Imagining the Possibilities in Multimodal Curriculum Design

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I have always loved literature for its ability to teach me about ideas, places, and people I have not experienced in my own life, but now I see how much more powerful these stories can be when juxtaposed with images, poetry, and music that take the reader to the emotional space of the piece of work.

—Lindsey, PST

For the past several years, I’ve been working with preservice teachers (PST), earning initial certification, and inservice teachers (IST), those already certified, in English education to support their efforts to design curriculum and focus attention on the role that multiple media play in the teaching and learning of English concepts and literature. In her statements above, Lindsey, one of my preservice teachers, understands the importance of engaging all students actively in learning by offering them multiple ways in which to express and demonstrate meaning. She has begun to learn how to integrate multimodality into her future teaching. As knowledge of digital technologies increases and many children, adolescents, and preservice teachers enter school with varied experience, especially working with multiple modes via computer, Leap Frog, Xbox, and so on, English education is primed for the role that multimodality can and should take in the teaching and learning of English language arts (ELA) teachers.

Evolution of the “old page,” or written hardcopy texts, to the “new” (Kress, 2003), or electronic page, means that today’s learners have experience with a variety of texts. Image, music, and electronic inscription (font, style, flash, and so on) are features of multimodal texts that many learners prefer to read and create. With the screen becoming the dominant medium (Kress, 2003), there is an increasing need for learners to under-
stand reading and writing in multiple modes, and for English educators to maximize the potential of multimedia in the teaching and learning of English. However, as Short, Harste & Burke (1988) have suggested, accepting a new alternative does not mean devaluing the contribution of one’s current or past beliefs. Rather, as English educators, we start with what we know is good teaching, and continually reshape our teaching based upon our new learning, and in this case, the role of multimodality. My interest over the past seven years has been on the integration of multimodality into English curriculum development and design. Perhaps equally important is the role that literature plays in our lives and the lives of our students. This paper addresses this inquiry and presents the Focused Study as a flexible curricular framework that supports a multimodal perspective and values the lives and experiences that learners bring to English language arts classrooms.

Multimodal Inquiry as a Framework

*English studies should include translations from one sign system to another as an essential part of the curriculum. These should include translating words into action—"acting out" scenes from stories, poems, and dramas—and novels to films, reports to speeches, paintings to descriptions. This means that students in English need to begin to give substantially more attention to various media.*

—Miles Myers, 1996, p. 191

In the opening statement, Miles Myers argues that in today’s world of multimodal texts, English teachers and students, both, must be able to interpret and represent meaning across and within modes. Maxine Greene (1995) agrees and suggests that multimodal expressions (including film, plays, artworks, music, photography, and so on) encourage students to think alternatively about the fictional world of literature and the real world around them. As a literacy educator for nearly twenty-five years, I continually rediscover and reflect upon the evolution of my own practice. For example, when I started teaching, I worked primarily with literature and writing, demonstrating strategies for interpretation and communication to my middle and secondary students. However, as a drama director during this time, I also understood the difference in interpretation when my students acted out scenes in plays in our anthologies, as well as their performances on stage. Drama encouraged me to think across systems of communications—language, art, drama, music—to design, develop, and direct a single production. Further, my students also thought across these communication systems in order to interpret and become their characters. Now, as an avid potter and amateur documentary videographer, I have furthered my understand-
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Representation of Meaning Occurs through the Use of Multiple Modes

It is possible to imagine the many types of modes and innumerable texts that can be generated in and across modes. Modes of communication, such as visual, speech, writing, gesture, musical, and so on, enable humans to interpret and represent meaning, yet meaning is not located within any one mode, but in how the modes are interpreted in relation to each other (Albers & Murphy, 2000). For example, the traffic light integrates both the visual and the language modes. In this multimodal text, humans have come to interpret red, amber, and green to mean “stop,” “proceed with caution,” and “proceed,” respectively. However, when these colors are represented on cloth, these modes can operate together and symbolize nationalism of Bolivia or Benin, the colors of their flags. Meaning is represented through multiple modes, which have the potential to represent many meanings.

