit, or a document using the Google Drive. Each group was to include five facts supporting their side and engaging visual

elements. Students were to write in their character's point of view, trying to persuade the audience to visit. The final projects were "published" online.

Data Collection

Before beginning the assignments, students completed a survey on their feelings or engagement with writing (see Appendix A) The survey included a 1-5 likert scale and open-ended questions. These surveys gave a base understanding of student engagement with writing. Most students recorded generally favorable opinions towards writing but very few considered language arts to be their favorite subject.

During the assignments, I asked six students- Michael, Danny, Marc, Rosalyn, Emily, and Anna, to do semi-structured interviews about their thoughts on the project and how engaged they felt with the assignment (see Appendix B). Five of the students gave permission to be audio recorded, and for all students notes were taken during interviews. Audio was transcribed following interviews. For the first project, these interviews were conducted in a private room, the day the assignments were due. Observations were taken before that point, of my perceptions and interactions with students about their work. For the second project, students gave one informal, non-recorded interview while practicing their presentations and one semi-formal interview the day the projects were due. As with the first interview, five students allowed audio recordings which were transcribed following the interview, and notes were taken on all interviews. Observations were collected as well as comments made by the general teachers as they pertained to student engagement and/or the assignments.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the results by triangulating my data, using the surveys, interviews, and observations. Through triangulating the data, four themes appeared: one, students are more

engaged when they are allowed to use technology; two, students will put enormous time and effort into a project that they are engaged in; three, despite technology enhancing engagement, the practical use of technology in the classroom is problematic; and four, the value and role of writing shifted between the projects.

Students are more engaged when they are allowed to use technology.

For the first part of the project, students were asked to create a poster, brochure, or pamphlet supporting the Loyalists or Patriots during the American Revolution. Students created some interesting projects that they were proud of, and most were positive in their interviews about the project. Still, it was seen as “just another assignment” and in interviews, students referred to it as an assignment or a project. The second part, which allowed students to use technology and work in groups of up to four, took engagement to a new level. Students immediately grabbed a Chromebook or an iPad. One of the groups that went for a Chromebook was Danny’s group. In his interview, Danny stated,

Danny: It was my idea [to do a video]. Well, me and Justin’s idea ‘cause we were together first and then Sam and Wesley joined. (All names are pseudonyms)

Interviewer: Cool. Why did you two decide to do a video?

Danny: Um, I was like, “we should do a video!” and he was like “ok.”

Interviewer: Why did you want to do a video over the other options?

Danny: Um, ‘cause I’m not really good at comics or Power Point

Interviewer: So you can make videos?

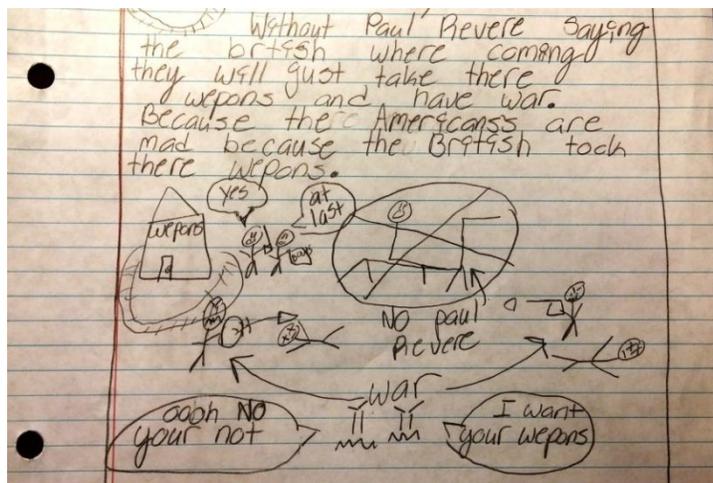
Danny: Mhm

Interviewer: So, tell me about the video. How did it go making it?

Danny: It was actually pretty fun making it, making a time machine (drawn on the white board, the participants dove through from modern times to end up in the 1700s).

