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“Ogres Remind me of Expanding”: First-Graders’ Multimodal Autobiographies

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Abstract

This naturalistic inquiry study investigated how engaging in a semiotically diverse multimodal autobiography propelled young students to compose multimodally. This article centers on three students' experiences with multimodal autobiography composing. The context of the study was a suburban public elementary school in the Midwestern United States. Findings reveal that the first graders embraced many kinds of texts, including family connections, were selective and purposeful in their selections, and chose mostly iconic sign representations. Additionally, students formed new perceptions of themselves, meta-level reasoning and higher-level thinking were present, and multimodality encouraged sharing. The implications are that autobiography done in a multimodal fashion is a powerful way to allow children to build confidence in their literacy identities as well as to analyze specific images they use to represent their history, such as popular culture references. This study suggests that technology and multiple sign systems assisted students' lived experiences and memories.

Keywords: multimodality, early childhood literacy, autobiography, digital composing, transmediation, new literacies

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“Ogres Remind me of Expanding”: First-Graders’ Multimodal Autobiographies

The increased dominance of screen-based reading and writing makes the role of multimodality in literacy more central (Hawisher & Selfe, 2000; Kress, 2003; Lewis & Fabos, 2005), reminiscent of an earlier era when the arts were more interwoven in the daily lives of humans (Dewey, 1934/1980). With these new options for readers and writers come new complexities, not only for the students who are attempting to compose using these new modes, but also for teachers and researchers who want to support young children’s composing with new media tools (Moje, 2009).

Recently, we had the opportunity to observe these challenges and opportunities play themselves out in a first grade classroom in which the teacher (a co-author of this article) assigned her students a “Multimodal Autobiography Assignment.” Based on the work of Tom Romano (2000) and developed by another co-author of this article, this assignment asks students to assemble texts of all kinds into an autobiographical narrative that is usually presented to the entire class (Kist, 2010). This narrative is often assembled in PowerPoint, but can also be formed as a Prezi, video, or in any other form of representation. We share three students’ multimodal autobiographies later in the article.

This article examines the virtual signs and artifacts that students wove into their multimodal autobiographies during a three-week unit. In this unit, first grade students found and created virtual artifacts to represent their young lives. Using a range of texts and moving between numerous sign systems are essential components in semiotics and have been named “transmediation” -- a mode switching that allows students to transform the meaning and original intent of a sign to create new signs (Siegel, 1995, 2006). Transmediation with multiple sign systems has been found to provide opportunities for risk-taking, inquiry, and abstract thinking in

older children (Batchelor, 2014). While working in different formats (alphabetic language, PowerPoint, paper, photos, Google images, and crayon drawing), we wondered what would be revealed about the process of multimodal composition and transmediation as it relates to the early childhood classroom. Specifically, what happens when young children engage in an assignment that demands some transmediation?

Theoretical Framework

If young children are going to be able to be competent writers (and readers) in this increasingly screen-based, multimodal, digital age, there is a pressing need not only to understand the semiotic aspects to children's early sign use as writers, but also the educational implications of their very early multimodal experiences. For purposes of this article, we consider "multimodal" to mean that a text can contain many different forms of representation embedded within it, including alphabetic language, visual imagery (both still and moving) and sound, and that this multimodality is increasingly a part of daily reading and writing now that people, both young and old, are doing more of their reading and writing on screens (Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kist, 2005; Kress, 2003). Lankshear and Knobel (2003) have pointed out that this kind of multimodality is a key characteristic of the "new literacies"--the more screen-based, digital media that have become omnipresent in our lives since the development of the Internet. Lankshear and Knobel contrast the "new literacies" (with small letters) with the capitalized New Literacy Studies (NLS) which is more of an overarching perspective for researchers interested in studying literacy practices and events in general.

The NLS perspective is firmly grounded in a sociocultural view of literacy, so it would make sense that some of the key work that has been done has spotlighted the integral role culture plays in shaping children's composing, and that the culture of many young children includes pop

culture and artifactual signs. Stories travel to school with young children that are rooted in these various literacies, which are increasingly multimodal in nature (Dyson, 2003; Pahl & Rowsell, 2010, 2014). We have situated this study within a socio-cultural view of literacy (e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 1996; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Street, 1995), as we believe that many educators may not be tapping into out-of-school literacies when these out-of-school literacies might, ironically, enhance in-school literacies. For many students, giving them opportunities to intermingle their out-of-schools literacies (e.g., video games, comic books, and other popular cultural interests) with school literacies may be a way to “include marginalized or struggling students, as they might begin to use what they know as they write at school” (Ranker, 2006, p. 24).

