Envisioning the Already-Present Literacy and Learning of Youth

Vaughn W. M. Watson

My tenth-grade English class at a visual and performing arts school in New York City had just ended and the students made their way to the corridors. I moved toward the board at the front of the room, pushing in chairs and collecting left-behind pens and pencils along the way. Jayson, nearly at the door, paused. He had pulled his phone from his backpack and now called out to me.

“What’s it about?” I asked, noting to myself that the video now playing on a student’s cell phone was prohibited by school policy. Jayson rotated the phone to its horizontal view and turned up the volume: “You ever heard of Suli Breaks?”

Suli Breaks, a Black, London-born, spoken-word poet, was shown standing in front of a North-East London college, lacing his six-minute poem with name drops such as Steve Jobs and Malcolm X and calling into question what learning may mean beyond classrooms and printed textbooks. Breaks’s poem, titled “Why I Hate School but Love Education,” challenges narratives of youth as disengaged in teaching as learning. As educators and researchers tussle with the enduring tension of what our field may consider as English, Breaks’s poem, viewed 8.6 million times to date on YouTube, prompts a consideration of English teaching and learning as building upon the “already present.” This purposeful situating envisions English teaching and learning as all around us. At a time when Common Core State Standards “de-emphasize writing ‘drawn heavily from student experience and opinion’ [para. 11],” such work acknowledges students as enacting “multiliteracies practices already present in experiences beyond school, underscoring identities as civic contributors” (Watson 57).

Jayson’s sharing of Breaks’s video, students constructing place through music, and preservice English teachers navigating languages and identities in video gaming all provide examples of building on the “already present” possibilities of English teaching and learning.

A year later, Jayson, Marcus, and Paul, now high school juniors, stopped me in the hallway.
“Watson, did you hear it?” Paul asked. “To Pimp a Butterfly.” Kendrick Lamar. It’s out. . . . My boss at work told me to listen, to read the lyrics. . . . He said if I read the lyrics, it will give it a whole deeper meaning.”

Jayson, Marcus, and Paul, young Black men, had long awaited the release of Lamar’s new hip-hop album, one that would go on to set a “global first-day streaming record” with 9.6 million listeners (Wood). Reviewing the album, Clover Hope noted emerging questions in Lamar’s words and music: “How do you capture the detail and the overwhelming visibility of invisibility?” in songs involving “deeper themes of community, power dynamics (between men and women, black and white), utter otherness and the comfort of home”? Building upon the “already present” involves attending to literacy practices and learning activities across communities and within contexts that students see as important to them.

In the Verses Project, a university/community-based, after-school literacy-and-songwriting collaboration at the Community Music School in Detroit, students from 46 schools and 22 metropolitan Detroit communities extend meanings of building upon “already-present” lived experiences as multiliteracies practices, brainstorming topics for songs, expanding words as lyrics, and making instrumental beats on iPads. The students, 99 percent of whom are youth of color, record, perform, and discuss songwriting with local audiences of peers and families, and they share songs globally through Soundcloud.com. As Monica, a high school student, reflected in her composition notebook, “My greatest strength as an artist is singing. I know how I could use this strength to help others. I can use [it] in my songwriting group by using my voice to sing the lyrics. I can sing in my city to help cheer someone up that feels down. I can also do it in the world.”

Attending to “already-present” lived experiences as literacy practices extends to video gaming, popular among students across console or mobile platforms (Burwell). In 2014, developers Upper One Games, “the first indigenous-owned commercial game company in the United States” (E-Line Media), released Never Alone, a video game designed with “nearly 40 Alaska Native elders, storytellers and community members.” During gameplay, a “master storyteller in the spoken Iñupiaq language” narrates gamers’ journeys as either Nuna, an Iñupiat girl, or her arctic-fox companion who “set out to find the source of the eternal blizzard which threatens the survival of everything they have ever known.” As gameplay progresses, gamers gain access to “video insights—elders, storytellers, and other members of the Alaska Native community share stories and wisdom about their culture [and] values.”

Preservice English teachers in my secondary methods class read a Washington Post review of Never Alone (Byrd) and viewed the game trailer (Vimeo). In journals, students complicated the possibilities and limitations in teaching and learning with video gaming (Gee) as building upon “already-present” lived experiences and knowledge of youth and communities. Jessica, for example, asked, “In what ways does a game created by Indigenous people help both the community represented and those who are not a part of the community?” Kendall observed, “How would you feel if this was your culture being played by others?” Joe asked, “What can we learn from a game like this?”

Building upon “already-present” and evolving literacy practices across classrooms and communities challenges deficit narratives of teaching and learning with youth—particularly students of color—in English classrooms (Howard). Such work emboldens ways in which English teachers, teacher educators, and researchers may envision students as both learners and teachers, themselves, within and beyond classroom contexts.