Several students, like the boys in Danny's group, got permission to bring in their own technology, such as iPads, computers, and phones without internet capability. Students were never off-task and several groups had to be reminded to scale back their ideas to fit within the timeframe. Danny's group had to draw the time machine when they originally planned to make a machine from construction paper, markers, and other classroom supplies. Students were excited by technology and all but two groups capitalized on the chance to use an iPad, Chromebook, or their own cameras and phones.

One group who did not capitalize on technology were three boys who used printed images and hand drawn images to create a poster board sized comic, depicting several battles. The other was Anna, who was the only student to work by herself. She created a hand drawn comic book to upload instead of creating her comic book online. Each page featured a paragraph and then a picture about the paragraph. This closely resembled her first project, and was within her comfort zone. In an interview, Anna said that she had seen comic books before, and enjoyed creating her own. However, she was hesitant to use the technology available and put her project



on the Google classroom. In regards to working by herself, she stated that it was easier for her to work by herself, and to create a comic by hand because she could use her time wisely and had the supplies she needed. These two groups were quieter about their process,

Figure 1. A sample from Anna's project.

needing less advice or technological supplies, but they still positive in regards to engagement with the process and pride in the final product.

The groups who did use technology often over planned, as with Danny's group. Another group wanted to reenact battles outside so they could yell, but that required special permission to go outside. Still another made roles for everyone and forgot to plan a cameraperson. Students needed guidance and were quick to ask for it, or change their project to work with what they had. The students would ask if they could work on their projects any time they finished an assignment early. This engagement stemmed from the use of technology and created an air of excitement and a room full of students giving their best efforts, as will be discussed in the next section.

Students will put enormous time and effort into a project that they are engaged in.

The first part of the project was hard to gauge in terms of effort or engagement, due to snow days. During class time, students occasionally struggled to remember guidelines for on-task behavior as was discussed in class and outlined in their rubrics, and had trouble pulling information together. No students asked for the books I had shown them from the library and made available to them (Appendix D). Instead, the students were excited to use the Chromebooks, or used their notebooks. The Chromebooks appealed to students as a something fun, while the notebooks were seen as easily accessible and full of information they already knew. Most students turned in the first project on time, but four of the thirty-one student in class did not turn in the project. Those who did submit their projects were excited to share them with the class and appeared to take pride in their work.

For the second part, students quickly paired up and would ask to use their lunch and recess time as extra time for their projects. Some groups worked after school together as well. They showed they were not only willing, but excited to use their free time for the project. My

teachers and I had to limit how many groups could stay back, to make sure students got time to go outside. The students wanted to share their projects with their classmates and the classroom had an air of engagement and learning that is often lacking during lessons that are based on notes or lecture.

Despite technology enhancing engagement, the practical use of technology in the classroom is problematic.

Chromebooks and COWs (computers on wheels) were frequently needed by other classes, leaving the classroom short on computers per students. iPads could not be taken for more than a day and the school did not have a system to ensure a class could not receive the same iPads for projects like this one. The school's wifi accessibility dropped frequently, requiring extra time to access the internet for sending project pieces to one's self. As well, students needed mini lessons on how to use the Google classroom, how to access materials online, and how to use their Google Docs or Google Presentation. Computers also needed time to load up and shut down. These issues became obstacles for some students, such as Emily and her group. In her interview, Emily showed a fondness for using technology while simultaneously annoyed at the troubles caused by using it.

Interviewer: Alright. What did you like about this assignment? Part two.

Emily: Um, I liked that we could work with a group on it and work together and could decide who to work with.

Interviewer: Yeah. What did you dislike?

Emily: Technology! (laughs) That was easy- technology.

Interviewer: Yeah. Now, what did you dislike about the technology?

Emily: Um, I dislike that it wouldn't work with us, 'cause like we could videotape it but

then I couldn't send it to my drive, neither of my accounts. (Personal or School-given account)

Interviewer: Alright. If we were going to do this assignment again, would you want to?

Emily: Yes.

Interviewer: Cool. What would you change?

Emily: I would use the Chromebook instead of an iPad.

Interviewer: Do you think we should not use the iPads at all?

Emily: Um,... yes, kinda.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Emily: Because with some accounts and some things, you might not be able to send it to yourself.

