WHICH NEW LITERACIES? : DIALOGUE, PERFORMANCE, AND COMMUNITY IN YOUTH WRITING

Kathleen Gallagher
Burcu Yaman Ntelioglou

When educators talk about a multiplicity of literacies—computer literacies, situated literacies, local literacies, eco literacies—it is as if there can be endless additions to the basic concept of (print) literacy without altering our fundamental understanding of literacy itself. (Somerville, 2007, p.155)

In this paper, we wish to both lay out the terrain in the vast field known as ‘literacy’ and to challenge some of the prevailing measurements for literacy that have settled into, what we argue is, a far too static and individualized understanding of what should be the most invigorating and social aspect of schooling for youth. To do this, we will analyse preliminary data from a multi-site ethnographic project aimed, in large measure, at better understanding the complexities of (dis)engagement for high school students in schools in Toronto, Canada, New York City, USA, Lucknow, India and Kaohsiung, Taipei. We put forward for consideration some analyses of qualitative data that have begun to push us towards new ways of making sense of the relationship between our multiple ways of knowing and our multiple ways of expressing and narrating ourselves and our understandings. How youth see themselves in the contexts in which they express their understandings, how they engage dialogically in the process of writing, and how they imagine themselves into, and create contextual sensitivity for, worlds unfamiliar to them, can significantly shape their sense of mastery of language and communication. Performative and aesthetic literacies, as we have come to understand them, play a prominent role in our emerging definition of ‘new literacies’.

Literacy is, if nothing else, a rapidly expanding field of study; many recent contributions to the field have pushed open the floodgates of our literacy consciousness. Our interest in this paper is to lend our voices to the growing movement of researchers and educators who want to challenge what counts as literacy (see, for instance, Johnson and Cowles, 2009). Specifically, we aim to do this by learning from three different but interrelated agents in the project of school literacy: i) those students in school who do not feel literate, ii) their teachers who struggle to find modes of expression that will move them towards literate identities, knowers and narrators of their worlds, and iii) a drama curriculum and pedagogy that exceeds the boundaries of common literacy practices.

The Study

In this international research project, we are examining how the relationships among language, culture, identity, multicultural/equity policies, and student engagement have an impact on the lives of youth in schools and communities traditionally labeled ‘disadvantaged’. Through digital communication, we are bringing together students, teachers, and researchers from diverse cities to examine student engagement, pedagogical practices, literacy practices, and success at school from a local-global perspective. Such ‘live’ and digital methodologies illustrate how a multi-site ethnography is changed by multimodal, participatory, and digital/performative research methods. In brief, the research project is concerned with how young people ‘perform’ - socially, academically, and artistically- in school contexts situated in marginalized communities. The research therefore examines both the cultural and everyday performances and the artistic performances created by youth in the particular context of drama lessons.

Many scholars are arguing for a reconceptualization of student engagement as a

school outcome in its own right, and one that is integral to all other positive school outcomes (Brady, 2005; Smyth, 2005; Willms, 2003). Brady (2005) suggests that in order to succeed in school, students must attempt to master two types of inextricably linked curricula: the one mandated by the education authorities, and the 'hidden' or 'corridor' curriculum of engagement, acquired through informal daily interactions with administrators, teachers, peers, and others. As in recent literacy studies (see, for instance, Casey, 2009), the concept of student engagement is seen as a dynamic that determines what formal education means to young people and the degree to which they perceive their presence and participation in school as valued. Our project makes central the importance of student engagement in learning by drawing from the dramatic performances imagined and created by the youth using, as sources, their experiences of the 'hidden' or 'corridor' curriculum of engagement. These performances are then shared among the five research sites, through the use of multi-lingual digital technology, in order to open up the dialogue on engagement and performance. But performance relies heavily on the body, too, and the dialogue among youth and diversely situated researchers allows for explicit conversation about the ways in which our bodies know and communicate. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, (2004) suggest that, to date, research has not capitalized on the potential of engagement as a multidimensional construct that involves behaviour, emotion, and cognition. Our study, with its participatory arts-based design, proceeds from this very multi-dimensionality and aims to make more textured the idea of 'behaviour' by bringing a sociocultural lens to the classroom literacy practices by relying, theoretically, on ideas about performance that address both the everyday performances of youth and the intentional performed event that is drama.

