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At Last

Youth Culture and Digital Media: New Literacies for New Times

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On a recent Saturday afternoon, people began filing into a community movie theater in Oakland, California known for its alternative films and sofa seating. They had gathered to watch the digital stories created by young people from the community—three-to-five minute multi-media compositions consisting of a narrative recorded in the author’s voice accompanied by photographs, video, and music. The event began with a story by Randy, “Lyfe-n-Rhyme.” “Mama’s only son is mama’s only gun with a guillotine tongue,” rang one rhythmic powerful line, as images of Randy and his mother morphed into photographs of the county jail, while the music of Miles Davis floated in the background. So proceeded Randy’s social critique and commentary on life and opportunity, or the lack thereof, in his city and country. There were playful, humorous stories, too, such as Jayson’s account from the vantage point of a twelve-year-old of “When I was Little” at age six. This piece combined images of the Oakland hospital where Jayson had always assumed that he had been born (a fact contradicted by his mother when she saw his digital story, to his surprise and disbelief), with Internet photos of polar bears and snow used to commemorate a memorable trip to Alaska. Jayson determinedly bookended his images and narrative line with the hip-hop sound of J.T. Money’s “Who Dat?” There were also digital stories celebrating family, community, and culture. A teen named Doris paid homage to her grandfather, her “Papito,” who had lived in Guatemala and had died on her birthday. Missing him deeply, this young author assembled photographs of family gatherings and symbols of unity. “We all are one,” her grandfather used to tell Doris and she repeated in her story, a theme that comforted her in the wake of 9/11. Doris used Madonna’s music as a background melody, one of several female pop stars who fascinated her, and she ended her story with a long list of credits, attesting to the social relationships that were an important part of her composition process.

Experiencing such digital stories, assisting kids and adults as they create them, and documenting their meanings and significance bring home to me a most

urgent need: to expand our conceptions of what it means to be fully literate in new times. Ours is an age in which technologies for multi-media, multi-modal authorship proliferate, challenging logocentric habits of mind; in which US popular culture has come to dominate globally, laying bare both its creative and reproductive potential; in which differences in our interconnected world grow ever more salient, even as we become increasingly aware of our own identities as multiple, and increasingly able to participate in the imagined realities of others. In these new times, I want to suggest, a familiarity with the full range of communicative tools, modes, and media, plus an awareness of and a sensitivity to the power and importance of representation of self and others, along with the space and support to communicate critically, aesthetically, lovingly, and agentively—these are paramount for literacy now.

Randy, Jayson, and Doris created their multi-media narratives by participating in DUSTY—“Digital Underground Storytelling for Youth”—a collection of after-school, evening, and summer programs that is a university-community collaborative aimed at closing the “digital divide.” As a community center dedicated to providing access to new technologies and to promoting particular social practices around them—for example, ways of thinking about stories, self, and community, and ways of interacting and participating—DUSTY isn’t an isolated phenomenon. In neighborhood centers, youth organizations, community theaters, and faith-based institutions around the country and across the world, youth are similarly envisioning, creating, rehearsing, performing, and revisioning, using language, media, their voices and bodies to represent themselves, their families and friends, their communities, their ideas, their takes on our world. And they are doing so by juxtaposing and joining a variety of semiotic systems and technologies, reinventing and invigorating what it means to communicate. In the work that my collaborators and I do at DUSTY, and in this brief reflection, I am interested in exploring and supporting such multi-media, multi-modal expression, as well as considering the relationships between these largely out-of-school performances and school-based literacy practices and instruction.¹

The most obvious thing to say about digital stories and other kinds of signification that are mediated by new information technologies is that they offer distinctive contrasts to the primarily alphabetic texts and the forms of textual reasoning that predominate in schools and universities. It has become a commonplace to say that ours is an age in which the pictorial turn has supplanted the linguistic one, as images push words off the page and our lives become increasingly mediated by a popular visual culture. For Jayson and other DUSTY students, there is great delight in pairing spoken word and music with image, often for ironic or humorous effect. Jayson revealed in his digital story that a previous favorite teacher was named Ms. Tubman—not *Harriet* Tubman, he quickly interjected, but *Jean* Tubman—as he transitioned from an old stern-looking drawing of the famous

historical figure to a thoroughly modern image of an attractive young African American teacher. Simple, yes, but also effective, playful, aesthetically alert, and fun. The multi-media compositional strategies of DUSTY students and other youth notwithstanding, sustained attention to the visual isn't a customary part of schools' literacy curricula, and in fact, many educators feel ambivalence about a reliance on the image as a core part of communication. This is despite the fact that visualization plays a crucial role in reading and writing alphabetic texts.

Our research at DUSTY has further illustrated that distinctive affordances are associated with different forms of representation. That is, some forms of representation seem better for expressing or performing some kinds of meanings than others. In the same way that we can ask—"what kinds of critical thought are best fostered through argumentative alphabetic essays?"—we can also identify the kinds of reasoning that are characteristic of powerful multi-media literacy. For example, one of the multi-media practices that is foregrounded in Randy's aforementioned piece is the recontextualization of images. The story has a remarkable opening in which several photographs are juxtaposed, including a sphinx and pyramids, Malcolm X, Tupac Shakur, Marcus Garvey, and Biggie Smalls, all icons that Randy chose to associate with himself and to transcend. By removing these images from their particular historical settings and re-purposing them within the context of his own creative universe and his own social world in Oakland, Randy demonstrated a very powerful authorial agency. This kind of compositional strategy is possible through alphabetic writing alone, but it can assume a special performative power and an aesthetic dimension through multi-media, at the same time that, as in Randy's story, it relinquishes some of the precision of claim and evidence associated with traditional argumentation.