Interviewer: Yeah. What was the hardest thing with this project?

Emily: Technology (laugh)

For all of these reasons- problems having enough computers, trouble having consistency with the iPads, wifi dropping, despite technology drawing students in, it requires extra time and effort on the part of teachers and administrators to use effectively and efficiently with regard to time.

The value and role of writing shifted between the projects.

The first project had elements that the students saw as “fun”, such as being able to pick sides and being able to pick the form of presentation, but was considered a writing assignment, as indicated in the interviews. The second part, however, was not seen as a writing assignment and was something the students worked very hard on. In the first project, the images were created after the writing, and often used to enhance the writing in the project. In the second project, the writing was created first simply as a guide for the visual works, and the visual

presentation took precedence. In interviews for the first project, most students did not mind the writing involved, but had comments about writing elements, like their hands cramping from the writing they did. For the second project, in interviews, all but one student did not consider the project to be a writing assignment. When asked if they saw the second project as a writing assignment, Michael, Danny, Marc, Rosalyn, Emily said, “not really” but that their projects did have typed scripts. Anna, who hand drew a comic, did consider the second project to be a writing assignment.

The students who did not see the second project as a writing assignment all indicated something not previously considered- typing was not seen as a form of writing. Below is Michael's response during the second interview,

Interviewer: Alright. Did you see this as a writing assignment?

Michael: Not really, 'cause I kind of liked writing the scripts and stuff.

Interviewer: Ok. You liked writing the scripts.

Michael: Yea, I don't like handwriting but I like typing.

Despite typing encompassing the same conventions as writing- such as sentence structures, written communication, and linear formation of text on a page, it was seen as preferable in the five interviews.

Discussion

The findings from the data analysis are: Students are more engaged when they are allowed to use technology, students will put enormous time and effort into a project that they are engaged in, despite technology enhancing engagement, the practical use of technology in the classroom is problematic, and the value and role of writing shifted between the projects. But what does that mean for educators?

Students are more engaged when they are allowed to use technology.

Most students enjoyed the first assignment, where they created a brochure, pamphlet, or poster championing a side in the American Revolution. They were positive when asked about the assignment during interviews and in observations. However, in part due to inclement weather creating limited opportunities to work in class or be reminded about the project, some students did not complete the assignment. This was not a problem for the second project, both in relation to the weather, and, more importantly, in terms of interest. All students completed the second project.

Students were highly engaged in the second project which involved creating a PowerPoint, video skit, or comic. They were happy to use class time, as well as their own time, to work on the project. The class was positive about working in groups, and ecstatic to use technology. The students would offer to pick up the iPads in the morning, and were quick to get on an iPad or Chromebook during project time. Overall, the students used the available technology to create highly multimodal representations. Their project included written scripts, audio, visual elements, and heavy use of technology. This indicates that educators should incorporate technology when possible because it encourages student engagement.



Figure 2. The time machine and game show from Danny's video.

Students will put enormous time and effort into a project that they are engaged in.

For the second project, students were willing to use lunch time, recess, and their own time after school to get together and work on their assignment. Burke et al. (2013) discovered that “students actively sought our opportunities and means by which they could incorporate multimodal forms of literacy that reflected their social identities and learning styles” and this research found similar results (p. 49). Students enjoy multimodal writing as component of multiliteracies. One teacher commented that she was impressed at how hard they were willing to work and the projects they were making. We had to remind students to scale back because of time limitations. The teacher commented, “this is what teaching should be, and so often isn’t.” Oftentimes, educators do not have the time to give students an opportunity to create a project like this. Between the snow and looming SOLs, we struggled within the classroom to give the students adequate time to create something multimodal. They used the time well and impressed us with the compositions they created to show what they knew, but to effectively employ multimodality, time is required. Unfortunately, time is a hard thing to find in education today, but it is worth it in relation to the engagement; these students found deeper insights than they would have with a traditional writing assignment and will likely remember this project and what they learned into adulthood.

Despite technology enhancing engagement, the practical use of technology in the classroom is problematic.

