Imagining the Impact of Images:

Visual Scenario-Based Approaches in English Language Arts

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Abstract

This article examines the use of visual texts in scenario-based learning activities as a vehicle for asking students to demonstrate in applied ways what they know and can do. Visual texts can be leveraged to help students practice close reading and critical analysis, articulate a proposal or position, muster specific supporting evidence, and anticipate and meet the needs of a particular audience, objectives central to the Writing strand of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. Scenario-based learning also holds potential for increasing opportunities for students to practice and refine composing skills in multimodal contexts. This discussion is followed by an argument for literacy practices as an appropriate philosophical grounding for this work, particularly in the process of moving students from receptive to critical stances regarding texts (Beach, Thein, & Webb, 2012; Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

Keywords: Scenario-based learning, common core, visual literacy, multimodal composition, literacy practices
Imagining the Impact of Images: Visual Scenario-Based Approaches in English Language Arts

In this article, we extend upon the groundwork laid by McCann, Johannessen, Kahn, and Flanagan (2006) in examining some of the ways that scenario-based exercises and assignments can incorporate visual and multimodal texts. In particular, we consider how such texts can serve as a vehicle for asking students to demonstrate in applied ways what they know and can do. Grounded in our work with preservice and experienced English teachers, we explore student learning anchored in scenario-based learning: simulated, yet realistic situations that require the application of knowledge and skills in judicious, tactical, and contextually appropriate ways. Additionally, we consider how analysis of visual texts can be leveraged to help students practice close reading and critical analysis, articulate a proposal or position, muster specific supporting evidence, and anticipate and meet the needs of a particular audience. These objectives have long been part of conventional English Language Arts curricula and are central to the Writing strand of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. We also explore the potential for expanding opportunities for students to practice and refine composing skills in multimodal contexts, and follow this discussion with an argument for literacy practices as an appropriate lens for this work, particularly in the process of moving students from receptive to critical stances regarding texts (Beach, Thein, & Webb, 2012; Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Finally, we argue that scenario-based learning is a means by which teachers can stake a claim to their role as professionals and expert practitioners, as well as a way to adopt the stance that the classroom is a place for curriculum in abundance, where teaching and learning is viewed as an evolving, ongoing conversation.
Common Assumptions: CCSS

The Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI), currently adopted by 43 states, sets ambitious goals for what students will know and be able to do (“Standards,” 2014). Much of the rhetoric surrounding this major shift in educational policy cites an emphasis on complex, high-level thinking skills. The CCSSI website includes a variety of explanatory documents detailing these expectations. For instance, the “Key Design Consideration” document for the English Language Arts standards details broad and complex cognitive tasks:

Students need the ability to gather, comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, and report on information and ideas, to conduct original research in order to answer questions or solve problems, and to analyze and create a high volume and extensive range of print and nonprint texts in media forms old and new. (“Key Design,” 2014)

Elsewhere, CCSS documents paint a picture of students composing their own work based on and responding to specific contextual and real-world circumstances:

Students need to learn to use writing as a way of offering and supporting opinions, demonstrating understanding of the subjects they are studying, and conveying real and imagined experiences and events [emphasis added]. They learn to appreciate that a key purpose of writing is to communicate clearly to an external, sometimes unfamiliar audience, and they begin to adapt the form and content of their writing to accomplish a particular task and purpose [emphasis added]. (“College,” 2014)

These purposes for student composing ideally take place in a social space that includes multimodal text analysis that privileges informal discussion...as students collaborate to answer questions, build understanding, and solve problems....Just as media and technology are integrated in school and life in the
The twenty-first century, skills related to media use (both critical analysis and production of media) are integrated throughout the standards. (“Key Shifts,” 2014) The CCSS Initiative, then, explicitly values classrooms in which students grapple collaboratively with real-world problems by responding to and creating a variety of texts within a rhetorically relevant framework. As we discuss below, at least in terms of official description and explanation, the CCSSI expects the sort of classroom experiences that scenario-based learning approaches emphasize.

**Scenario-Based Learning: Background and Assumptions**

Broadly speaking, Scenario-Based Learning (SBL) can be considered a subset of problem-based and inquiry-based learning predicated in a larger sense on constructivist notions of meaning-making. Duffy and Cunningham (1996) trace the epistemological roots of inquiry-based approaches to the work of John Dewey and Jerome Bruner, among others (pp. 174-5). Dewey argues that learning originates in an engaging disturbance of settled thought that provokes the need for inquiry. Presented with a problem, dilemma, or conundrum, “learning [is] then organized around the learner’s active effort to resolve the issue” (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996, p. 174). This effort is characterized by problem-solving through rational thinking, with the teacher’s role one of developing relevant problems, guiding students toward defining viable solutions, probing student knowledge to deepen understanding, presenting challenges to tentative conclusions, and organizing a learning environment premised on collaboration, social checking, and rational community criteria for assessing quality (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996, p. 194).

While not new, the use of scenarios and simulations as teaching tools remains relatively uncommon. As Duffy and Cunningham acknowledge, inquiry-based approaches tend to challenge conventional, transmission-based notions of learning that privilege content-driven
forms of knowledge over learning-through-doing and knowledge-as-action models in which students assume an investigative stance, pose questions, conduct experiments, grapple with ambiguity, and solve problems (p. 174). By their very nature, scenario-based approaches are oblique strategies, that is, they are applied means of engaging course concepts, skills, and standards less direct than a teacher-driven lecture or presentation. Additionally, the presence of standardized end-of-course and state exams may add overt pressure for teachers to adhere to conventional teaching methods that treat student understanding in the narrow manner typically represented by high-stakes testing expectations (Hillocks, 2002, pp. 193-4, 198-204). There is perhaps some contradiction, then, in the CCSSI’s expectation of student critical engagement with real-world problems when the ultimate measure of students’ achievement will likely be determined by scores on standardized exams.¹