Methods of Investigation & Data Sources

This research employs a “problem-posing ethnography” (Gallagher, 2007), with participatory live and digital drama methods. More conventional data collection methods are also called upon. These include: participant observation to build a profile of each site; individual and focus-group interviews to build profiles of ‘at-risk-ness’ and ‘resilience’; arts-informed artifacts; and policy and discourse analyses. The digital sharing and coding of data among international research sites through an on-line digital content management system represents a significant shift in the very notion of data collection and analysis. Currently research collaborators are documenting data through a project wiki. Discrete, linear activities, they are not. Instead, these processes benefit from a dialogic commitment across borders.

In all sites, semi-structured focus group and individual interviews with teachers centre on their; i) accounts of the school culture and structures; ii) pedagogical and curriculum choices and; iii) perception of the engagement of their students. Semi-structured focus group and individual interviews with students investigate relations in the classroom and explore: i) their self-perception; ii) their perception of others; iii) their engagement with literacy through theatre-making projects and; iv) the ‘corridor’ aspects of school/classroom culture. Creative arts-based modes of research and technology-assisted data gathering, such as language and literacy products made by students, digital video making, spatial mapping techniques and teacher-researcher email exchanges are also used.

For this paper, we will focus exclusively on data from one of our Toronto sites: Middleview Technical School. Specifically, we will analyse data from: i) fieldnotes; ii) teacher interviews; iii) student focus groups and; iv) student dramatic writing and

performance pedagogy. From the analysis of these data sets, we will put forward, and elaborate upon, two strong thematic findings related to the work of writing and performing in literacy learning. The themes are titled as follows:

1. Aesthetic Writing: Drawing from students' personal/cultural narratives;
2. "I guess I can write now": Performative literacy and audience feedback.

Through this excavation, we consider the value of our findings for current literacies practices and their related theories.

The New London Group (Cazden et al., 1996) has stressed the necessity for educational researchers to "rethink the fundamental premises of literacy pedagogy in light of increasing cultural and linguistic diversity and rapidly shifting communications media" (p.63). UNESCO, in their "Literacy for All" project, also emphasizes the need to consider different kinds of literacies. They write: "Literacy can no longer be seen as just a technical skill; as simply the ability to read and write" (UNESCO, 2008). The term 'literacy' is now routinely complemented by the terms 'Multiliteracies' (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Cazden et al., 1996) or 'New Literacies' (Laksher & Knobel, 2003; Street, 2003) or 'Critical Multiliteracies' (Botelho, 2007) due to the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in society; an increasing awareness of the social, economic and political forces enacted on curriculum; and the recognition of different modes of meaning-making and communication (audio, visual, linguistic, spatial, performative, etc.) by educators. Based on our outlined emerging themes, we particularly consider drama pedagogies as both creative and critical forms of literacy that offer empirical weight to newer theories of literacy articulated by many literacy theorists, and which may also open onto new modes of theorizing the multiple acts of literacy in schools.

Drama Pedagogies and Multiple Literacies: Some Initial Findings

Globalization, urbanization and migration are reshaping needs, goals and teaching in classrooms. Consequently, many educational researchers (Cazden et al., 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Laksher & Knobel, 2003; Street, 2003) have stressed the need to expand our notions of literacy and literacy practices to better equip students, in general, and linguistically diverse students in particular, with different creative and critical modes of communication and expression. Based on this sense of urgency, and the current policy emphasis on the need to examine literacy across the curriculum, we now turn our attention to the data we collected in drama classrooms. In our sites, high school students engaged in extensive dialogue and interaction that helped them to think both aesthetically and critically; they explored different writing media moving from free-writing to monologue crafting to script writing; they went to see plays and reflected on them. They also routinely explored metaphors, symbols, and performative moments within and beyond the classroom. They engaged in writing their own scripts and performed them for an audience. Paying attention to these diverse pedagogical practices that clearly produced different literacy opportunities has helped us to shape our thematic understandings of this complex and literacy-rich classroom.