Modes within Texts Are Partial, Potentially Significant, and Ideological

Within a multimodal perspective, an implicit assumption is that modes of communication are partial and communicate only a part of the overall message (Kress & Jewitt, 2003). In any one text, multiple modes are involved in its making, and modes operate together to represent an overall message. Yet, each mode is not equal in its importance, and each carries different parts of the overall message. For example, the visual mode in pottery is particularly important. Readers look at, see, and, perhaps, feel the message of the pot. Yet, often, artworks leave a reader asking why an artist made this piece or what it means. Sometimes, the title of a piece offers this information, but is often secondary in its importance to the piece. As Kress and Jewitt (2005) argue, examining representation in this way forces us to consider what a mode does, what it does not do, and its meaning potential. For example, Figure 1, a bowl that I made from clay (visual mode) offers a reader visual information about the piece: it is round, the rim is cut away, and the colors enable the reader to see a city surrounding the central image of a
concerned woman. The title (language mode), “Closed In . . . the City,” adds different information, and additionally supports the visual composition. “Closed in . . . the City” reveals my own impression of the city in which I reside, a feeling of being closed in and overwhelmed by its size. The visual mode, the language mode, and the gestural mode (the cutaway rim of the pot) together contribute to the overall meaning of the piece. The visual, however, is more significant than the other two, but all three have significance in the overall message. The making of this pot is situated within my own ideological assumptions and beliefs and the community in which I live. Initially, my move to the city felt intimidating and suffocating, and this bowl represents not only my own experiences, but perhaps others’ as well. Modes, then, serve different purposes in the overall message, are significant in the overall message, and are ideological.

Learners Design Multimodal Texts with Intention and Interest

When meaning makers design texts, they do so based within their interests in a topic (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996), their understanding of the modes and their potential for expressing meaning (Kist, 2005; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003), and the assumptions of their social environments (Kress & Jewitt, 2003). When constructing multimodal texts, meaning makers intentionally choose media with which they are familiar, and/or the media that will enable them to say what they want to say. In addition, they may have a particular interest in various media which enters into their compositional decisions. In Figure 2, Amber designs and develops a multimodal text entitled “You Got to Take the Crooked with the Straights” based upon her inquiry into August Wilson’s Fences. At first glance, a reader can see that Amber uses a number of modes—visual, language, and spatial—to communicate her connection between Wilson’s characters and settings to her own Appalachian background. Amber’s choice of foam board, as opposed to other materials such as wood, cardboard, or paper, offers a portable, but flexible, and stable platform that she can cut and manipulate and which is a familiar medium.
to her. “I used foam board to cut out the fence in the shape of Tennessee, and made the fence to open and close to symbolize both the tension between Troy and his son Corey as well as the love that Rose wants to keep close in her family.” Like characters in the play who pass down songs from one generation to another, Amber’s grandfather “sang a song to my father who sang it to me, and now I sing it to Alice (her two-year old daughter).” Each of these modes is carefully considered and is of interest to Amber in the design of this text.

Inquiry-Based Learning Offers Flexible Opportunities for Multimodal Expression

Inquiry-based curriculum has as one of its central tenets the importance of learner’s interests and experiences. According to Burke (2004), learners bring knowledge and experience to their learning, and it is this personal inquiry that drives their interest in a subject or topic. Learners are actively involved in their own learning (Short & Burke, 1991) and can’t learn something that they aren’t already involved in thinking about. Within an inquiry-based curriculum that supports a multimodal perspective, learners are offered flexible opportunities to engage in research that interests them and express meaning using multiple modes. Learners of varied experiences and language ability can participate in ways that support their ongoing learning. In Figure 3, Mary, a preservice teacher,
inquires into connections between Huxley’s (1998) *Brave New World* and her own personal heritage. Her multimodal text includes visual, musical, spatial, and digital modes that, together, express this connection. Opportunities to flexibly represent connections between literature and learners’ experiences and knowledge are important in inquiry-based curriculum and support the language and experiences that learners bring to their learning.

In this next section, I describe my multimodal approach to curriculum design in which PSTs live through a multimodal curriculum centered on the Harlem Renaissance. Living through a multimodal curriculum—at the same time that they learn about multimodality—enables PSTs to conceptualize curriculum design from such a perspective.

**The Focused Study: A Multimodal Approach to Curriculum Design**

*Your class was an answer to a prayer for me, and I can’t stress enough how it has clarified that I can indeed weave the two disciplines I love together, art and English. The Focused Study plan was incredibly difficult for me, mostly because that kind of plan is new territory. But as I planned with integrating art, PowerPoint engagements, invitations, and projects, I had a hard time turning off the ideas so it didn’t become a 50-page document. There is so much that can be done in an engaging, yet instructional fashion. I ran into several of the high school students for which I substitute, and was telling them about some of the things I am planning. They were astounded. “You mean we could be doing something more than book work? That’s all we do!”*

—Janey, preservice teacher.

If high school students’ impression of English instruction is “doing only book work,” working with preservice teachers in designing curriculum from a multimodal perspective becomes essential. Janey enthusiastically looks forward to the day when she can design her own multimodal curriculum and even tries out this idea with her students. This move towards new understandings about the planning and teaching of English may be difficult, but this struggle is worthwhile.

In the summer, I teach an English methods course entitled *The Principles of English Instruction* with a focus on teaching literature, the oral, dramatic and visual language arts, and curriculum design. At the same time that preservice teachers study the concepts and methods of teaching English, they participate in a multimodal curriculum that I designed around the Harlem Renaissance, a literary time period that will most likely be introduced in a middle or high school literature class. Throughout this course, I present content and methods through multiple modes and a variety of
media including film, photography, clay, paints, digital texts, print-based texts, and so on. Course assignments are designed to encourage multimodal responses to course readings. One of the major assignments is for PSTs to design their own multimodal curriculum based upon a major text or novel (Lord of the Flies, Glass Menagerie, etc.) and essential questions that guide this curriculum. I use the Focused Study developed by Carolyn Burke and implemented by Beth Berghoff (1995) as a curricular framework, a design that I believe offers space for flexibility in planning, teaching, and learning, and many opportunities for multimodal exploration, interpretation, and representation.

