Which New Literacies? Dialogue and Performance in Youth Writing

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When educators talk about a multiplicity of literacies—computer literacies, situated literacies, local literacies, eco literacies—it is as if there can be endless additions to the basic concept of (print) literacy without altering our fundamental understanding of literacy itself. (Somerville, 2007, p. 155)

Drama thrives, however imperfectly, on the idea that a diverse group of people can come together and make meaning; this can be a profound experience of literacy for the adolescent learner. In this article, we wish to both lay out the terrain in the vast field known as literacy and to challenge some of the prevailing measurements for literacy that have settled into what we argue is a far too static and individualized understanding of what should be the most invigorating and social aspect of schooling for youth. How youth see themselves in the contexts in which they express their understandings, how they engage dialogically in the process of writing, how they imagine themselves into and create contextual sensitivity for worlds unfamiliar to them, and how they perform in a world can significantly shape their sense of mastery of language and communication.

Performative and dialogic literacies, as we have come to understand them, play a prominent role in our emerging definition of new literacies. Our goal is to invite readers first to see dialogue and performance in the context of a vibrant drama classroom and then to reflect on the role of dialogue and the function of performance in adolescent learners’ tumultuous journey toward literacy engagement. We see this journey as tumultuous because literacy engagement in many classrooms of diverse learners is a day by day negotiation between teacher and students and among students themselves. But here we focus on an analysis of some pedagogical practices that make the success of that complex negotiation between and among teacher and students more probable.

Global processes of urbanization and migration are reshaping needs, goals, and teaching in classrooms. Consequently, many educational researchers (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Medina & Campano, 2006; New London Group, 1996; Street, 2003) have stressed the need to expand our notions of literacy and literacy practices to better equip students...
in general, and linguistically diverse students in particular, with different creative and critical modes of communication and expression.

The New London Group (1996) has stressed the necessity for educational researchers to “rethink the fundamental premises of literacy pedagogy in light of increasing cultural and linguistic diversity and rapidly shifting communications media” (p. 63). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (n.d.), in its Literacy for All project, also emphasized the need to consider different kinds of literacies: “Literacy can no longer be seen as just a technical skill; as simply the ability to read and write” (n.p.). The term literacy is now routinely complemented by the terms multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Kalantzis & Cope, 2008; New London Group, 1996), new literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Street, 2003), or critical multiliteracies (Botelho, 2007) due to the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in society; an increasing awareness of the social, economic, and political forces enacted on curriculum; and the recognition of different modes of meaning making and communication (audio, visual, linguistic, spatial, performative, etc.) by educators.

Literacy is, if nothing else, a rapidly expanding field of study; many recent contributions to the field have pushed open the floodgates of our literacy consciousness. Based on this sense of urgency, and the current policy emphasis on the need to examine literacy across the curriculum, we lend our voices to the growing movement of researchers and educators who want to challenge what counts as literacy (see, e.g., Johnson & Cowles, 2009). Specifically, we have done this by focusing on three different but interrelated agents in the project of school literacy:

1. Students in school who do not feel literate
2. Teachers who struggle to find modes of expression that will move students toward literate identities as knowers and narrators of their worlds
3. A drama curriculum and pedagogy that exceeds the boundaries of common literacy practices

In other words, our data include student experiences of writing and performance, their teacher’s analysis of her literacy goals, and the observation of a drama program that challenges the researchers to pay attention to the role of dialogue and performance in emerging literacy practices and outcomes.

The Study, Its Methods, and Context

The data are drawn from a larger international multisite ethnographic project aimed at better understanding the complexities of (dis)engagement for high school students in schools in Toronto, Canada; Boston, USA; Lucknow, India; and Taipei, Taiwan. We offer analyses of qualitative data from one of our Toronto sites, Middleview Technical School (pseudonym). Data collected from the drama classroom in Middleview during the first year of our four-year study began to push us toward new ways of making sense of the relationship between our multiple ways of knowing and our multiple ways of expressing and narrating ourselves and our understandings. Of all the sites in the larger study, this one in particular is where literacy engagement, not simply engagement, is explicitly reflected upon by the teacher and her students.