Theme 1

Aesthetic Writing: Drawing from students' personal/ cultural narratives

Prior knowledge, skills, beliefs, and concepts significantly influence what learners notice about their environment and how they organize and interpret it. (Cummins, 2006, p.88)

Recent literacy research (Cummins, 2001; 2006; Botelho, 2007) and critical theory (Freire, 1970/2006) focus on the importance of validating students' prior knowledge, their culture, community, language and identity for literacy learning and deep understanding. In classrooms that are very multicultural, such as our Toronto drama classroom, we have observed that when the teacher's pedagogical practice activated students' prior knowledge and built upon their personal and cultural narratives, the students found the literacy practices in their classroom more purposeful and they, consequently, appeared more willing to invest themselves in their learning process. Gallagher (2007, p.78) has argued elsewhere that part of what powers teachers in the classroom is what they receive from their students and that we ignore that essential part of the equation at our peril. Booth (1998), too, has paid close attention to the ways in which drama makes it possible to hear students differently:

Reflection offers a chance to be heard, an opportunity to express ideas and feelings, an occasion for language. While drama is an active, "doing" medium, the reflective mode allows children to make meaning by examining and understanding their thoughts and perceptions both as spectators and participants. (p. 30)

Researcher Fieldnote, October 23, 2008, Middleview, first class visit:

As I enter the classroom following the teacher . . . [I hear] students' loud conversations, their teasing and pushing of each other. . . . One girl is completely

withdrawn from conversations in the classroom, busy texting. Four students continue to listen to their mp3 players even though the teacher invites them to the circle in the middle of the room. After a warm-up and a class discussion about how students felt they were mistreated by the staff at a theatre they had recently attended- how they were kept in the cold outside until just before the play began- Ms. S starts distributing students' journals and asks them to write their reflections about the play. They had seen a new Canadian play called Scratch by Charlotte Corbeil-Coleman. There is great resistance to this request: "Miss, can we skip that part?" "You can never watch a play for the fun of it, you always have to write something." Ms. S ignores the comments and continues to distribute the journals. On the board she writes down questions that the students are asked to use as a springboard:

-The play made me feel /think.....

-One performance that stood out for me wasbecause.....

-The "style" of the play wasbecause....

-I think the lice "metaphor" was used because.....

-The Title "Scratch" was used for different reasons. One was because the main character had head lice, but the other reasons were.....

-What I liked best about the play was What I liked least was

After the individual writing time, Ms. S asks students to share their writing with the class. After all the resistance to writing a reflection about this play, I am amazed by the thoughtful and personalized reflections students share with the class. Erica (All names of students are pseudonyms, selected by the students. They were also invited to identify themselves according to social markers of their choosing. We offered

possibilities for ways in which the students might ‘identify’ themselves socially but also left open the possibility to ‘mark’ themselves in ways that made sense to them.) *shares that she could relate to the play because one of her moms died. She goes on to say that it was very difficult to see her mom sick, so changed and frail. She is sorry that she didn’t have the courage to talk to her. Another student says it reminded her of the times she went to visit a young family member in the hospital and how hard that was because the child could not respond. . . . Another student says the play made her feel angry because it reminded her of her own mother who didn’t come to visit her at the hospital when she was little.*

During these discussions Ms. S genuinely engages with their writing and shares her own reflections, which are also surprisingly personal. She talks about her own failures, her failure to get into medical school and her fear of facing the truth when her own mother got sick.

We include this particular field note because it gives a good sense of the kind of classroom we are in. Early on, we became aware that writing personal responses was a valued form of communication in this context, and further, that sharing personal writing was a part of that. The prompts, at first glance, would not necessarily yield such profoundly personal reflections; but here they did. And we wanted to understand better why this was the case.

The Doors Project

Ms S. provided different writing opportunities for students throughout this project. In one of the earlier classes she asked the students to free-write about ‘doors’. In another class, using another experience of seeing a play with her students (*Scorched* by Wajdi Mouawad)

she began another writing activity. The instructions were:

- 1) write a monologue asking somebody to open a door. [building upon a scene from the play they saw];
- 2) write a monologue about why you can't open the door. What could be a reason for not opening a door?

