

Secondary Orality and Emerging Literacy in an Age of Multimodal Literacy

by Matthew Skillen and Kenan Metzger

Jallal is hard at work making a video on his laptop at the kitchen table in his parent's suburban home when Malcolm's picture pops up on the screen. "How ya doin'?" Jallal's friend asks.

Without answering, Jallal responds with a question, "Where you at?"

"Australia."

Jallal is elated by his friend's answer. He has always wanted to experience Australia. He asks, "How's the weather?"

"Take a look at the live feed." Malcolm points his webcam to a nearby window. Jallal can see a deluge of rain falling outside.

"Wow, that's some storm." Jallal is still taken aback by the strength of the storm.

"Hold on I got Nijar on the line." Nijar's picture pops up.

"Hey, guys, need directions out of the storm, Malcolm?" Nijar engages screen-sharing permissions before bringing up a real time satellite view of the roads out of Sydney. Malcolm gets into his vehicle. Just as he finds his way out of the storm, Jallal sends a text message to a hostel in a nearby town to reserve a room for his friend.

"Hey, I'm uploading my new video to my website as we speak. You should both check it out." Jallal offers.

"Soon as I get outa here." Malcolm says as he navigates out of the torrential rain.

"That's cool," says Nijar, "Want some help editing? I'll make the changes and upload it to your server."

"Thanks, Nijar. Hey, Malcolm, call us when you get to the hostel."

"K, bye." At that, Jallal's friend ends the video chat session and makes his way to the nearby hostel. Jallal continues to work on his video as Nijar navigates to Jallal's website to view the progress Jallal has made so far.

This dialogue isn't part of some science fiction movie in the future; all this technology is available here and now. With podcasts and vodcasts, Skype, Google maps, and instant messaging, young adults today can do multiple tasks

in rapid succession. To call this multitasking is inaccurate since they are really only paying attention to one thing at a time. Young adults have just become adept at juggling many bits of information at the same time. For educators, this presents particular challenges. First of all, how do we compete, or do we need to compete with all this new technological innovation? Perhaps it is not a matter of competition as much as it is integration. Maybe we need to acknowledge that these thousands of bits of information our students are dealing with each day are merely new and exciting literacies. Educators, "can start to change their attitudes about literacy to broaden their understanding of, and appreciation for, students' literacies by attending as closely to students' online reading and composing practices as they do to their own more traditional writing practices" (Hawisher, Selfe, Moraski, and Pearson, 2004, p. 677). It is entirely possible that young adults do not necessarily see the educational value of all these new technologies; perhaps they do not see beyond their entertainment value. Perhaps if we as educators can find ways to integrate these new media into our classrooms, we can help our students to sort through the thousands of pieces of information and find what is valuable for their intellectual growth.

Secondly, we need to understand that technology is merely a tool for understanding the world. It isn't about having all the fancy bells and whistles; it is about contextualizing the literacy experiences of our students. As Ong (1960) says, "These new media are not just new gadgets to be employed for what we are already doing with other less efficient gadgets. They are part of a shift which is inexorably affecting our very notion of what communication itself is" (p. 249). If teachers can acknowledge and nurture multimodal literacies in their classrooms, young adults will be more apt to become involved in the learning process. Teachers can put this into practice by "expanding their definitions of 'texts' and 'composing' practices to include a range of other behaviors: among them, reading and composing images and animations; creating multimedia assemblages; combining visual elements, sounds, and lan-

guage symbols into alternatively organized and presented forms of communication in digital environments” (Hawisher et. al., 2004, p. 677).

When we began our initial discussion about how this might work and the implications for teaching young adult literature, we talked about students creating videos in response to books, stories, and poems they had read. But, what are the underlying implications of the use of such technologies? What sort of sociocultural milieu are our students coming out of when they come to us? There is a cultural shift that began about fifty years ago, which has been moving even more rapidly lately with the advent of personal computers and handheld electronic devices. Walter J. Ong (1960), a man well ahead of his time, began to see this shift from a literate culture to what he terms a secondary oral culture. He says, “One of the principal causes of the shift in status of reading and grammar is the increased importance of oral-aural communication in our technological society” (p. 247). Young adults are constantly inundated with thousands of bits of information every day, much of it visual in nature. These inundations along with the overwhelming oral/aural nature of multimedia communication, creates literacy experiences more akin to oral cultures. These literacy experiences are in direct contrast to the dominant culture’s focus on literate cultural experiences.

