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Kate Hope

Arizona State University, kmrandol@asu.edu

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## **When Memories Make a Difference: Multimodal Literacy Narratives for Pre-service ELA Methods Students**

Kate Hope  
*Arizona State University*

*I saved assignments from high school that I thought would eventually be important. Unbeknownst to me at the time, the assignments I collected would reflect my ultimate career choice. I had only saved the assignments from my English classes, both junior and senior year. These were the classes during which my greatest influencer affected my outlook on life. My teacher at the time, Mr. Pischke, taught me to analyze prose and interpret poetry as I saw fit; the resulting philosophy succeeded in molding my little brain enough to fall back on my teaching career after I discovered cosmetology was not a lifelong goal.*

-Vanessa, pre-service teacher

For many of my pre-service teachers in the English language arts (ELA), Vanessa included, teachers significantly influenced her choices (Brandt, 1998) and perspectives on learning, especially in language arts classes. As she describes in the opening quote above, Mr. Pischke believed in Vanessa and provided important motivating encouragement for her to feel successful in English classes. However, a couple of years before Mr. Pischke had entered the scene, Vanessa reflects on her 7th grade English teacher, Mrs. D: “she made me believe I wasn’t as good at Language Arts and I didn’t like it as much as I really do. When I reflect on the time spent in her class, I wonder if my recognizable literacy journey may have started earlier, had she not temporarily convinced me that I did not like the subject” (Vanessa). Like Vanessa, many of our students endure years of apathy toward reading, lack confidence in writing, or simply feel their ideas are not worth sharing, while others experience wonderful successes in their reading and writing pathways and feel they have grown from support figures, teachers, and literacy sponsors (Brandt, 2001).

It was not until after I taught high school English language arts for several years and began graduate school, that I was invited to think about my own literacy pathway by writing a literacy narrative for a methods course in my English Education PhD program. All of the graduate students in the course had previously

been middle or high school ELA teachers, and for most of us, writing about our own literacy pathways was a new venture. This writing invitation provided an opportunity to reflect on and notice clear connections between the classrooms where we had participated as students and as readers and writers so many years ago, and the teachers we had become in our careers. For me, writing a literacy narrative was a reminder of many feelings, from that lump that sometimes settled in the pit of my stomach when I knew I had royally messed up on an essay for a teacher or class, to the indignation I felt when teachers misunderstood my intentions in my writing. Worst of all, I remembered the hopeful rejection I endured when my senior British literature teacher, Mrs. Snyder, posted a zero on my term paper, followed by her brief note: “*You can do better.*”

The literacy narrative serves as a wonderful avenue for pre and in-service teachers to place themselves in their students’ shoes and to reflect on their own experiences of learning and developing as readers and writers (Clark & Medina, 2000; Parker, 2009; Rogers, Marshall & Tyson, 2006). This article presents instructional tools embedded into a classroom study for the teaching and writing of multimodal literacy narratives for methods of teaching students. The purpose of the study is to explore how this process of reflecting, creating, and sharing multimodal literacy narratives impacts pre-service teachers’ perceptions of their own growth and to notice how the multimodal narrative writing project may influence their ideas and plans for their future teaching. I draw from sociocultural theories of learning and literacy (Bahktin, 1986; Bazerman & Prior, 2005; Prior, 2006), along with two additional intersecting theories, which include the theory of multiliteracies (Alvermann, 2010; New London Group, 2000) and the theory of social semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

### **The Literacy Narrative**

In this article, I use the term “literacy narrative” to refer to a compilation of remembered experiences -- from birth to the present -- having to do with literacy learning and development. The literacy narrative genre has been studied in a variety of contexts with the overarching goal of understanding students’ development of literacies. One repeated theme from students’ narratives is the importance of literacy sponsors (Brandt, 1998), such as teachers, parents, and siblings, throughout their years of literacy acquisition and development (Carlo, 2016; Kist, 2017; Roe & Vukelich, 1998; Williams, 2003). Additionally, autobiographical writing and the literacy narrative, as modes of self-reflection, have been found to bring about heightened cultural awareness (Clark & Medina, 2000; Rogers, et al., 2006), increased sensitivity to emotional or traumatic experiences (Early, 2019; Spear, 2014)), and identity construction (Early, 2019; Parker, 2009; Soliday, 1994; Williams, 2003).

For teacher educators, the literacy narrative assignment provides insights into pre-service teachers' identities within their many Discourse communities (big "D") (Gee, 2012, p. 3) and serves as a platform through which they might further expand and challenge their own theoretical positions, epistemologies (Clark & Medina, 2000), and pedagogies. Many university teacher education programs infuse the literacy narrative into methods courses as a tool that invites pre-service teachers to write about their literacy journeys (Clark & Medina, 2000; Kist, 2017; Parker, 2009; Rogers, Marshall, & Tyson, 2006). In this context, the goal of the assignment is for teacher candidates do further develop cultural awareness, as well as sensitivity to the emotional and social elements of adolescence (Alvermann, 2010; Clark & Medina, 2000; Kist, 2017; Parker, 2009; Roe & Vukelich, 1998; Rogers et al., 2006).

