Rewriting the Script: Multiple Modalities in a High School Humanities Classroom

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And of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger.
- Audre Lorde (1978)

My high school students are creators discovering how to express their ideas and emotions in multiple, complex ways. I teach students who write their lives through words on pages as they fill journal after journal. There are others who constantly write and create in the form of tweets, photos, videos, status updates, and texts that tell their stories and define their worlds. And finally, there are those who do not regularly express themselves but spend much of their time observing and developing their own private ideas.

It is my hope that, during their time with me, students will master multiple forms of communication and thought. Developing the skills necessary to be critical media consumers; close, analytical readers; and insightful creators is not easy work.
If I were to force my students to be writers and creators in only traditional academic forms I would suppress their creativity, talent, and emotion. Academic writing is not intrinsically engaging or comfortable for them. While I do want them to become experts in academic discourse, I also want them embark on processes of inquiry that allow them to discover new ideas about themselves and their world.

Traditional forms of text and communication are eroding and being replaced by new, hybrid forms. These new forms have changed research and allow students to individualize content and express themselves in multiple ways while inventing new forms. My goal is for students to develop unique, individual voices and discover multiple avenues for communicating their ideas as they present their work to public audiences using multiple modalities.

The Setting

I am fortunate to teach at Science Leadership Academy, a Philadelphia public school that encourages multiple modalities of student work and learning. At Science Leadership Academy we share the philosophy that "[t]echnology must be ubiquitous, necessary and invisible" (Lehmann, 2013). To these ends we have a one-to-one laptop program and encourage students to use their devices to implement the school's Core Values of inquiry, research, collaboration, presentation, and reflection (Science Leadership Academy, 2014). Student final projects are often posted on public blogs, and students are regularly asked to present their work to wider public audiences. My students accompany me to academic conferences, they share their work with artists and experts, and I promote and publicize their work through social media and blog posts.

The technology-rich environment at SLA is a 21st Century incarnation of John Dewey's vision of constructivism, meaning education grounded in the real world (Open Educational Resources, n.d.). The school-wide emphasis on project-based learning (PBL) and authentic experiences has allowed me to experiment as I design projects that push students to explore

ideas in creative ways and create products in multiple modalities.

A Multimodal English Inquiry Unit

Years ago two veteran Philly teachers, Marsha Pincus and Dina Portnoy, introduced me to the idea of Language Autobiographies. The project, designed by Marsha and taught by the two master teachers, requires students to see their world and their identities in new ways (Cook-Sather, 2009). With this project as inspiration I designed a unit that integrates multiple modalities for student expression and creation.

The unit began with me pointing to a piece of chart paper hanging on the wall and asking the students their thoughts about our essential question for the unit: "What are the relationships between language, power, and identity?" Students had time to journal and record initial thoughts before we discussed these different concepts that relate to all of our lives. Students wrote about relatives with strong accents or dialects and being judged for the ways they speak, among other topics. At this point in the process their ideas are interesting but not very developed. These beginning stages are a little bit like tilling the soil in preparation for the work that lies ahead.

I then told the students that we were about to begin reading a book that was written in a rural, Southern, African American dialect in the 1930's. I asked who had been to the South and who had been exposed to Southern dialects. Many of my students shared stories of visiting relatives in the South or told of relatives who migrated from there. Others report that they have no connection to or experiences with this type of dialect.
For the next several weeks we immersed ourselves in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1990) by Zora Neale Hurston. As we were nearing the end of the novel we returned to the idea of language as a topic for investigation. One way we did this was by creating a class dictionary in which students shared words or phrases that matter to them. On an online forum I wrote:

> Share two words that matter to you. They can be slang, a word only used by you and those close to you, have to do with your family or your home language, or may be unique to Philly.