In order for students to demonstrate applied skills based on complex thinking, they must, of course, have learning experiences that require and support such thinking. Engaging with challenging texts, situations, and ideas, however, is difficult for most students, even with instructional support. Motivation is key; without a compelling reason or purpose to make mental effort worthwhile, most people find such work onerous (Alessi & Trollip, 2001, p. 229). How, then, do teachers construct learning experiences that motivate complex thinking? In noting the persistent difficulty that many students have in crafting elaborate arguments, McCann (2003) makes the case for a sequenced, problem-based, and discussion-centered approach that places students in interesting situations calling for close analysis, context awareness, case building, and applied writing (pp. 38-9). Also crucial for McCann (2010) are two elements: students must

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¹ As of this writing, the two federally funded testing consortia, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) and Smarter Balanced, count 38 states and the District of Columbia as members. States who have adopted the CCSS but are not members of these testing consortia must still develop assessments to measure student learning in accordance with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002.
“grapple with the kind of problems that resonate with them” and they must have “extended opportunities...to interact with each other in purposeful ways” in order to derive a response or solution to these problems (p. 34). We note McCann’s attention to resonance and purpose here--of central concern is that students care about the work they are doing. Also notable is the dialogic nature of McCann’s model. Students must enter into conversations in order to make sense of problems, invest in possible solutions, and negotiate a reasoned response, a process that includes dealing with differing positions and reaching consensus. In sustained episodes of inquiry, this process requires students to collaborate, weigh alternatives, and craft rationales that take into account the needs of specific stakeholders and adhere to realistic or defined expectations.

McCann’s “problems that resonate” scenario-centered approach to course concepts and themes invites the inclusion of non-print texts—images, paintings, photographs, film, sculpture, and public spaces—as well as artifacts that combine various print, graphic, image, aural, and tactile modes. From our experiences working with students, a quality of “realistic boundedness” to such situations is critical. As McCann (2010) notes, “throwing problems at students is not sufficient to help them to think logically and to write coherent arguments. They need access to the information that will help them to think about the problem” (p. 35). Here, context is essential, including the details of the specific situation and the needs and expectations of those involved.

Analyzing Visual Texts: Basic Considerations

Throughout our discussion, we use the term visual texts to describe texts characterized by (but not limited to) image-based components. The multi-semiotic nature of many visual texts (e.g., the photograph/text/graphics combination of a typical print advertisement) locates them as a subset of multimodal texts—texts that employ various modes (visual, audio, tactile, verbal, etc.) as a means of conveying meaning (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1997). What and how such texts
produce meaning occurs within a network of factors, through the interaction of elements within
and beyond a text.

Before examining several variations of scenarios using visual texts, a few notes about the
challenges presented by non-print texts will be helpful. Broadly speaking, “reading” or making
sense of an image can be a deceptively simple process. A single glimpse can often yield a
rudimentary or literal meaning from an image or visual text (Mitchell, 2008, pp. 11-13); print-
based texts in comparison require a gradual (and comparatively laborious) construction of
meaning from letters, words, and sentences. This common quality of immediate
comprehensibility, however, can also complicate the process of thinking more carefully about
visual texts.

When we derive literal meaning quickly from a visual text, we risk fixing meaning
conclusively (Chandler, 2002), in effect treating the text as a (or “the”) definition of reality rather
than as a partial, ideological, or political representation that is open to question. A specific
challenge for teachers working with visual texts, then, is to get students to look closely and
carefully, delay conclusions, and extend inquiry (Helmers, 2006) rather than simply assessing
meaning in snap fashion and shutting down thinking. Tracing initial reactions to specific
elements, noticing relevant details, asking questions, and forming tentative statements about
possible meaning are part of recognizing images as intentional constructions, phenomena created
for and employed toward specific purposes. Viewed as acts of intention, images can be
interrogated--for what and how they imply, transform, distort, or ignore--and thus critiqued as
representatives of reality. And while the close reading of image-centered texts can involve
learning new terms (such as foreground, framing, shading, arrangement, etc.) we would argue
that a formalistic command of visual element vocabulary is less important than the ability to
articulate possible meanings, rhetorical impact, context, and implication. This work falls under the rubric of “visual literacy,” a term with a variety of meanings that we define as the ability to critically respond to and compose image-based texts. Assuming a critical stance extends to students’ creation of multimodal texts for particular purposes and, crucially, delves into the ethical implications of the uses to which images are put. Elkins (2008) summarizes the stakes in such work:

[...]

our sense of self, both individually and collectively, is made and remade in and through the visual, and therefore it is fundamentally important to understand images as social constructions rather than reflections of reality, instances of aesthetic pleasure, or marketing tools. (p. 7)

Elkins’ point is worth remembering as we explore scenarios anchored in realistic situations. While we want students to consider the pragmatic or utilitarian effects of context-bound choices, we also want to create space for them to question assumptions and, through their analysis and decisions, potentially disrupt settled thinking.

**Critical Literacy and SBL**

Given Elkins’ (2008) insight above, one possible limitation of SBL lies in the genre- and context-based assumptions of particular applied scenarios. For instance, scenarios in which students are asked to think as advertisers, marketers, or public relations personnel--or to take on similarly specific organizational, business, or professional roles--typically come with a set of implied assumptions regarding genre (how meaning is best conveyed), quality (as determined by the expectations of particular target audiences), and success (often profit-oriented). A number of the scenario examples we discuss in this piece ask students to consider applied visual rhetoric in these ways, and while such exercises may superficially align with the CCSS expectations for
“college and career readiness,” scenarios that tightly define how success is determined may also risk reifying dominant assumptions, perpetuating stereotypes, and limiting alternative solutions.

In these situations, the tenets of critical literacy can help students interrogate the parameters and assumptions of certain contexts and so widen the scope of what is possible (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2015; Janks, 2014). Critical literacy “refers to approaches to literacy education that seek to both disrupt unjust texts and social practices and use literacy to reimagine and redesign new possibilities” (Rogers & Mosley, 2013, p. ix) and challenges individuals “to understand implicit ideologies and agendas, to think and speak for oneself, [and] to understand how social contexts affect how texts are designed and understood” (Warnick, 2002, p. 6). As Warnick notes, such a framework asks students to critique the rhetorical nature of language and images, particularly in what is emphasized and de-emphasized, and why. As a tool for interrogating dominant assumptions, values, and truisms of particular contexts, a critical literacy approach can help to de-marginalize diminished voices, highlight alternatives perspectives and solutions, and draw attention to potential injustices, biases, and inequities that might otherwise remain subsumed.