In our methods course, the multimodal literacy narrative served as students' first formal assignment. I wanted students to reflect on their histories as readers and writers while blending multiple modes of storytelling using a wide range of modalities beyond traditional conceptions of text-based reflection (Hawisher & Selfe, 2004; Kist, 2017; Meixner, 2018). In the past, I have invited students to produce written text-based literacy narratives, much like the one I had been asked to write in my own teacher training program. However, for this study and my teaching practice, I wanted to try something new to expand the way my students share their literacy pathways by expanding my definition of what counts as a literacy narrative.

Students took creative freedom as they found unique ways to represent their literacy memories using a variety of modes. Through a combination of visual, audio and text-based expressions, pre-service teachers pieced these memories together, and began making assertions about how their experiences might shape them as teachers.

Two semesters prior to the project described here, I conducted a study that examined analog literacy narratives of my pre-service ELA teachers, which led into a single-participant case study the following spring. That study piqued my interest in the literacy narrative as a genre, and after reading Kist's (2017) ethnography of over 100 teaching candidates' multimodal literacy narratives, I liked the idea of redesigning the project to include a multimodal component for a few reasons. First, as PSTs prepare to teach secondary students, they need breadth and depth of knowledge and experience using a variety of digital tools (Alvermann, 2010; Hicks, 2009; New London Group, 2000). Next, the literacy narratives that my earlier students had composed using a text-based approach gave way to creativity and stylistic choices through poetry, dialogue, unique organizational structures, and more. By inviting students to incorporate a variety of mediums, I hoped they would further explore means of expression with even more clarity and precision. And sure

enough, I quickly discovered that students' conceptions of literacy extend beyond traditional reading and writing, including everything from graphic design to navigating interactive video games; from listening to music and drawing to watching educational cartoons and playing digital learning games.

Many scholars have reported on the value of narrative (Hillocks, 2007; Karr, 2015), biographical writing (Early, 2019), and specifically, the literacy narrative assignment (Hall & Minnix, 2012), at all levels of schooling. By providing a useful model for teacher educators, this project offers one example of how pre-service methods courses may become spaces for developing culturally aware, self-reflexive teacher candidates whose experiences, sponsors (Brandt, 1998), and significant learning events all intersect to inform their teaching. With the combination of text-based reflection as well as a balance of other varied modalities selected by students, this reimagined literacy narrative yields informative results and perspectives.

## **Theory**

### *Sociocultural*

This study employs a sociocultural theory of writing (Bahktin, 1986; Bazerman & Prior, 2005; Prior, 2006) as well as a combination of multiliteracies theory (Alvermann, 2010) and social semiotic theory (Kress, 1997; Kress & VanLeeuwen, 2006). Through a sociocultural lens, writing as reflection and learning in digital spaces are outcomes of social interactions that exist within larger cultural and institutional settings (Vygotsky, 1978). A sociocultural perspective views writing events through a lens that captures all influencing factors on such events, such as institutional norms, personal ideologies, physical objects and people surrounding the writer, and semiotic signs both within and outside of the writing environment internalized by the writer. Writing, according to sociocultural theorists, is bound to a specific purpose, context, and point in time. With the specified purpose and unique context as mediators of writing, as well as through practice and guidance, writing evolves over time. When applied to the current study, a sociocultural approach values the everyday relationships, sponsors (Brandt, 1998), and events on which students self-report through narrative, as learning spaces worthy of exploration. Sociocultural learning theory also allows for close examination of students' learning as they engage in the social practices of participating in writing workshops (Early & DeCosta, 2012), as they condense their literacy memories into multimodal narratives (Kist, 2017), and as they choose particular literacy events to share through representative digital platforms (Selber, 2004).

## **Multiliteracies**

Set inside the broader canopy of sociocultural theory, I also combine two important conceptual frameworks: Alvermann's theory of multiliteracies (2010) and social semiotic theory (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Multiliteracies theory derives from The New London Group's (2000) discussions to redefine "mere literacy" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) in a way that reaches beyond reading and writing, with a pedagogy of "multiliteracies," which they define as having a focus on "modes of representation much broader than language alone" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Multiliteracies, narrowed within a sociocultural framework, shift according to culture and context, making way for a new pedagogical approach that embraces "language and other modes of meaning" as "dynamic representational resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve their various cultural purposes" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Researchers have since drawn from this definition of literacie(s) as plural instead of singular to expand the way literacy is defined, taught, and studied in writing classrooms and learning spaces.