Furthermore, in a digital age of literacy learning, children must not only rely on visual images in non-print modes, but they must also, perhaps on a subconscious level, acknowledge how audio, spatial, and gestural signs work together in this new mode (Hughes & Robertson, 2010). When children blend these multimodal designs together, they create real-world products that represent their lives (Wohlwend, 2009). The concept of identity can develop in children through autobiographical units (Armon & Ortega, 2008). Multimodality, combined with autobiographical composing, could assist children in identity formation, which Gee (2000) defined as “Being recognized as a certain ‘kind of person’ in a given context” (Gee, 2000, p. 99).

While this kind of identity work has often been written about in relation to teens and social media (Boyd, 2014; Buckingham, 2007), it has less often been studied with small children (Dyson, 2003; Pahl & Rowsell, 2014) or seen as a key focus for some early childhood literacy educators. In sum, then, we looked at the multimodal compositions (autobiographies) of very

young children through a sociocultural lens, attempting to link their multimodal writing with their developing literacy identities.

METHODS

Data Collection and Analysis

This article presents research from Ms. L's first grade classroom during the spring of 2013. Ms. L teaches in a public elementary school in a suburban city in the Midwest. The school district, which consistently ranks "Excellent" on the school report card, serves a wide variety of students in its population of over 2500. Ethnic identities included: 88% Caucasian; 3% African American; 3% Hispanic; 1% Asian/Pacific Islander; and 5% multiracial. Twenty-four percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-cost lunch. Ms. L's class consisted of 24 first graders, 16 of whom had parents or guardians who granted consent for interviews and use of their work. She has been a teacher for six years, and her class consists of literacy events, such as literature circles, writers' workshop, and learning centers, based on a whole language model of reading, in which she encourages her students to take ownership over their learning, believing that her students have the ability to construct their own knowledge. Direct instruction is based on the students' needs and interests, and individual growth is the goal.

Through naturalistic inquiry methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), data were allowed to "emerge, develop, and unfold" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) through the use of thick description. The following data were examined: 1) field observation notes that were collected in a shared online researcher journal (Google Drive), 2) student interviews that were recorded for transcription, and 3) student artifacts of finished multimodal autobiographies, brainstorming lists, personalized scanned artifacts, and notes. All of these data were stored on the online data housing site Dropbox.

Inductive analysis of the data was ongoing, constantly informing the progression of the study. Once all data were collected, data sets were prepared, reduced, and analyzed in a recursive, inductive, interactive process (Merriam, 1998) as the research team examined how the data provided an understanding of how these children used these signs to write their life stories. Once the student interviews had been transcribed, each of the four co-authors engaged in a systematic and rigorous reading of one fourth of the data, including: the field notes, the transcribed student interviews, and the artifacts. During this initial coding period, categories of data were developed and refined using the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), with the intent that the categories reflect the purpose of the research, be exhaustive, be mutually exclusive, be sensitizing, and be conceptually congruent (Merriam, 1998).

The purpose of the first reading of all the data was to identify trends that spoke to how the students purposefully selected texts and repurposed them for their autobiographies. While reading the data, the team wrote memos of potential ways to code, noting any instances of themes that emerged. Additionally, keeping a researcher journal throughout the study allowed the team to revisit their thinking about each visit's instructional decisions and discussions that occurred.

After doing the preliminary coding, the four authors met in person to discuss the categories they had each identified in their specific portion of the data, allowing the data to be triangulated across researchers and data sets (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The code labels, definitions, and examples appear in Table 1 below:

Table 1

Code Labels, Definitions, and Examples

Code Labels	Definitions	Examples
New perception of self/identity	Definition: Comments that demonstrated that young children could allow alternative identities to formulate based on their selections of signs to represent themselves.	Quote example: "Ogres remind me of me expanding."
Pop culture trends	Definition: Comments that showcased popular culture artifacts of high interest to young children as a way to represent an aspect of their lives.	Quote example: "I like Niall from One Direction because he's cute and he sings really good too."
Selective and purposeful sign choices	Definition: Comments identified as having specific intent and purpose when selecting signs to include in their autobiographies.	Quote example: "I like David books because he always gets in trouble like my brother."
Process of searching for signs	Definition: Comments indicating how young children sought out signs to include in their autobiographies.	Quote example: "I am going through my packet and only picking the ones that I circled. This is helping me decide."
Audience awareness in sharing	Definition: Comments that highlighted young children's awareness of an intended audience other than themselves in this process.	Quote example: "We're not just going to share it with ourselves. We're going to share it with our friends and our

		family.”
Interest in design features during creating	Definition: Comments and/or questions generated by young children who placed emphasis in aspects of PowerPoints’ design features to assist during the composing process.	Quote example: “I liked how I could get a picture of a truffula tree up close so people could really see the detail and the color in it.”
Family connection and personal lived experiences	Definition: Comments that demonstrated a personal connection to their family members and shared lived experiences.	Quote example: “This one represents my family and my family is really important to me.”