The Focused Study, Figure 4, is a unit of curriculum that concentrates on a particular topic or issue, involves a community of learners, and operates under two assumptions: (1) Teachers are knowledgeable curriculum designers who make decisions based upon the lives, interests, and experiences of their students, and (2) Curriculum is grounded in current theory and practice. The flexibility and generative nature of the Focused Study enables preservice teachers, as well as inservice teachers, to develop confidence in their own subject matter expertise, and pushes them to generate content and engagements independent from and/or in conjunction with a teacher's guide. The Focused Study encourages teachers to engage in Planning-to-Plan (Watson, Burke, & Harste, 1989). Planning-to-Plan is the teacher/curriculum designer's best understanding and intention prior to working with learners. They must also be aware of the interests and questions that students will bring to their learning and be flexible enough in their Planning-to-Plan to enact changes based upon students’ responses. In essence, when they plan-to-plan, teachers make decisions about long-term plans, but are flexible in day-to-day plans as questions arise and interests are generated by their students. Additionally,
teachers’ curricula must be grounded in current theory and practice, including multimodality. Rather than rely on memory or what they presently know, teachers investigate the theme or topic as they design their curriculum, search out current information and multimodal ways of presenting this information, and encourage multimodal interpretations and responses. They become curriculum designers who develop lists of potential texts (such as poems, songs, videography, GameBoys, plays, picture books, etc.) to teach content, and integrate a large number of texts into their curriculum plan to inspire further inquiry into the text or theme being studied. Rather than think short-term, (Oh, this is what I will teach tomorrow) teachers begin to think long-term: What essential question(s) will guide our study of this theme/topic? How will I introduce the core text or topic, and tap into what my students may already know about the text or theme? How will I continue to introduce strategy lessons within this larger topic? What demonstrations may be important to the study of this topic, and how will I integrate students’ responses and questions into demonstrations? How does this study build upon previous learning? How will I integrate multiple modes into my teaching to maximize student involvement and understanding?

The Focused Study is designed around an essential question (or questions) that guides students’ inquiry and study. Throughout the study, learners are given opportunities to reflect on what they know, bring their own experiences and questions to bear, to construct new understandings, and to use those new understandings in support of further learning or action. Six components commonly comprise this framework: Initiating Engagements, Demonstrations, Text Study/Literature Study, Invitations, Sharing and Organizing Learning, and Reflective Action. How teachers move among and between these components as they go about teaching is flexible and dependent on the content of the study and the responses and involvement of their students. I describe each of these components below (Albers & Egawa, 2004; 2005).

**Initiating Engagements** helps participants reflect on their personal experiences and knowledge. These engagements introduce the focus of the study and trigger connections between the study and personal experiences, and set the stage for the upcoming learning. Everyone involved—those who write the curriculum and those who work with it—shares responsibility for contributing ideas and questions.
Demonstrations are large group teacher-conducted short strategy lessons intended to show students a concept, technique (linguistic, visual, musical, spatial, etc.), and/or feature of a text. Demonstrations may derive from students’ questions about the content of the Focused Study and/or concepts important to an in-depth understanding of a text.

Text Study/Literature Study supports in-depth learning of related content and concepts. One primary text or a theme might be used as a focused area of study, but other texts, including music, art, drama, film, digital texts, photos, and so on, may be part of these studies. Learners work together in small groups to set the course of their reading and discussions. Small group conversations allow for the active participation of everyone in the group.

Invitations to Inquiry support deeper learning on specific issues of interest. Learners are encouraged to work with a partner or small group to identify and pursue their questions based upon their interests in a variety of related areas designed by the instructor or students.

Opportunities for Organizing and Sharing are experiences in which students intentionally organize and share their discoveries, ideas, and findings. They include public displays such as charts, webs, artworks, digital presentations, oral and written presentations, Readers Theater, knowledge, and plans. Each text contributes data that documents students’ evolving learning and links to previous learning.

Reflective Action Plans provide learners with opportunities to purposefully apply their learning and demonstrate their understanding of new ideas, discoveries, and connections. They prompt learners to revisit previous beliefs and knowledge and to summarize new understandings and beliefs. They also call on learners to “make a difference”—to do something to change attitudes and/or practices.