In the next class, students were asked to bring to class three artifacts about a door, which could include stories, poems, drawings, pictures or other objects of interest. The teacher brought three large doors to class. She first asked students to introduce their artifacts to the class. Then they all placed their artifacts on the floor next to, or on top of, the doors, which lay on the floor. Students walked around the artifacts, looked at them carefully and read the pieces of writing that were interesting to them. Then they chose one artefact, sat beside it and free wrote about the artifact. And this was how they began developing the script for their performance of “The Door Project” (Nov 17, 2008 from fieldnotes).

(Students choosing artifacts for their writing, Nov. 6, 2008)

Student Excerpts

Writing about an open door:

Mya (Female, African, straight, average class, orthodox religion. Eritrean born) wrote:

I am very thankful that I live in Canada now. Because if I was back home, I would probably been joined in army after finishing high school for about 2 years at least. Even though my brothers (3 of them) are already in the army training. Which is really sad because they don't get good food or get to see their family members for pretty long times. I am very thankful for the people that had fight for my country with Ethiopia and past away for their land.

Writing about a closed door:

Chrysthanemum (Female, white, straight, middle class, Roman Catholic, Canadian born)

wrote about her memory of when her father left:

My first memory of the door wasn't good. It was when my father left. I remember calling to him "where are you going?" He looked back, crying. But didn't say a word. The door closing represented the beginning of a very hard time of my life. It's not like I was homeless or anything like that. But it was hard. Dinner wasn't every night, my mom wasn't always home. The door closing was a very big part of my life. It was years, maybe 2 before he came back. They opened the door and made us leave. The next door I entered was my grandparents. This door represented an escape with rules. It was obedience and forced respect. A life of dictatorship. Then I went back to the door of my house. Entering that place was the beginning of the beginning. It was only my two brothers and sister. But that beginning led to ends, with the front door not only closing, but slamming. My door to my old house represented the end before the beginning, I would say. I will always remember my front door. I have memories of looking at it, decorating it and just being around it. I miss that door because it was my home. But now that door is the home of others and I hope it is great to them, better than it was to me.

Writing about an artifact related to a 'door':

Jamila (Female, Black):

My big black key-When I first used you I was a little confused and you broke in the door. You were the brand new key to my apartment building! I was excited, it meant no more ghetto- no more Regent Park.

In her pedagogy, Ms. S asks students to use the ‘stuff’ of their lives to interact with ideas beyond their lives. That is to say, she asks students to bring their personal and cultural knowledge to worlds and ideas that extend that knowledge. What does the metaphor of the door mean in the contexts of their lives and how can they move that knowledge into new forms of expression? The resulting collective performance of “The Doors” created the framework in which diverse individual stories would relate to the whole. These ‘bridging’ pedagogical practices in this classroom foster the kind of “inquiry about life itself rather than the mastery of fragmented knowledge and skills” that Berghoff and Borgmann (2007, p. 22) argue for.

According to Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) to develop mature writers, we need to provide them not only with opportunities for ‘knowledge telling’ but also ‘knowledge transforming’. The writing for the collective creation in this drama classroom involved a process that started with ‘knowledge-telling’ and developed into a kind of ‘knowledge transformation’. Students were first given opportunities for knowledge-telling through free writing activities about doors; open doors and closed doors. Then students explored ‘knowledge transformation’ by choosing the relevant parts of their initial written pieces to think more explicitly about: genre; character development; the mood that they would like their writing to invoke; the relevance of their writing to the collective creation as a whole; and the audience for whom they were going to perform their collective creation. Students worked together, with their peers and the teacher, in this process of knowledge transformation. Booth (2008) writes, “ Language/thought/feeling/learning occur when the children have the power to shape the action and the learning” (p.9). Students,

from our observations, became “active designers of meaning” while planning their collective creation (Cazden et al., 1996). The New London Group outlines six design elements in the meaning-making process: “those of Linguistic Meaning, Visual Meaning, Audio Meaning, Gestural Meaning, Spatial Meaning, and the Multimodal patterns of meaning that relate the first five modes of meaning to each other” (p.65). All of these design elements were clearly present in the preparation and performance of the collective creation.