Writing scholars and practitioners have broadened the way they approach the teaching of writing to include traditional analog texts (e.g. essays, books, etc.), along with multimodal forms of literacy such as podcasts (Bianchi-Pennington, 2018), blogs (Hicks & Turner, 2013), digital storytelling (Ohler, 2013), and many other diverse forms of blended, visual and audio texts (Hicks, 2018; National Writing Project, 2010; New London Group, 2000; Selber, 2004; Vasudevan, Schultz & Bateman, 2010), an important and significant shift that directly affects teachers in the English Language Arts. Alvermann (2010) explores traditional definitions of *literacy* as well, along with the interpretations presented by this, especially pluralizing the term to push the boundaries of literacy beyond identifying *literacies* within the context of literacy pedagogies. As a critical component in the discussion of literacy pedagogies, and with the goal of bringing equity to the conversation around learning and knowledge construction in secondary settings, Alvermann also examines the ways in which we characterize adolescents. She foregrounds "the importance of 'knowing' adolescents and their literacies through examining the social and cultural contexts of adolescence" (Alvermann, 2010, p. 15)

### **Social Semiotics**

Social semiotic theory (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) encompasses overarching modes of communication --"visual, oral, gestural, linguistic, musical, kinesthetic, and digital" (Alvermann, 2010) -- with the goal of understanding and explaining how people make meaning. Given that all people use semiotic signs to create meaning, social semiotic theory offers a critical space through which to examine these signs and the role they play in meaning-making processes for individuals. For researchers interested in writing, social semiotic theory considers

the signs of expression writers employ to represent themselves and their composition, whether through text-based writing, images, audio, or other modalities. Social semioticians strive to “treat forms of communication employing images as seriously as linguistic forms have been” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

### **Methods: School Setting**

This study takes place in a methods of teaching course, a cohorted requirement for English education students at a large public university in the southwest. The majority of students in the methods course, 19 out of 21, entered the class as seniors, so a number of collaborative groups and friendships were well established prior to the start of the fall semester. Our class was made up of 17 female students and 4 male students. 48% of students identified as Caucasian, 38% of students identified as Mexican American, 1% Japanese, and there was one African American student in the class. The average age in the class was 23 years old.

The methods class met just once each week, on Tuesday evenings, for a 3-hour block. The evening time slot was important because of the various daytime responsibilities of students in the program. Five members of the class had begun their student teaching. One student was working through a full year of student teaching, which differs from a traditional single-semester requirement. This extension allowed this student more experience and the ability to see his mentor teacher and students as they begin, grow, and finish-out the school year. Each of the remaining 16 students were engaged in their final courses and teaching internships. Each semester for seven terms, students in the program are required to visit and participate in secondary classrooms (grades 7-12) once each week. Students are assigned these internship placements, which change with each new semester. During internships, students review, discuss and practice writing lesson plans; they also take on minor teaching responsibilities as they prepare for student teaching.

### **Participants**

*Pre-service English Language Arts Teachers.* Inclusion criteria for this project required that participants (1) were enrolled in the 16-week semester course titled, *Methods of Teaching: Language*, (2) remained in good academic standing and completed the literacy narrative assignment in full, and (3) were at least 18 years of age during the time of the study. Participation was entirely voluntary; during the initial data collection stage, two male students and 13 females agreed to participate, but one initial participant failed to meet the requirements of the multimodal literacy narrative assignment. I further narrowed the lens of the project as I sought more depth from a small pool of students within the final 14 participants. After the conclusion of fall semester, I sent an email inquiry to those who had agreed to

participate, seeking volunteers to meet with me for an informal interview to discuss their teaching and how the literacy narrative as reflection had influenced, if at all, their approaches to designing lessons, working with adolescents, or implementing teaching strategies.

Four female participants, Christie, Vanessa, Jessica, and Holly (all names are pseudonyms), were the first to respond, and all agreed to be interviewed. These students became the final participants and the focus of this article. Of the four participants, three identify as Caucasian and one as Mexican American. All students shared that English is their first and only language, they were between 21 and 23 years of age, and all maintain grade point averages above 3.3. Jessica had already begun her semester of student teaching in a 7th grade English Language Arts classroom, and was invited to take a job at a school different than her student teaching placement, also with 7th graders. Christie, Vanessa and Holly were working through their final out of seven terms of internships and would begin student teaching the following fall. Each participant shared unique experiences and perspectives around issues of equity and access, as well as insights regarding the secondary students they had observed, which ranged from grades 7-12 within various public schools in the metropolitan area surrounding the university.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Ethnicity</u>	<u>1st/2nd Lang</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Year in EE Program/GPA</u>
Christie	Caucasian	English	21	Senior/3.4
Vanessa	Mexican American	English	23	Junior/3.66
Jessica	Caucasian	English	21	Senior/3.99
Holly	Caucasian	English	22	Senior/3.4

Jessica’s California roots shined through her love for Disneyland, princesses and mermaids, even though three years had passed since she made the move across state borders to attend the university. A creative entrepreneur, Jessica designed and decorated Mouse headbands to sell in the online store, Etsy. Jessica is a swimmer, a dancer, and a self-identified extravert, and she used her tendencies toward teaching to lead the university dance team and to serve as the leader of a women’s Bible study on campus. At 21-years old, Jessica traced a strong love for learning back to her earliest memories of rebellion: sneaking a book and a flashlight under the blankets after her mom had turned off the lights at bedtime.