In the discussion of variations in visual scenarios below, we note areas in which a critical literacy lens can call into question fundamental assumptions. As an example of this work, consider the potential offered by Newsweek magazine’s Tumblr post (2012) featuring rejected cover designs for the story of President Barack Obama’s reversal of position on the issue of gay marriage. A scenario based on these visual texts might ask students to take on the role of a Newsweek editor, arguing for the effectiveness of a particular cover design over others. In this case, the criteria for “effectiveness” might be considered through conventional rhetorical criteria and questions that are in turn organized around institutional and, in this case, corporate interests:
Which cover design best catches the eye? Which is likely to sell the most copies by generating buzz? Which is likely to offend the least number of people? Which best represents the facts of the story?

A critical literacy angle brought to the same scenario might also challenge students to ask questions that go beyond (and perhaps critique) the structures of business logic: Who benefits and who is disadvantaged by these texts? How might these visual texts refer to, reinforce, or complicate stereotypes? How might they exaggerate or simplify reality? Which choices, if any, might challenge the assumptions of particular viewers in positive ways? What other perspectives might be considered that are not currently represented?

We would argue that critical literacy is not an add-on consideration in working through applied scenarios, but is central to this project and a crucial aspect of ethical communication in everyday social and professional situations.

Methodology

Our experimentation with scenario-based learning (SBL) grew out of conversations with several of our colleagues in English Education after both of us had dabbled with SBL for years. Darren developed early versions of some of the scenarios included in this article, while Rob had looked for ways of incorporating standards-related scenarios in his time as a high school teacher. More recently, after reading Beach, Thein, and Webb’s (2012) text, Teaching to Exceed the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards, we realized our work with SBL nicely mapped onto what those authors (and others) said about the role of literacy practices in the secondary school classroom. Namely, we saw SBL as possessing great promise for at least three audiences: 1) Pre-service teachers, who would see how they could teach writing- and discussion-friendly lessons that were not just in aid of standards documents but were, more importantly,
supportive of the existing literacy practices of their future students; 2) Current practicing
teachers, who could take these activities directly into their own classrooms and, presumably,
develop new materials of their own; and 3) Secondary school students whose existing literacy
practices could be leveraged inside the classroom to build upon and extend what they were
already doing outside the classroom.

Because our work is primarily conducted with pre-service and practicing teachers, the
process of selecting scenarios for this article focused on the work we regularly do in our classes,
professional development workshops, and conferences. To that end, all the scenarios presented in
this article were initially “road-tested” with a variety of audiences including, but not limited to,
undergraduate methods courses in reading and writing, graduate methods courses in reading and
writing, several workshops conducted in conjunction with the Kennesaw Writing Project
(KMWP, an affiliate site of the National Writing Project), multiple presentations at the annual
Georgia Council of Teachers of English conference, and the 2012 National Council of Teachers
of English Conference in Las Vegas, Nevada.

In all the above instances, we present these scenarios in the manner that we hope they
would be taken up by “real” classroom students. Namely, we ask the participants in all these
venues to experience them as their own students would. We break each large group into smaller
collaborative groups, assign one or more scenarios to each small group, provide them with ample
time (approximately twenty minutes) to work through the provided scenario, and then return to
the whole-group setting to debrief. During that final large group discussion, we make note of the
process by which each group arrived at consensus and solicit suggestions for ways the scenarios
might be modified and/or adapted for different grade levels and student populations. A final level
of review occurs when we follow up with those teacher candidates and practicing teachers who
have taken part in these sessions. This happens most often when we follow up with graduates of our program who have begun using these scenarios in their own classrooms, as well as with teachers who complete the KMWP’s Invitational Summer Institute. While this feedback is informal and largely anecdotal in nature, it helps us see which scenarios are seeing the highest degree of success in secondary classrooms. All the scenarios included in this article have gone through this process of review.

As the creators of these scenarios, we have opted not to write a traditional article wherein we conduct a conventional textual analysis of the scenarios and then present the findings emerging from that analysis. Instead, what follows is a description of what we intended to accomplish with each scenario and a discussion of how we believe it achieves that intent. In this way we attempt to take up what Ely, Vinz, and Downing, et. al. (1997) refer to as “writing our way toward understanding” (p. 27). By using reflective memos which “help us to critique our own work and to develop insights or directions” (p. 28), we are able to assess the degree to which these scenarios accomplish what we initially hoped they would. In the course of this reflection, we also explain the ways in which each scenario adheres to a literacy practices framework while simultaneously meeting various Common Core State Standards. We conclude with a discussion of how a use of SBL requires at least two critical shifts in the way we think about English Language Arts as a discipline. Taking such a tack allows us the opportunity to explain the methods, motivations, and processes that led us to develop this series of activities, which we believe holds great promise in the English Language Arts classroom.

**Variations in Visual Scenarios**

The full scope, nature, and variety of possible scenario-based learning activities in the English Language Arts classroom is beyond the scope of this article. Instead we will focus on a
number of representative examples while making connections to broader principles as we go. In
terms of design parameters, these examples are ordered from “structured” to “ill-structured”
(Dabbagh & Dass, 2013, pp. 161-2) in a movement that we think best supports students in
increasingly challenging and complex kinds of work that moves them from responding to texts to
composing their own. Before moving to practical examples, it is worth mentioning that we have
used these scenarios extensively with preservice teachers enrolled in our content methodology
courses and with in-service teachers as part of various professional development programs,
including Invitational Summer Institutes of the Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project. Teachers in
both populations have gone on to use these scenarios successfully with their own students.

As a point of departure, we begin with the following prompt:

**Prompt 1.** Find an image that you think best represents the theme of Nathaniel
Hawthorne’s story “Young Goodman Brown” and explain your choice.

Though this prompt invites students to think in multimodal ways about a text, we argue that it
does not require extended higher-order thinking. Combined with generalities about Hawthorne’s
story, *almost any image* with a negative charge culled from thirty seconds of online searching
could fulfill this assignment. In the absence of specific parameters for a response or criteria for
quality, student explanations for their choices are unlikely to reveal depth of thinking.