Cazden et al. (1996) also stresses the necessity of addressing the linguistic and cultural diversity in classrooms. They write:

Just as there are multiple layers to everyone’s identity, there are multiple discourses of identity and multiple discourses of recognition to be negotiated. We have to be proficient as we negotiate the many lifeworlds each of us inhabits, and the many lifeworlds we encounter in our everyday lives. This creates a new challenge for literacy pedagogy. (p. 71)

Identities are in flux in drama. The process of devising a collective performance provided creative and critical opportunities for students to enter each others’ worlds as in Appiah’s (2007) sense of ‘conversation,’ as real engagement with another’s ideas. They tried on different roles and identities, and expressed these through language. Learners juxtaposed different ideas, worldviews, languages and discourses in the context of an emerging piece of ‘fiction’, in their creation of *The Doors* performance. For example, in the dramatization of Chrystanemum’s monologue, one student took on the role of the mother who was hoping to start a new life with her new boyfriend and her daughter; and another

student played the mother's boyfriend who was upset because he felt his step-daughter was not appreciating all the material goods he was providing her; and Chrysthanemum became the character portraying the struggles of the adolescent daughter she wrote about in her monologue who felt ignored and mistreated. But Chrysthanemum's 'story' was transformed by these other 'characters'. Her life-world was brought into dialogue with other characters' reactions, insights, and challenges. We watched the solo-written monologue transform into a presentation of possible relationships and possible dialogues. This new mode of co-creation produced a new fiction from an individual story that extended Chrysthanemum's story well beyond her own imagined context.

Mya's monologue about the portrayal of Canada as a country with 'open doors' was juxtaposed, in the larger collective work, with two scenes depicting how Canada might be seen as a 'closed door' in terms of work opportunities for skilled workers such as doctors and lawyers, who are internationally educated but have no Canadian experience. This idea emerged from yet another student's writing. Erica's monologue was a reaction to the ubiquitous discourses of homophobia she experiences in her school life. Her writing troubled the notion that heaven's door is closed to gays and lesbians. Her monologue also exemplified a moment of transformation through writing; it articulated a combination of both self-discovery and social change. But more importantly, when brought into dialogue with other pieces in the collective whole, her monologue was 'surrounded' by the very voices (played by other students) she despised and came to challenge as a result of their embodiment of those ideologies. In other words, Erica's monologue came 'face-to-face' with her imagined detractors and she had to find a way through her story in dialogic relation to those voices. This is not to suggest that the pedagogical practice of dialogue is a

panacea, but only to suggest that individual thinking and writing is marked by real and imagined audiences who receive our words in contextually specific ways and cause us to rethink our own thinking and writing. These experiences of ‘writing-in-dialogue’ also had clear aesthetic dimensions: how should they represent these ideas through their physical embodiment? ; where should they stand in relation to one another?; what is the image they want to communicate to the audience about the victory of the lone voice against the collective voices of homophobia? And through these negotiations, students from diverse ethnic, cultural, linguistic, socio-economic, gender and sexual-orientation subject positions created a physical and embodied representation - through story- of the social, political, economic and historical discourses always already present in a richly multicultural/racial/linguistic urban context.

Theme 2

“I guess I can write now”: Performative literacy and audience feedback

Ms. S (White, Female, Jewish, Canadian-born):

I think there should be like an oral stage in between the writing and the next writing because I think when the student reads what they have written out loud, if their purpose is to make the listener understand, then as they are reading they recognize the inherent problem between what they meant to say and what they have written.

(Teacher Interview, February 3rd, 2008)

One of the ongoing literacy debates centres on the role of orality in reading and writing.

Bell (2008) states,

Long before the written word, information was stored in bodies, in cultural memories, and in oral traditions, enacted only in their performances...The knowledge stored in bodies was passed on, generation to generation, through performance- face to face, participatory, immediate, and empathetic. (p.57)

In this drama classroom, when students shared their individual monologues, they were able to see, immediately and tangibly, what they were successful in communicating and what they were not successful in communicating. Performative literacy, according to Fels (2002) is the ability of students to interact, express, respond and critique within performative spaces. In the context of ‘classroom drama’, O'Connor (2005) explains that “at the centre of classroom drama is improvised role play designed to create meaning for the participants rather than for an external audience” (p.1). We witnessed students in the drama class benefit from sharing their work during these in-class dialogues, as well as through the more obvious sharing of their work with an external audience. The two activities accomplish different things. The in-class work helps students understand how they are being read and how successfully they have communicated. They know this not because of applause from a faceless audience, but because their peers have listened to them and responded ‘in role’ in ways that help them understand, in the moment, whether they have been heard as they wish to be heard. This ‘in-role’ work further allows them to play with their own words, to ascribe meaning in new ways, as a result of dialogic exchange. Booth (1991) writes, “drama forces participants to consider the content and context of the statements, and provides a forum that allows for communication, restating, and subsequent interaction (p. 95).” When the writing/composition and the performance/communication are united in the

drama class, “it turns the idea of audience into something concrete and participatory” (Fishman, Lunsford, McGregor, & Otuteye, 2005, p.228).