Middleview is a richly multicultural/racial/lingual urban high school with 1,797 students (62% male, 38% female; 56% of students with a primary language other than English). It is the largest technological school in Ontario, offering a comprehensive selection of academic and technological study programs. The school is located in downtown Toronto but draws students from across the entire city. The drama classes we observed draw students from all programs within the school.

Early on, we became aware that writing personal responses was a valued form of communication in this context, and further that sharing personal writing was a part of that. The following field note gives a good sense of the kind of classroom we were in. The prompts, at first glance, would not necessarily yield such profoundly personal reflections, but here they did. We wanted to understand better why this was the case.

Ms. S starts distributing students’ journals and asks them to write their reflections about the play. They had seen a new Canadian play called Scratch by
Charlotte Corbeil-Coleman. There is great resistance to this request: “Miss, can we skip that part?” “You can never watch a play for the fun of it, you always have to write something.” Ms. S ignores the comments and continues to distribute the journals. On the board she writes down questions that the students are asked to use as a springboard, including:

- The play made me feel/think....
- One performance that stood out for me was... because....
- The style of the play was...because....
- I think the metaphor used was because....

After the individual writing time, Ms. S asks students to share their writing with the class. After all the resistance to writing a reflection about this play, I am amazed by the thoughtful and personalized reflections students share with the class. One student shares that she could relate to the play because one of her moms died. She goes on to say that it was very difficult to see her mom sick, so changed and frail. She is sorry that she didn’t have the courage to talk to her. Another student says the play made her feel angry because it reminded her of her own mother who didn’t come to visit her at the hospital when she was little. During these discussions Ms. S genuinely engages with their writing and shares her own reflections, which are also surprisingly personal. She talks about her own failures: her failure to get into medical school and her fear of her mom sick, so changed and frail. She is sorry that she didn’t have the courage to talk to her. Another student says the play made her feel angry because it reminded her of her own mother who didn’t come to visit her at the hospital when she was little. During these discussions Ms. S genuinely engages with their writing and shares her own reflections, which are also surprisingly personal. She talks about her own failures: her failure to get into medical school and her fear of facing the truth when her own mother got sick. (researcher field note, October 23, 2008)

In addition to such ethnographic field notes, here we also analyze data from teacher interviews and student dramatic writing and performance pedagogy. From the analysis of these data sets, we put forward and elaborate on one strong thematic finding related to the work of writing and performing in literacy learning. We have titled this theme “Drama Pedagogies and Aesthetic Writing: Bringing Students’ Personal/Cultural Narratives Into Dialogic Play.”

Through this excavation, we consider the value of our findings for current literacy practices and their related theories. We consider drama pedagogies as both creative and critical forms of literacy. They offer empirical weight to newer theories articulated by many literacy theorists, which may also open onto new modes of theorizing the multiple acts of literacy in schools. Based on close examination of one drama classroom, we invite the reader to consider our notions of performative and dialogic literacies.

**Drama Pedagogies and Aesthetic Writing: Bringing Students’ Personal/Cultural Narratives Into Dialogic Play**

At Middleview, high school students engaged in extensive dialogue and interaction that helped them to think both aesthetically and critically; explored different writing media, moving from free-writing to monologue crafting to script writing; and went to see plays and reflected on them. They also routinely explored metaphors, symbols, and performative moments within and beyond the classroom. They engaged in writing their own scripts and performed them for an audience. Paying attention to these diverse pedagogical practices that clearly produced different literacy opportunities has helped us to shape our thematic understandings of this complex and literacy-rich classroom.

In a desire to bring alive the dynamic classroom practices we observed and to provide a first-person narrative account, we invited our Middleview teacher, Ms. S, to create a pedagogical road map, a description both practical and philosophical, which follows:

In my work as a teacher and theatre artist, I always begin with writing. My students and I (or I alone) will pick some kind of theme that we want to develop theoretically and my first steps into the creation process involve giving the students various writing prompts that are related to the theme in some way. For this project, I introduced the metaphor of doors to the students as a way of developing their personal narratives into material for a play.