In the final phase of data analysis, each written reflection, observation, and transcript of conversations was reread with these themes in mind, seeking out quotes that not only verified the themes, but could also be used as samples. The team enlisted an outside reviewer to engage in an independent close reading of the data using the co-authors’ established categories. The outside reviewer looked at our collaborative coding/categories and agreed with 89% accuracy. This led to the analysis of making interpretations. Based on these interpretations, we sat down as a group with the outside reviewer to discuss discrepancies and possible codes that could be combined, such as “perceptions of self/identity/personal expression” with “meta-cognitive aspects of project.” Most negotiations centered on the abstract complexity of students’ possible symbolic perceptions of the images. Ultimately, we pulled from students’ comments paying careful attention to how they described the images and events surrounding the images.

Setting the Scene

During the three-week time frame, the authors developed a unit consisting of four phases, moving from genre awareness to a final product to share with peers and family.

Phase 1

We began by introducing autobiography through read-alouds and shared readings of autobiographical picture books, such as *David Gets His Drum* (Francis & Reiser, 2002), *Through My Eyes* (Bridges, 1999), and *The Art of Miss Chew* (Polacco, 2012). Students generated “noticings” of features common to autobiographies, noting the difference between this genre and biographies. We also created our own multimodal autobiographies and shared them with the students in order for them to learn more about us as well as to provide modeling for autobiographical incidents that could become “jumping-off” points for further discussions. Sharing these autobiographies also allowed students to better connect to us and with each other through common interests we highlighted in our presentations.

Phase 2

Next, students received a brainstorming packet entitled “Who am I?,” which offered numerous categories they might identify as having an impact on their lives. Each category was in the form of a “blocked” list where students were asked to brainstorm titles that represented their “favorites” in these categories, such as favorite books, music, sports, and games. These categories were generated by one of the authors who has a daughter in early childhood who assisted her in developing the categories (see Table 2). Throughout the days of brainstorming and drafting the autobiographies, students were encouraged to bring in objects to have scanned as images to place in their autobiographies. Students were also encouraged to think outside of these categories, and they usually did. Furthermore, the first graders also worked in collaborative groups, sharing influential moments that shaped their identities, which assisted in helping others think about similar moments.

Table 2

Who Am I? Brainstorming Categories

BOOKS	MUSIC
SPORTS	HOBBIES
TV	PLACES VISITED
GAMES (video & board)	FAMILY
MOVIES	CHARACTERS
APPS	WHAT ELSE?

Phase 3

The majority of the unit was centered on Phase 3, where students learned how to navigate PowerPoint (which was the recommended presentational tool) through a series of short, introductory assignments. Since this was the students' first experience with PowerPoint, we began with how to create a title page and new slide. Then we moved into how to import pictures from ClipArt and images from the web. We also presented mini-lessons that focused on the importance of navigating the Internet safely, using appropriate search terms, and how to search in Google Images. This led to conversations regarding digital safety and the importance of parental/guardian supervision. Additionally, students were able to bring artifacts from home,

such as a favorite sticker, book jacket, personal photo, or artwork, and we scanned these artifacts so that students could import digital copies of these personal items into their autobiographies.

There were three working computers in Ms. L's classroom and five computers in the library that were reserved for students' use during this phase. Students rotated throughout the week to create their autobiographies, and during this time the authors interviewed students on their intentional decisions regarding the images that they selected to represent their lives.

Phase 4

This final phase became a celebratory phase in which students shared their autobiographies with each other during whole class presentations. During presentations, students shared reasons why they selected artifacts and included the stories behind them. Throughout the year, Ms. L had students find connections with their peers, and when they found a commonality, the students indicated this by rocking their hand back and forth in the air as a "hang-ten." These instances of connections occurred throughout students' autobiography sharing. At the end of each presentation, students asked follow-up questions to the autobiographer.