**The Tense Crisis of Our Identity**

Dan Bruno

When we ask about students’ current understanding of literacy learning, we should also ask about that learning itself. In a recent Socratic seminar with my students, many of them voiced what they believed are the benefits of reading literature. Common threads included the following:

- It is interesting to study another culture.
- I like to see how different social groups interact.
- These books teach us about the past.

As I was listing these discussion points for assessment purposes, I was struck by the consistency of
Building Literate Identities on What Already Exists

students’ reactions. When I think about studying culture, social structures, and the past, I think about social studies—not English. Arguments about the importance of interdisciplinary studies aside, this curricular redundancy made me wonder about the value of English class if it is accomplishing the goals of social studies courses (and vice versa). Thinking about this feature, and the work of scholars such as Robert Scholes, it was apparent that one of the most enduring tensions in English language arts is the identity of the subject itself.

Would Vaughn’s administrators, focused as they must be on the tangible data points of a standardized world, see the literacy value in his students’ YouTube video sharing? If not, is that something for which we, the stewards of our discipline, should argue more stridently? What do I do that is cognitively unique to my classroom? This is a good question in the day and age of English as the place where students are made literate so that they can read math and science textbooks.

This brings me to those debates I hear every year in November about the nonfiction reading quotas in the Common Core State Standards. After all, we are being asked to consider the following:

In grades 6–12, ELA programs shift the balance of texts and instructional time towards reading substantially more literary nonfiction . . . including essays, speeches, opinion pieces, biographies, journalism, and historical, scientific, or other documents written for a broad audience.

And yet, we exist alongside teachers of other disciplines (such as science, mathematics, and social studies) who seem to look perpetually at our English departments and ask why students cannot read their materials. What if our place in the panoply of knowledge acquisition is more work-a-day than our desires suggest? Should skill and process be the focus of our time and practice?

This tension endures because our identity crisis has continued well past our adolescence and into the full maturity of the current system; I mean maturity in both its positive and pejorative meanings. We know the value of the literature we share with students, but we allow watered-down “translations” of works written in plain English to permeate classrooms. We know the flexibility and beauty of the English language, but we penalize creative uses and new literacies.

These ontological arguments challenge us to grapple with notions of what we believe. Beliefs are tricky. They can be absolutely contradictory and absolutely true (little “t” true) at the same time. As John Mayer puts it:

Belief is a beautiful armor
But makes for the heaviest sword

The tension stretches further as psychometricians ask how we can measure the value of literary fiction versus literary nonfiction. We are asked to consider the National Assessment of Educational Progress’s suggested text percentages (the hallowed, but hated, 70 percent for grade 12 students), but we are not asked to consider who is making these suggestions and for what reasons. Ultimately, the blame falls on us. Our silence in these discussions about the core principles of our subject has allowed others to make specious data-driven arguments and decisions for a discipline that has ended up resembling everything but itself.

In Parker J. Palmer’s The Courage to Teach, the author depicts the classroom centered around ideas and principles, rather than skills and check-points. The most striking image in that depiction is a simple easel paper inscribed with a single word or idea that sits in the middle of the classroom. That word or idea is the focus of the students’ work, discussions, and assessments. The paper serves to remind students what they are struggling together to learn. What would be written on the easel in our English classrooms today? Would we need to have courage to teach words and ideas such as metaphor, simile, plot, argument structure? Or should that courage be reserved for teaching students to have civil discourse about civil issues that may make our courage be reserved for teaching students to have civil discourse about civil issues that may make our classrooms a little less predictable? That is a question I cannot and should not answer alone.

In the same seminar I alluded to in the opening paragraph, students praised the fact that the book they read dealt with the issue of sexual assault. Many of the students are young women getting ready to attend college. As they spoke about the impact of the novel’s depiction of sexual assault, they made connections to the alarming national statistics related to campus rape. They recognized the value in talking about the impact of being victims of such a crime. They said the novel was a valuable experience because it allowed them to “look at sexual assault and understand why it happens . . .
this understanding leads to talk . . . solutions come from talk.” One young man, an exchange student from Italy, made this observation: “Maybe the reason the hate groups you have here [i.e., in the United States] are popping up is because there is not talk about the issues they represent. They are given power because we are told not to speak.”

Perhaps there is an idea in that for all to rally around.

Works Cited


Vaughn W. M. Watson (watson2@msu.edu) is an assistant professor of English education at Michigan State University; he previously taught high school English for twelve years in New York City. An NCTE member since 2010, Vaughn has published in journals including American Educational Research Journal, Review of Research in Education, Literacy, Urban Education, and the International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education. Dan Bruno (morganwriter612@gmail.com) has taught remedial through AP level students in both language and literature. He currently teaches at Springfield Township High School in Erdenheim, Pennsylvania. He holds a Master of Education degree in Social Foundations of Education and National Board Certification in Young Adult/Adolescent English/Language Arts.

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