As enumerated on in the data analysis, despite technology enhancing student engagement, the ability to use it was hampered. It was difficult to keep computers connected to the wifi. It was even more difficult to have enough computers for everyone. Fortunately, when students got in groups, they were willing to use one computer for the whole group. iPads were wonderful in their capability to take pictures, videotape, and in their mobility. However, the

school was not set up to lend iPads for projects, leading to the class receiving different iPads each day.

Students love technology and have an almost intuitive sense of how to use it. However, some things are not intuitive. To use technology to its fullest capability in a classroom, students need to understand features like volume buttons and desktop items. They also need lessons on how to safely navigate the internet, choose appropriate and informative sites, and how to store their information so they can reach it. While all students had Google accounts, very few had used them for more than emails, requiring lessons in Google Docs and Google Presentations. While students engage with technology in a meaningful way, they need explicit instruction in how to use it. That instruction is so important, so that students will be able to engage with technology without barriers and be able to create multimodal demonstrations of their knowledge, which will create deeper and more meaningful understanding.

The value and role of writing shifted between the projects.

As Michael said, “I don’t like handwriting but I like typing.” Students love opportunities where they get to have a say. However, most of the students in the class had unfavorable opinions of writing. Between the two assignments, the role of writing shifted from the primary vehicle to show understanding, to secondary. In a converse relationship, as writing became less stressed, student engagement increased. Students did not view typing as writing. Typing leads to less fatigue than handwriting and is easier to edit. In addition- technology can allow for multimodal compositions, rather than linear writing, which could be a reason why students enjoy using technology and computers. Edwards-Groves (2010) states, “data show(s) that ‘planning’ often involves preparing and designing a multiplicity of texts which require a recursive movement between and across phases of writing. This process is not liner” (p. 61). In the first

project, students viewed the writing as linear. They wrote and then they drew pictures for support. The second project, and the use of typing, allowed students to have the recursive movement necessary for multimodal compositions. Computers are increasingly relevant to today's society, so more typing activities may be useful to prepare students as members of a technologically literate society. Typing can also lessen hand fatigue and encourage multimodal compositions due to the recursive ability of typing.

The questions that started it all.

How do students engage in multimodal practices during writing processes? As Hassett and Curwood (2009) stated, "children have always been multimodal; their social and cultural resources for meaning making include talk, gesture, drama, drawing, and ways of incorporating, integrating, and extending linguistic signs" (p. 271). Rosalyn gave a great example of this when she compared her video to scat singing, stating, "to me, a video is easier to do because it's like, when you- it's like scat singing, when they make it up as they go." She used her understanding of scat singing, a primarily auditory mode, to communicate with the researcher about her process for creating the video, as well as revealing some of her background context for making meaning (scat singing). Her ability to think across multiple modes is similar to how other children make connections. According to Dyson (2003), "children bring, not nothing, but frames of reference (i.e., familiar practices and old symbolic stuff) to make sense of new content, discursive forms, and symbolic tools" (p. 102). Rosalyn used her understanding of scat singing to compare to her process for creating her video. Being able to make those connections helps students integrate and extend information. However, for writing, students are still often taught process writing and think of writing as a five paragraph thing. In the first project, students would do a little research, chose a favorite site, write down five facts, and then draw a picture to illustrate their print. No

student decided to create a picture first and then draw the facts from that. Writing was seen as the prominent vehicle, which led to a linear creation in the project.

However, the students did not feel the same linear constriction with the second project. While most still started with a script and then filming, before doing either of those, students got into groups and grabbed some technology. The first day, I would observe students with iPads and would ask what they were going to make. Often they would say they didn't know, but they knew they wanted to use the iPad. After selecting the technology, they would create an idea that could undergo revisions easily because they could edit the script or rearrange the video. As Rosalyn said, you can "make it up as you go."

