

# Transforming English Language Arts Class into Multimodal Arts Explorations

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In the introduction to the 2007 special issue of *English Education*, “The Arts, New Literacies, and Multimodality,” Peggy Albers and Jerome Harste describe the trends toward technology and art as “redefining the world of literacy and basic notions of what it means to be literate” (p. 6). Further, more than a decade ago, they felt “a sense of urgency about the arts and technology and the English language arts classroom” (p. 6). Their sense of urgency has transformed over these eleven years into a full-blown, full-volume tornado warning siren in 2018.

Times, they are a-changin’.

When we think of the pinnacle of education, it might be capped by someone writing a dissertation or defending a final project. Oh no! A university faculty member talking about dissertations, one might ask, what does that have to do with teaching middle school English? I’ll assert that the dissertation has nothing to do with teaching English, though my adviser described writing one as simply writing a five-paragraph essay in long—really long—form. Instead, I’m using it here as an example of something archaic and outdated that still reigns supreme. Dating back to medieval times, a dissertation exemplifies the product of a significant project that is typically represented in 50,000 to 100,000 words printed on reams of paper. In school, it’s almost always the longest thing anyone has ever written; it is almost always written.

I recently attended a friend’s Master of Fine Arts exhibition at the University of Arkansas. “Palimpsest” featured life-size photography in a studio space and a

reception replete with twelve different kinds of homemade pie, hot dark coffee, and warm conversation. It was a celebration of a distinct and distinguished project. This type of exhibition isn’t out of the ordinary in the art world, and the celebration—at least for the audience in attendance—was at least as much a focus as the creations on display. I took in the space and wondered how a classroom set up more like an art exhibition space might work.

What most people might point to is that with an art form like photography, a totally visual exhibition is necessary. But recent final projects of traditionally text-based disciplines have resulted in such dissertations as a graphic novel (Nick Sousanis’s *Unflattening*, Teachers College, Columbia) and a rap album (A. D. Carson’s *Owning My Masters: The Rhetorics of Rhymes and Revolutions*, Clemson University). What used to be strictly text—and in many cases pretty dry text—is transformed into something live, lively, and engaging. As I listened, I wondered how often our classrooms sound like a rap album in place of students reading traditional texts aloud and what skills our students

might need to create such original products in their lives.

As I write, middle school English teacher and doctoral candidate at the University of Georgia, Rachel Kaminski Sanders, is preparing

to present *[text]ure: Weaving Together an Understanding of New Literacies*, a text-free dissertation. The advertisement directly challenges the status quo:

*A legitimate question remains at the heart of all of this: What kinds of activities are valued in our classrooms?*

The dissertation is the seminal piece of a PhD research program, yet few students have produced one in a format solely outside the written word. This creates a contradiction between scholars who acknowledge the importance of new literacy practices, yet do not accept their production as true intellectual work. (Sanders, 2018)

While the graphic novel and rap album dissertations were and are revolutionary, what Sanders seeks to do here eclipses those efforts because those products were text. “As an artist, fashion designer, and female educator, the scholar hopes to bring art and fashion, femininity and the body, from the academic margins where they lie” (Sanders, 2018). How often do our classes look like Rachel’s dissertation and operate completely sans the written word?

English as it is taught, nurtured, developed, and edified today should, in many cases, not look like it did ten or fifty years ago. One of many ways that it can change is by incorporating non-print texts as part of the core curriculum and require the same in response from students. A legitimate question remains at the heart of all of this: What kinds of activities are valued in our classrooms? Will skills like writing a rap album, for example, prepare students to succeed on standardized tests or in their high school English classes? In thinking of the literature-heavy curriculum of the schools in the area where I work (Fayetteville, AR), I’m not so sure moving middle school students toward such goals will ultimately help them find success. And what’s more, I’m perfectly fine with that and wouldn’t recommend that teachers anywhere sacrifice doing what’s best for students due to obstacles like tests and antiquated literature curricula.

But how does this work and what does it look like? For me, students creating art in my classes wasn’t something that was automatic when I started teaching in 2000. Though the New London Group work was a few years old already and though I included music in the teaching of English frequently, I must admit that—outside of a few options selected on class projects—my students weren’t positioned as artists and weren’t creating meaning in the classroom in those ways. In fact, it took me until I was exposed to the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts work on arts integration in 2009 that art-making, as it could naturally fit into English class, was thrust into my focus.

The most well-accepted definition for arts integration

comes from The Kennedy Center, as “an approach to teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form. Students engage in a creative process which connects an art form and another subject area and meets evolving objectives in both” (Silverstein & Layne, 2010). It is this move toward learning and creating in an art form—broadly defined—that changed how I thought about the use of arts in the teaching of English language arts and of teaching English itself. Much of what I did as a teacher was arts enhancement, using art to edify, improve, enliven, and enrich teaching and learning, a shift in thinking I describe in more detail in a recent *English Journal* article, “Beyond Enhancement: Teaching English through Musical Arts Integration” (Goering & Strayhorn, 2016). Arts enhancement is great but it isn’t arts integration, and it isn’t moving students toward being the drivers and creators of their own learning in new ways.

Returning to Albers and Harste (2007), the questions they posed then are more relevant and urgent today: “How do we build on the literacies [that] today’s students bring with them to the classroom?” and “How do we put in place a new set of social practices so as to support students being critically literate when it comes to their involvement with the arts, multimodality, and the new literacies?” (p. 15). And I’ll add, how can we transform English language arts class into a class called Multimodal Arts Explorations, a class in which students engage an evolving curriculum through art, multimedia projects, critical literacy including critical media literacy, and activities, projects, and explorations that value non-print texts at least as much as those involving the written word?

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- Focus on art and artists and bring both into the classroom as often as possible.
- Downplay the importance of assessments that don’t value multimodality and new literacies.
- Require students to take up and study an art form for at least as long as it would take to teach *Animal Farm* to seventh graders.
- Respond to students in non-print formats; require non-print responses from students. I’ve found tableaux is a terrific art form to initiate thinking with the body and moving away from a reliance on text.

- Balance activities students did in English class five years ago with newer ones that were not possible then.

As a profession, English language arts should do more to celebrate and highlight the voices, like those contained in this issue, who are enacting a Multimodal Arts Exploration—version of English class. Let's strive toward supporting students and teachers engaged in moving our practice and our profession in these directions. Let's create the next generation's leaders ready to push the envelope of what is acceptable like Nick, A. D., and Rachel. How else can we prepare our students for a world none of us can imagine?

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## Cultivating New Voices among Scholars of Color Program, 2018–2020

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The NCTE Research Foundation's Cultivating New Voices among Scholars of Color (CNV) program is designed to provide two years of support, mentoring, and networking opportunities for early-career scholars of color. The program aims to work with doctoral candidates and early-career postsecondary faculty of color to cultivate the ability to draw from their own cultural and linguistic perspectives as they conceptualize, plan, conduct, write, and disseminate findings from their research. The program provides socialization into the research community and interaction with established scholars whose own work can be enriched by their engagement with new ideas and perspectives. The 2018–2020 CNV program participants are listed below:

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