To contextualize this curricular framework and process of curriculum design, preservice teachers live through this curriculum. Initially, PSTs experience the Focused Study framework through a PowerPoint presentation with hyperlinked examples that both introduce and define the components, and that invite them to think about what they offer in terms of curriculum design. Over the course of six separate sessions, I introduce one component of the Focused Study, and demonstrate its function in the curriculum design. We then reflect upon the engagements that help to define this component, and generate new ideas about other possible engagements. Towards the end of the semester, PSTs learn how to plan short- (daily) and long-term (one-, two-, or three-week periods) based upon the Harlem Renaissance engagements they studied. At the end of the course, each preservice
teacher designs a Focused Study on a topic and/or major text of their choice, including a calendar with short- and long-term plans, state and national (NCTE) standards, and individual lesson plans designed like those posted on NCTE’s Read/Write/Think site (www.ncte.org/readwritethink).

The Harlem Renaissance: A Multimodal Focused Study in Action

Preservice teachers’ (PST) participation in the Harlem Renaissance Focused Study is a demonstration on how to design, organize, and implement multimodal curriculum for any topic/theme they may want or must study with their future students. Since middle and secondary English curricula are often built around core texts, I organize the design of this methods course around Zora Neale Hurston’s (1998) *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as part of our larger Focused Study on the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance (HR), by nature of the creativity and generative influence of the time, necessarily invites disciplinary connections among art, music, politics, photography, literature, science, and history. The topic readily affords PSTs the opportunity to flexibly design curriculum that includes a wide range of texts (see Appendix) within art, music, Web sites, drama, oral language arts, literature, and so on into their short- and long-term planning.

To begin, together we develop an essential question that will guide our learning. The question should be general enough to allow for flexibility and student interests. Part of our consideration is not merely the written texts that will be studied, but how the flavor, or multimodality, of the HR can be captured in a variety of modes. Our essential question for this literary time period becomes “What was it like to live and create during the time of the Harlem Renaissance?” From this essential question, we develop complementary questions that address long-term planning: Which initiating engagements will set the scene when reading a novel such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God*? Which demonstrations will further develop students’ knowledge about expression during this time period? What other genres (picture books, songs, poems, etc.) will enable me to introduce and/or teach English concepts and further students’ understanding of this time period? What projects and experiences will enable my students to demonstrate knowledge of English concepts, multimodal interpretation of this time period, inquiry into personal interests in this era (music, art, literature, politics, history, etc.)? How will students organize and share their learning with an emphasis on multimodality? And, finally, how does this Focused Study inform future readings and themes? Space allows me to share only several key engagements in each Focused Study component.
Initiating Engagements

To demonstrate initiating engagements, I designed four specific engagements that serve both as demonstrations of how to introduce the essential question, as well as a way to generate other ideas that may work well as initiating engagements: a 60-slide PowerPoint presentation, a Gallery Walk of HR writers (Figure 5), artists, politicians, historians, and philosophers, a newsletter, and a book pass.

As preservice teachers enter the classroom, they see on one wall of the classroom a photo gallery of literary, artistic, historic, and political figures under which I place short biographies and sample pieces of HR figures. This immediately catches their interest, and they move to the wall for a closer look. I start class with a simple statement: “What do we know about the Harlem Renaissance?” Even though these are middle and secondary English teachers, their knowledge is general, and discussion is short. They name three or four key writers (Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Countee Cullen) and their texts, and generally understand artistic contributions to this literary era. After this initial conversation, I simply say, “We’re going to Harlem today.” I turn off the lights and show them a self-running 15-minute PowerPoint presentation. Music of the time period, especially that of Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, and others, is embedded throughout this presentation. Writers, musicians, artists, photographers, historians, philosophers, and politicians and their works automatically and smoothly transition across the screen. Also embedded into this presentation are individual sound bites of Langston Hughes reading “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” and Gwendolyn Brooks reading “We Real Cool” (Paschen & Presson Mosby, 2001). Artists and their artworks, photographers and their photos, and photos and statements by historians, politicians and philosophers, and maps more completely define the cross-disciplinary connections within this time period. The last slide invites learners to pose questions for further inquiry. A number of questions are generated and PSTs are eager to begin this inquiry.

Along with this PowerPoint presentation, I include three additional initiating engagement experiences: a Gallery Walk through the Harlem Re-
naissance figures (Figure 5), a newsletter, and a Book Pass. The Gallery Walk introduces PSTs to the texts and authors whom we will study. The newsletter introduces the core text and time period, and inquiry-focused questions for students to research on the internet and/or in printed texts. The Book Pass exposes PSTs to a large number of books/texts (picture books, CDs, art prints, biographies, novels) related to the Harlem Renaissance. At the start, every PST has a book/text in hand, and they are given approximately 45 seconds to peruse a text and then pass it to the person next to them. This continues until all texts have been passed. We then talk about our favorite texts, and personal and literary connections, and what we learned from them.