This means that although our academic structures are still based on traditional western notions of literacy, the students who come to us are operating from a visual and oral rhetorical stance. So, young adults are in fact part of a secondary oral culture. Therefore, we as educators need to make a sociocultural shift in our thinking not just in our methodologies. Despite this need for us to make a shift it seems many of our students struggle with the most basic awareness of their own literacy. When we began to think about this we realized some of the research on emerging literacy might apply here. In the past, much of this research has focused on younger children of elementary school age. But, if we secondary teachers are honest with ourselves, we will acknowledge that we have struggling readers, non-readers, and well below grade level readers sitting in our middle school and high school classrooms. In a study conducted by Vincent (2005) “the students who struggled with language...produced...multimodal creativity” (p. 4). Thus, the research on emergent literacy and multimodal literacies can be applied to young adults. We know that literacy emerges first from visual representations. These representations eventually become sequential and narrative in nature. When the written word is added and is integrated with the visual, meaning is created. At some

point it seems the dominant literate culture discourages this integration of the visual with the textual. We should at some point find a way to continue the integration of the visual and the textual and the visual and the oral/aural. According to Phillips Parette, Hourcade, Boeckmann, and Blum (2008) students could begin engaging literacy content presented through technology presented by other students, and eventually move to higher levels in both literacy and technology, expressing themselves in contemporary and relevant formats (p. 238). The primary way to fully utilize the cultural orality of our students and to encourage their emerging literacy is to find ways to evaluate their growth. According to Koplitz Harty (2003), students’ “oral responses to stories in the classroom [need] to be validated in a similar manner to the validation of written/drawn story responses” (p. 7). We must also allow students to participate in the evaluation of their growth.

The key to this evaluation is balance. Students must be evaluated on a multitude of measures, combined for a comprehensive view of their literacy achievement. For example, one could create a benchmark attainment assessment profile (Harty, 2003). The evaluator could allow the learner to demonstrate a level of proficiency on three measures: oral retelling, written and kinesthetic. The goal would be to show that the student was able to attain the desired benchmark, but through a comprehensive approach (Harty, 2003). So, if they were able to show completion on retelling, minimum on written and average on kinesthetic, they would in fact demonstrate they had reached the goal set for them. Vincent (2005) acknowledges students “offered the scaffolding of non-verbal modes of representation by using a computer multimedia tool, [saw] their multimodal literacy skills [emerge], something that would never be tested by a conventional literacy test under the present curriculum imperatives in most education systems” (pp. 4-5). Therefore, more comprehensive evaluation tools are needed to measure these multimodal literacies.

In looking at how these literacies relate to young adult literature, we reflected on the value of using student created videos as responses to the literature. As Ong (1980) states, “Technologies dealing with the word all lend themselves to deep interiorization, including computer-technologies” (p. 142). Thus, by creating videos students can truly interact with the text in a meaningful way. In addition, the sharing of the video on venues like YouTube affords for a deeper creation of meaning since, “Ultimately, meaning is not assigned but negotiated, and out of a holistic situation...shared by speaker and hearer in oral communication, [while] in written communication [it] is

generally not shared” (Ong, 1988, p. 267).

It is obvious to most teachers who work with young adults that a good deal of their students’ time is spent online. Whether it is by communicating through Facebook or Twitter, or sharing photos and videos on websites like YouTube, Flickr, and Shutterfly, these emerging digital natives are carrying out their lives online. Digital media that is created and shared online is a defining example of the aforementioned cultural shift that is defining an entire generation of readers, writers, and communicators. As we have mentioned above, there are a number of trends evident online that young adult readers are using these technologies to celebrate and discuss their favorite books and stories from a natural oral/aural stance. As we take a closer look at this growing phenomenon, and how these new technologies can be integrated into the classroom, there are a number of considerations teachers should make.

