

Teaching the (Uni)Verse: An Essay for Teachers of Languages, Texts, and Cultures

About two years ago, I walked into my English education classroom and showed my students—20 or so English teacher candidates—a small box. I asked them to think to themselves about what the box might mean. I asked them to read it. They read it. Interpreted it. Then I asked them to share their interpretations with the whole class. I encouraged my students to be creative, so in their responses, they described the box as:

... a mini chest forbidden to be opened. It is locked shut because it contains all the bad in the world. As long as it is closed, people will live in peace and harmony. Once opened, darkness will taint the world's light. Chaos will fill the land. But the box itself wants to be open; it is alluring like a box holding a diamond ring, captivating like a mysterious treasure chest. (Student 1, February 27, 2008)

... a tomb where dreams go to die. As we grow older, we let go of dreams, and dreams cannot live without a vessel. So shut out, they travel, seeking a place elsewhere, but never finding one, they take rest in the little box. We all keep them (boxes), unfortunately. And sometimes we don't know we keep them. (Student 2, February 27, 2008)

... a gift from a man to his would-be wife. The box holds the symbol of his commitment. He wants to propose to her, and hides his intentions in this cubed confessional. When the time is right, he will open the box in front of her, one knee braced to the ground, the other pointing at her. Taking her by the hand, he will open the box and it will speak for him, saying better than words: "I love you." (Student 3, February 27, 2008)

Many other students shared responses, my favorite of which declared: "It is only a box. Somebody probably threw it away, so I guess it's garbage." What's garbage to some is treasure to others. A dissenting student suggested, "It's not garbage; it's a mini-recycling bin—a small garbage can."

Beyond the laughs the activity evoked, the point of the exercise was twofold: 1) to demonstrate how various artifacts in our textual world tell stories beyond our basic beliefs about the human condition, moving beyond and expanding our canon (Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Sanchez, 2010), and 2) to give students an opportunity to draw out such stories and the emotions we tie to them. In the box, we get a new canon, for which *canon* means the substantive artifacts that speak of our humanity. When reading the box, my students explored themselves and the rich complexities related to some aspect of our shared "canonical" experience. Some readings wore the sad, social commentary of regret (e.g., grieving for a dream left to die). Others reached out to the great stories of our time—the myth of Pandora's box comes to mind. Still others drew more romantic, less apocalyptic conclusions (i.e., a box hiding an engagement ring). Whatever their response, my students—soon to be teachers themselves—found meaning in a box. On that day, a box was a story, a story that my students and I *read*.

There was a "true" story behind the box. It was a gift from a father to a son. The father passed, and the boy kept the box in memory of his father. A last gift. A lasting memory. The boy read the box, much like we had in class, but differently. His story had resonance, for the

box contained memories of his father. His story wasn't fiction; it was real.

As I told this story to the class, I asked my students to look at the box again, to feel it, to smell it, to listen to it, to make sense of it. I have since

While it calls for expanding ELA curricula and updating ELA pedagogies, it also insists on new ELA assessment models capable of “illustrating” (as opposed to measuring) what students have learned.

had time to reflect on the box lesson. Why did I teach it? How did the box expand the canon? The box situated the canon in what I have been calling the *New English Education* (Kirkland, 2008, 2009a, 2010), an orientation to English studies inclusive of the many varieties of language (i.e., Englishes), texts, and modalities of literacy that represent societal shifts (cf. Hull & Nelson, 2005). The *New English Education* also updates the teaching of English in ways that correspond with and are socially, politically, and culturally relevant to the lives of young adolescents. While it calls for expanding ELA curricula and updating ELA pedagogies, it also insists on new ELA assessment models capable of “illustrating” (as opposed to measuring) what students have learned.

The box represented my expanded view of the canon. It was emblematic of the texts I teach, the value I place on them, and the purpose I find in reading. In English studies, reading has long offered a way for us humans to uncover the mysteries of our unknown (and perhaps unknowable) world, to become somewhat informed and entertained, enthralled by those series of expressions—past, present, or future—that articulate meaning to and about us. Regardless of its specific purpose, the canon has always been about finding in the substance of a text evidence of who we are or are likely to become. This is why I *taught* the box.