Holly, a serious and dedicated student, shared her lifelong love of reading mystery novels and young adult fiction, as well as her strong proclivities toward journaling and fiction writing. With plans of someday writing mystery novels,

Holly was intent on reinforcing the joys and the escape to be found through writing with her future students. In her free time, Holly often drove to the northern part of the state with her boyfriend to enjoy weekends in the cooler weather with his parents. A self-identified perfectionist, Holly frequently emailed me questions on the various assignments in the methods class. She wanted to be creative while meeting all of the requirements, so she would send me drafts of her work long before the due dates, with requests for early feedback. In her teaching presentation in the methods course, Holly stood before a class of her peers with poise, confidence, and a clear excitement for the opportunity to practice teaching.

Vanessa, a young lady with a determination to reshape her future, from hairstylist to English teacher, developed a strong camaraderie within a small group of her classmates in the teaching program. In the methods course, Vanessa expressed strong opinions regarding issues of social justice, especially when it came to advocating for her future students. Vanessa's mom and dad, who were teenagers when she was born, encouraged a love of learning from the beginning, and despite undergoing some ups and downs when it came to the influence of teachers, Vanessa came out of high school with a voracious passion for both reading and writing. With a heart for helping young people to love literacy, Vanessa knew the importance of building a support system within her cohort. In doing so, Vanessa showed interest in learning from those around her, which helped to initiate a culture of kindness and support within her pre-service teaching cohort.

Christie, at 21-years old, contributed to the positive and supportive atmosphere in our methods of teaching course, and with kindness, this young lady always effortlessly praised her peers when they went in front of the class. This was never ingenuine though; in fact, Christie voiced her opinions and didn't hesitate to disagree with viewpoints outside of her own, but she always did this in a way that respected the other person's perspective. Christie grew up with two sisters among whom she traded books and shared stories over the years. She told about weekends as a child, when she and her sisters would secretly switch the furniture from one bedroom to another, and move everything back in time for their parents to wake up.

All four participants approached teaching with the professionalism it requires. With a genuine interest in getting to know their students, these teaching candidates were hungry for teaching resources, good books for young adults, and all of the teaching advice they could soak up. They all expressed ambitions to teach in secondary settings within our state.

### **Researcher**

My role in this project began as the instructor for the *Methods of Teaching: Language* course. During the study, I was a graduate student working toward my PhD in English education, and through an assistantship, I had the opportunity to

teach a number of teacher education and first-year composition courses. I am a white, middle-class woman in her mid-thirties. Prior to seeking my doctorate, I taught high school English language arts for seven years, then moved on to teaching foundation-level composition courses at a rural community college. As the instructor for the methods course, I designed, taught and studied the multimodal literacy narrative project, along with every other element of the course, which placed me in a participant-observer position (Spradley, 2016).

### **Instructional Overview**

Each part of this project included direct instruction, model texts and modeling, as well as opportunities for participants to write as they recalled and reexamined their experiences with literacy, from the beginning of their lives through their current positions as pre-service ELA teachers. The project began with students mapping their literacy journey, which meant they engaged in drawing to remember the spaces in which their reading and writing began, followed by a series of quick writes (Kittle, 2008), three-minute responses to specific prompts that further brought their minds back to moments in their early literacy. Following these preliminary activities, along with reading and listening to sample literacy memoirs, students began weaving the memories they had mapped and written about into their own multimodal literacy narrative (Appendix). Students crafted their literacy journeys using four mediums, and were required to use some written, some audio, and some visual text in their projects. I encouraged students to explore, to play, as they found ways to express themselves through means they had never known or tried previously. There was some resistance to this uncomfortable, somewhat undefined task, and I received emails seeking guidance and clarification as students began testing new mediums. Students asked: *Would it be okay to sculpt something out of pottery? Could I input videos from interactive video games I played as a child into my slideshow? I would like to make Mickey Mouse ears with a quote on them. What if I make a twitter account to represent my literacy, including a space that invites followers to respond to small surveys about themselves?* Amid their discomfort, I was genuinely impressed. For all of their lives, these students had written essay after essay, and by their third year as college students, they were expert essay-writing machines. But the option to crank out an essay was off the table for this assignment. Instead, students worked through the initial frustration of the unknown, and really began digging for ways to represent their literacy journeys as accurately as possible. After drafting their projects, students engaged deeply in a peer review and feedback workshop, they took time to make final revisions, and finally, students shared their projects in oral presentations to the class.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection began through the process I employed as instructor for the methods class and through interpretive, participant observation (Erickson, 1985; Spradley, 2016), and moved forward throughout each step of the literacy narrative project. I employed an emic perspective (Erickson, 1985) while maintaining a sense of what I wanted to learn from participants and the data. Data included students' narratives, each consisting of at least four modalities, written reflections, email correspondence, and interviews. For the interview with Jessica, we conversed one-on-one, while I conducted a group interview with the remaining participants: Holly, Christie, and Vanessa.