In contrast, McCann (2010) recommends a *supportive data set* when creating scenarios—
essentially, contextual elements that determine the boundaries, nature, and conventions of
acceptable responses. Here is one version of how the Hawthorne prompt might be revised
through McCann’s lens:

**Prompt 2.** You work for an independent film company that is producing an adaptation of
Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story “Young Goodman Brown.” The film will soon be
premiering at film festivals, but the marketing team can’t decide on a movie poster image. They want something weird and eye-catching to attract moviegoers, but the image has to be connected to the story’s themes. Consider the six image options below in terms of the themes in Hawthorne’s story, along with the company’s goals. In a carefully worded memo to the marketing team, explain which image would work best on the movie poster and why. You should also include an explanation of why some or all of the other images would be less effective. Media attention and financial success are riding on a successful choice.

This prompt provides much more contextual guidance about what constitutes an effective response, including specific criteria for a selection, a genre for writing, and real-world stakes. While the verisimilitude in the prompt is not new (e.g., the standard exam prompt requiring a letter to a principal or newspaper editor is almost a cliché), contextualizing a reason for writing almost inevitably calls for integrating skills and tactics that often get piecemeal treatment in conventional classroom exercises. Here students must draw upon an understanding of genre (memo structure and conventions), appropriate diction (i.e., register, charge, and connotation), and professional meta-language gestures (e.g., elements of communication that signify seriousness and build goodwill) in addition to demonstrating their applied knowledge of the text itself. This integrated quality is typical of myriad situations calling for focused communication in the world, professional or otherwise. As Duffy and Cunningham (1996) put it, “we do not learn in a content domain simply to acquire information but rather to bring that information to bear on our daily lives” (p. 191).

A noteworthy element of Prompt 2 is that students do not have carte blanche in choosing

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2 See Appendix A for sample images for prompts 2, 3, 4, and 6.
a suitable image; they must instead select from a limited and predetermined pool of options. This
framing of solutions—a model we call “divergent with constraints”—provides students with
flexibility in response while also challenging them to think systematically. In particular, the pool
of image options should support a “range of possibilities” and act as a mental puzzle not easily
solved (McCann, 2003, p. 35). While a clearly poor choice among the options can help students
gain leverage, most of the images provided should be plausible solutions. Grappling with a set of
possibly appropriate choices also edges students into the realm of rhetorical awareness. Rather
than a convergent exercise that requires finding the single correct answer or an “anything goes”
divergent response requiring little grounded explanation, a rhetorically oriented situation
presumes multiple possible solutions (and thus multiple ways to respond successfully) anchored
in rational case-making and the needs of a specific audience. What gets most value here is not
correctness but the quality of the mustered argument and the contextual communicative
competence demonstrated in support of a choice.

Creating Prompt 2, perhaps obviously, requires more effort from a teacher than
generating a more traditional prompt. In working with pre-service and in-service English
teachers, however, we have found this kind of work to be compelling and useful. Teachers and
teacher candidates designing these “framing events”—applied situations requiring complex
thinking and contextually appropriate decision-making—are approaching Common Core
expectations constructively (Beach, et al, 2012). The process of selecting visual options to
accompany a scenario, for instance, requires teachers to think carefully about textual themes in
order to prompt a particular kind of thinking from students. Instructional effort is rebalanced
toward constructing and planning these applied scenarios; class time is likewise repurposed for
students to grapple with the situation, attend to rhetorical and ethical considerations, and begin
the process of building responses. Notably, this work encourages a reflective and experimental mindset from teachers as they refine or revamp scenario elements based on student response, demonstrations of learning, and feedback.

We believe this kind of work can be used to invigorate traditional assignments typical in an English classroom. As an example of applied literary analysis, the Hawthorne scenario expects students to demonstrate an understanding of literary elements (such as theme, tone, and characterization) that might more conventionally be assessed in a traditional essay form. Prompt 3 draws upon similar understandings:

**Prompt 3.** Mr. Mildew, an eccentric philanthropist, has chosen your school's English department to be the recipient of 200 new copies of George Orwell's novel *1984*. In order to qualify for this gift, however, you must select a cover design from the list below and provide Mildew with a convincing rationale for your choice. "The cover needs to be accurate and eye-catching," says Mr. Mildew. "And, it should make students want to read the book."

Based on your knowledge of the novel themes, write a letter to Mr. Mildew that

1. Explains which cover design best fits the criteria.
2. Refers specifically to details from the novel and elements of the design in making your case.
3. Explains why you did not select some (or all) of the other covers.
4. Thanks him for this opportunity.

Again, this scenario requires some frontloaded effort from a teacher in locating suitable cover options, easily accomplished with an online image search. In the broader field of scenario-based learning, the situations in Prompts 2 and 3 are a variant of “design problems” (Dabbagh & Dass,
2013, p. 172). While students are not actually creating a unique solution to a problem, they find themselves in a situation featuring “multiple solutions and solution paths” that require “domain-specific and domain-general problem solving skills [and] integrating multiple knowledge domains” (Dabbagh & Dass, 2013, p. 172). Instructionally, we might ask students to develop individual responses to this prompt before working in small groups to reach consensus, deepen the case for their choice, and craft a polished piece. During this process, student groups can be tasked with posing critical questions to one another for purposes of clarification, justification, and perspective. Again, such work is a strong match with Common Core’s expectations: students are engaged in complex readings of texts and their applied uses, while teachers are recast from lecturers and information providers to situation designers with the primary role of probing emergent thinking with questions.

When we have used Prompts 2 and 3 with preservice and in-service teachers, we have found them to be a fruitful means of engaging students with a cognitive challenge, easily adapted to focus on different understandings and skills. Prompt 4, for instance, springs again from a conventional ELA literary work, but places more emphasis on rhetorical savvy and contextual understanding.