The students were each given a journal for the process and I began with the prompt, “An open door is....”

The rules I have for free writing are that students write in silence for a given time period (start with 2 minutes and work up to 20 depending on your group’s ability to focus) and that they don't stop writing. I tell them to always return to the prompt if they get stuck. When I explain the rules to the students, I let them know that they will be sharing what they write but they don't have to share all of it. I encourage every student to share something at the end of each free write (even if it is just a sentence) so that the group gets into the habit of everybody sharing. It's important that the students share because it gives a purpose, incentive and
immediacy to the writing. When students get an immediate peer response to what they have just written, they feel encouraged to write again and again.

The next prompt was “A closed door is...”

After these initial prompts to open up our thoughts on the topic, I asked students to write a monologue to a closed door with someone behind it that either won’t come out or won’t open the door for them. Instead of sharing in the circle, as I did with the two initial pieces, I asked students to perform their monologue (reading from their written text) by choosing someone from the class to be the person behind the door. The chosen classmate would try to respond naturally on stage as if they were hearing the words for the first time.

At this point, the students told me that they wanted to write a monologue “in reverse” with the person on the opposite side of the door speaking back to the initial writer. A lot of my planning for these projects happens on a class-by-class basis so there is plenty of room for students to direct the creative process. It is, in fact, ideal to have students directing the process spontaneously, but this is not a guaranteed outcome.

The next step was to have students write based on artifacts they brought in from home that were related to doors. I told them to bring in three artifacts—one had to be written (like a poem or information), one had to be physical, and the other was their choice. I presented all of the objects to the students on the floor and they had to select one and free write based on the object. We did this twice and then shared. [See Figure 1.]

There comes a point when you are creating drama when you know that you must stop writing because you have collected enough material. At that point, I presented students with my own writing based on the door artifacts and staged it as an example of how you could move from the page to the stage.

I also chose key lines from their own writing for them to develop scene work. I gave each group a line from someone’s monologue and they created scenes based on the text.

Depending on time, I could have gathered all the monologues and scenes and asked students to create an order for the show. I did not have that luxury, so I created an order for the students, which became a skeleton on which to build, stage, and create something for performance.

**Student Writing**

In her pedagogy, Ms. S asked students to use the stuff of their lives to interact with each other and with ideas beyond their lives. What does the metaphor of the door mean in the contexts of their lives, and how can they move that knowledge into new forms of expression? The resulting collective performance of “The Doors” created the framework in which diverse individual stories would relate to the whole. These bridging pedagogical practices, as we saw them, foster the kind of “inquiry about life itself rather than the mastery of fragmented knowledge and skills” for which Berghoff and Borgmann (2007, p. 22) argued.

As is fairly typical of adolescent writers, Mya, Chrysanthemum, and Jamila begin their work from profoundly personal places. (All names are pseudonyms. Pseudonyms and identity markers were selected by the students. We invited them to list those things they believed would most clearly explain who they are to a reader who didn’t know them, those aspects of their identity they believe to be fundamental to who they are and how they live in the world.)

**Writing about an open door:** I am very thankful that I live in Canada now. Because if I was back home, I would probably been joined in army after finishing high school for about 2 years at least. Even though...
my brothers (3 of them) are already in the army training. Which is really sad because they don't get good food or get to see their family members for pretty long times. I am very thankful for the people that had fight for my country with Ethiopia and past away for their land. (Mya; female, African, straight, average class, orthodox religion, Eritrean-born)

**Writing about a closed door:** My first memory of the door wasn't good. It was when my father left. I remember calling to him “where are you going?” He looked back, crying. But didn’t say a word. The door closing represented the beginning of a very hard time of my life. It’s not like I was homeless or anything like that. But it was hard. Dinner wasn’t every night, my mom wasn’t always home. The door closing was a very big part of my life. It was years, maybe 2 before he came back. They opened the door and made us leave. The next door I entered was my grandparents. This door represented an escape with rules. It was obedience and forced respect. A life of dictatorship. Then I went back to the door of my house. Entering that place was the beginning of the beginning. It was only my two brothers and sister. But that beginning led to ends, with the front door not only closing, but slamming. My door to my old house represented the end before the beginning. I would say. I will always remember my front door. I have memories of looking at it, decorating it and just being around it. I miss that door because it was my home. But now that door is the home of others and I hope it is great to them, better than it was to me. (Chrysanthemum; female, white, straight, middle class, Roman Catholic, Canadian-born)