Three Students' Stories

We would like to highlight three students' stories in this section. We chose these students because they represent the varying levels of affordances that multimodal composition can bring to young children. We also chose them because they were representative of the three levels of engagement that students in Ms. L's class experienced regarding technology. For example, one student, Maddie, (all names are pseudonyms) has unlimited use of technology at home, while another, Luke, is interested in learning all that he can about technology in school due to its unavailability in his home. We also chose a student, Kevin, who did not seem to engage in the assignment to depict his life multimodally.

Maddie

Maddie is a white, female student from an upper-middle class family living in the school district. She lives in a two-parent home with two brothers, one older (age six) and one younger (age one). Both of her parents have at least a four-year college degree and work full-time. Maddie has full access at home to the Internet, computers, iPads, and iPods. During the three weeks of the multimodal autobiography project, it was clear that Maddie emerged as a student leader who assisted her peers in creating the PowerPoint presentations.

During classroom brainstorming sessions, Maddie filled out numerous categories of kinds of texts that represented her life. She would routinely ask us how to spell certain words, especially words in book titles. She enjoyed sharing ideas with her peers during this brainstorming time and provided supporting anecdotes to go along with her text choices in each category. Many of her anecdotes centered on moments in the classroom, such as “Dress-as-Your-Favorite-Book-Character Day” when Ms. L. came dressed as Morgan LeFay from *The Magic Treehouse* series.

During the creation of her slideshow presentation, the first author worked with Maddie in the library, noticing how quickly she learned PowerPoint and how to search for pictures on Google Images, neither of which she had experienced prior to doing this assignment. She took pride in her technical dexterity. She noted, “Remember in the library, when I just learned how to make my whole PowerPoint, and it was so easy for me?” Maddie understood the “E” icon at the bottom of the computer screen represented “the E for internet” which enabled her to toggle back and forth between cutting and pasting images into her PowerPoint. She exclaimed, “I know where to use this one [pointing to the Explorer icon] and this one [pointing to the PowerPoint icon] because that is one way to get the pictures.” In fact, Maddie enjoyed working on the

computer so much that she created her own model laptop out of paper and pretended to use it to look up information on the Internet when she did not have access to an actual computer in the classroom (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Maddie’s computer “screen shot” with “recent search terms.”

Maddie used a wide range of images to represent her life. For example, she included images of the computer game Minecraft. This game is known for creatures, called Creepers, which lurk in the game. It has two modes: the “design” mode and the “play” mode. Maddie explained that she is not allowed to enter the play mode because it is too scary because of the creepers. She described Creepers as, “They don’t have any arms. They have four feet and they’re green and their necks go really tall and their eyes are black and so are their nose and mouth and there’s a movie and it goes like this.” She begins to sing the YouTube song parodied off of Taio Cruz’s “Dynamite.” When asked where she heard that song, she exclaimed, “My dad has it on his computer. I have Minecraft on my computer but I can’t get on it. I have it on my Kindle.”

Maddie is also an avid reader. During her brainstorming, she included several titles, such as titles from *The Magic Treehouse* series and *The Secret Garden*. As noted earlier, Maddie’s

teacher, Ms. L., dressed up as a prominent figure in the series, and Maddie dressed up as the little girl, Annie, a main character. She described her outfit: “My dad had a regular white shirt for me to wear and jeans, that’s what she, Annie, wears and sneakers and my mom before she went to work, she put a braid in my hair.” When asked why she enjoys these books, she said, “Because *Magic Treehouse* books are really long books and I like to listen to chapters.” To represent her interest in these books, she specifically chose book number 42: *A Good Night for Ghosts*. When asked why she selected that title, she noted that she wanted to read it and learn more about the book. She stated, “I love to read books because sometimes I read for a long time in one place because reading helps me concentrate on what the words are so I can understand words that are kind of hard for me.”

Maddie also represented memories surrounding family when including images in her autobiography. For example, she inserted an image of the board game Trouble. When asked about this image, she talked about the memory of when she won “Family Game” night after playing this game. In this instance, her image of the game Trouble represented more about the symbolism of her family experience than the iconic viewing of the game. The text meant more to her as the memory of the event than the game itself. There were other instances of symbolic representation in Maddie’s PowerPoint. For example, Maddie inserted an image of a stream flowing through a forest. When asked if she liked the outdoors, and if this image represented nature, she said it didn’t. Rather, it represented her favorite song entitled, “Peace Like a River.”