During my first stage of analysis, I collected multimodal narratives from 14 students, and began reading, listening, and reviewing the materials within the various modalities they chose, taking note of recurring ideas, themes, or significant connections that came about. Given that students produced narratives using a wide range of modes, my analysis process focused first on the meaning students intended to make (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), as well as the content of their narratives. I categorized the experiences they shared, the sponsors they mentioned, their conceptions of schooling, of reading, of writing, and of the circumstances around their decisions to pursue careers in teaching. This led into the development of a spreadsheet on which I organized initial, tentative categories for each of these findings.

The second stage of analysis centered on semiotic signs, the modes through which students created meaning. It was at this point that I considered how and why students pieced their narratives together; given that their projects did not simply exist as black letters on white paper, but came about in an array of pictures, colors, videos, timelines, slideshows, as pottery, painted dishes, jeweled accessories and many other modalities, my efforts of categorizing quickly felt disjointed, as the data seemed impossible to categorize into related groups, which led me to narrow the focus of my inquiry. This was when I emailed all of my initial participants, asking for volunteers to be interviewed. The first four students to respond were Holly, Vanessa, Jessica, and Christie. We scheduled times to meet, and these four students became my new, smaller group of participants for the study.

With a narrowed focus, I retraced my steps and began reviewing the four PSTs' multimodal projects. I looked again for recurring themes, ideas and connections. I then reviewed their work to examine meaning projected through semiotic signs and categorized my initial findings using a new tab in the original excel spreadsheet as I wanted to track changes in data analysis and begin the triangulation process.

In the third stage of analysis, I listened and loosely transcribed the two interviews, first with Jessica, and next with the group of three: Holly, Vanessa, and

Christie. After listening to each interview three times, adding notes to my Google Document each time, I began to flesh out common threads. In order to categorize these threads appropriately, I created categories and subcategories, highlighting sections of interview data as I went. This process led to a cut-and-paste triangulation process of moving themed elements of interview data to fit under each of the labels I had created, which also incorporated students' written reflections and email correspondence with students during the fall semester.

### **Discoveries**

**Designing narrative through multiple modalities.** The multimodal component of the project invited, and in some cases, compelled participants to add depth, more personalization, and refined accuracy to the memories they shared of their literacy growth. For Jessica and Vanessa, a new form of design proved somewhat intimidating. All four participants mentioned feeling initially unsure about how to best represent their experiences, what experiences should or should not “count” as literacy, and how to organize their memories in a cohesive way without the familiar foundation of writing an essay. Especially for English language arts teacher candidates, essay writing tends to become second nature, which accounts for some of the initial shock these students felt at having to compose using uncomfortable, or at least unfamiliar mediums. The opportunity to design their narratives using a variety of modalities eventually opened the floodgates of opportunity for PSTs to identify and flesh out important connections from their many early literacy experiences, between themselves as learners versus their identities as teachers, and the important connections they discovered by weaving together the modalities they chose for their projects.

**Vulnerability with change of paradigm: A Multiliteracies approach.** Jessica, Vanessa, Holly, and Christie, during post-project interviews, discussed the discomfort and vulnerability they felt when it came to making use of a variety of modalities. The challenge this presented to these pre-service teachers centered around how they could most accurately relay past feelings, memories, events, and the experiences with teachers and parents. Vanessa described this discomfort as, “it feels more vulnerable, like it’s a real aspect of myself I’m representing as opposed to “I need to make sure I’m hitting this in my essay, need to make sure my transitions are good, word choice is on point, etc.” It’s a little scary, but nice because you get to portray a real image of yourself.” Christie readily agreed, nodding her head and humming her approval as Vanessa spoke. As one element of her narrative, Vanessa painted a coffee mug (Figure 3), dubbing it a provider of both storage and warmth. She designed her mug to serve as a metaphor for the books that have provided storage and warmth for her soul, which she describes in a variety of ways: through the black block lettering of the word METAPHOR,

through the icons representing each novel and all of the associated feelings she experienced, and through her written explanations. The text-based expression, which Vanessa wrote in above the mug, serves as supplemental to the painted emblems; these semiotic signs provide meaning in themselves.