**Writing about an artifact related to a door:** My big black key—When I first used you I was a little confused and you broke in the door. You were the brand new key to my apartment building! I was excited, it meant no more ghetto—no more Regent Park. (Jamila; female, black)

Recent literacy research (Botelho, 2007; Cummins, 2001, 2006) and critical theory (Freire, 1970/2006) focus on the importance of validating students’ prior knowledge, their culture, community, language, and identity for literacy learning and deep understanding. Cummins (2006) wrote, “Prior knowledge, skills, beliefs, and concepts significantly influence what learners notice about their environment and how they organize and interpret it” (p. 88). In classrooms that are very multicultural, such as our Toronto drama classroom, we have observed that when the teacher’s pedagogical practice activated students’ prior knowledge and built upon their personal and cultural narratives, as in the clearly personal and culturally situated narratives presented, the students found the literacy practices in their classroom more purposeful, and they consequently appeared more willing to invest themselves in their learning process.

Gallagher (2007) has argued that part of what powers teachers in the classroom is what they receive from their students, and we ignore that essential part of the equation at our peril. Booth (1998), too, has paid close attention to the ways in which drama makes it possible to hear students differently:

Reflection offers a chance to be heard, an opportunity to express ideas and feelings, an occasion for language. While drama is an active, “doing” medium, the reflective mode allows children to make meaning by examining and understanding their thoughts and perceptions both as spectators and participants. (p. 30)

**The Process of Collective Creation**

In a study of writing research, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) argued that to develop mature writers, we need to provide them not only with opportunities for knowledge telling but also knowledge transforming. The writing for the collective creation in this drama classroom involved a process that started with knowledge telling and developed into a kind of knowledge transformation. Students were first given opportunities for knowledge telling through free-writing activities about doors: open doors and closed doors. Then students explored knowledge transformation by choosing the relevant parts of their initial written pieces to think more explicitly about the following:

- Genre
- Character development
- The mood that they would like their writing to invoke
- The relevance of their writing to the collective creation as a whole
- The audience for whom they were going to perform their collective creation

During the next set of exercises, students worked together, with their peers, and with the teacher to...
create dramatic pieces in this process of knowledge transformation. Students became active designers of meaning while planning their collective creation, which is also in line with the multiliteracies pedagogy suggested by the New London Group (1996) and expanded by Kalantzis and Cope (2008).

Kalantzis and Cope (2008) stated that, as opposed to the traditional views of literacy where learners are passive receivers of information, a pedagogy of multiliteracies acknowledges the role of agency in the meaning-making process and sees learners as active designers of meaning:

The logic of Multiliteracies is one which recognizes that meaning making is an active, transformative process, and a pedagogy based on that recognition is more likely to open up viable lifecourses for a world of change and diversity. (p. 28)

The writing of the collective creation in this drama classroom incorporated some of the major pedagogical acts/knowledge processes for a transformative pedagogy of multiliteracies outlined by the New London Group (1996) and Kalantzis and Cope (2008) such as situated practice or experiencing, which puts special emphasis on incorporating students’ prior knowledge and experiences; critical framing or analyzing, which allows students to be analytical with respect to relationships of power and provides room for students to reason and draw inferential and deductive conclusions; as well as transformed practice or applying, which “entails the application of knowledge and understandings to the complex diversity of real world situations or a situation of the ‘real world’” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2008, p. 30).