After presenting her autobiography in the library to the first author, Maddie asked if she could go through the slideshow again to look at the pictures. She said, “I want to go through it again because I like the pictures that I picked. I like the way they tell about my life.” To view Maddie’s multimodal autobiography in its entirety, click on the link below:

<http://www.livebinders.com/play/play/1679630?tabid=c560b031-da7e-08d4-cc86-2a5bfad2e537>¹

Luke

Luke is a white student who qualifies for the school's free and reduced breakfast and lunch program and who alternates homes between his divorced parents. His parents do not have college degrees and work part-time jobs. Luke's technology experiences are limited to playing Xbox since he does not have Internet access at home. He also does not own a tablet or have access to a computer at home. Luke admitted to watching a lot of television shows and movies in his free time, especially films centered on comic book heroes. In fact, his real name is based on a mythical hero, one in which he identifies with and takes great pride. At the beginning of the study, he expressed his excitement in wanting to learn about the various components of making a multimodal autobiography project and how this could inform his ability to use a computer.

While most students chose images that were direct representations of their interests, Luke included items that represented him in non-direct ways. For example, he stated that he had a passion for ants and diagrams, so he included an image of an ant with its parts identified in an accompanying diagram. He said, "I like ants and diagrams, so this is a diagram of an ant." He also included an image of a red skull in another slide. When asked about the significance of the skull, he explained that it represented his favorite movie, *The Avengers*, because he said it was the exact skull seen at the end of the credits. He said, "It represents me because I've watched that movie before." He identified with this particular movie and chose a unique way to show his interest, also highlighting his understanding of a current characteristic of Hollywood blockbuster films to include a post-credits teaser scene.

Unlike his peers, Luke also inserted original texts created by his imagination. Indeed, Luke stated that his favorite part of the assignment was that he could "create my own stuff." He

brought in a drawing he created of a super villain he called “Sprdablrdacksprs” who “spits fire from his eye sockets and shoots water from his belly button” (see Figure 2).

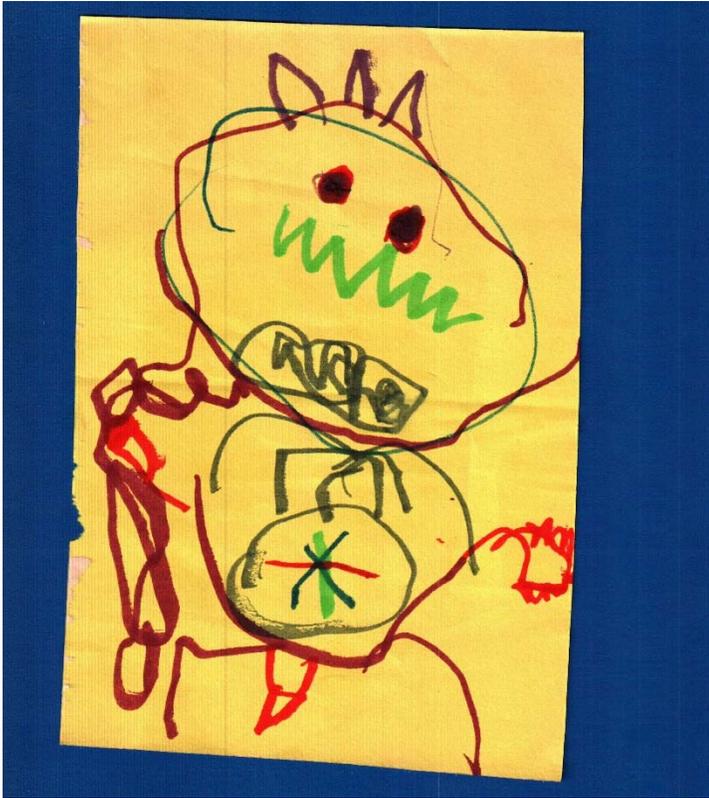


Figure 2. Luke's heroic creation.

Throughout the duration of the unit, he created four more hero/villains, each with a separate name, but, together, calling them “The Elements” (representing the elements of nature: earth, air, water, fire). “Water Master,” for example, “turns into a giant octopus whenever he takes off his helmet and can shoot water out of his tentacles and sometimes shape-shift its tentacles into hammers.” “Earth Lord” can form into a “giant mutant laser,” and “Fire Master” has special powers to “turn into a porcupine on fire.” Finally, “Air Lord” can form into a “giant cobra person and can get bigger than the school in two seconds just by taking off his helmet.” When asked where he gets his ideas, he replied, “My imagination.” To Luke, using the sign

system of drawing enabled him to showcase his imagination and fascination with another world: the superhero/villain realm.

Luke's creations might have stemmed from his fascination with and knowledge of "Skylanders," a popular group of video game heroes. He included a variety of characters' images into his autobiography and explained each person's origin. For example, he included a photo of a popular Skylander named "Whamshell." One of us asked if he was a good guy or a bad guy.