Figure 3

“The coffee mug I brought today is going to serve as kind of a metaphor. Since mugs hold drinks that are warm, like coffee and tea, it provides storage for warmth. Similarly, books holds warmth, but in a way that’s more for the soul. Thus, a metaphor. I’ve included icons for the books on the mug that have helped provide me some warmth in the form of connection, whether with another person or within myself. *Harry Potter* was one of the first books my mom gave me as a kid. *Twilight* allowed me a chance to make friends at a new school, when I was prepubescent, ugly, and scared. *Walk Two Moons* provided the perfect opportunity to build lasting friendships. *The Great Gatsby* comforted my teenage broken heart when boys couldn’t. *The Awakening* taught me to reconsider the thought of staying in an unhappy relationship. *Bud, Not Buddy* reminded me of the wonders of children’s literature and showed me how compassionate simplicity can be. And now, *Loving Day* reminds me that all hope is not lost in modern day fiction.”



Vanessa painted three symbols on either side of the word, *metaphor*. The six symbols hug this word, *metaphor*, in its all-capital black letters, a dark, defining strand attaching one end of symbols to the other. Each symbol, uniquely designed by Vanessa, represents a different novel from her timeline of significance. I was most interested in her choices to visually represent each novel (Jewitt & Oyama, 2000). For *Bud, Not Buddy*, she uses the outside of the mug's handle to display the dates and the city that Bud's grandfather had written on rocks for his daughter. For *Harry Potter*, Vanessa could have chosen any number of symbols, but decided on the triangle of the three Deathly Hallows, expressing how this symbolized the jump-start of her love for independent reading, gratitude to her mom for giving her these books, and possibly, her childhood fascination with the world of magic. She decided on plump red lips with dark shading on either end to represent the decadence and culture of superficiality in *The Great Gatsby*. For *The Awakening*, a birdcage, which artfully displays the metaphor of Edna Pontellier's feelings of entrapment by life's struggles. For *Walk Two Moons*, she painted two moons at different phases, displayed incongruously from one another, and finally, *sesa wo suban*, a symbol of personal transformation, a theme Vanessa discovered in the novel, *Loving Day*. On the mug, paint colors are limited to black, red, gold and green, but through these small images, Vanessa represents associated memories and connections she felt to each represented work of fiction.

Making the paradigmatic shift from essay writing to representing her literacy using images or artifacts proved challenging for Jessica, as it did for Vanessa and Christie. During our interview, Jessica told about some of these challenges: "I liked the project. I tended to get stuck because I'm usually like 'oh, yeah, I'll just write an essay, it will be fine.'" As she began this process though, she experienced a push to evaluate what "counts" as literacy as she says she had to "dig down and find all of these things I already do, like making the ears, and having my old journals. It was cool." Her Mickey Mouse ears (Figure 4) display a quote from *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* that reads "darkness rises and light to meet it," for which Jessica used felt cutouts coupled with small cubed letters. The poetic nature of this quote and other lines from the *Star Wars* movies serves as one of the main reasons she is such a huge fan. For Jessica, who has been enthralled with reading since first learning to string letters into words, identifying her interests as forms of literacy proved tough. This young lady describes the gravitational pull toward beautiful words and stories as second nature, which for her, made the meta-awareness required for this project somewhat challenging.

Figure 4



**Connections through multiliteracies.** One of the first tendencies in writing is to outline. When students write essays, they decide on a line of focus or argument, they read and collect data to support their claims (or the other way around), they list their ideas, and then organize this all into a nice outline. For the multimodal literacy narrative, students were provided freedom to report on their memories and literacy journeys, with only the restrictions to incorporate visual, auditory and written text through a minimum of four mediums. Christie started with a Popplet (Figure 5), a webbed mind-mapping tool, which she had used in another class, to begin parsing out her ideas for the project. In order to fulfill the auditory requirement, she also recorded a podcast in which she discussed the novels that influenced her throughout childhood and her teenage years. It wasn't until midway through her presentation to the class that Christie discovered that her "podcast directly related to the popplet; I made the connections to each book." Not only did the visual aspect of the project spur her on to remember more and more books she had loved, but Christie also notes that "in an essay, I wouldn't have made as many connections."