**Prompt 4.** Construction of MockingWorld, a “literary theme park” devoted to Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is almost complete. The park features a variety of rides, structures, exhibits, and characters inspired by the novel and the 1962 film adaptation. When the park opens, the first 10,000 visitors will receive a free high-quality souvenir T-shirt. But just what image should appear on the shirt has been a contentious issue. The selection committee has narrowed the options to four possibilities, but they need help.
Part 1. Review the images below and draft a letter to the committee explaining which of these images should appear on the T-shirt. Your letter should

- explain the thinking behind your choice
- discuss why the other images are less effective

Part 2. Revise your letter so that it

- takes time to point out what’s good about the other images
- provides more support for your choice with specific reference to the novel and the park
- thanks the committee for the chance to offer your insight

In particular, Prompt 4 asks students to weigh possibly competing factors--the novel’s themes and family-friendly marketing, for instance--that demonstrate an awareness of audience and situation. By phasing in different stages to the work over time (we might easily imagine a Part 3 of this prompt that calls for peer review of one’s proposal and incorporation of feedback into a final version), we are able to more realistically reproduce the literacy practices of real world organizations. Using a critical literacy lens, students might also question the assumptions of the four options presented and instead propose alternatives that refocus on characters, conflicts, and issues that have been minimized or ignored. Such a move might lead students toward a wider critique of the proposed park itself: what are the ethical questions and social justice considerations involved in turning a novelistic rendition of historical events (i.e., a false rape accusation, an attempted lynching, systemic racial injustice) into theme-park spectacle?

While we have already discussed the value of scenario-based activities in generating student-centered discussions focused on problem solving, another benefit of these activities is in the way they provide students with an opportunity to write in ways compatible with Common
Core expectations. In particular, the CCSS emphasis on argumentative writing is clear. Beginning in Grade 6 and continuing through Grade 12, the argumentation strand receives priority in the Writing Standards. In Grade 6, students are required “to write arguments that support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.” By Grades 11 and 12, students are asked to write “arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.” Even in Grades 1-5, students are asked to write a rudimentary form of argument in the form of pieces that call on “reasons to support [an] opinion.” Finally, the implicit priority of argument receives official sanction in “The Special Place of Argument in the Standards” in CCSS ELA Appendix A, which describes “the unique importance of argument in college and careers” (p. 24). In short, of the three genres of writing mandated by the CCSS (argumentative, explanatory, and narrative), argument clearly takes pride of place.

Considering the emphasis placed on argument, it is important for teachers to consider innovative ways to teach the form that go beyond traditional essay forms. Unlike the scenario-based activities described earlier, the prompts below are not anchored to a literary text. They do, however, provide students with an opportunity to make a claim while considering context-dependent elements such as audience, purpose, and rhetorical appeals vital in constructing a successful argument.

**Prompt 5.** The Georgia Tourism Board is in the process of developing a new campaign designed to draw visitors to the state. You are part of the advisory committee tasked with reviewing the proposed designs and selecting the one that seems likely to generate the most tourist revenue in the state.
The four designs are below. As you think through your choice, please identify the appeals (ethos, logos, and/or pathos) that seem to be at work in each and evaluate their effectiveness on potential tourists. In your final report, you should identify which design you selected and why its appeals seem most likely to bring tourists to the state.

In Prompt 5, students choose from four actual tourism designs culled from online brochures, materials, and advertising. Note that while options are constrained in that students are specifically asked to consider the Aristotelian appeals of ethos, logos, and pathos, the true task here is justifying why the selected design will appeal to a majority of tourists. In this way, students must build an argument for hypothetical outside audiences while also analyzing and evaluating the appeals used in each of the four designs, making the activity both argumentative and analytical. To increase the activity’s sophistication for advanced students, a teacher might ask that counterarguments be considered for the three designs not selected. From this single activity, students would be asked to demonstrate a variety of CCSS expectations across multiple strands.

We have also tried a variation of this scenario with preservice and in-service teachers that increases its sophistication through a more thorough consideration of audience.

**Prompt 6.** The Georgia Tourism Board is in the process of developing a new campaign designed to draw visitors to the state. You are part of the advisory committee tasked with reviewing the proposed images and selecting the one that seems likely to generate the most tourist revenue in the state.

The four images are below. As you choose, please discuss and identify how you think each photo would appeal to prospective tourists, as well as if there seems to be a specific kind of tourist targeted by each image. In your final report, please specify the
image your group selected for use in the ad campaign, as well as why you selected it.

Additionally, identify the target market for the image and how you think this image will appeal to that specific demographic.

In Prompt 6, students are provided with four photographs representing different aspects of the state (in this case, the Atlanta skyline at night, a beach on the Atlantic coast, a woodland river scene, and a fountain on an historic square in Savannah, Georgia). Rather than evaluating the appeals of a pre-existing advertising campaign, this activity relies on students to evaluate the audience to which each image would most appeal and consider this information in terms of tourist revenue.

The fact that all of the image options should be potentially appropriate means that students must develop a rhetorically informed argument in response. For instance, some students may select the Atlanta skyline, arguing that it connotes youth, dynamism, culture, and nightlife and would thus appeal to tourists drawn to the city to spend money in clubs, restaurants, and museums. Other groups may select the Savannah fountain based on appeals to heritage and the history of the antebellum South. Where the Atlanta skyline could be any city in the United States, they might argue, Savannah is uniquely Georgian—groups that choose this picture often cite the unique emotions it evokes as the reason for its appeal. These groups believe the Savannah image would be a more successful ad campaign because it can potentially capture the imagination of a wider group of tourists than the Atlanta skyline, which offers pastimes not terribly dissimilar from other urban centers. In this way, groups might place youth and affluence (Atlanta) in contrast to widespread emotional appeal (Savannah), requiring students to dissect not just what appeals are inherent in each image, but why and to whom they are appealing, as well as how that can translate into revenue for the state. Once again, the result is that a single
activity can ask students to wrestle with multiple domains found in the English Language Arts CCSS.

**Multimodal Composing and Scenarios**

As Doering, Beach, and O’Brien (2007) have argued, the realities of modern communication mediated through digital tools, modes, and spaces is changing the nature of English Education curricula and the purposes to which we ask students to compose. Particularly important, they note, is the implicit real-world challenges of creating texts in context: students “must know how to go beyond simply creating multimodal texts to knowing how to design these texts using visual rhetoric to effectively attract, engage, and influence their audiences” (p. 41). Such work calls for students to consider both the rhetorical and semiotic power of various textual elements within a specific situation (p. 43). In practicing the ways that individuals, organizations, companies, and groups respond to, anticipate, and attempt to shape public perception, students engage in literacy practices realistic to the world beyond the classroom. In Prompt 7, for instance, students examine how corporate logos have evolved over time with the goal of deriving specific principles for a related realistic situation.