First, there are a number of outlets available for digital media producers and consumers to exchange information using the World Wide Web. For example, in a 2007 article Rozema suggests that student and teacher produced podcasts, audio recordings published to the World Wide Web, formatted as recorded book chats, serve as an engaging replacement for the traditional book report. Scripting, recording, editing and publishing a podcast is an engaging activity that encourages students to talk about what they have read. Student interest is further amplified by the considerations of reaching a broader audience when their work is shared on the Internet. While Rozema (2007) provides only anecdotal data from a podcasting project undergraduate college students completed as part of their study of Young Adult Literature, this article encourages middle school and high school teachers to incorporate podcasting in their classrooms.

Secondly, while podcasting has carved out a permanent presence on the web, digital video has also become extremely easy to capture, edit, and publish for the world to view online. With every entry-level mobile telephone now equipped with digital video cameras, and intuitive

video editing software like Apple’s iMovie, digital short films that used to require expensive professional grade equipment can now be composed with a few pieces of technology with a manageable price tag. This is why video sharing websites like YouTube have become wildly popular for digital film makers of all ability levels to share their latest compositions with the rest of the online community.

If you haven’t taken the opportunity to search YouTube for videos about Young Adult Literature, you really should take a moment to do so. When you navigate your web browser to YouTube’s website and search for your favorite YA title, you will probably find a number of short digital features dedicated to the book. These digital videos take a number of forms, but there are a couple of popular flavors that overwhelm this area of YouTube. Student-producers, who are often posting videos in response to the books they read for homework assignments, upload new content every single day. Videos composed for these purposes are usually book previews, similar to movie previews, which combine images, music, video clips, title frames,

and eye-catching transitions in a single video to encourage viewers to pick up a copy of the book being previewed. These types of videos vary in quality, but it is apparent that those who take the additional

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time to create these book previews are demonstrating the ability to draw connections between the book they have read and the audible and visual elements incorporated in their videos. And, in some cases, the book previews portray a student’s advanced comprehension skills as well as his or her keen understanding of the book, and the important messages translated in the text, are illustrated in the video.

Beyond producing previews of their favorite books, young adult readers, turned digital movie producers, have also uploaded another type of digital short that can only be described as general interpretations, or dramatic retellings, of their favorite stories. In most cases, these reenactments summarize the main plot with hypnotic youthful energy that draws in viewers to examine the student-producer’s perspective and interpretation of the text. Again, like the book previews mentioned above, this

style of student-generated materials are diverse in quality. However, even in the examples posted online that are lower in quality—with perhaps less than refined multimodal elements like music, transitions, and title frames—a number of higher order literacy activities are exhibited. So, whether the latest student interpretation of a new YA title is the work of a future blockbuster to go viral on the web, or if it is humble oral retelling of a longstanding YA classic, it is obvious that digital video has become a popular outlet for students who read and enjoy young adult literature.

Additionally, video sharing websites like YouTube enhance the literacy experience of young adults through the feedback viewers post in response to the uploaded video. Comments of support and expanded threads of discussion on related topics provide authentic evaluation from the online community for the student-producer to build upon for his or her next online release. And, while young adults garner helpful support from the comments provided by their new audience, they also gain real-world validation for their efforts. With each new upload, and the corresponding comments that follow, young readers turned movie producers are able to evaluate their own progress in developing new visual literacies.

Although we teachers recognize the impact these technologies have on the way our students communicate in their day-to-day lives outside of school, as we have mentioned above, they may not understand how these practices are literacy experiences. That is why, as Ong (1960) suggests, it is imperative that classroom teachers celebrate these new and emerging literacies and encourage students to stretch their use and understanding of them. Developing avenues for students to demonstrate their technological know-how in a supportive environment will foster a sense of acceptance and opportunity, which will ultimately fuel creativity and intellectual freedom. However, providing the guidance, technology and time in a real-world classroom takes a great deal of planning and commitment.