*say, "mama, apple!"  
and they all live in the sea  
everybody poops*

**Creativity using Multiliteracies.** For Holly, Jessica, and Christie, the requirements to reflect through multiliteracies offered an invitation to find their creative zen as they thought about all of the influencing factors in their literacy development. Holly remembered the motivational songs she had listened to while reading in high school, so she embedded this playlist into her Weebly. In our interview, Christie noted the challenge of working without an example: “normally, I love when teachers give us an example, but the fact that you didn’t give us an example forced us to really think, ‘okay, what are we gonna do that’s creative that’s something she hasn’t seen before?’” Holly nodded in agreement as she told about the stress this group of three friends had felt after receiving the guidelines for the project as Christie added, “but it forced us to create something that was more than just a piece of paper. It was awesome.” Similarly, Jessica noted the fall-back to writing essays, and that for this project, she had geared up to write an essay. “Usually, I can just type it out, but for this, it was like, oh, okay, we’re not doing this...? What? It just kind of threw me off.” She also pointed out the uniqueness of this project, that if she had been asked to write a text-based literacy memoir, she said, “I don’t think I would have talked about my ears (the Mickey Mouse ears) because I wouldn’t have thought about it. I was (initially) thinking just in the mindset of the narrative after writing personal narratives for other classes. I wasn’t thinking about going into different modes. It turned into a different story based on using technology. I really liked it. It put me out of my comfort zone, but then it was worth it.”

For Vanessa, designing a project that incorporated all four mediums was a shift in her usual approach: “we had to include speaking, writing, listening, so I was thinking of what I could use to best represent those skills, which is why for my listening and talking I used the podcast so you could hear me orate how I speak and how that ties to what I’ve learned.” Vanessa’s cognitive process evolved to a different place than when she writes essays. Rather than outlining, and adding in details as she went, Vanessa thought about the project with the visual, auditory and linguistic requirements in mind.

**Transfer to teaching: Flashbacks to studenthood.** One important rationale for the multimodal memoir is the meta-awareness PSTs experience by remembering their many experiences as learners during their transition into new

roles as teachers. Given that a sociocultural perspective appreciates and applies past experiences, cultural ideologies, institutional settings, as well as people and objects around the learner, it was not surprising to me when PSTs made direct connections between the factors that shaped their perspectives and how they imagine themselves as teachers. In their memoirs, PSTs told about the significant impact of teachers. With a single motivating suggestion, the Advanced Placement (AP) Literature and Composition teacher at Christie's high school insisted she sign up to take the AP class the following school year. So, she did. She remembered back to her realization during our interview, exclaiming, "oh my God, I'm good at this!" Teachers can make you feel so much." The power of suggestion by this teacher altered Christie's course, and over time, she became aware that her love of reading and writing could extend into a career that would enable her to inspire young people in the same way.

Vanessa's memoir focused on her emotions and relationships; these shaped her journey more than anything. She first tells about Mrs. D, her middle school English teacher who admonished Vanessa for wearing ostentatious makeup. A few months later, Mrs. D addressed Vanessa's attitude in class, thus initiating a spiral into what Vanessa calls "defiance unparalleled to any other authoritative interactions." Vanessa equated her hatred for Mrs. D with her own success and interest in English language arts, deciding she was not any good at it. A couple of years later, everything changed as Vanessa began her junior year of high school as a student in Mr. Pischke's Advanced English class. "Mr. Pischke helped me to discover that I would always want something to do with literacy." Mr. Pischke noticed and helped build Vanessa's strengths as a poetry writer, which only pushed her to try harder and develop greater confidence. In our interview, Vanessa reflected on Mr. Pischke's and other motivating influences by noting, "how they responded to what I did makes me think about what am I doing right now that's going to impact students with how I respond to them. I think about what they are going to take away from that."

With a similar perspective, Holly used her narrative to reflect on the personalities, activities, and approaches she enjoyed learning from, especially as she develops her plans to teach. In our interview, Holly included that these memories would fuel her sensitivity to the influence she will have on students. In a timeline slideshow, Holly shared her favorite books and writing assignments, and associated these favorites with the role they played in her literacy journey. In the sixth grade, Holly volunteered as a reading and writing tutor for first and second graders (Figure 7), which marked her first inclination toward teaching others.

Figure 7

## Sixth Grade: 2009

Age: 11-12

**Favorite book:** In the sixth grade, *The Hunger Games* had just released. I remember that two of my best friends had just bought it, so I begged my mom to take me to Border's to buy it and she, thankfully, obliged. It's still a fantastic book and one of my favorite's.

**Part in literacy journey:** Along with having a passion for reading and writing, I also wanted to assist young children with their reading and writing. In the sixth grade, I became a tutor for first and second graders. This is so significant to me because it's when I realized that I actually enjoyed teaching. It's when I realized that I could make an impact on those who were struggling with reading and writing. This was a milestone in my literacy journey.



Jessica remembers journaling at home in her room, but recalls a lack of motivation to write in academic settings during middle and high school. In our interview, Jessica elaborated by sharing:

Most kids probably don't have that passion for creative writing like I do, but I also think, regardless, it's really important for that emotional outlet, especially if that's the only place they're getting it. As far as writing goes, that's the thing I think I will use the most. I think back to high school and I did not enjoy writing in high school as much as I enjoyed creative writing. I would like to find ways to bring that in, so the kids who already don't like writing don't come out of high school completely loathing it.