During our focus group interviews, when students were asked to describe an artistic moment, a moment that stood out in some way for them, Bell commented:

Bell (female, white, straight, middle class, agnostic, grade 11):

That for me is my writing. I’ve never personally taken the time to write about anything specific. Like I mean I kept journal logs and stuff like that. . . . But writing, I didn’t think I would be any good at it because I’m not a top English student. I’m not very bad but I’m just about average. I never thought I could write in artistic forms like just express myself really. But when I started writing in my journal (in drama class) and having, like, the reactions from Miss S and my fellow peers saying wow that’s really good, I really liked it. . . . But I wasn’t expecting it because I never tried. It is different and I guess I can write now. I think I have the confidence that I can write and it doesn’t have to be a certain way. Like what people say, like I can step out of that limit. And be like ‘I’m really good at this’. (Focus Group Interview, Middleview, November 23, 2008)

Bell chose a doorknob as her artifact. Her piece of writing became the first scene in their collective door performance:

Doorknobs are objects everyone overlooks. They can take many shapes and sizes. But did you ever personally take time to figure out what a doorknob actually is? It is not just a piece of metal. . . . It symbolizes a connection, a connection you have had with others’ lives for that brief second. It may seem like the general audience you are around with at school don’t seem to care. But they are not everybody. .There are

people out there who care. But did you ever give us the chance before you judged how we looked on the outside, rather than the inside? It is always about judgment...
(Nov 17, 2008)

This piece of writing is emblematic of so many of the students' expressed need to connect with some larger (and often, in their eyes, more caring) audience. Ms. S, in an illuminating interview, articulates this phenomenon in the following way and we cite her here at length, given the strength of her analysis:

Ms. S: One of the things I find the most powerful about writing in drama, is that it connects to our need as human beings to connect to each other. It's always powerful throughout our lives, but maybe even most powerful when you're a teenager, because of the cognitive place that you're at, and also your need to take risks, and to experiment, and to develop your own self. That developing of one's self can't happen in isolation. It happens with others, and in relation to others. Writing is a natural way to understand the self. People talk about journaling and writing about yourself, but until you read that and share that with others, it doesn't grow. A lot of kids need to share. There's no reason to write, unless they're sharing. There are some exceptions, of course. There are some kids who are really drawn to the written word, and to writing, and to making that an interior experience, but the whole idea of the community is created when one shares one's thoughts. That is a real motivating factor in drama, and I think the writing is a springboard to that. If we just said, "OK share your thoughts on this topic", we wouldn't get such a rich response. It's mediated through the writing. So change is

the response, but there's something about learning the process of how you yourself can shape your words and play with language and then share that with others. . . . [Students are] more motivated to create this version of themselves through writing because they're sharing it with their peers, and they want to either connect or impress or reveal or flirt . . . all those things that we talk about when we're doing scene work in drama, where you're always trying to do something with it. If you're just writing for your teacher unless you have a real transference with your teacher, and you really want to impress them, it's not as engaging as an audience, as purposeful as an audience.

Kathleen (female, White, first-generation Canadian of Scottish descent, researcher): That's right. You're reminding me of what one of your students said in one of our focus groups. She saw herself as a mediocre English student. But in drama class she felt like a writer. It was a really poignant moment, because she was saying something about her identity that was so fundamental to not only her self-concept but also to her school identity. It was in drama class that she realized, "I am a writer." She saw that as totally different from in an English class where she is asked to write more often yet doesn't feel like a writer.