Just as there are multiple layers to everyone’s identity, there are multiple discourses of identity and multiple discourses of recognition to be negotiated. We have to be proficient as we negotiate the many lifeworlds each of us inhabits, and the many lifeworlds we encounter in our everyday lives. This creates a new challenge for literacy pedagogy. (p. 71)

Identities are in flux in drama. The process of devising a collective performance provided creative and critical opportunities for students to enter each other’s worlds as in Appiah’s (2007) sense of conversation as real engagement with another’s ideas. The three student writing segments in the previous section are emblematic in that they illustrate an immigration story, a domestic struggles story, and a poverty story that would certainly be familiar to many inner-city teachers.

Standing alone, the writing segments risk fixing students, trapping them in the confines of their archetypal identities and personal histories. But in this classroom, using the pedagogies of drama, the stories became the source of dialogue and collective imagining. Students listened to each other, tried on different roles and identities, created new roles in response to the ones they heard, and expressed these through language. Learners juxtaposed different ideas, worldviews, languages, and discourses in the context of an emerging piece of fiction in their creation of “The Doors” performance. For example, in the dramatization of Chrysanthemum’s monologue, one student took on the role of the mother, who was hoping to start a new life with her new boyfriend and her daughter; and another student played the mother’s boyfriend, who was upset because he felt his stepdaughter was not appreciating all the material goods he was providing her; Chrysanthemum became the character portraying the struggles of the adolescent daughter, who felt ignored and mistreated.

Chrysanthemum’s story was transformed by these other characters; her life-world was brought into dialogue with other characters’ reactions, insights, and challenges. We watched the solo-written monologue transform into a presentation of possible relationships and possible dialogues. This new mode of cocreation produced a new fiction from an individual story that extended Chrysanthemum’s story well beyond her own real and imagined context.

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Mya’s monologue about the portrayal of Canada as a country with open doors was juxtaposed, in the larger collective work, with two scenes depicting how Canada might be seen as a closed door in terms of work opportunities for skilled workers such as doctors and lawyers, who are internationally educated but have no Canadian experience. This idea emerged from another student’s writing. Again, we point to dialogue, collaboration, and ultimately, performance as enabling factors in students’ thinking and rethinking of their written expression.

Erica (female, white, gay, middle class, atheist, Canadian-born, grade 11) performed a monologue that she described as a reaction to the ubiquitous discourses of homophobia she experiences in her school life. Her writing troubled the notion that “heaven’s door is closed to gays and lesbians.” Her monologue also exemplified a moment of transformation through writing; it articulated a combination of both self-discovery and social change. But more important, when brought into dialogue with other pieces in the collective whole, her monologue was surrounded by the very voices (played by other students) she despised and came to challenge as a result of their embodiment of those ideologies. In other words, Erica’s monologue came face-to-face with her imagined detractors, and she had to find a way through her story in dialogic relation to those voices.

We do not suggest that the pedagogical practice of dialogue is a panacea, but only to propose that individual thinking and writing is marked by real and imagined audiences who receive our words in contextually specific ways and cause us to rethink our own thinking and writing. These experiences of writing-in-dialogue also had clear aesthetic dimensions. For instance, how should students represent these ideas through their physical embodiment? Where should they stand in relation to one another? What is the image they want to communicate to the audience about the victory of the lone voice against the collective voices of homophobia? Through these negotiations, students from diverse ethnic, cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, gender, and sexual-orientation subject positions created a physical and embodied representation—through story—of the social, political, economic, and historical discourses always already present in a richly multicultural/racial/linguistic urban context.

What was also clearly present in this example of the process of collective creation were the six different modes in the meaning-making process in multiliteracies pedagogy outlined by the New London Group (1996) and then by Kalantzis and Cope (2008): linguistic meaning, visual meaning, audio meaning, gestural meaning, spatial meaning, and the multimodal intertextuality. This collective creation process acknowledged and used the meaning and learning potential in different meaning-making modes as opposed to confining students to “the monomodal formalities of written language” in traditional literacy (Kalantzis & Cope, 2008, p. 20). The collective creation in the drama classroom became a site of multimodal pedagogy, which provided space for alternative forms of literacy engagement for the learners.