**Prompt 7.** As a “branding” professional, your expertise has been sought by two companies. Both CVS (a pharmacy chain) and Sherwin-Williams (a paint company) are interested in a logo redesign to update their image with a fresher, more modern style.

Consider the before-and-after logos of the companies below and try to reach conclusions about motivation for changes, connotations of the images, and the decision-making process. Then, describe (or sketch) a logo redesign for CVS and/or Sherwin-Williams. Include a written explanation of your choices that details your reasoning. You’ll be pitching your proposals to both companies, so be ready to convince through
detailed argument!

As students examine “before and after” logo designs of corporations such as Burger King, Apple Computers, Walmart, and BP, they are forced to look closely at each set of images to reconstruct a plausible rationale for changes. Given that such logo redesign is an expensive proposition for any organization and therefore not a change undertaken lightly, there are almost always intentions that, through careful analysis and research, students can discern and articulate.

Students’ own redesign proposals for company logos are in turn guided by the patterns and principles they have gleaned in these earlier conversations---for instance, a corporation’s desire to appeal to younger consumers, to project a more environmentally friendly image, or to eliminate logo elements with negative connotations.

Through this work, students demonstrate their understanding in at least two different ways: by making a reasonable and evidence-supported speculative argument as to why certain logos were changed or abandoned and then applying that same logic to an original design that takes rhetorical appeals and audience perception into account. The result is that students are asked to consider audience and purpose in much the same way they would be asked to consider those elements in a traditional essay, only they are asked to do this in a multimodal fashion that encourages analysis of the affordances of visual modes in addition to written composition.

A variation on this scenario that could have particular relevance (depending on the news cycle) deals with sports logos.

**Prompt 8.** Two professional sports teams have sought out your insight regarding a possible logo change: the Cleveland Indians of Major League Baseball and the Columbus Crew of Major League Soccer. The Indians want an “updated” logo; the Crew want a more “accessible” logo.
Consider the logo redesigns of the various teams below. Speculate about rationale and intent for each change, articulating any patterns or trends. Then, based on your conclusions, create a redesign proposal (including sketches) for the Indians and the Crew. Similar to the previous scenario, students have to consider the decision-making process that goes into creating and approving the logo for a sports team, but if used in tandem with the previous example, it also invites them to explore how sports logos are rhetorically similar to or different from brand logos. For instance, while both types of logos presumably should be easily recognizable, do sports logos need to present a particular message that is different from the logo of a particular product? Or if we want to consider a sports team to be a product itself (since most teams do, after all, need to be money-making ventures and therefore “sold” to the public), what considerations need to be taken into account before settling on a desirable message? Like the Georgia tourism examples above, students will find themselves inevitably concerned with audience, especially to whom the sports logo should appeal and what message or narrative a logo might send about the team (and community) it represents. Finally, this scenario asks students to adopt a particular rhetorical stance, draft a proposal for redesign, and move their understanding of argument into the field of graphic representation by sketching the redesigned logo.

As students become more practiced with these kinds of realistic communication challenges, the complexity of scenarios can likewise be increased. Consider Prompt 9, which asks students to consider more precise criteria in constructing a more sophisticated package proposal.

**Prompt 9.** Your small company has decided to submit a proposal for what could be a very lucrative contract: creating the name, logo, and bottle/packaging design for rap superstar Eminem’s new line of men’s cologne. Eminem has been very clear about the
criteria for this product:

- it must convey quality and distinctiveness
- it must convey hip hop authenticity
- it must embody the cross-cultural appeal of Eminem’s music
- it must be stylistically different from the design of Eminem’s albums and other merchandise, yet still recognizable as unique to him.

Eminem’s team has pointed to Jay-Z’s “Roca Wear” label, David Beckham’s fragrance line, and Diddy’s “Sean John” sportswear and accessories company as representing the kind of image and branding they’re after. Your team’s pitch to Eminem’s people should include a mock-up of the product packaging, materials, and logo, along with a complete explanation of how your choices reflect his image and desired criteria.

Potential follow-up work for this project—in keeping with both the realistic needs of the scenario and the multimodal considerations of modern branding—might include spec plans for the website and social media campaign accompanying the product’s rollout.

Note that the situation in Prompt 9 implicitly embeds a rationale for collaborative brainstorming, drafting, feedback, revision, proofreading, and final public presentation of a project. Put simply, work that is thoughtful, creative, practiced, and polished is more apt to be rewarded (in this scenario, financially) while superficial or careless work in real organizational situations generally is not. The need for revision can be a difficult sell for students in conventional writing assignments. By invoking actual audiences and their expectations, however, teachers can raise the stakes in a way that makes careful work matter.

More broadly, the field-specific and market-oriented nature of Prompt 9 is again worth complicating through a critical literacy lens. While the immediate economic consequence of
professional communication holds obvious real-world relevance, we also want students to practice speaking back to conventions of messaging that may reify reductive definitions of identity. The cultural territory occupied by this scenario, for instance, invites students to consider what Washabaugh (2008) calls “the undercarriage of gendered and racial identities” with which images, particularly in capitalist culture, often traffic (p. 134-5). What constitutes an ethical, fair, or accurate representation of people, cultures, lifestyles, and identities (and if, why, and how such a consideration matters) are elements of critical literacy meta-inquiry that reveal a potentially transformative dimension of this work.

In all the cases described above, students are taking up the kind of argumentation valued highly by the CCSS. However, rather than requiring students to argue in traditional ways that many find unmotivating or arbitrary (and which, for some students, have been assigned so frequently that they require minimal thought or effort), these scenarios ask students to weigh and present evidence, anticipate (and address) counter-arguments, consider factors such as audience and purpose, question ethical ramifications, and present their arguments in various real-world genres (such as reports, proposals, and pitches). We argue that visual scenarios such as these invite students not just to engage with the texts they read, but to learn how to compose in ways that map onto the kinds of complex arguments that they may be required to make in life beyond school.