If given the opportunity to self-select writing tasks, what multimodal representations would students create to demonstrate their knowledge for a summative assessment? Students will create something that is incredibly multimodal, drawing on as many modes as can be thought of- visual, auditory, even kinesthetic- one group made a music video for their project. Students engage in multimodality in the way they present information to each other- they talk about it, they draw it, they use their hands for expression, they show each other videos, pictures, music. Too often, assignments and projects ask for something too specific for students to create wonderful, multimodal representations of their understanding. The first part of the project was too confining to many students. It provided a strong base for the second project though, and that is where students flourished. With the proper amount of time, freedom to chose, and exciting technological opportunities, like iPads, students will create vastly different and original multimodal representations that show deep understanding and interest in the subject.

Limitations

The primary limitation to this research was the weather. During February, students lost almost two weeks of school due to snow, one consecutive week of snow, and other days throughout. This hampered the ability for students to engage in the first project, because of so many snow days and the effect that frequent delays and cancellations had on the classroom schedule.

Another limitation was problems operating technology, which did provide great insights into potential pitfalls in the use of technology. Technology is always increasing in ability and is often new to the school, as the iPads were. Navigating the system for checking out iPads, and the inability to receive the same iPad related an unexpected but insightful barrier.

Implications for future research

The New London Group envisioned schools with a “vision of meaningful success for all,” (1996, p. 67). Multimodality seems to increase student engagement in assignments and tasks, which could lead to critical thinking and success for all. It is a powerful tool to use in content areas. The students in this research responded positively when given the ability to exercise choice in picking sides and representations of knowledge. They were particularly drawn to the use of technology. Future research should consider the evolving nature of technology. How is technology used every day, as well as how is technology used for projects, and what technology is available? What does that availability entail to set up?

In addition, how can multimodality effect student engagement in other content areas? This research looked at History content with a Language Arts format. How would multimodality impact engagement with explorations in Science or Math?

This research showed a positive relationship between the use of multimodality and student engagement. More research could be conducted concerning the use of technology, as well as the link between multimodality and other content areas.

Conclusion

Children are multimodal by nature. Their capacity to work within and between modes has been acknowledged in research. In this study, the students engaged more intensely in the second assignment, where multimodality and technology allowed greater freedom within the assignment. The New London Group paved the way for research in multiliteracies and multimodality, such as this one. Despite a difference of almost 20 years since this research, their theory remains significant- literacy is more than just reading and writing. It is expression. Student's expressions of their knowledge are shallow when asked for information in one way. On the other hand, students are engaged and create interesting representations that reflect deep understanding when the assignment uses multimodality. "Education is not the filling of a pail, it is the lighting of a fire" (Yeats, 1996). Multimodality can be the spark that lights the fire in a child, leading to a rich, vibrant world of expression and understanding.

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Appendix A
Student Survey and Questionnaire

These questions will help me understand your feelings toward writing. Please be honest. This is not a graded assignment. **Circle the phrase for each question that sounds most like you.**

1. I enjoy writing in school.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N/A
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2. I enjoy writing outside of school.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N/A
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3. I write to express my ideas.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N/A
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4. I think writing is important.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N/A
---------------------------	--------------	---------------------------	-----------------	------------------------------	------------

5. When I write, I usually use a pen or pencil and paper.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N/A
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6. When I write, I usually use a computer.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N/A
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Please answer the questions honestly. They do not have to be in complete sentences but I do need enough information to understand your answers.

7. What sort of writing do you do in school? _____

8. What is your favorite thing you have written in school? Why? _____

9. Do you write outside of school? Why or why not? _____

10. What is your favorite subject? Why? (Lunch and recess are not subjects) _____

Appendix B
Student Interview Questions

1. Which side did you chose? Why?
2. How do you like what you're working on?
3. How does it compare to other writing assignments you have done?
4. What do you like about the project?
5. What do you dislike about the project?
6. What is the hardest thing about this project?
7. If you were to do this assignment again, or one like it, would you want to? Why or why not?
 - a. What would you change?
8. How do you feel about the writing involved in this project?
9. How do you feel about other aspects (using the internet, works in teams, finding or making pictures, locating books and reference materials)?

Appendix C
Project Write-up, Part 1

Name: _____

Due date: _____

Who Do you Support?

If you were alive during the American Revolution, would you support the Americans or British? Consider advantages and disadvantages for each side and the political and economic relationship between the colonists and Great Britain.