The world is littered with such “reading” materials, unlikely texts that archive important narratives of our humanity. We read in this canon daily and write with(in) it often. However, the study of English has not always embraced such

texts. And ELA teachers are rarely prepared to help their students explore meaning behind this hidden, too-often forsaken textual world (Tremmel, 2010). Yet, texts as unlikely as a box can be canonical elements in what I call (using a metaphor borrowed from Edwin Hubble) *our expanding universe of texts*. This universe comprises the various objects available to readers and writers, objects that are capable of capturing the human experience in its rawest, most natural form. As our universe of texts expands, so should our thoughts about what and how we teach in ELA.

Beyond Print

The canon I teach is not in competition with traditional print texts. Beyond print, cultural artifacts—the material language of a people—such as our box tell stories consistent with the great books. The box my students studied, for example, echoes an unspoken story similar to Tim Ruskert's narrative of a father who gives his son the gift of hard work and commitment, or Kipling's poem “If,” which concerns the lessons of manhood passed from father to son. In the box, I can imagine exploring themes such as these—rites of passage and the wisdom that chains together generations. The box also provides another character to exposition—a *fourth person perspective*, if you will—whose point of view in some larger story is linked only to what we know, our ability to infer and fill in the details of what's left unsaid. The box becomes meaningful because we can make sense of it. It speaks because we give it language.

Most print forms can be considered texts, but not all texts are composed in print. Indeed, there are multiple forms of expression that pepper the universe (Kirkland, 2004). Everything is text, and a text is simply a form to be exhumed, examined, explicated, and deconstructed—a frame of reference with roots in some deeper process of mind. It can never be restricted to print alone, and it is open to the world of artifacts that so tellingly speak of things distilled in material dialects that voice stories too often unheard.

Reading the World

When they wrote *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, Freire and Macedo's (1987) aim was to combat forms of oppression that tragically but undeniably characterize the lives of the culturally innocent and socially dispossessed. They sought to redefine literacy as a concept tied to freedom, as a methodology leading to raised consciousness. This form of literacy marked a person's emancipation from the fetters of ignorance. In their view, in order to be truly liberated, one had to actively and critically read not just words on a page but also the discursive world beyond the page. Only by reading the world could the oppressed gain access to the forces concealed in a word and in a social order constructed to maintain oppression. Being fully aware, the oppressed could ultimately rewrite history and, in the process, challenge existing oppressions to free themselves and others from the bondage of inequity.

While they offered "reading the world" as a way to understand (and ultimately act on) that world, Freire and Macedo also saw "reading the world" as a way of disrupting the governing processes of injustice that sanction oppression:

In essence, the progressive educators sometimes not only fail to recognize the positive promise of the students' language, but they systematically undermine the principles of an emancipatory literacy by conducting literacy programs in the standard language of the dominant class. The result is that the learning of reading skills in the dominant standard language will not enable subordinate students to acquire the critical tools "to awaken and liberate them from their mystified and distorted view of themselves and their world." Educators . . . must develop a literacy program based on the theory of cultural production. In other words, subordinate students must become *actors* in the reconstruction process of a new society. (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 159, italics in the original)

For them, literacy could only be useful in breaking down the barriers of oppression when it related to people. Reading the world, then, for Freire and Macedo, was as much linked to reading the local lives of individuals as it was to reading the global presence of injustice. It meant

finding meaning in the cultural artifacts—the material language—of people so that people could have power over their realities and opportunities to understand who they are and could be in other possible realities. Hence, reading the world also meant challenging narrow notions of canon that reproduce social outcomes (Giroux, 1983; MacLeod, 1995). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it meant expanding what gets read—an inclusive canon comprising the word and the world.

For this reason, I teach all kinds of texts in my English education courses. These texts aren't always boxes, but they emanate from the particular lives of people. Specifically, I search out texts that saturate young adolescent worlds—billboards, tattoos, and (once) a flower-patched dress. Anything that my students might find meaningful, that might tell their story, I use as text.