These experiences lead into a definition of and purpose for designing multimodal initiating engagements in English curricula. We then revisit the principle of the nature of modes and discuss the question, How do different modes enable us to understand aspects of the HR that one mode may not afford? How is it that one mode can tell only part of the story? How, for example, does the art of Jacob Lawrence visually present workers, Harlem, and migration in a way that written or musical texts may not? How does Charlie Parker’s music help listeners understand the emergence and importance of jazz? These questions about modality and their affordance become clearer to PSTs as they generate their own ideas for initiating engagements. Hannah wants to design a “stranded” drama experience so her students are introduced to various themes in Lord of the Flies (Golding, 1959). Arthur wants his students to study Guernica, a painting by Picasso, as an initiating engagement for 1984 (Orwell, 2003) to “elicit student responses comparing the war-torn world of Oceania to that of our own world.” In general, PSTs’ responses to such multimodality to introduce themes/texts are enthusiastic. Hannah states, “It is important to integrate many different forms of media to help facilitate students’ understanding of the theme or topic.” Marcus remarks, “Curriculum never stops changing. It is constantly evolving and we need to integrate a number of different modes to match this change.” Esther agrees with Marcus, “I thought curriculum was a set of guidelines that teachers had to follow and just make slight adjustments to. I think now that curriculum has a lot more to do with students and it constantly changes with time.” In less than 120 minutes, these future teachers have experienced a number of multimodal texts and the important role that multimedia plays in the teaching of English.

Demonstrations
To demonstrate the teaching of English concepts, ideas, and strategies, I design several short multimodal context-based lessons to teach concepts such
as readers’ stances (Rosenblatt, 1996), interpretive stances, techniques for analysis, and so on. I often teach concepts through art and music texts because they lend themselves to holistic and immediate readings. For example, to demonstrate the distinction between aesthetic and efferent stances, I place three HR artworks and one song in the corners of the classroom and ask PSTs to rotate among them and record information they see or hear in the text (technique, style, colors, composition, musical instruments, timing, etc.), and record their feelings and emotions as they view or listen to these texts. This is followed by a discussion of these stances. PSTs then read two written texts, one narrative (Marie Bradby’s, 1995, *More Than Anything Else*) and one expository (an internet text based upon the life of Booker T. Washington), further developing the conceptual differences in the two stances. This is followed by a discussion and analysis of Countee Cullen’s “Incident,” and the ideological message he conveys through this short text (Albers & Egawa, 2005). These experiences, from visual and musical modes to written modes, demonstrate to PSTs how to design such strategy lessons for their students who will have varied language experiences, and whose backgrounds and experiences lend different, and ideological, readings across texts.

To demonstrate the teaching of poetry, I introduce TPCASTT (Title, Paraphrase, Connotation, Attitude (of author), Shift in Tone, Title (revisited), Theme), a technique to analyze poetry that many English teachers in our area of the country must use. I start not with a written poem—which is a common approach—but with Harlem Renaissance painter William Johnson’s artwork entitled “Street Life—Harlem.” Because the visual mode often affords immediate readings, Johnson’s artwork enables us to discuss each of the components of TPCASTT in a quick and holistic way. The move, however, is to deepen the reading through discussion of the artist’s choices. Our analysis is not linear, as TPCASTT might elicit, but recursive. PSTs study the painting, read the title, and begin to talk across components of TPCASTT, rather than address each one in succession. After our analysis, we critically reflect upon the importance of conducting holistic readings and analyses of literary texts, much like we do with paintings, and theoretically link Rosenblatt’s reader response (1991) to this experience. Following this, we read Phyllis Wheatley’s poem “An Hymn to the Evening.” PSTs better understand the concept of analysis, and the reading of Wheatley’s poem now resembles the reading of Williams’ artwork. As teachers, we discuss the multimodal approach to teaching poetry, and how the visual mode may support students’ initial learning of concepts and approaches to analysis, followed then by the written mode, or the poem. Another poetry demonstration that I introduce was designed and developed by Pam Smith out of Fresno,
California called Poetry with Panache. She uses Tupac’s “The Rose that Grew From Concrete,” a poem that reaches the lives and experiences of her high school Latino students. Like Pam, I also integrate the posthumous release of this poem sung by Tupac’s mother with narration by Nikki Giovanni, and designed a PowerPoint presentation with images, music, and written text. Such multimodal demonstrations support the notion that representation and meaning occur across and within modes, and each mode contributes something unique to the overall message. “I learned a lot about demonstrations,” states Mary Lou, “their purpose and the actual process of designing and when to use them. I liked the variety of examples and really enjoyed learning multimodal ways to engage students and get them actively involved in the learning.”