First of all, if you are completely unfamiliar with digital media, and how to apply it to what you are already doing in the classroom, you may need to consult colleagues who have successfully incorporated digital media production in their practices. The internet has made communication among teachers far more accessible than it has been in the past. Classroom teachers are not only sharing their students' digital compositions online, they are also talking about how they are making time in their curriculum to include instruction that assists students in developing literacy skills beyond traditional academic literacies.

Teachers who are ready to embrace these principles

and celebrate relevant modes of communication should be prepared to frame these activities in such a way that artfully connects traditional reading and composition strategies. Just as teachers validate writing that demonstrates critical thought and strong idea development, teachers should recognize similar characteristics demonstrated in digital compositions as well. This is not to say that digital compositions can be evaluated in the same manner as written compositions. However, teachers who understand how these multimodal literacies contribute to the overall literacy development of young adults will often begin the process of assessing visual literacy skills by finding out what their students know. Then, well-intended literacy instructors build on what their students contribute and challenge them to sharpen their skills using the tools they have at their disposal.

In this way, teachers can capitalize on the oral/aural nature of multimedia communication, creating literacy experiences that nurture the oral culture of their students. Although they are operating from a visual and oral rhetorical stance, and thus a secondary oral culture, young adults can integrate the literate traditions of the dominant culture. As educators make the sociocultural shift in thinking necessary to legitimize the integration of young adult literature and video production, they can use secondary orality to strengthen students' literary culture.

The emergent literacy of young adults lends itself to the development of multimodal literacies. Since literacy emerges first from visual representations, video production is the logical place to begin. As students develop their videos further they become sequential and narrative in nature, thus moving to a new level of emergent literacy. When text is added, whether through the written or spoken word, and is integrated with the visual, meaning is created.

By building a bridge between the oral/aural culture in which young adults actively participate beyond traditional literacies that dominate the normal school day, language arts teachers at all levels invite new possibilities into their classroom. The integrated classroom invites young adults to take their understandings of literature and establish meaning in their literate lives. There are new possibilities in such learning environments to create and interpret media using a multiplicity of new literacy skills, skills that are becoming increasingly important in a rapidly changing world of information. Teachers who foster these emergent literacies, thereby encouraging students to incorporate visual and oral rhetorical elements in their schoolwork, are embracing the promise of literacy instruction that is relevant and meaningful.

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Making Sense of the World: An Interview with Meg Rosoff

by Steven Watson

What would God do if She or He were omnipotent, incapable of maturing, and accountable to no one?

This is the question Meg Rosoff asks in her new book, *There Is No Dog*. The answer, according to Rosoff, would be to create a world very similar to our own. In the book, Rosoff parts with all established religions to write her own version of the creation. At the same time, she deftly borrows from Greek and Biblical mythology to create her characters. Bob is an eternal teenage boy whose mood swings keep the Earth in chaos. His mother, an active alcoholic, is incapable of monogamy or a real relationship. Another divine being, Mr. Emoto Hed, kills gods and mortals alike to revenge the most trivial slights.

The book does make a case for God being either negligent or malicious. Rosoff's ideas are interesting, but her thoughts on the book and on the YA genre are even more thought provoking. I spoke with her about *There Is No Dog*, the nature of genre rules, and her views on God.

SJ: How does the questioning/philosophical component of TIND compare to that of traditional "adult" texts (Dante, Milton for example)?

The question of who or what God is has been dealt with in thousands of texts. I don't see myself really as a "non-adult" writer, just a writer with a particular interest in adolescence. Every writer makes sense of the world as best he/she can. I found a construct that seems to make perfect sense of what a mess the world is in, and used that construct to write my book. As a person and a writer I'm not constrained by the way people have traditionally thought about a religion so I didn't worry about an old white male God ruling heaven and consigning humans to hell – which strikes me as a pretty peculiar idea in any case. I enjoy Milton and Dante and love Boticelli's versions of heaven and hell in the same way I enjoy Raphael and Titian and Rubens' versions of religious painting. But my philosophy is my own.

SJ: Do you think it's important for teachers to open a dialogue about God without advocating any certain religion? Any suggestions for how to navigate that fine line?

I'm a confirmed atheist, but I'm interested in religion