Thinking about multi-media composing like Randy's story, other forms of technology-mediated popular culture, and examples of youth cultural performances such as spoken word and poetry slams can push us to think anew about theories of literacy. In the current context the old debates about orality and literacy, as well as long-held distinctions separating the personal and the analytic, seem almost quaint in their dichotomous views, given the complex combinations, juxtapositions, and manipulations of spoken and written language and other semiotic systems and designs for meaning presently possible. There is much room, then, to explore and learn from the new formulations of literacy embodied in youth's cultural performances. In doing so, we can helpfully draw on interdisciplinary insights from fields such as communications theory, film studies, visual culture, semiotics, and the ethnography of media, where scholars are thinking about multiple as well as non-linguistic forms of representation. Other theoretical underpinnings are important for literacy studies, too, perspectives that connect new textual forms with individuals' desires for mastering them. The theoretical entry-point for exploring digital storytelling and other forms of multi-media for

my colleagues and me has been the rich and vast literature on identity. Scholarship is abundant, for example, on narrative, or verbal, visual, or embodied representations of past or future events, and the linkage between narrative and the construction of a sense of self. Students of narrative believe that we formulate notions of ourselves by telling ourselves stories about who we have been in the past and who we want to become in the future. Certain life changes have special import for one's sense of self—critical periods like adolescence or events such as changing jobs or the loss of a family member, as was the case for Doris. There are also turning points unique to individuals, which likewise are perceived as moments of change in how self is conceptualized.

At DUSTY the goal is to position participants to tell stories about self and community, and to use those moments of narrative reconstruction to reflect on past events, present activities, and future goals. Further, participants learn to construct stories that position them as agents, as young people and adults able to articulate and act upon their own desires and as local and global community members able to alter their worlds. The ability to render one's world as changeable and oneself as an agent able to direct that change is integrally linked to acts of self-representation through writing, as Freire taught us long ago, and through other semiotic systems. When those moments of self-representation are intensely performative, as with digital storytelling, they can be especially powerful. I am suggesting, then, that those of us who are interested in new literacies might consider, as many learning theorists and ethnographers of personhood have begun to do, the connection between conceptions of self and how and why we learn, and the linkage between the desire to acquire new skills and knowledge and who we yearn to become as people. How might such a focus reorient our curriculum and projects, both in and out of school?

Let me go further, still, and include in this discussion other examples of symbol-rich, language-saturated, and technology-enhanced practices that comprise youth culture—spoken word performances or poetry slams and the creation and performance of music. These cultural forms overlap and blend into each other, since they include the composition of lyrics or verse or rap or prose, most often through writing. At any night of the week in the San Francisco Bay Area, as well as across the country and the world, it is possible to attend a spoken word performance or a poetry slam. At these venues youth and others perform their own poems and prose for appreciative, knowledgeable, and critical audiences. Frequently youth record their performances on CD's for distribution, and some have begun to transform their recordings into multi-media. Increasingly, too, young people are able to create their own beats, their own electronic music. Building on youth's deep interest in many forms of popular music and the desire to make music with others, and becoming students ourselves of the ways in which joint music-making organizes lived time and plays a role in the construction of self, we have begun to offer electronic music classes as part of DUSTY after-school and summer

programs. An important challenge with this music program, as with the other DUSTY offerings, a tightrope to walk, is providing access to tools, social practices, supportive relationships, and critical audiences, but taking care not to domesticate youth culture. Another tension, this one strung in the opposite direction, is to celebrate youth culture clear-eyed, without romanticizing it, and to assist youth in moving well beyond the available stereotypes and formulas as they represent others and perform possible selves.

In many ways out-of-school literacy programs, youth organizations, media centers, and other non-profits are well suited for the kinds of projects I have outlined above. Given the pressure to teach to state-mandated content standards and to test students' academic achievement defined as meeting those standards, and given the way in which such activities are tied to federal and state funding, teachers and schools are now very hard pressed to find space and time to think expansively about the interface of literacy, youth culture, multi-media, and identity. After-school programs are also themselves at risk, many succumbing to a bad economy, and the rest under pressure to be only an extension of the school day, places solely for academic assistance geared toward the improvement of test scores. It is important to resist that pressure, and indeed, there are many forms of acceptable compromise and generative collaboration. Each DUSTY session, for example, begins or ends with a homework hour, and throughout the after-school activities instructors seek to make transparent overlaps between state content standards for language arts and the skills and knowledge required for multi-media composing. Without denying the importance of traditional alphabetic literacies and test-certified credentials or the attractiveness of out-of-school support to help students acquire these, I want to call for alternative learning spaces centered on youth culture and new media and new literacies, both inside school and out. I also urge collaborations among schools, universities, community organizations, and faith-based institutions to design and support them. To my mind such spaces and new literacies are not just add-ons, nice to have but dispensable; they are at the very center of those forms and practices of communication and representation that are crucial in our new times.²

NOTES

1. DUSTY is headed by Michael James as Director and Mira-Lisa Katz as Research Coordinator and is staffed by teachers, tutors, mentors, recruiters, researchers, and administrators drawn from the Oakland community and the University of California, Berkeley. The project is funded by grants from the US Department of Education, the Community Technology Foundation of California, the University of California's UCLinks project, and the City of Oakland. Additional support has been provided by the Prescott-Joseph Center for Community Enhancement, Allen Temple Baptist Church, the Center for Digital Storytelling, and the County of Alameda.

2. I thank Mike Rose and Mira-Lisa Katz for their helpful comments on this essay.