Through such texts, the knowable world reveals itself. As we come to know this world, we also come to know the people in it and critical issues that affect them, such as economic oppression and gender politics. Somewhere in our conversations, I hope to dismantle historic patterns of oppression that play out all around us by making such patterns visible to my students.

This kind of literacy, a critical literacy, is very much about reading the world in order to expose what's hidden in it so as to challenge unfair conditions that plague people. (For more resources on critical literacy, see Gutierrez, 2008; Morrell, 2008; Soares & Wood, 2010.) While critical literacy deals in the messy stuff of social chaos and the types of counterfeit realities that chain each

While critical literacy deals in the messy stuff of social chaos and the types of counterfeit realities that chain each of us to one particular oppression or another, I have honestly always wanted critical literacy to be about something more—more than heightened or chronic exposure to our social ills or fruitless criticisms launched in the extreme.

of us to one particular oppression or another, I have honestly always wanted critical literacy to be about something more—more than heightened or chronic exposure to our social ills or fruit-

When reading the world, we finally expand the canon to life, helping our students to link literacy and living.

less criticisms launched in the extreme. Indeed, there is a criticality attached to a search for hope in our world and in our texts. At least, this is what I tell my students. I tell them to search for the hidden things—oppression, injustice, inequity; but know, too, that our most precious treasures are usually hidden as well—hope, faith, and love.

When reading the world, the expanding universe of texts opens to us along with all its possibilities. The sheer diversity of texts contained in this vacuous domain elicits a range of options helpful for meeting our students' complex needs, creating a space where we are no longer forced to abandon them or press upon them a tyranny of traditional textualities. Instead, we read with them as we teach them to read the world in which *they* live. In the process, we all learn how to read, for example, the very rocks that cry out our history, the scarred bodies of slaves that declare our broken pasts, the humble prose of patriots that evoke our freedoms, or various scenes of society as they reveal themselves on television and computer screens, newsstands, billboards, in coffee

shops, and on playgrounds. In reading the world, we finally expand the canon to life, helping our students to link literacy and living.

Writing (and Reading) New Words

I also imagine students “writing” new canons in this expanded textual universe. I imagine them responding to the world using texts other than print. For instance, what if my students had done as Glynda Hull and her colleagues (Hull & Katz, 2006) have their students do—compose digital stories to respond to the word and the world? Many of my students wrote fiercely in new literacy domains, in digital social contexts that allow for a (re)mixing of modes where texts conspire—print and image, voice and verb—to add nuance and deep meaning to “written” responses (Alvermann, 2008; Knobel & Lankshear, 2008).

There is something splendid if not new about these approaches. Such ways of writing are invigorating, like the time my students and I analyzed the character Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Instead of using the traditional character analysis worksheet, we analyzed Iago by creating Facebook profiles for him. My students composed profiles of Iago that peeled apart his complexity (e.g., Iago as having no God; Iago as having few friends; photos of Iago—self-centered, egotistical, and sneering—peeping viciously at Othello). They also used other details to support their analyses (e.g., Rodrigo and Emilia posting ran-

CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

Using PowerPoint to Share Research

The ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan “What Did George Post Today? Learning about People of the American Revolution through Facebook” invites students to create Facebook-like presentations via Microsoft PowerPoint, which will engage and motivate students to learn about famous people of the American Revolution. To gain background knowledge prior to their study of the Revolutionary War, students will research people who played an important role during this time period. While sharing their research in their PowerPoint presentations, students provide written feedback.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/what-george-post-today-30865.html>

Lisa Fink
www.readwritethink.org

dom but incisive comments on Iago's wall).

Today's young adolescents write with new words—print sometimes assisted by image, or image sometimes assisted by print. They use sound and visual, movement and motion picture. They write in new spaces, exchanging paper for screens. They have new tools for writing—computers and cell phones, camcorders and spray cans. The benefit of analyzing Iago using Facebook profiles was that it allowed for a new writing experience, a rewriting of the canon.