**Literacy Practices as a Guiding Framework**

In recent conversations with practicing teachers, one thing is clear to us: many teachers feel constrained—even stymied—by the extremely limited extent to which they can create instruction that is creative and engaging. This seems to be due to an ironic confluence of the CCSS themselves (which focus inordinately, some might say, on tasks such as close reading and
academic writing) and the restrictive ways in which their implementation has been enforced by various levels of administration (based at least in part on the way in which the CCSS is tied to high-stakes testing and value-added measures of accountability). For these reasons it is worth mentioning that what we have presented to this point is not mere whimsy or the fanciful musings of two out-of-touch members of academia. In fact, the kinds of activities we present above are currently being used in middle and high school classrooms by our former students who are successful teachers, and the activities (and the assumptions from which they derive) fold neatly into a coherent literacy practices framework as advocated by Beach, et al. (2012).

As the name suggests, a literacy practices approach is based in how literacy is actually practiced in specific circumstances and contexts in our lives, grounded in engaging and meaningful learning episodes and experiences through which students employ “literacy practices” in a real or invoked context (Beach, et al, 2012, pp. 32-34). Known as framing events, these situations call on students to adopt roles, consider beliefs, examine rhetorically specific norms and conventions, articulate goals, create plans, and muster appropriate responses given the boundaries and expectations of a real situation (2012, pp. 44-48). In its most fully realized incarnation, a literacy practices approach challenges students to identify, grapple with, and participate in conversations about actual framing events relevant to their own lives. Within this model, ELA knowledge and skills are anchored within and emerge through situations that allow students to define the issues and problems that matter to them, analyze the range of contextual responses, and take action through informed literacy choices.

These scenario-based activities follow the literacy practices framework in other ways. All of these activities require students to construct and enact identities, in the process adopting the discourse of different professional disciplines, and in the process “acquiring specific uses of
academic language” (Beach, et al, 2012, p. 49). For instance, rather than write a traditional persuasive or argumentative essay in which the student takes up a position supporting or refuting a controversial social issue (and where the underlying rhetorical task remains firmly rooted in the student writing for the teacher/assessor), the “Young Goodman Brown” scenario described in Prompt 2 asks the student to construct and enact an identity as the member of a movie’s marketing team. This necessarily means the student will have to take into consideration the impact of image on an audience, the relevance of that image as it relates to the film, and how the literacy moves involved in justifying this choice to the rest of the team who will be concerned with publicity and the film’s potential for financial success. Furthermore, the presumption of an authentic audience means the students will need to adopt the discourse to which that audience will be most receptive. This is obviously a complicated series of intellectual and rhetorical tasks, and students may need help constructing these identities through mentor texts or other materials.

Another obvious connection between SBL and a literacy practices framework is that these scenarios ask students to relate to and collaborate with others. This involves the crucial ability to “empathize with others’ perspectives, share one’s own feelings and perspectives, and negotiate differences of opinion” (Beach, et al, 2012, p. 52). Because all of the scenarios described earlier ask students to 1) arrive at a consensus of opinion, and 2) write a collaborative piece justifying their decision, they must first settle on a process by which they will discuss their opinions, resolve differences, and write collaboratively. For the scenarios based in literature, this also provides students with a valuable opportunity to discuss their reading in a different context, a practice supported by Blau (2003), who sees reading as a social process, completed in conversation. Students will learn literature best and find many of their best opportunities for learning to become more competent, more
intellectually productive, and more autonomous readers of literature through frequent work in groups with peers (p. 54).

By negotiating whether an image of Atticus Finch or Tom Robinson (or for that matter, Calpurnia) would be most appropriate for a representative *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) t-shirt or which cover design of *1984* (Orwell, 1949) is most effective for a particular audience and purpose, students will necessarily have to distill thoughts about the text while supporting those thoughts with evidence. Teachers who bring these small-group discussions to the larger class (a practice we endorse) engage in what Nystrand (1997) refers to as dialogic instruction, in which there is conflict, tension, and negotiation in the discussion, and through which the teacher incorporates student responses into subsequent questions. Explaining decisions to a wider audience can also serve as a verbal revision strategy prior to writing, as each group has to consider how best to present the image selected, explain the selection, and why other options were eliminated. And, of course, these classroom processes emphasize a teacher’s role in asking questions that stretch student capacity for evidentiary reasoning.

Finally, these scenarios adhere to a literary practices framework in how they ask students to adopt a critical engagement perspective. Here, students consider the larger issues at play behind the texts, and in so doing, “interrogate different viewpoints, focus on issues, and promote social justice” (Beach, et al, 2012, p. 58). While the language of the CCSS largely treats “critical thinking” as a value-neutral concept, real or realistic scenarios expect context-embedded proposals and action as a response. In such cases, exercising a critical mindset means more than applying a set of cognitive skills or analytical procedures. Students will quite likely find themselves practicing critical literacy: challenging status quo assumptions, critiquing received truths, and engaging relevant issues of social justice as a necessary part of tackling complex
problems. As Mulcahy (2008) notes, “while critical thinking is crucially important...critical literacy challenges students to identify issues such as gender bias, cultural bias, omissions of narratives by marginalized groups from texts, and re-write the texts to represent a more complex picture” (p. 26).

Prompt 8, the scenario dealing with sports logos, is one such example. In evaluating an existing logo and designing an alternative, students must consider how different groups respond to the current logo and how those same groups might respond to a redesign. At the time of this writing, the United States patent office has revoked the Washington Redskins’ trademark, which makes for an especially productive opportunity for exploration. Students would have to consider why some groups take offense to this National Football League team logo and, in proposing a new design (and, presumably, a new name), how tensions might be defused while finding a possible solution that simultaneously addresses criticism and potentially honors the history of the team and the city it represents. Again, this goes beyond a simple argumentative essay to explore issues of bias, tradition, and multiple perspectives, and it does so in a way that is collaborative and multimodal. We do not mean to suggest that a critical literacy approach can always be reconciled smoothly with the imperatives of marketplace or organizational thinking, or, for that matter, conventional classroom group work. Rather than insisting that all student groups must achieve consensus—a practical constraint of many applied situations—teachers might consider alternatives that allow for voicing perspectives otherwise silenced. In all situations, students can act as auditors of their own group dynamics and processes (both interpersonal and those produced through enacted identities and roles), with the broader goal of interrogating how power is accessed, consolidated, shared, and negotiated through language (Janks, 2015, p. 5).
Where Do We Go from Here?