Text Study/Literature Study

For approximately 30 minutes for three class sessions, PSTs study and discuss literary and professional texts associated with or applicable to the Harlem Renaissance. Several texts are grouped together—a professional article, picture books, and novels—to demonstrate the importance of text-to-text connections, present, past, and future. A sample text is as follows: Nikki Grimes (2002), *Bronx Masquerade* (novel); Christopher Paul Curtis (1999), *Bud, Not Buddy* (novel); Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), “But That’s Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy” (professional reading), Walter Dean Myers (1997), *Harlem*, Nikki Grimes (1999), *My Man Blue*, Vanda Nelson (2003), *Almost to Freedom* (picture books). Based upon their selection of a theme, PSTs form their own small study groups, and are pushed to make connections (not all of them obvious) across and within texts and across and within modes (art, language, music)—a strategy many PSTs want their future students to develop. As a culminating experience, small groups present their learning visually and orally, highlighting experiences that they enjoyed, found frustrating, and/or want to share. Text studies prove to be extremely engaging for PSTs. Bobbi shares,

> Overall, this reading experience was both enlightening and motivating, and it encourages me to use this type of study in my own classroom. We connected books and experiences outside the texts back to these particular coming-of-age stories, much like a family brings their various daily lives back to the dinner table to reconnect. Perhaps one day down the road my students will come to think of class discussions as “family time,” too.

Such cross-textual and multimodal analyses situate learning within PSTs’ interests in the topic or theme and they discuss texts with intention. They
come to this metaphorical dinner table with a purpose, to share ideas about issues raised in these texts. They also more fully understand Rosenblatt’s (1996) purpose for reading literature, to understand our lives and those around us.

Invitations for Inquiry

Invitations, a literacy strategy designed and developed by Carolyn Burke (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988), support deeper learning on specific issues of interest that learners share in the context of on-going talk, discussion, and engagement with texts of the Focused Study. Invitations are just as they imply, experiences that learners can accept or decline. Invitations are grounded in six key principles: (1) attention is on meaning-making, (2) the learning environment is social and collaborative, (3) the experience is open to learners of varied language flexibility, (4) the experience is consistent with knowledge about semiotics and disciplines, (5) the experience is open to alternate and multimodal responses, and (6) they should have the potential to generate future inquiry (Burke, 2004).

Over the course of the summer semester, I learn about my PSTs’ interests and questions, and design invitations with this knowledge in mind. Some of my students are interested in more in-depth study of female poets of the HR, photography of the time, music, art, and so on, and design of these invitations reflects these interests. Together with at least one other person, PSTs work through one or more invitations (Figure 6).

Two sample invitations are presented in Figure 7.

Like initiating engagements and demonstrations, invitations encourage thinking and learning about the Harlem Renaissance across and within modes. A number of varied texts are introduced within each invitation (picture books, poems, short stories, photos, and so on), and encourage a more complex view and understanding of this time period.

Opportunities for Sharing and Organizing

As part of their lived through experience with the Harlem Renaissance, PSTs organize and share their learning in a variety of ways: Literature studies,
exit slips, class discussions, written and artistic responses to literature, PowerPoint presentations, journals, Internet research, critical analyses, cultural heritage projects, and their own Focused Study. Transmediation, a literacy strategy in which learners retranslate their understanding of an idea, concept, or text through another medium, is one engagement through which PSTs organize and share their learning about the HR. Through the medium of clay, PSTs recast their interpretation of the Harlem Renaissance after which follows group interpretation and discussion of these representations. Before LaShondra explains her representation (Figure 8), we use a strategy called “Save the Last Word” [for the author] (Harste, Short, & Burke,
In this strategy (which we have adapted—“Save the Last Word” [for the artist]), the class is invited to share their responses to the representation, followed by LaShondra who has the last word. Individual class members state: “This looks like hands joining together, bodies are coming together.” “This also seems to show that this is an isolated movement that occurred at a particular time.” “This is all about reading, celebrating, and striving for something because the hands seem to reach up.” LaShondra, then, shares her interpretation:

For me, this represents all of the different things that impacted the HR. It is a representation of the unity that occurred during this period. The hands are being held high, to represent the attempt to excel beyond the boundaries that had been placed upon African Americans. This represents all of the people and their thoughts.

Preservice teachers often find that transmediation is a moving experience. For Jonathan, whose transmediation is composed of many objects found in and outside his home, transmediation “opens new discussions, expands on ideas, and includes more students (levels the playing field, and makes class fun and interesting).” He begins to recognize the flexible opportunities students must have when representing their understanding.

