

## Chapter 12

# Building Literacy through Media-Rich Projects: Slow Down, Look, and Connect

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter details a case study of a librarian and high school English teacher who collaborated on Shakespeare projects to improve students' critical reading of sonnets and soliloquies. The literary analysis goal expanded as students developed media-rich products that reflected media literacy skills: performing advanced searches, locating research to inform image selection of primary sources, and evaluating images to communicate analysis of Shakespeare works. Students also modeled digital citizenship skills by respecting the copyright of images, and exploring contemporary images from creative commons sites. Following fair use guidelines, students created transformative works, adding value to and repurposing copyrighted materials. Text, images, and music were combined into a movie using the free digital software Animoto. The school librarian and teacher successfully collaborated, supporting goals of improving literacy and helping students to become 21<sup>st</sup> century learners.*

### INTRODUCTION

*I'm going to deliver a call for slowing down, for quietness, for stopping by woods, even for a kind of creative loafing, for taking a moment to observe.... Although teaching and learning themselves have been motorized by the hyper-pace of information, it is good to remember that the true tempo of education has always involved a deceleration (Collins, 2003).*

Billy Collins, US Poet Laureate from 2001-2003, gave this surprising rallying call to *slow down* in a commencement speech at Choate Rosemary Hall. How do we *decelerate* students, who point-and-click on hypertext, and instead encourage students to stop and ponder? In the hectic rush of meeting curricular goals, do librarians and educators even have the time to slow down and allow students to look closely and connect with images and text? How do you construct a project so that students

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use critical thinking to create thoughtful products that move beyond topic reports? This chapter provides a case study of a librarian and high school English teachers who collaborated in several Shakespeare projects to improve students' critical reading of sonnets and soliloquies. Begun at first as a "close reading" exercise, the project evolved into an information literacy opportunity. Students created media-rich products that reflected media literacy skills: performing advanced searches, locating research to inform image selection of primary sources, and evaluating images to communicate analysis of Shakespearean works. Ironically, digital tools became the medium to *slow down* students. Working with the free movie making software Animoto (www.animoto.com), students made decisions on pacing and staggering of text excerpts from the sonnets and soliloquies. Students also modeled digital citizenship skills by respecting copyright of images and exploring contemporary images from creative commons sites. Following fair use guidelines, students created transformative works, adding value and repurposing copyrighted materials. Text, images, and music were combined into movies that powerfully dramatized viewpoints and motivations of characters in the play *Julius Caesar* or evoked insight into the emotion-charged sonnets.

This chapter will discuss research that emphasizes the need for slowing down and suggests strategies to strengthen students' critical thinking. Examples from student movies will be highlighted in order to demonstrate the steps of *slowing down*, *looking closely*, and *connecting*, steps that encouraged critical exploration and resulted in dynamic movie dramatizations. Recommendations and future research directions will also be discussed as we ponder how librarians and educators can develop collaborative instruction that supports the goals of improving literacy and guiding students to become 21<sup>st</sup> century learners.

## **BACKGROUND**

An abundance of media vies for students' attention: cell phones, texting, iPods, computer games, and social media sites dominate our students' daily lives. It is no wonder this generation is called *Generation M*, "millennials," who were born into the digital age (1980s-1990s). The "M" in Gen M can also stand for their aptitude for multitasking. The Kaiser Family Foundation surveyed 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> graders on their use of technology. Survey results showed 4 in 10 students use another technology "*most of the time* while also using the computer; another 26% say they do so *some of the time*" (2010, p. 20). This multitasking behavior affects reading habits, as observed in a survey by The National Endowment for the Arts. Young adults report that they spend only 7-10 minutes on leisure reading and technology competes with students' assignment-related reading, "58% of middle and high school students use other media while reading" (2007, p.10). Nicholas Carr (2011), author of *The Shallows*, suggests that interacting with the Internet, instead of print, changes the way students read and drastically decreases their comprehension. Carr calls this new thinking "the shallows" and suggests that the ability for critical thinking, deep thinking, is endangered by the digital age.

To address these concerns, a new type of literacy is emerging, *media literacy*. Just as literacy describes a person who can do more than decode words, media literacy involves a critical thinking approach to consuming and creating media. Media literacy researchers (Thoman, 1994; Jenkins, 2009, p. 22) describe media as having a distinctive *language* and individuals who are media literate develop a critical appraisal of how to *read* media messages. These individuals examine how media messages are constructed and analyze the purpose of the message; they can then evaluate whether or not to accept the message being communicated.

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