Below is Luke's response:

A good guy. He's a Skylander. All Skylanders are good guys. Except ones that Chaos releases because Chaos is a Portal Master, too. He's the evilest guy in all the game.

Choppies are just brainless. Choppies are these little creatures that try to bite you. Believe it or not, in Skylanders, a Choppie invented a hot air balloon by accidentally chewing on the helium, and he turned into a hot air balloon and he started flying away.

Luke also has extensive knowledge of Marvel Comics heroes Spiderman and Captain America and many of the superheroes associated with the group S.H.I.E.L.D. When asked if he read their comics, he said no, but instead has watched all of their movies. He said he also enjoys reading, particularly books in the fantasy genre. His favorite series is *Beast Quest*. He said, "It's sometimes kind of violent, but not that violent. Only sometimes tearing flesh from bones."

During the creation of his multimodal autobiography, he inquired about icons he noticed in PowerPoint's toolbar section. He was particularly interested in the shapes toolbar. In one of his slides, he inserted an image of a one-eyed ogre and asked if he could play with the shapes. When one of us showed him how to drop, drag, and resize the various shapes, he chose a hexagon and initially practiced, moving the hexagon to each corner of the slide. Ultimately, he

placed it directly over the eye and hit “save.” When asked why he chose to position the shape directly over the ogre’s eye, he stated that the hexagon now “symbolized magic.”

Luke noted that he wanted to be a videogame designer when he grew up. He said, “Can I tell you why? Because almost all of these [slides] have something in common.” When asked what the connection was, he replied, “Some of them are almost all from a videogame.” Furthermore, when asked if this project made him think about reading and writing, he commented, “Yes, it has made me think about making a videogame.” For Luke, literacy is more than just reading and writing words on paper; for him, literacy plays itself out in the worlds of Marvel superheroes and Skylanders as experiences within game worlds. To view Luke’s multimodal autobiography in its entirety, click on the link below:

<http://www.livebinders.com/play/play/1679630?tabid=857d8bc3-54be-16fc-2788-7e833005f65c>²

Kevin

Kevin comes from an upper-middle class family. He lives in a two-parent home and is the youngest of three boys. Both parents work full-time. They have full access to the Internet, computers, and iPads. Ms. L explained that he struggles with Attention Deficit Disorder and is very easily distracted.

Throughout the unit, Kevin did not really show an interest in creating his autobiography. His brainstorming packet included little notes, and he did not volunteer to go to the library to work on his project as many of the other students eagerly asked each day. When Kevin worked on his PowerPoint, one of us watched him select one of the first images that was displayed each time he searched on Google Images. He seemed in a hurry to finish. Furthermore, Kevin had difficulty explaining his slideshow; not only to his peers during presentation day, but also during

his one-on-one interview. The interview revealed that the images he selected might not have really represented Kevin. For example, he included an image of a Lego guy. When asked if he played Legos, Kevin replied, “hmmm... not really.”

He also included an image of a basketball made out of Reece’s Pieces. When asked what this image meant to him, he said he chose it because of the candy rather than basketball. He also inserted a picture of Flat Stanley next to a cat sitting on a piano. This could have represented his interest in the book series, or his love of cats, or even taking pride in a musical talent. Instead, he said he chose it because “I just wanted to see what this was. It looked like a foot.”

At the conclusion of each student interview, we ended with a final open-ended question: “What question should I have asked you?” Kevin provided a surprising response. Here is an excerpt from his interview:

Interviewer: What question should I have asked you?

Kevin: What I liked.

Interviewer: What do you like?

Kevin: Animals.

Interviewer: You love animals. What’s your favorite animal?

Kevin: Um, kind of all of them.

Even though Kevin was apparently an animal lover, a viewer would not have known this from his multimodal autobiography (which featured no animals). Kevin’s initial response indicating that he wished the team would have asked what he liked might suggest he had difficulty understanding the autobiographical genre. However, when asked what the purpose of this unit is, he stated, “For you to know what I like.” To him, there was a disconnect between the purpose of the unit and the process of completing it. To view Kevin’s multimodal autobiography

in its entirety, click on the link below:

<http://www.livebinders.com/play/play/1679630?tabid=a51fc980-ed83-0cee-a1f0-057d5f16d1c8>³

Connecting the Multimodal Autobiography to Early Childhood Literacy Development

Our multimodal autobiography unit examined what happens when young children engage in an assignment that demands some transmediation. One of the strengths of the assignment, as we see it, is that we found it to correlate quite closely with existing curriculum objectives for early childhood literacy. For example, when the first graders worked through their autobiographies, they gained the ability to link their prior knowledge and experiences to various text choices. This is important because interest and personal background impact how students select books and other media to read. Students were also able to utilize authentic tools and resources in order to select these texts, which are meaningful to them and go beyond the traditional workbook instruction so often used in classrooms.