In addition to day-to-day multimodal responses like transmediation, PSTs design and develop course projects from a multimodal perspective. After several weeks, we create a Harlem Renaissance book (Figure 9), with and without written text, based upon our study of the process and art of HR artists. We inquire into the lives, experiences, and art of Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, William Johnson, Lois Mailou, Augusta Savage, and others through Internet research, videos, art books, picture books, and photos. We reflect on its organization, and its impact upon us as a group. Preservice teachers also design, plan, and teach a 10-minute lesson on a literary term from a multimodal perspective. Margo designs a 16-frame PowerPoint presentation and teaches plot structure, in particular “climax,” through images of the Wizard of Oz, a Beatles song, and special effects, all meticulously coordinated. She follows this with a drama engagement that deepens the class’s understanding of this component of plot. Students applaud loudly in recognition of the hard work, the planning, and the multimodal creativity.
that Margo demonstrates. Further, they learn more about how Margo’s interests in film and Beatles music enable her to teach story structure with intention. On the last day, PSTs bring in cultural heritage projects, multimodal representations of their inquiry into their major text and their own personal lives and experiences. They bring in personal laptops on which they present videos, photo montages, and music. They also bring in food, clothing, texts, and other artifacts, associated with both the major text and their own lives. PSTs transact with their core text in multimodal ways that they would not have imagined before, and understand how interest and intention drive their inquiry into the major text and their own lives. More importantly, cultural heritage projects are not just designed as potential school projects, but bring their home lives, families, friends, and community in their multimodal texts. Amanda describes her cultural connection to *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (Hardy, 1984):

I thought at first that trying to make a connection to the novel, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, would be rather difficult. But as I worked on my lesson plans for the text, I realize that we have more in common than I thought. For one thing, both of our genealogies play a significant role on our lives. Her immediate family helped shape her into a hard working, modest, respon-
sible, and loving woman . . . As I looked through our family pictures that each brought significant events to my mind, I thought of how much my immediate family has helped to shape me into an independent, strong, responsible, caring, and loving individual . . . I really enjoyed working on this project. Realizing where I came from reminded me of who I am and encouraged me to keep moving towards my goal in life. I am also inspired to search and learn more about my genealogy, see what else has contributed to who I am today.

These cultural heritage projects are always extraordinarily moving, as it is through this multimodal text that PSTs realize the power of literature to connect deeply to their lives and experiences.

Reflection is essential in sharing learning, and to capture this, PSTs complete exit slips, or written and illustrated reflections on their learning for the day. They respond to three ideas: Today I learned . . . , I have questions about . . . , and Illustrate your learning and thinking today. Exit slips offer information about thoughts that my PSTs have about what they learn, and offer me insight into questions they still have. Their questions drive instruction for the next class. On the day that we studied Invitations, Jackson illustrates the importance of choice and interest in presenting invitations as a part of curriculum design (Figure 10).

Contextualizing and connecting the learning over the course of the term is crucial, and learning walls (Harste & Vasquez, 1998) support visual,

Figure 10. Jackson’s exit slip
written, and spatial modes through which to organize this learning. Over the course of the term, PSTs continue to add artifacts to the learning wall which helps them organize their learning (Figure 11). The wall consists of various artifacts, papers, photos, projects, and other documents they complete. PSTs read the artworks, statements, and projects made, not just as creative expressions, but as expressions that gesture towards their learning. They become adept not only at producing multimodal texts, but reading such texts.

Learning within a multimodal perspective impacts PSTs in very profound ways. On the last day of class, Meena writes her exit slip:

Six weeks ago I would have been skeptical if I was told to incorporate multimedia in an English classroom. Aren’t books enough? During the past six weeks, I’ve been amazed at how effective teaching is when it integrates PowerPoint, music, images, artwork, children’s books, drama, etc. into a curriculum. Students live in a world where they do take in experiences through every form. I’ve seen kids “surf the Internet,” download a song, and text message their friends all at the same time. Students have come to expect multimedia in everything they do and school should not be the exception. Using a multimedia approach is engaging, fun, and appropriate for all students. I think the days of reading a book and then writing an essay about it are gone. Students need to respond to the text in a way that helps them make sense of their own world—using multimedia can make this easier. If we don’t try to achieve that goal, we may be wasting our time.

Reflective Action Plans

When we provide learners with opportunities to purposefully apply their learning and demonstrate their understanding of new ideas, discoveries, and connections, they engage in reflective action. It is at this time that we focus on long term planning and instruction. In small groups, PSTs design a two-week Focused Study on the Harlem Renaissance, based upon the various engagements throughout the term. PSTs look across the engagements,
and make decisions about the purpose and position of each, as well as which ones they want to include and exclude. They work backward, and consider what they want their students to know or experience, and then plan short-term, playing around with engagements and where they believe they best fit. For example, even though the newsletter was introduced as an initiating engagement, one group decides to use it as a sharing/organizing experience. Another group wants their students to share their learning through PowerPoint projects. The versatility of engagements in the Focused Study design pushes preservice teachers to think through the purpose and function for each experience. As Ingrid soon finds out, “Curriculum is very difficult to plan and prepare.” Jermaine agrees and adds, “So many things must be considered to help students initially connect, but at the same time, content must also be addressed. I learned how to decide what is important to cut and keep in curriculum.”

In doing such long- and short-term planning, PSTs learn several important features of designing strong curriculum: (1) Engagements must be flexible and serve potentially different functions within a Focused Study; (2) Multimodality takes time, and engagements must be carefully considered, organized, and managed; (3) It must engage students at all levels and experiences; and (4) A teacher needs to know the subject matter and their students in order to make sound curricular decisions.