Students were enthusiastic about posting to our class dictionary and incorporated teenage slang, words from different languages, and jokes that they share with their friends. Some sample student responses:

> Aateeyah:
> *That's dead* - It doesn't matter, end of conversation. Something that nobody wants to do.
> *Schemin'* - someone who lies about the truth.
>
> Temperance:
> *Salty Grits* - When someone is wrong/ incorrect.
> "Yes you did!"
> "No I didn't, look!" (proves something)
> "Oh"
> "Look at you, salty grits!"
> *Doing the mos*t - When someone is unnecessarily doing too much.
> "You're really doing the most, right now."

The choice of an online forum where everyone submits concurrently allowed for a wider range of responses than a discussion where the first respondents set the tone for an entire group. Additionally, student voices that are not always present within group discussions often seem to successfully become a part of

online sharing.

For the next step I gave students the assignment to "write a prose scene about a real event in order to show some part of your language identity." Students wrote the scenes one night and posted them to a forum for all of their classmates to see the next day. As students read each other's scenes they began to create lists of issues related to language. As a class we began to discuss ideas of language, power, and identity.

The use of a digital forum to share student writing allowed the class to continue a process of inquiry while providing space for the development of unique, individual voices, opinions, and ideas. Students were able to look at the writing as a whole and notice patterns that emerged. No one piece was prioritized over any other. I made a point of complimenting the unique features of multiple scenes in order to affirm students who had chosen to approach the assignment creatively.

The next week was spent reading essays from different authors about their experiences with language. James Baldwin, bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldua, Mike Rose, and others helped the students to develop a rich understanding of the complexity and poignancy of our topics. As students' vocabularies and understandings of the issues began to grow, students from varied backgrounds began to reexamine many aspects of their own daily realities. Students began to distinguish between slang and Black English or African American Vernacular. They began to articulate some of the ways that their most intimate languages allow them to express themselves and connect with others in unique and personalized ways and recognized that many of these languages are judged by mainstream society. Finally, they all embraced the concept of Code Switching as a necessary skill for survival (Auer, 2013). There was a collective acknowledgment of the connection between language and power and the hegemony of and lack of emotion and expression associated with Standard English.

Finally, it was time for the students to write their own Language Autobiographies. We began crafting the papers. I made a conscious decision not to reveal anything about the multimedia component that would follow with the knowledge that many students find it easier to immerse themselves in a media project and there was potential that they would do so at the expense of the ideas they were developing in the papers. It seems that when given the option, most students will gravitate to design work en lieu of more rigorous intellectual discovery. I wanted to make sure that complex ideas were developed before the creation of the digital product began.

Students brought in drafts, the class discussed different themes and methods of analysis, peers edited each other's work, and eventually we were nearing the point of polished final products. It was then that I told students that their final papers (which they had already known were going to be public,) were to be posted to their blogs along with a digital story that would present material that was either similar to or complementary to the paper. "Digital stories use images, narration, and words on the screen to communicate larger ideas," I explained. We screened several sample digital stories and dissected different aspects of the form before the students took over the process.

As is often the case, the media production drew in almost all the students. The excitement could be felt in the room as I described this step of the process. Often, even students who do not commit themselves to a written paper excitedly dedicate themselves to a media project. The challenge is to channel

the excitement and eagerness into quality final products.

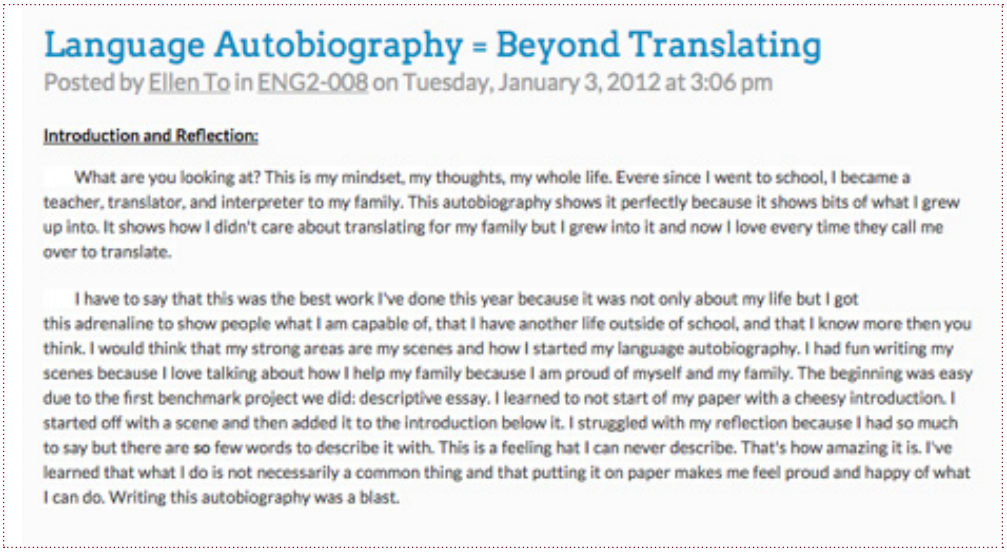
All students were responsible for creating a script that matched narration to images. When their scripts were ready they called me over and walked me through their plans before I sent them off to record and edit.