For this reason, I not only had my students use Facebook to analyze Iago, but also had them use Facebook to explore real people and their stories. Online is a place of millions of postmodern autobiographies. Some might argue that these autobiographies are not autobiographies at all, because online social communities feature a proliferation of play and fiction where the borders between imagination and reality easily blur (Kirkland, 2009b). In online social communities, identities are often the substance of performance, but isn't this true for much of writing, even so-called nonfiction writing? Online stories are perhaps more true than their offline counterparts precisely because online, just as in life, things can change—and often do.

Beyond the debate, we are in a place to “read” the world by learning to “read” the (con) texts that reveal it. My students wrote and then read their own and their friends' Facebook sites as autobiographies. They interpreted what such life stories meant and, in a fine Derridean sense, how they related to other texts, including (but not limited to) more traditionally bound memoirs and autobiographies. They wrote on each other's walls, becoming part of the narratives they studied. In the process of reading the world, they also found opportunities to write (in) it.

Following the box lesson, I had my students bring boxes of their own to class. My students brought boxes from everywhere—a cardboard moving box (the student who brought it was moving from a dorm to an apartment; hence, the box was “a metaphor for life's instabilities”); a box of Ramen noodles (a symbol of one student's

poverty); and a boom box playing 1980s hip-hop (this student's message was “do the right thing”). In class, we carefully read what each student “wrote,” curating each “new word” with curious eyes and even more curious minds. The Rosetta Stone for each text was its message's composer, who translated the distinct dialects of boxes into an experience intelligible to the rest of the class.

Of course we human beings use language to communicate our thoughts and experiences, desires and distresses. Then what is good about a language that belongs solely to its user? While it is a tool for communicating with others, language has an equally important role in configuring lives (Bakhtin, 1981). It can be translated across bodies and minds, whereas each new language articulates, to a relative degree, expressions of things that are cast about it—many boxes with many meanings, coalescing into a seamless pronouncement of a common thought. We are in a place in ELA to expand our vocabularies and invite new words that will help us to write new truths and explore, in new ways, our textual universe.

We are in a place in ELA to expand our vocabularies and invite new words that will help us to write new truths and explore, in new ways, our textual universe.

Teaching Literacies without Limits

Concern has been mounting for years about the nature of American education. Many educators, researchers, and policy makers fear that subjects such as ELA have oscillated too far from their basic principles and have become a nebulous stew of ineffective inputs that leave us wanting for outputs. Perhaps of most concern is student readiness for college entrance and the increasingly technological job market. This sentiment is expressed clearly in the recently released Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (March 2010), an initiative—undertaken by governors and state commissioners of education from 48 states, 2 territories, and the District of Columbia—com-

mitted to developing a common core of state standards in ELA and mathematics for grades K–12. According to CCSS:

Just as students must learn to communicate effectively in a variety of content areas, so too must the *Standards* specify the literacy skills and understandings required for eventual college and career readiness in history, social studies, and science as well as ELA. By their structure, the *Standards* encourage curriculum makers to take a comprehensive approach that coordinates ELA courses with courses in other subject areas in order to help students acquire a wide range of ever more sophisticated knowledge and skills through reading, writing, speaking, and listening. (p. 1)

My concern with the *Standards* is that “a wide range of ever more sophisticated knowledge and skills” unfortunately boils down to narrowly defined, traditional print-based literacies that, predictably, tread backwards to conventions of “standard spoken as well as written English” (p. 2). While the CCSS leaves the question of pedagogy (or “means”) open, this “back to basics” approach to ELA promises to reinforce scripted practices, skill and drill on rules of traditional print practice, and isolated and exclusive readings and writings of old canons. While these *standards* have their progressive elements, they do not go far enough with regard to expanding canons.