Implications for Your Classroom

One of the curious things about drama classrooms, like the art form of theater itself, is their ephemeral quality. Once the event has happened, very little remains beyond the students’ and teachers’ memories. In addition, it is not possible, in the strict sense, to replicate drama lessons such as this one, because so much of what happened in this drama class depended on what a particular group of students brought to the collective writing and creation. For example, although it was the teacher’s idea to introduce the concept of a door as a metaphor, the students decided which themes and events they would like to focus on. It was the students’ personal/cultural narratives, diverse as they were—their dramatization, dialogues, and reflections with each other—that informed the narrative of the collective piece, in the end collaboratively written and performed. Instead of personal or cultural narratives fixing identities in place, reifying certain kinds of urban youth, these stories became the texts for opening up dialogues with other “others.”
and consequently challenging the things they believed about themselves and others.

Despite the specificity of this experience in one urban classroom in Toronto, Canada, there are a few important implications for practice in all classrooms. We invite teachers to consider the following:

- Using students’ personal and cultural experiences is key. When students’ prior knowledge, identity and culture are validated, not simply as background story or as token forms of inclusion but as the main context for their work, students are more willing to invest themselves in their learning process and move beyond what they already know.

- Providing room for students to share their personal/cultural stories is risky but worthwhile. Scaffold this work by giving students a model by sharing your own experiences and brainstorming ways that your story could be rewritten or performed using verbal and non-verbal language, sound effects and props.

- Listening and responding to students’ written/oral responses seems obvious but is easily lost in the management of classrooms. Students always notice when their teacher listens.

- Providing a classroom atmosphere and modes of communication in which students give respectful and productive feedback directly to each other is not only good for the social health of a classroom but also makes the work of revising writing more meaningful. This practice improves considerably the work that students ultimately produce.

- Using multimodal sources to inspire students’ writing is effective. For example, the teacher in this classroom asked students to bring artifacts to class such as objects, pictures, stories, poems, drawings or music about a specific theme, topic, or event of interest. She then used these creatively to extend students’ interest in the topic and create a sense of the individuals who were part of their collective.

- “Drama is a cognitive tool that concretizes the abstract, making it sensory and available” (Edmiston & Wilhelm, 1998, p. 31). In other words, using drama to flesh out ideas through story, abstract language, and concepts such as metaphors and symbols often produces results that surprise both teacher and students.

- Using collective writing (such as collaboratively creating a script) as a prompt or source for what Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) call transformative writing opportunities and what the New London Group (1996) and Kalantzis and Cope (2008) call transformative pedagogy of multiliteracies is novel for many students. Here, learners’ subjectivities and experiences are taken into account so they can engage in multiple modes of meaning making and extensive dialogues about genre, character development, audience and mood. These dialogues provide opportunities for scaffolding or the transformation of solo ideas into communal ones.

- Using drama or role-playing makes it possible for students to step back and examine the motives and the psychology of characters in their story (as in the case of the transformation of Chrysanthemum’s monologue in the collective piece). Using this explicitly to add dimension to student writing of character and context is always fruitful.

- Drama or role-playing is a performing and an exploratory art form. Used in these ways, it can make possible an exploration of the complexities and multiple layers of meaning and interpretations embedded in texts.

- Collective writing and creation inspired by personal or cultural narratives (as in Erica’s experience) can invite students to critically engage with the world in order to bring thought and action together to reimagine their relationship to others. Using this social power of drama to help students encounter ideas and experiences different from their own is an imaginative way to raise fundamental issues of difference in classrooms and to challenge the constraining social roles so often ascribed to high school students.

We give the last word to Ms. S, who keeps us both hopeful and sober about what might be
accomplished for teachers and students alike in these rich, demanding, and complex sites:

For me partly it is a personal need for connection and community, for something to happen, for it to feel like a moment, and for it not to just feel like part of the daily grind and slog. We create these moments that live, and feel compelling and exciting. To do that, it takes a certain amount of nudging and vulnerability on your part [as a teacher] to share as well. In the class that you saw it did happen, but it also didn’t happen, in a lot of ways. That is fine [because] the work is flawed; it is never perfect. That’s what makes it dynamic and interesting. (personal communication, February 3, 2009)

Note
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References

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