While most students embrace this stage of the process there are others who are easily frustrated with technological challenges. I check in with these students frequently and try to help them find allies who can help them troubleshoot challenges that arise. For two days I circulated around the room as a consultant, answering questions about details and reminding students to take the time to re-check and polish their final products so that they could proudly share them with a wider audience. In many ways, the digital stories are what transformed insightful papers into living documents of students' realities, struggles, and transformations.

In her paper, "Beyond Translating" (2012), Ellen wrote:

Ever since I could talk, I was assigned the role of translator in my family. Every time I go over to my grandparent's house, I am a Di-jew to Cantonese translator for my grandma and grandpa...

Figure 1: Screenshot of Ellen To's Language Autobiography, Beyond Translating



Language Autobiography = Beyond Translating

Posted by Ellen To in ENG2-008 on Tuesday, January 3, 2012 at 3:06 pm

Introduction and Reflection:

What are you looking at? This is my mindset, my thoughts, my whole life. Evere since I went to school, I became a teacher, translator, and interpreter to my family. This autobiography shows it perfectly because it shows bits of what I grew up into. It shows how I didn't care about translating for my family but I grew into it and now I love every time they call me over to translate.

I have to say that this was the best work I've done this year because it was not only about my life but I got this adrenaline to show people what I am capable of, that I have another life outside of school, and that I know more then you think. I would think that my strong areas are my scenes and how I started my language autobiography. I had fun writing my scenes because I love talking about how I help my family because I am proud of myself and my family. The beginning was easy due to the first benchmark project we did: descriptive essay. I learned to not start of my paper with a cheesy introduction. I started off with a scene and then added it to the introduction below it. I struggled with my reflection because I had so much to say but there are so few words to describe it with. This is a feeling hat I can never describe. That's how amazing it is. I've learned that what I do is not necessarily a common thing and that putting it on paper makes me feel proud and happy of what I can do. Writing this autobiography was a blast.

It was a cold winter morning when I woke up before the sun with my dad. We left the house while it was still pitch black out. We talked about how he always had to wake up so early and go to work every Sunday… I walked to the Whole Foods Sushi Department. When I got there, I stood at the entrance watching my dad work and shred through the salmon, seaweed, and rice with his hands and a sushi blade. While he is doing that a customer walks up to the counter and starts asking my dad questions. PANIC MODE.

"Excuse me? What's the difference in these two rolls?" She says as she gestures to the Dragon roll and the Spider roll.

"Daddy, kueh yew gee gaw long gah roll yow meh yeah yup been ah…[Daddy, she wants to know what is in each roll.] I say quickly and quietly as he walks towards her.

"I know, noi noi." He said all confidently.

"Oh… okay daddy" That's when I realized that my parents are in their everyday job and they don't need me to defend them here.

"The dragon roll inside eel, cucumber. Outside is avocado. On top avocado. And spider roll outside have masago. Inside has soft-shell crab, snow crab, and avocado." He says

with an accent.

