

# Creating New Figured Worlds Through Media Literacy

Jolene Zywica, University of Pittsburgh

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

**LRDC** Learning Research & Development Center



## Introduction

Here, I describe one teacher's effort to develop students' high-level media literacies in English Language Arts (ELA) through two course assignments: a creative writing narrative and a visual media project (e.g. movie trailer, poster). By high-level media literacies I refer to students' opportunities to be critical consumers of media (e.g., to analyze, evaluate, and critique texts) (Barron, et al., in press) and constructive producers of media through the use of disciplinary language and literary techniques. Specifically, I draw on the concept of figured worlds (Holland et al. 1998) to examine how opportunities to develop high-level media literacies within the class contributed to students' identities.

## Research Questions

1. What opportunities did students have to develop high-level media literacies?
2. Did, and if so, how did the development of high-level media literacies contribute to shifts in students' identities?

## Methods

### Setting and Participants

Research took place at a charter school in Western Pennsylvania during the 2010-2011 school year. Thirteen high school students were in the class: nine females and four males. Four case-study students were selected.

### Data Collection

Data collection took place over a six-month period. Research methods included classroom observations and field notes, student interviews, teacher interviews and artifact collection.

### Analysis

First, I developed a coding scheme (See Table 1) for understanding shifts in students' identities. Second, I created a list of the main instructional activities from each class period to help explore opportunities to develop high-level media literacies. I coded each activity using the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Curriculum and Assessment Framework (NCTE 2008) and an NCTE Standard. Table 2 categorizes each of these literacies as either consuming or producing and provides examples from the analysis.

Characteristics	Source	Our Application
Access to domains, spaces, associates, activities, or genres	Nasir & Hand, 2008	Opportunities to learn about and practice being a writer, visual media creator, critical consumer, storyteller, etc. through using domain specific language and skills
Discourse and genre specific language	Holland et al., 1998	Discussions, conversations, debates, critiques, presentations, explanations (written or verbal) that involve ELA specific language
Position or role	Holland et al., 1998; Nasir & Hand, 2008	Opportunities to take on specific roles or tasks, whether these are chosen by the student or assigned by the teacher. This includes taking on the role of video editor and being positioned as an expert storyteller.
Agency	Holland et al., 1998	Students' capacity to act on their world through creating artifacts and using them, reflecting on actions or artifacts, or providing feedback to peers, etc.
Clarity of goals	Holland et al., 1998	Students' clarity when describing goals or purposes, assignments, activities, etc. Vague and unclear goals suggest students don't find projects or ELA important or applicable to their lives
Connection or comparisons to others	Holland et al., 1998	Comparing one's life, artifact, or style of writing to other popular artists, writers, or filmmakers.
Artifacts	Holland et al., 1998	Student created projects, text, visual media, etc.

Table 1: Characteristics used to investigate students' identity shifts and Figured Worlds

	Literacies (NCTE)	Examples
Produce	Use tools to create new thinking or to communicate original perspectives	Summarize literary elements on chart paper to share with the class; Use Google Docs to share a story
	Communicate information and ideas in a variety of forms	Communicate ideas orally or through written text, drawings, sound recordings, etc.
	Communicate information and ideas to different audiences	Communicate ideas to peers, the teacher, film experts, etc.
	Articulate thoughts and ideas so that others can understand and act on them	Vocalize thoughts and ideas; Share writing or media produced
	Apply knowledge of techniques used to create meaning or emotional impact (high)	Use techniques like action or dialogue to develop a character; Use sound effects or music to create emotional impact
Consume	Analyze and evaluate the text and multimedia sources that they use (high)	Analyze a news source for credibility, bias, etc.
	Evaluate sources for techniques used to create meaning or emotional impact (high)	Deconstruct Peter Pan for characterization techniques and their impact; Analyze a video for visual effects and their impact
	Evaluate their own text or multimedia works (high)	Deconstruct one's own writing for characterization techniques and their impact; Analyze original video for visual effects and their impact; Consider feedback from others

Table 2. Explanation of Literacies

## Results

Results from this study show students' identities as writers shifted as a result of opportunities to participate in narrative production and to develop high-level media literacies. By contrast, students' identities as media creators did not shift in meaningful ways as a result of participating in the creation of visual media projects. Table 3 provides a summary of all four case-study students and their shifts in identity. Only when activities focused on a combination of high-level literacies did I see shifts in students' identities. Because visual media projects focused less on developing high-level media literacies, students did not have meaningful opportunities to develop identities as media creators.

Opportunities to develop high-level media literacies served as pivots for developing new identities and figured worlds. High-level media literacies became tools for evoking students' identities as writers.

Student	Identity Shifts		Student's Perceptions of Shifts
	Writer	Visual Media Creator	
Dacia			"I would pick drawing over it any day, but [writing]'s not as bad as I thought it was" (writer); "...I never had to put a cover to it and it was kind of new to actually take your story and come up with an overall picture for it..." (visual media creator)
Mischa			"yeah I think I've changed a lot."; "this had a very good impact on me because it made me think outside the box. It made me want to write more..." (writer); "I guess I was a real director" (visual media creator).
Charles			"I learned how to write a story better" (writer); "I can actually write longer before, not wanting to go do something else" (writer)
Aaron			"I learned that writing a story takes a lot of time and a lot of caffeine. A lot of sitting down and tuning out the environment" (writer)

= identity shift    = no evidence of identity shift    = partial shift

Table 3: Summary of Identity Shifts

## Discussion

I expand on Holland et al.'s (1998) and Vygotsky's concept of pivots by suggesting pivots can be more than artifacts. This study found that high-level media literacies served as pivots for evoking new identities and figured worlds. This discovery emphasizes the importance of teaching high-level media literacies during projects involving digital and visual media. Results also emphasize that the purposeful integration of media and technology in classrooms is a difficult undertaking for teachers, particularly when the goal is to develop high-level literacies and youths' identities. The only way to better prepare teachers for these types of classroom projects and activities is to provide more training, models, practice and feedback.

## References

1. Barron, B., Gomez, K., Pinkard, N., & Martin, C. K. (Eds.). (In press). *Cultivating Creative Production and Digital Citizenship in Urban Communities: The Digital Youth Network*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
2. Holland, D., Lachicotte, W., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
3. Nasir, N.S & Hand, V. (2008). From the court to the classroom: Opportunities for engagement, learning, and identity in basketball and classroom mathematics. *Journal of the Learning Sciences* 17 (2):143-179.
4. (NCTE), National Council of Teachers of English. (2007). *21st-Century Literacies: A policy research brief produced by the National Council of Teachers of English*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.