Furthermore, first graders were using the computer to create authentic literacy pieces based on self-selected interests, rather than using the computer as a tool to engage in literacy programs or games, which are pre-programmed. Finally, students engaged in active thinking during brainstorming sessions, sharing their thinking with others. This, in turn, allowed for students to socially construct meaning and understanding. Seeing that their own interests are meaningful to themselves and their peers assisted them in also recognizing that literacy is meaningful.

Young Children Think Deeply and Purposefully about Texts in Multidimensional Ways

We found that many students in Ms. L's class were able to "hit the ground running" as they energetically filled their brainstorming packets to generate search terms for images. It was also clear that many of them were searching for texts that had meanings that went far deeper than

just their iconic meanings. The finding of one meaningful image seemed to link to the next image and to the next. Many students made notes on sidebars of their packets of new ideas they had while searching. They also circled words throughout their packets to help them remember how to search for ideas. Most students scrolled through pages of images of searches to find the “right” text that would represent their lives (see Figure 3).

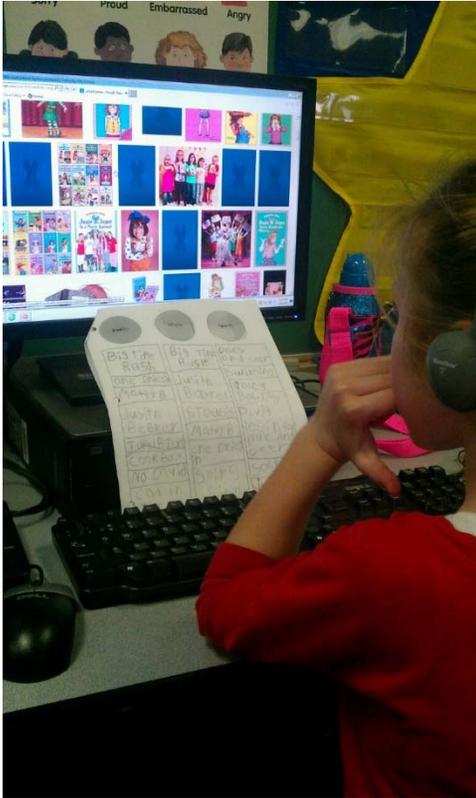


Figure 3. Student selecting artifacts for her auto-bio.

We noticed that Maddie, Luke, and Kevin arranged and played with their images in the slides. For example, Luke inserted an image of a cyclops-monster covering the eye with a shape. When describing his autobiography he noted, “Here’s a cute little monster, and he kinda’ sees into the future. With that eye. I covered it up because the real eye was an octagon.” When asked why he did that, he replied, “because I didn’t like the circle eye.” Additionally, during a picture-walk of her PowerPoint with us, Maddie covered up an image with her hand of Pocahontas

accidentally placed at the top of another slide. She said, “Just don’t look at this picture yet. It’s going to come up now [on the next slide]. I love Pocahontas.” We explained that she could delete the accidental insertion of the image, but she stated she wanted to keep it so that Pocahontas could be on two slides. That’s how much she “loves her.”

Along with the three students highlighted above, most students in Ms. Long’s class were able to share why they had selected certain texts to appear in their autobiographies. As we watched this project unfold, we commented that, in our experience, this kind of intertextual conversation should be a naturally occurring common experience in early childhood classrooms. While conventions of print often dominate meta-discussions in early childhood classrooms (such as “What can you tell from the cover about the contents of the book?”), it seemed that the comments researchers elicited from students gave evidence that they were thinking about texts in reflective ways. Students would engage in involved storytelling and plotting as they told about the texts they had referenced.

Furthermore, Maddie, Luke, and Kevin wanted to explain their selection process. Luke noted that he selected characters in all his favorite games, such as Viva Piñata and Skylanders. He also enjoyed creating his own characters to insert in his autobiography. Furthermore, he noted that he wanted to be a videogame designer, reminding us that his images all have something in common. When asked about the commonality, he replied, “Almost all of them are from a videogame.” Maddie ended with, “What I like about my PowerPoint is the pictures I picked, like I want to go through these pictures again because I like the pictures that I picked because the way they tell about my life.”