Then my dad walks back with a satisfied face and says:
"Gnaw sick gnaw jogan meh yeah! A yah noi noi. [I know what I am doing and saying, daughter. Oh gosh daughter.]"
Nevertheless, that's one memory that will most likely have me questioning the fact that my parents don't need me as a translator as much as I thought they do as the years pass by. It's a saddening thought that keeps getting bigger and bigger but I guess I'll get easier as I write it on paper? I hope so. Just the thought of losing the one thing that I have done to help them so much is heart breaking because they've done so much for me and for me to lose that role is like losing a lifetime job.

Ellen's paper is a powerful narrative of a first generation immigrant youth continually learning to navigate different worlds. Her work gains additional power, poignancy, and individualization as a result of the digital story that she made to accompany the paper. The viewer can hear the voices of the many different members of the family as they introduce themselves in their native tongues and Ellen performs her long-standing role as family translator. The digital story can be seen at the bottom of her blog post. Put together, the paper, the digital story, and the introduction she wrote to her post create a powerful document of learning that naturally appeals to a wider audience. The complex ideas and poignant emotions provide a rationale for posting the work on the web and sharing it widely.

Overall, the design of this multimodal unit led to high student engagement and insightful final projects. Students were motivated to apply theory to issues that integrally connect to their identities. There was excitement about the opportunity to transform their silence, which was related to the deeper issues connected to language and the opportunities to make their work public and tell their stories in varied and creative ways.

A Multimodal History Inquiry Unit

In my 10th grade World History classes we began our unit with a journal and a discussion about how to define a "revolution." Students discussed different types of social change and began to question the criteria for something to be considered "revolutionary." We then spent two weeks researching and then participating in a role play that investigated the French and Haitian Revolutions. From the perspectives of different roles that they had researched, students debated issues of universal rights and social change. Ideas about revolutions, strategy, and change were continually examined, defined, and redefined.
As the revolution unit continued students learned first about the geography of the Arab Spring countries and then taught each other about the sequence of events in four of these countries, each of which had a different revolutionary outcome. With this background knowledge, students watched the wonderful documentary *The Square* (2013) and its depiction of events in Cairo, Egypt. Students were captivated and looked away from the screen only to copy quotes into their journals.

After having immersed ourselves in discussion and analysis of revolutions and

revolutionary thought for nearly a month, I then told students about their project. Once again I chose the format of a digital story, but this time, instead of focusing on their own experiences, students had to gather evidence from both historical and contemporary revolutions in order to create a two- to three-minute "Guidebook to Revolutions." In the project description I wrote: "Your digital story must be focused around a key question or issue that you investigate and/or answer using evidence from at least three different revolutions."

For the first checkpoint students showed me eight pieces of evidence they had gathered. I reminded students of text sources from the French and Haitian Revolutions but I also pointed out that searching on Twitter and Facebook allowed for unique first-person accounts or modern day revolutionary struggles. By utilizing social media and other sources students found images, quotes, and videos that provided poignant accounts of revolutionary struggle.

When making videos many students are tempted to hastily craft a product without paying attention to larger design issues. For this reason we spent time as a class discussing effective narration, a balance of text and images, and when to layer in music versus when it is important to avoid distractions. I regularly reminded students that their Guidebooks needed to be framed around a question and by the end of the video they needed to develop a larger idea. Most importantly, I did not allow them to progress to the production phase until I had seen a written script for the entire digital story. These steps pushed students towards much deeper critical thought and analysis. In many ways these skills mimic what is required for traditional academic writing but the format of a digital story encouraged many more students to engage with and develop new ideas as they incorporated sources of various modalities.

Students submitted their projects in the form of blog posts within which they were required to write an introduction that explained our studies and the project to a wider audience. My rationale for this step was to expand student understanding by having them detail and articulate their own learning and focus within their projects.

Amelia's introduction (see *Figure 2*) and the two videos below provide examples of the range and depth of student work and understanding that emerged through the projects. Each video deals with a complex issue worthy of investigation: the spread of revolutions and the role of nonviolence in revolutions.