Ms S: The assignments that students are so often given in English classes are not creative assignments. The way that I ask students to write, is immediate. . . to capture the immediacy of thought and so I say "You have five minutes, and you can't take the pen off the page, and you can't censor yourself, and you can't self-

edit.” It is so hard to connect with the immediacy of thought. The way that I think the writing process is broken down in English, it is so far away from those. . . . Our immediate thoughts are often the most interesting and the most worthy of exploration. But we censor those, we create this very long and distanced process.

Kathleen: There is something about what you are saying, which makes writing accessible to so many more students

Ms S: Yes, and it removes the pressure of perfection...

Not only were the immediacy of communication and the audience clearly important factors for the students, but this ‘community’ was also where the teacher sought membership:

Ms. S: There has to be some sort of vulnerability that you take as a teacher. Sometimes it is to write with them and to read what you wrote. . . It is important to be in that position where- if you are asking them to create and show their work and share their work, you have to do that too.

In one of our early classroom visits, we observed Ms. S write a monologue about her personal experiences, share it with the students and ask them to brainstorm about ways that it could be performed using verbal and nonverbal language, sound effects, and props. She used her own narrative to model the different possibilities of writing and performing monologues. When we discussed this experience Ms. S said, “*modeling is very important but you want to be careful about that because you don’t want them to be copying*”. Ms. S taught us a great deal about being present in one’s pedagogy. And she held expectations that her students would be present to one another, in meaningful ways, as they worked out

who they were as writers and performers of their often fragile, but deeply felt, ideas.

Making Literacy Critical: Some Concluding Remarks

The two themes we have focused on in this paper have taught us about the place of aesthetic, dialogic, and performative forms of literacy in the adolescent classroom. In watching literacy unfold in multiple and dynamic ways in these early days of research, we have also seen critical forms of literacy emerge from the pedagogies of drama and the spaces of drama classrooms. We have watched students surf the Internet for information about Algeria because they saw a play set in the context of a civil war they knew nothing about. Ms. S explains:

Plays contain little worlds of meaning... There are lots of different ideas that can be bound together in a play. There is a spontaneous need to learn more things, because we went to the theatre and collectively didn't understand something. We want to know because we want that experience to be more enriched. There are things we need to know to really understand this play. There is a reason to know more. (February 3, 2009)

We have watched vehement debates on the election of Barack Obama because the current events of another country mattered to the students at Middleview; and the teacher regards these spontaneous conversations as “gold in teaching”. The storytelling, the plays they saw and the ones they created, the ‘personalizing’ work of drama, as Ms. S describes it, opened up a critical engagement with the world that is not typical of many school contexts.

“Learning the art of debate”, she says, “linking your idea to somebody else’s idea”, that is

what drama work is enabling. The space of the drama classroom, of these situated bodies in a negotiated space, creates, more often than not, a laboratory for experimentation of many forms of ‘new literacies’ through rich engagements with the world beyond the classroom walls.

Semioticians have persuasively argued (see Barthes 2001; Dansei 1993) that we are in the business of reading the world, not just the word, which is, of course, as tied to ‘literacy’ as it is to the complex social processes of identity-construction and the nurturing of a critical engagement with the world. The teacher in our site, through her performance pedagogies, has opened up the question of what it means to be literate and what a community of differently literate people might accomplish together. This notion of a community is tied to all the major themes we have begun to explore through our data. And as we bring this work- digitally- to our global sites and engage youth across sites in conversations about their writing and performances, we have yet another layer of ‘community’ to consider. There is much more to analyse here, especially in terms of critical literacy practices, but that is the work of another paper. Drama thrives, however imperfectly, on the idea that a diverse group of people can come together and make meaning. It can be, as we have argued here, a profound experience of literacy for the adolescent learner. To close, the last word is left to Ms. S; she keeps us both hopeful and sober about what might be accomplished, for teachers and students alike, in these rich, difficult, and complex sites:

Ms. S: For me partly it is a personal need for connection and community, for something to happen, for it to feel like a moment, and for it not to just feel like part of the daily grind and slog. We create these moments that live, and feel compelling

and exciting. To do that, it takes a certain amount of nudging and vulnerability on your part [as a teacher] to share as well. In the class that you saw it did happen, but it also didn't happen, in a lot of ways. That is fine [because] the work is flawed; it is never perfect. That's what makes it dynamic and interesting... (Interview, February 3, 2009)

Notes:

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