**Making a case for multimodal composition vs. computer technology.** It was most interesting to me that, although students were challenged by this project, and ultimately truly enjoyed engaging their multiliteracies to share their journeys, the consensus was to use computer technology sparingly, but to find inventive means of creativity through the use of varied modalities. Jessica's experience with student teaching showed her the reality of available materials for students in schools: "The placement schools I have been in have not had a whole lot of

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technology available to them. There's a computer cart in my current school, and we only use them when students are typing their essays because it's not something we use on a regular basis necessarily. I've come to understand the importance of that." And although recognizing herself as a Millennial, Jessica asserts her inclination toward text-based writing. "I still think it's not where I naturally go. I think of all these things (in her memoir), the powtoon was the most unnatural thing for me. Although I am a Millennial, I am not as attached to technology."

Holly planned to limit the use of technology as an extension of text-based writing assignments, noting "how damaging it can be to the students' curriculum. I think that writing, actually writing, is important. I think doing projects, multimodality projects other than just using technology need to happen in the classroom. Plus, grading things like pottery and stuff is pretty cool." Nodding her head in agreement, Vanessa interjected that computer technology offers great tools for differentiating instruction, but that teachers should not rely fully on computers for literacy education. She also identified that "writing an essay is pretty constrained to one modality," but that by inviting students to express themselves using different technological tools provides a necessary freedom.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

This study provides teacher educators, and reading and writing researchers with resources and rationale for examining pre-service teachers' literacy experiences and their conceptions of teaching through the multimodal literacy narrative project in university methods courses. Rooted in a sociocultural lens (Prior, 2006), this study shows how cultural ideologies (Clark & Medina, 2000), literacy sponsors (Brandt, 1998) and literacy experiences of four pre-service teachers are woven together through their use of multiliteracies. Additionally, this project foregrounds the importance of noticing design through a social semiotic (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Jewitt & Oyama, 2000) examination of their narratives.

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## Appendix

### Multimodal Literacy & Language Memoir ENG 482

Consider your perspectives and biases – your paradigm – as you bob and weave through the process of entering the field of education. I want you to consider *why* and *how* literacy education is important to you. We often take our own literacy for granted; however, literacy is what allows us to update our social media, maintain friendships, navigate public spaces, and well, communicate with other people in the world. You are only able to do these things because you are literate. This, of course, will also be the case for your students. As we begin to build upon our strengths as future literacy teachers, it is important to first recognize and understand the people, events and places that have shaped our own literate practices. The exploration of one’s inner self and our abilities to think, read and write critically, requires preparation, hard work, an appreciation for new experiences, and an awareness of different cultures and ideas.

For this first assignment, you will explore the roots of your own literate practices and the ways in which those practices shape how you will approach critical thinking, reading and writing in your future classroom. Moment-by-moment and day-by-day, a wide range of literacy tasks surrounds us. We scan websites and news articles, critically evaluate political ad campaigns, respond through “likes” on social media, review products we love and hate, and enjoy or condemn the music we hear. As such, your literate life is multifaceted, which means that your literacy and language memoir, too, will be multifaceted.

## Your Task:

Using multiple mediums (a minimum of 4), this project invites you to share your personal literacy journey. Do your best to explore and express the most significant and impactful moments of your journey using these multiple modalities. In doing so, you will use visuals, auditory text, and written text. Share a range of your literacy capacities and how they have developed in your life. You will share this online and in class so be sure your memoir is conducive to those spaces.

Begin by thinking of moments when you grew significantly from your own reading, writing, thinking, speaking or listening. Find those texts (whatever medium), and share how that text changed you and how you grew. Think also about different spaces in which you learn: i.e., at school, online, talking with friends, at home, alone. These spaces might be significant to your literacy growth as well.

You will be evaluated in the following ways:

- Have you presented some specific and important artifacts from your life? Did you just get something out of today's newspaper, or are the objects/artifacts presented obviously from your meaningful past? Does your memoir appear to have been just thrown together at the last minute, existing almost as a list, or has some real thought gone into it?
- Is there a balance that includes emergent literacy years, adolescent literacy years, and adult years?
- Has some creativity gone into the creation of the memoir?
- Do one or more themes about your multimodal life thread through your memoir?
- Did you build a presentation with innovative use of graphics and/or music?
- Did some thought go into the graphic design used in the slides or video? Were relevant, interesting music clips included?
- Were there some uses of sound effects? Were video clips included?
- Was some imagination displayed (humor, pathos, interesting juxtaposition of images and/or sound, etc.)?

Create a draft for review by: September 4<sup>th</sup>

Final Draft Due: September 11<sup>th</sup>