Another feature of reflective action invites PSTs to make theoretically-based decisions about their own practice and attitudes. Tenisha invites her students to read *Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger, 1991) and develop CDs with music that corresponds to their interpretation of the characters. Carla teaches her 11th grade students to work with acrylics to design their own coat of arms and relate it to their reading of Ernest Gaines’ *A Gathering of Old Men*. Other students—long graduated from the program—share how they integrate multimodality and digital technologies at local literacy conferences. Several weeks ago, one of my PSTs emailed me to ask permission to use/adapt several of the Harlem Renaissance engagements. Barbara writes:

Thank you so much for sharing the HR invitations and PPT with me. I used both with two of my 11th grade honors classes. They absolutely LOVED the invitations and are still humming “Summertime” :) The invitations were such a change of pace for them. Most of those students are unbelievable creative, artistic, and brilliant! It was definitely a success! Thank you for all of your creative, innovative ideas!
Although I appreciate such accolades, I understand that PSTs now recognize what they already are invested in thinking about, bridging the divide between popular culture, digital texts, and modes of representation, with their familiarity with a more traditionally taught English. Their inquiry into teaching English pushes them to think more broadly about multimodality and its potential for meaning making in their classrooms.

**Tensions in a Multimodal Approach**

Even within a multimodal approach, tensions can arise. I find that PSTs become so enamored with multimodality that they can lose focus on the actual literature they are asked to teach. They want to integrate art into their planning, but linking this artwork with the literature sometime eludes them. I must continually remind them about the literature they must teach, and offer suggestions on how to engage learners in multimodal experiences that support the readings. Other tensions emerge when PSTs find that there are few technology resources available in public schools, or that the equipment is down or glitches occur in digital presentations. PSTs want to work with new technologies; however, fighting for resources often moves them into more routine and traditional approaches to instruction. Although such problems arise, I suggest that they use alternative old technologies such as art materials, cassettes or CDs, and players, or even the overhead transparency, all of which can support multimodality substantively.

**Conclusion**

Imagining the possibilities of multimodal curriculum design in the English classroom will, indeed, lead to an exciting future for English educators. Maxine Greene (1995) writes, “I am reminded of the differentiated meanings of literacy. As a set of techniques, literacy has often silenced persons and disempowered them. Our obligation today is to find ways of enabling the young to find their voices, to open their spaces, to reclaim their histories in all their variety and discontinuity” (p. 120). Imagining the histories of the authors and writings studied in English curricula alongside the histories of English students everywhere through multimodality will no doubt change the way English educators approach the subject of English. Although it has taken me several years to design the engagements in the way that I have described, I believe that it is essential that, as English education instructors, we continue to push towards a more multimodal approach to English language arts teaching and learning. I have recently discovered
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videography. I film my students during class, and then create movie shorts to demonstrate various English concepts and present these movies at the next class. Such work is time-consuming, but effective especially when PSTs themselves are central in presentation of information and demonstrations.

With expression now crossing modes through which information is communicated (brochures, PowerPoint presentations, Web pages, etc.), educators must begin to think differently about literacy and language arts instruction that addresses 21st century needs. Educators must have knowledge both about the various modes of expression, and how to research, design, and develop projects that are complex, modally interesting, and demonstrate deep understanding of the issues, ideas, and/or concepts presented. They must have the flexibility not only with their use of modes in expression, but the choices that modes afford them when designing projects. When modes of communication are inextricably linked to each other, these projects become coherent in their dynamic and multimodal form. Such perception will inspire their own students to imagine expression in a variety of modes, and to grasp the fullness and complexity of English as a discipline.

References


**Appendix: Texts Studied in Harlem Renaissance Focused Study**

**Core Text:**


**Texts Used for Demonstrations and Invitations:**

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Books Used in Demonstrations, Invitations, Initiating Engagements, Literature Circles:


**Videos Used in Demonstrations:**

**Audio Performances:**

**Music Used in Demonstrations and/or Initiating Engagements:**
Louis Armstrong “Blueberry Hill,” “What a Wonderful World”, “Black and Blue”
Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, “Summertime”, from Porgy and Bess (along with picture book inspired by the song)
Duke Ellington, “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If you Ain’t Got that Swing)”
Vera Hall, “Another Man Done Done Gone”
Charlie Parker, “Parker’s Mood”
Bessie Smith, “Backwater Blues”

**Poetry Studied and Used in Demonstrations:**
Gwendolyn Brooks. “We Real Cool”
Countee Cullen, “Incident,” “The Wise”
Jesse Redmon Fauset, “Words! Words!”
Angelina W. Grimke, “Tenebris”
Phyllis Wheatley, “An Hymn to the Evening”

**Short Stories**
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Original Readers Theater
Albers, P. “Readers Theatre: Great Voices and the Political Debates of the Negro.”

Young Adult Novels Studied in Literature Studies:

Sample Text Set within Literature Studies:

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