We hope the discussion above can serve as a practical starting point for teachers seeking to engage meaningfully and critically with the demands of the CCSS. In particular, the literacy practices framework presents us with a crucial difference in looking at how to approach standards and assessment in the classroom. Where conventional wisdom suggests that we begin with the CCSS as a laundry list of tasks to complete (limiting the curriculum by necessity), a literacy practices framework flips that formula on its head and asks that “[the teacher] begin with a focus on meaningful issues, topics, themes, activities, experiences, and events that will engage students in learning” (Beach, et al, 2012, p. 43).

This refocusing represents two critical shifts in thinking. The first is in treating teachers as professionals, experts in their subject who can (and will) make informed instructional decisions responsive to the learning needs of their students. Implicit in all standards documents (and the high-stakes tests that accompany them) is the belief that teachers need external guidance in knowing what to teach and how to teach it well. Sometimes, to be fair, this is true, and teachers should certainly be encouraged to seek out collaborative opportunities with their colleagues. The notion that teachers know what is best for their students, however, seems to run counter to the philosophy of mistrust on which educational reform movements often seem based. Using a literacy practices framework to design activities such as those we have described is a move of empowerment away from homogenized lessons created in the name of “meeting standards” to activities that give students opportunities to collaborate and compose in contexts that develop their rhetorical dexterity and sophistication.

A second shift in thinking lies in encouraging teachers to recall the ways in which English Language Arts is an abundant curriculum. The CCSS shares an unfortunate
characteristic with its predecessors: operationalized, it often acts to artificially compartmentalize and restrict aspects of the English classroom that are, in actuality, complementary. For instance, according to the CCSS, texts are either literary or they are informational; writing is either argumentative or narrative. Left out of this false dichotomy is the reality that great literary texts can teach or inform to the same degree as speeches or essays might, and that persuasive arguments can be made (for instance) through the use of story. Jardine, Friesen, and Clifford (2006) attribute this restrictive view of curricula to the educational climate (of which the CCSS are very much a part) in which school subjects “become necessarily bounded in ways that make it possible to control, predict, assess, and monitor their production, distribution, consumption, dispensation, and accumulation” (p. 4). In other words, concepts and topics are reduced to their most easily digestible, controllable, and testable forms. SBL and multimodal textual analysis and composition can help to disrupt this movement. While much of our focus in this article has been on conventional image-centered visual texts and their uses, other possibilities—in the form of clothing, design, three-dimensional structures, sculpture, spaces, gestures, sounds and music, video, remix, memes, and other realia—offer intriguing SBL possibilities for innovative teachers.

The scenario-based activities we describe earlier follow more closely Jardine, Friesen, and Clifford’s (2006) philosophy of curriculum in abundance, a view of education, borrowed from hermeneutics, that believes human endeavors (such as those studied in the English classroom) are not “inert, finished, bounded, isolated, commodified, and manageable objects, but...living, contested, still-ongoing human projects” (p. 8). This move away from closed, predetermined responses to a classroom where learning is viewed as a dynamic, living, breathing phenomenon will be more likely to engage students in the subject matter of the classroom. In the
context of SBL, we hope that by asking our students to recognize the various connections between literature, media, and writing, they can come to view the English classroom as a place for real intellectual challenge and where they can engage in vital, ongoing projects that foster their abilities to read, write, and think critically. And, following the literacy practices framework discussed earlier, they will do this in ways that echo the kind of reading, writing, and thinking that they will be asked to actually perform in college, career, and life.

We do not intend to position SBL as a silver bullet. Like anything else worth doing in the English Language Arts classroom, it takes time, creativity, persistence, and risk to work. Despite these challenges, SBL is a strategy accessible and available to English teachers, within which the demands of the CCSS (among the kaleidoscope of educational reform mandates past and present) are simultaneously addressed and subordinated to the realistic circumstances, considerations, and purposes of literacy at work in the world.
References


New York: Routledge.


Appendix: Sample Images

Prompt 2: “Young Goodman Brown” film poster images

Image 1

Image 2

Image 3

Image 4

Prompt 3: 1984 covers

Cover 1

Cover 2
Prompt 4: “Mockingworld” T-shirt images

Design 1.

Design 2.

Design 3.

Design 4.
Prompt 6: Photos of Georgia

Photo 1

Photo 2

Photo 3

Photo 4
Prompt 2.

Image 1.


Image 2.


Image 3.


http://charnine.com/paintings/page1/g.htm. Used with permission.

Image 4.


Prompt 3.

All cover images collected at


Prompt 4.

Design 1.


http://leomatsuda-blog.blogspot.com/2009_03_01_archive.html\textsuperscript{15}. Used with permission.

Design 2.

Iggy Oblomov. (2013). Oak tree in silhouette in two colors. Retrieved from


Design 3.


Design 4.


https://www.flickr.com/photos/robertlz/3048429243/in/photolist-4ecAdy-5DnZNT-67khnv-4kT8SE-4GCgqX-5Gdmp-5hkXsH-4bQ2Lj-4bJD1f\textsuperscript{18}. Used with permission.

Prompt 6.

Photo 1.


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efFZFA-ogQaW-8fV2S-awp9Vt-dURFtp-ny2KUA-baNnmR-eCJHKc-5VbJwu-aHepCv-
aHeqVZ-dmX5BN-aHenSB-aHems4-aGBhzP-4uzjxv-4yYn71-f5Eb5e-4vNWxe-
EvRQf-aKbS1K-fA4vNS-6gUqDy-d5Qmr-hMX8df-9xFPp7-8SaWYK-9EWE3e-
6gQeJR-a3tzZ6-9DpTK9-bCCZoi-nE7zvi-86e9H5-4fcVhU-nKn62V-S2rUU-S2rVb-
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