Rather than restricting ELA to conventions of yesterday, we would do better to let it expand by embracing the evolution of texts, texts that come to us with their own histories and grammars—sometimes similar to the traditional forms of print that currently dominate English classrooms and sometimes vastly different. But certainly, expanding canons can only enrich the teaching of traditional forms (e.g., through scaffolding). We should also teach new forms because they can, in their own right, enhance and inspire the minds of young adolescents. Helping our students understand meanings expressed in

expanding canons will be key to helping them reshape the world. After all, in the end, the teaching of English is not just about getting a job or getting into college, it’s about enriching lives—ours and our students’.

References

- Alvermann, D. E. (2008). Why bother theorizing adolescents’ online literacies for classroom practice and research? *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 52, 8–19.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays* (M. Holquist & C. Emerson, Trans.). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Bezemer, J., & Kress, G. (2008). Writing in multimodal texts: A social semiotic account of designs for learning. *Written Communication*, 25, 166–195.
- Common Core State Standards Initiative. (2010, March). *Common core state standards for English language arts and literacy in history/social studies & science*. Washington, DC: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers.
- Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. New York, NY: Bergin and Garvey.
- Giroux, H. A. (1983). Theories of reproduction and resistance in the new sociology of education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 53, 257–293.
- Gutierrez, K. D. (2008). Developing a sociocritical literacy in the third space. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 43, 148–164.
- Hull, G., & Katz, M.-L. (2006). Crafting an agentic self: Case studies of digital storytelling. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 41, 43–81.
- Hull, G., & Nelson, M. E. (2005). Locating the semiotic power of multimodality. *Written Communication*, 22, 224–261.
- Kirkland, D. E. (2004). Rewriting school: Critical pedagogy in the writing classroom. *Journal of Teaching Writing*, 21, 83–96.
- Kirkland, D. E. (2008). “The rose that grew from concrete”: Postmodern blackness and new English education. *English Journal*, 97(5), 69–75.
- Kirkland, D. E. (2009a). The skin we ink: Tattoos, literacy, and a new English education. *English Education*, 41, 375–395.
- Kirkland, D. E. (2009b). Standpoints: Researching and teaching English in the digital dimension. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 44, 8–22.

Helping our students understand meanings expressed in expanding canons will be key to helping them reshape the world.

- Kirkland, D. E. (2010). English(es) in urban contexts: Politics, pluralism, and possibilities. *English Education, 42*, 293–306.
- Knobel, M., & Lankshear, C. (2008). Remix: The art and craft of endless hybridization. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 52*, 22–33.
- MacLeod, J. (1995). *Ain't no makin' it: Aspirations and attainment in a low-income neighborhood*. Oxford, England: Westview Press.
- Morrell, E. (2008). *Critical literacy and urban youth: Pedagogies of access, dissent, and liberation*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Sanchez, D. M. (2010). Hip-hop and a hybrid text in a postsecondary English class. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 53*, 478–487.
- Soares, L. B., & Wood, K. (2010). A critical literacy perspective for teaching and learning social studies. *The Reading Teacher, 63*, 486–494.
- Tremmel, R. (2010). On the horns of a dilemma: Deweyan progressivism and English teacher education. *English Education, 42*, 121.

David E. Kirkland is an associate professor of English and Urban Education. He is also the director for the Center for Applied and Inclusive Teaching and Learning in Arts and Humanities at Michigan State University. He can be reached at davidekirkland@gmail.com.

2014 Call for CEL Award for Exemplary Leadership

Please nominate an exceptional leader who has had an impact on the profession through one or more of the following: 1) work that has focused on exceptional teaching and/or leadership practices (e.g., building an effective department, grade level, or building team; developing curricula or processes for practicing English language arts educators; or mentoring); 2) contributions to the profession through involvement at both the local and national levels; 3) publications that have had a major impact. This award is given annually to an NCTE member who is an outstanding English language arts educator and leader. Your award nominee submission must include a nomination letter, the nominee's curriculum vita, and no more than three additional letters of support from various colleagues. Send by **February 1, 2014**, to: Rebecca Sipe, 8140 Huron River Drive, Dexter, MI 48130. Or email submission to Rebecca.sipe@emich.edu (Subject: CEL Exemplary Leader).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.