Jasmin's video:
http://vimeo.com/88223035

Mali's video:
http://vimeo.com/88219960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Learn · Create · Lead

Revolution Benchmark

Edit Delete

Posted by Amelia Stuart in WRLDHIST-014 on Thursday, March 6, 2014 at 8:23 am

In this unit we covered numerous topics on Revolutions, first focusing more on the French Revolution. We got a perspective on what it would be like to be in the Revolution with the role-play and were challenged to think like the characters assigned to us, despite our personal opinions. After the French Revolution we focused more on modern Revolutions (Venezuela, Arab Springs, Ukraine) and we were able to do our own research. Throughout the unit I learned numerous things, not just about revolutions that happened or are happening now. I learned about what makes a revolution, and how to carry through a successful Revolution. For instance, taking advantage of the internet, getting lots of people involved but have a small group for people who are more involved. One of the larger things I learned was to approach with peace, although violence is a way to show your feelings, it just causes more injury and death. When people are approached with peace they don't feel threatened, and they are more open to the idea of negotiation.

Figure 2: Screenshot of Amelia Stuart's Introduction

As the videos demonstrate, the structure of the revolution Guidebook project seemed to allow students to individualize and pursue topics of their choosing. Students discovered different forms for integrating sources and analysis leading to deeper analysis and further investigation.
Some of the most powerful and insightful projects came from students who had been struggling academically. Many students felt immense pride about the quality of their final products and the fact that the videos were ready to be shared with a wider audience. In a wonderful way their public projects speak to issues that have regularly been headlines in the media. We celebrated the projects with a class screening party and closed the unit by hearing a final thought about revolutions from each student.

The initial investigation of the ideas and theory of revolution, the role play of historic events, the multiple avenues for researching the Arab Spring, and the digital story projects had resulted in students who could speak from a place of intellectual authority. Students shared complex thoughts about the causes, timing, successes, and strategies of revolutions that were backed up by evidence gleaned from the unit.

Challenges & Strategies

Learning is inherently messy and challenging. For me as teacher, there were many pitfalls and challenges throughout these units. Laptops crashed and students were left in the lurch until components were replaced. Some students rushed through the process and their final products were sloppy and unappealing to wider audiences. For others the amount of information available was overwhelming and their research didn't match the ideas they wanted to convey. Some students never defined a clear focus and their final products were disjointed and difficult to comprehend.

The projects I assign regularly require advanced technological skills. As my students are in the midst of graphic design, editing video, or mixing audio, I am cognizant of not presenting myself as the expert in the room. When someone comes to me with a tech question, I may ask the class, "Who is an iMovie expert?" and send the student to a peer who is more likely than I to be able to solve the problem. Even with this strategy there are times when projects get stopped in their tracks because of tech challenges.

Both units led to high student engagement but there were times when I would sit down next a student only to discover that the time I thought she had had been spending on research had actually been time spent reading tweets from friends. At other points I would see Facebook on a screen only to realize that a student was trying to find the original event post calling for a protest in Tahrir Square in the hopes of including the image in his digital story.

Ultimately my goal is to find a balance that leads to deep, meaningful inquiry; student ownership; and final products that can proudly be shared with the world. At times this means we don't use technology at all and at other times every student works intently in front of a screen. At times we are unified as a class, all looking at the same resource as I actively facilitate the discussion, and at other times each student is on a path to discovery of ideas, questions, and information most relevant to her/himself.

Final Thoughts

New modalities have changed research and allow students to individualize content and express themselves in multiple, new, innovative ways, and yet the tensions, struggles, and rewards of meaningful intellectual work remain. *In Pedagogy of the*

Oppressed (1970), Paulo Freire writes,

> The conflict lies in the choice between... following prescriptions or having choices; between being spectators or actors; between acting or having the illusion of acting through the action of the oppressors; between speaking out or being silent, castrated in their power to create and re-create, in their power to transform the world (p. 48).

It would be foolish to argue that technology somehow simplifies the challenges faced by educators and students. Yet it would be even more foolish to ignore the possibilities and opportunities for meaningful engagement, choice, audience, and discovering voice that technology and multimodal works present to us as educators, creators, and citizens of the world.

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