Persuade others to join you by creating a poster, brochure, essay, or pamphlet (small booklet) on why people should join your side. Include at least 5 reasons why your side is the right side. You must include both words and visuals to make your case. Visuals mean pictures and drawings . You must have at least one drawing of your own and any other pictures or drawings that will look good and help with your argument. You must also recommend a site or book where your audience can get more information. This recommendation may be from one of your sources.

Support your stance by using information you find on the internet, in your textbook, in your notebook, and any other books or resources. Include a list of your sources with your project.

Options for the project:

Brochure

Poster

Pamphlet/Essay

Other (must be discussed and approved by Ms. Cline)

Recommended sites:

http://www.ducksters.com/history/american_revolution.php

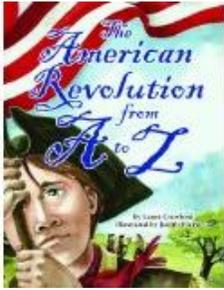
http://www.softschools.com/timelines/revolutionary_war/timeline_11/

http://www.pbs.org/ktca/liberty/perspectives_military.html

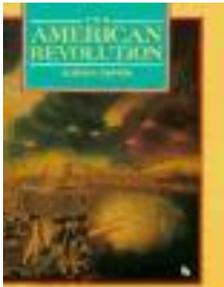
Patriots_Loyalists_Powerpoint on Google Classroom

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2p21-soVuA&index=4&list=PL8PhEQj6g66ltl4l28R0kWI0C6HGm0P2j>

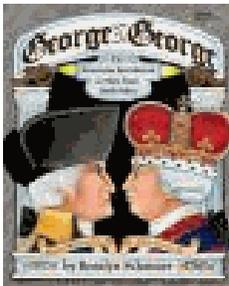
Appendix D
Books made available from the school library



The American Revolution from A to Z, b Laura Crawford



The American Revolution: war for independence, by Alden Carter



George vs. George: the American Revolution as seen from both sides, by

Rosalyn Schanzer



Important people of the Revolutionary War, by Diane Smolinski

**Appendix E
Project Rubric, Part 1**

Name: _____

Due date: _____

Check the project you chose:

_____ Brochure

_____ Poster

_____ Pamphlet/Essay

_____ Other (must be discussed and approved by Ms. Cline)

Who Do you Support?

Category	Expert (4 points)	Competent (3 points)	Novice (2 points)	Needs Development (0-1 point)
Information (x2)	Student included 5 or more facts that support their side, found in their textbook, online, or from another source. Information is relevant and accurate. Student recommended a reliable site or book to the audience. A list of sources is included with their project.	Student included 3-4 facts that support their side, found in their textbook, online, or from another source. Information is mostly relevant and accurate. Student recommended a somewhat reliable site or book to the audience. A list of sources is included with their project.	Student included 2-3 facts that support their side, found in their textbook, online, or from another source. Some information is relevant and accurate. Student recommended an unreliable site or book to the audience. Some sources are included in with their project.	Student included 0-2 facts that support their side/ Information is not relevant to the American Revolution or their side, or is inaccurate. Student did not recommend a site or a book to the audience. A list of sources is not included with their project.
Persuasion	Student included persuasive elements, such as supporting their side with facts and strong writing, and stating the audience should do something or feel a certain way.	Student included some persuasive elements, such as supporting their side with facts and strong writing, or stating the audience should do something or feel a certain way.	Student included little persuasion and did not support their side or call for the audience to do something.	Student included no persuasion.