We were impressed with the ubiquity of the role of video games in many students’ autobiographies. Like Luke, several students highlighted characters from video games in their

autobiographies and seemed to have bonded quite closely with favorites. These students talked about games with apparent joy, perhaps revealing the paucity of game-related discussion in most schools (Gee, 2003).

The Collaborative Nature of New Literacies Forms New Literate Identities

So often in early childhood classrooms collaboration and sharing of individual ideas is limited. Perhaps teachers may not think young students are ready to handle collaboration; there is limited time because of test preparation or content standards that must be addressed, or not valuing students to connect to others in this way in the classroom. Regardless of the reason, the researchers found that students thrived with this assignment, found value, and appreciated hearing from their peers.

There was an eagerness to share presentations with peers as they developed another aspect of literacy: audience awareness. Students noted that they got most of their ideas from seeing the autobiographies of the researchers, and one of the researcher's daughter's presentations, as well as brainstorming with friends. Luke and another student in the computer lab created a "shared computer space" where they typed on each other's keyboards when they thought of something the other would like in order to help them search for images.

Additionally, they helped each other select the "perfect" image of their favorite videogame, Sonic the Hedgehog. Maddie and another student "oohed" and "ahhed" at each other's image selections while they searched, affirming each other's decisions. Presentations held excitement and engagement, while students interacted with the presenter by waving the "Hang-10" sign with their hands, noting it was a "connection" they had with their peer. During one of the presentations, a student selected an image of Carly Rae Jepsen and the class broke into the chorus of "Call Me Maybe."

Not only were we seeing intertextual conversations that we have not often seen in early childhood classrooms, we also were seeing uncommon evidence of identity work occurring. As students chose and, in some cases, created and manipulated images, they were intentionally positioning themselves as lovers of cats or as athletes or budding musicians, just to name a few examples. Luke, who was very proud of the fact that he was named after a famous fictional film and comic book character, was clearly using this assignment to showcase his burgeoning identity as a creator and interpreter of his own superhero mythology.

Lessons Learned

With this unit, we learned that a multimodal autobiography project should be planned to allow students as much freedom as possible when structuring their stories. While the brainstorming list assisted students in generating ideas to include in their autobiographies, it might have also constrained them by forcing them to think about themselves only in the categories represented, which could have felt confining or narrow to some students. For example, during an interview, Kevin shared his interest in what he wanted to be when he grew up: an inventor. He elaborated by sharing a story of how he and his friend were inventing a contraption that “can shrink you.”

This “big picture” idea of thinking about how he described himself when he grows up can be a defining factor in an autobiographical moment, and this thinking about the future regarding identity only appeared in conversation rather than in an autobiography. It was only during the conversation with one of the co-authors of this research; that some of Kevin’s interests were uncovered. Furthermore, Kevin’s interest in animals might not have been something he thought to include until discussing his autobiography with the interviewer.

More importantly, using the sociocultural lens previously stated (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 1996; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Street, 1995), educators should acknowledge that not all students will construct meaning in the same ways. For some of the children in the class, such as Kevin, the multimodal autobiography simply was not their preference for how to go about constructing their own life stories. Even going beyond the multimodal aspects of the assignment, some children might have intuitively rejected the memoir itself as a way of looking at themselves and their experiences.

Another explanation which links more closely to the new literacies might be that the apparent disinterestedness of some children might be an example of the flawed nature of Prensky's (2005) "digital native" concept. The fact that the children in this study were born around 2007 does not guarantee that they are going to be necessarily more "wired" or passionate about using new media to read and write about their worlds. Or perhaps the disinterested students were ones who had ample access at home to new media. For them, composing in these new forms was no big deal. For whatever reason, however, it is worth noting that there was a small group of children (four students out of the 16 who had consent to participate in our study) who did not seem particularly engaged by this assignment or by talking about it with the team.

Conclusion

We suggest that using autobiography in a multimodal fashion is a powerful way to allow children to build confidence in their literacy identities as well as analyze specific images they used to represent their history, such as popular culture references. Furthermore, technology and multiple sign systems assisted students' lived experiences and memories. We encourage practicing teachers and teacher educators to use this article to inform their own literacy instruction in early childhood education. We also urge researchers to build from our study by

examining classrooms that embrace a postmodern approach to literacy, one in which multiple sign systems that include a Dr. Seuss book, a video game character, a store at the mall, and a favorite band are all seen as equal and necessary, especially at this early time when children are creating their literary identities. It would be interesting, in fact, to follow children who have been allowed this multimodal freedom and to see what trajectories they take as they grow into more mature “readers” and “writers.”

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