

Chapter 15

Re-Imagine Writing: Multimodal Literary Analysis in English Education

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ABSTRACT

In “Re-Imagine Writing: Multimodal Literary Analysis in English Education,” authors Hundley, Smith, and Holbrook discuss a study of the multimodal and digital composing practices of pre-service English teachers in a writing methods course and their struggles to redefine writing and to compose using multiple modes. As these pre-service teachers are part of a generation of students who are active consumers of digital media, their struggles highlight the disconnect between their literacy practices inside and outside of school.

INTRODUCTION

Real writing isn't this instant messaging stuff or other kinds of digital writing. It's the writing we do here, in school. On paper. Essays and papers and theses.... As future teachers, we have to be able to teach real writing on paper....Preservice Teacher, Michael, 2007

The stuff I do online, well, that's not writing. It doesn't come into the classes...unless the profes-

sor chooses to incorporate blogging or tweeting or some other online interactions. Preservice Teacher, Lilah, 2009

The question of what kinds of writing need to be taught in school is common in writing methods courses. The more rare question is, *What is writing?* or *What is the writing that counts?* The majority of the preservice English teachers with whom we work in our writing methods courses rarely question their conception of what counts

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as “real” writing. For them, “real” writing is what is produced *in school for school*, different from the writing done in the context of social media, gaming, or in the creation of expressive digital compositions such as videos or mash-ups. Michael and Lilah (all names are pseudonyms) serve as examples of preservice teachers who are digital composers outside of the classroom but who do not see their online authoring as writing that “counts.”

Initially, we were surprised at the disconnect preservice teachers exhibited between their out-of-school digital literacy practices and what they viewed as sanctioned and appropriate in-school writing (see Hundley & Holbrook, in press). Many of the preservice teachers in our classes blogged and tweeted, emailed and texted, created and posted video compositions. It made sense to us that they would embrace those literacy practices as part of an expanded notion of writing in a digital era and that they would be eager as teachers to bring those practices into their English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms. It has been over two decades since Bolter (1991) wrote that developments in computer technology would “threaten the definitions of good writing...that have been fostered by the technique of printing” (p. 2), so we were certain that students entering teacher preparation programs would come pre-conditioned through personal experience to conceptualize writing as more than words on a page. We were dismayed to discover how narrowly our candidates defined writing.

In retrospect our dismay was unwarranted. Reasonably, the preservice teachers with whom we worked based their thinking about good writing on print technology, cultivated through years of schooled practice and more recently reified on state and national assessments. The differentiation many of them made between their in- and out-of-school writing practices was grounded in the sharp divide they experienced in both their own K-12 education and their teacher preparation

programs. Lianne, a graduate student in the second year of her program, explained that the “writing that I see in my practicum is the same kinds of writing I did in ninth grade. The writing tests are the same. Writing is the same.” She saw no shift in writing practices in school environments, therefore, she questioned the role digital tools might play in re-imagining what writing might be. That said, preservice teachers did not necessarily value digital compositions as *less than* conventional writing; rather they valued them differently. As preservice teacher Mikayla said, “I blog for me and for my readers ... My school stuff is different. A lot of that writing is focused on getting the grade.” In both examples, preservice teachers indicated strong distinctions between writing created in the context of school environments and writing created in online environments with digital tools.

While we comprehend their thinking around what counts as “real” writing, we also recognize that conventional ideas of writing based solely on print technologies are challenged by emerging communication technologies. With this in mind, we work to engage ourselves and preservice teachers in discussions about writing in the digital age and, specifically, the compositional possibilities afforded by digital tools.

In this chapter, we take up the notion of “real” writing by looking at how preservice teachers engaged in one specific writing genre: literary analysis. A standard component in ELA curricula, literary analysis conventionally uses print-based notions of writing in two ways: the (typically) print-based written text that is analyzed and the print-based written text in which the analysis is communicated. In a writing methods course designed to support both print-based and digital composition practices, Authors A and B asked preservice teachers to communicate their analysis of a canonical literary text using digital tools that allowed them to compose with words, images, sounds, and hyperlinks. Author C pro-

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