Grammar	Grammar usage included proper capitalization and punctuation. All words were spelled correctly.	Grammar usage included proper capitalization and punctuation. Most words were spelled correctly.	Grammar usage sometimes included proper capitalization and punctuation. Many words were spelled incorrectly.	Grammar usage did not include proper capitalization and punctuation. A significant number of words were spelled incorrectly.
Visuals	Student included visuals in a way that enhanced their project and related to the writing component. There is at least one drawing.	Student included some visuals that enhanced their project or writing, but some visuals were not relevant. There is at least one drawing.	Student included some visuals, but they did not enhance the project or relate to the writing component. Student did not include a drawing but did use pictures.	Student did not include visuals.
Presentation	Student was confident in their presentation, spoke loudly, and was able to answer questions about their project and their process.	Student was mostly confident in their presentation, usually spoke loudly, and was able to answer most questions about their project and their process.	Student was somewhat confident in their presentation, often spoke too softly to hear, and could answer some questions about their project and their process.	Student was not confident in their presentation, spoke too softly for audience to hear, and had trouble answering questions about their project and their process.
Productivity	Student always used in class time in a productive way.	Student usually used class time in a productive way, but sometimes was off-task (talking, looking up unrelated resources).	Student sometimes used class time in a productive way, but was often off-task (talking, looking up unrelated resources).	Student did not use time in a productive way and was usually or always off-task (talking, looking up unrelated resources).

Score: _____

Notes:

Appendix F
Project Write-up, Part 2

Name: _____

Due date: _____

Who Do You Support? Part 2

You have now chosen a side in the Revolutionary War and made something to tell others why they should support your side. But, sometimes, it's more helpful to hear these things from another person.

Your second project is to create a colonial or British character going through the Revolutionary War and discuss your experience and persuade others to join your side, using the information you already found.

For this project, you must chose at what point of the war your character is in. It must take place between the Battle of Lexington and Concord, and the Battle of Yorktown. You may create a comic, video, or PowerPoint of your character telling others (their friend, their family, a crowd) why theirs is the right side. Use the information you gathered from the first part for this assignment to help your character be convincing.

This assignment will be due on the Google Classroom and will be turned in online. You will be given time to work on this in class. If you create a comic or video and need help getting it online, Ms. Cline will be able to help you.

Options for the project:

Comic

Video

PowerPoint (if you did not previously do this one)

Other- must be discussed and approved by Ms. Cline

**Appendix G
Project Rubric, Part 2**

Name: _____

Due date: _____

Check the project you chose:

_____ Comic

_____ Video

_____ PowerPoint

_____ Other (must be discussed and approved by Ms Cline)

Who Do you Support? Part 2

Category	Expert (4 points)	Competent (3 points)	Novice (2 points)	Needs Development (0-1 point)
Information and Grammar (x2)	Student included 5 or more facts that support their side, found in their textbook, online, or from another source. Information is relevant and accurate. Student consistently used proper capitalization and punctuation.	Student included 3-4 facts that support their side, found in their textbook, online, or from another source. Information is mostly relevant and accurate. Student mostly used proper capitalization and punctuation.	Student included 2-3 facts that support their side, found in their textbook, online, or from another source. Some information is relevant and accurate. Student used some capitalization and punctuation.	Student included 0-2 facts that support their side. Information is not relevant to the their side, or is inaccurate. Student did not use proper capitalization and punctuation.
Character	The character is interesting and persuades others to join their side.	The character is somewhat interesting and uses a little persuasion to try to get people to join their side.	The character is somewhat interesting but does not try to persuade others to join their side.	The character is not interesting and does not try to persuade others to join their side.

<p>Style</p>	<p>Student’s project is engaging (colorful, big enough print, loud enough audio) and uses the online format to persuade the audience. Student turns the project in using the Google classroom.</p>	<p>Student’s project is somewhat engaging (some colors, most print big enough to read, audio kind of soft) and uses the online format to persuade the audience. Student turns the project in using the Google classroom.</p>	<p>Student’s project has some issues engaging the audience (no colors, hard to read print, hard to hear audio) or does not use the online format to persuade the audience. Student does not turn in the project using the Google classroom.</p>	<p>Student’s project is not engaging (no color, cannot read print, cannot hear audio) or does not use the online format to persuade the audience. Student does not turn the project in using the Google classroom.</p>
<p>Productivity</p>	<p>Student always used in class time in a productive way.</p>	<p>Student usually used class time in a productive way, but sometimes was off-task (talking, playing on the computer).</p>	<p>Student sometimes used class time in a productive way, but was often off-task (talking, playing on the computer).</p>	<p>Student did not use time in a productive way and was usually or always off-task (talking, playing on the computer).</p>

Score: _____

Notes: