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**Writing Bravely: Transformed Practice through Multimodal Composition in History and  
English Language Arts**

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### Abstract

The New London Group's (1996) seminal document, "Pedagogy of New Literacies," has framed the conversation around these ideas: situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing and transformed practice. This case study explores how a cross-disciplinary digital inquiry and multimodal composition demonstrated each of those elements and supported the learners coming to a critical understanding that challenged the norms and political conventions of their communities by drawing connections. The networked nature of the assignment allowed the learners to ask profound questions not just of history, but of their own world. Within the context of new literacies, this inquiry demonstrates the possibilities of multimodal composing in supporting our students in authentic disciplinary inquiry and argument.

*Keywords:* multimodal composing, new literacies, cross-disciplinary inquiry, evidence-based writing, historical argumentation, disciplinary literacy

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## **Writing Bravely: Transformed Practice through Multimodal Composition in History and English Language Arts**

### **Introduction**

The two girls huddled together in the small classroom of the school learning commons. They had been working together to curate sources about Japanese internment camps, and one of them had found a picture of a 2017 protest against a Muslim travel ban imposed by President Donald Trump. The picture's focal point was a placard with the words "Japanese Jew Against Targeting Entire Groups of Humans. #NeverForget #NeverAgain." Hailey<sup>1</sup>, who had located the picture in her research, called Sarah to her table.

Later, as they talked to Walsh-Moorman (author 1) about the sources they had found in their research about the internment camps, Sarah turned the discussion to that photograph. "We obviously ... I don't know ... I feel like not a lot of people learned that much from the internment camps since we are going through the same thing today." Hailey agreed, adding that "banning a certain culture" is not the answer. In video essays the girls composed after the curation process, the picture and their fears that Americans were making a similar mistake became central to their arguments.

Finding the courage to move past the political rhetoric of fear that shaped the arguments about the so-called "Muslim Travel Ban" might never have happened for both Hailey and Sarah, who attended a mostly White, affluent parochial high school in a very conservative county in the Midwest, had they not been engaged in active inquiry to prepare them for multimodal composing. Creating a safe space to allow students to grow individually, take risks and consider

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<sup>1</sup> All names of students are pseudonyms

new perspectives is critical to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century writing classroom, where digital tools make such connections possible (Coppola, 2020). However, it is also true that the networked nature of the literacy tasks challenges students' assumptions and leaves writers vulnerable because their work is more accessible and public than ever (National Writing Project, DeVoss, Eidman-Ahl & Hicks, 2010). Donald Graves wrote, "Writing develops courage. Writers leave the shelter of anonymity, and offer to public scrutiny their interior language, feelings and thoughts," (Graves, 2013, p. 22). The digital nature of the learning only amplifies Graves' point.

Since the important work of the New London Group in 1996, educators have been working to understand the pedagogies which support new literacies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Hicks, 2013; Coppola, 2020). Using a layered case study approach (Merriam, 1998), this article shares the results of a study into the affordances multimodal composing offered two high school students as they worked in a cross-disciplinary context to develop historical thinking skills. Using the tools offered through multimodal composing, the girls were able to demonstrate transformed practice, or the ability to apply what they learn in new and personal ways (New London Group, 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Our study was drawn from important work on multi-modal composing and new literacy pedagogy. In the following section, we present that framework and review of literature.

**Multimodal composing.** Drawing on the work of socio-cultural linguistics, semiotics is the study of anything that stands for something else (referred to as a sign), including language, sounds, gestures and images, and takes its meaning from the social system in which it is shared (Chandler, 2007). The expanded choices in multimodal composing offers access to multiple

signs, and the “integration of multiple modes of communication can enhance or transform meaning of the work beyond illustration and decoration” (National Council of Teachers of English, 2005, para. 1). In today’s digital world, “what it means to consume and produce texts is changing as digital technologies offer new opportunities to read, write, listen, view, record, compose, and interact with both the texts themselves and with other people,” and teachers must continue to develop pedagogies in support of new literacies (National Council of Teachers of English, 2018, para. 1).

Multimodal composing places strong demands on the writer because the environment is less stable and more fluid than traditional composition, allowing the writer vast freedom to represent knowledge (Slatin, 1990; National Writing Project, et al., 2010; Hicks, 2013; Coppola, 2020). Today’s writers do much more than traditional composing, as “they are increasingly exploring images, videos, slideshows, wikis, podcasts, digital stories and other types of digital writing” (Hicks, 2013, p. 2). Available resources and context determine semiotic potential (Harste & Carey, 2003); therefore, multimodal composing expands the availability of signs for writers while also requiring them to make complex decisions about how to use those signs to share their understanding. Importantly, in this environment, composing is both active and social as it allows broad audiences through digital sharing (National Writing Project, et al., 2010; Richardson, 2010; Hicks, 2013).

**New literacy pedagogy.** In 1996, the conversation about emerging literacies was given new importance with the convening of literacy experts in what was called The New London Group. The resulting document coined the phrase “new literacy pedagogy” and discussed critical aspects of that pedagogy (situated practice, critical framing, overt instruction and transformed

practice) and remains a guiding document on emerging digital literacies (New London Group, 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009).

Situated practice can be understood as allowing students to experience the *known* (experiences and practices drawn from their own life) with the *new* (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). These new experiences must relate closely to the known so that students can draw on vernacular knowledge in new, more academic ways (Cazden, 2006, p.2). Critical framing asks questions of socio-cultural contexts and purposes of learning (New London Group, 1996; Mills, 2006). Because of the connected nature of digital communication, such framing allows the learner to ask questions about what it means to be literate in today's world. Therefore, students need to ask important questions about context, power, and the privileging of some forms of knowledge over others.

Overt instruction prepares students for multimodal learning, but such instruction is not focused on discreet technology skills. Rather, the New London Group coined the term "metalanguage" to describe the process of drawing connections among and across various modes to create meaning (New London Group, 1996; Unsworth, 2005). The shifting nature of today's technology, where learners can move seamlessly from consuming to creating content, offers unique challenges because "this has huge pedagogical implications, not just about what we must do but what we have to do" (Cope, Kalantzis & Smith, 2018, p. 9). Therefore, overt instruction must prepare students to access available designs other than print-based texts and allow learners to access the "grammars" of other semiotic systems, such as film, photography, gesture or music (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Through transformed practice, the learner connects their real-world experiences to what is gained from the situated practice, critical framing and overt instruction (New London Group, 1996; Seglem & Garcia, 2018). Therefore, the meaning-making is

connected to the learner's lived experiences, allowing learners to apply what they have learned to those experiences. Because multiliteracies "sustain authentic literacies, student agency and positive distribution of power," the student is empowered by such practice (Seglem & Garcia, 2018, p. 62).

**A critical lens.** Because "technologies and their associated literacies are not neutral" (National Council of Teacher of English, 2018, para. 4), teachers must promote critical thinking about digital literacies. Digital literacies involve the use of tools that many view as free of bias or intent until they are manipulated by a user, but this does not consider the unequal distribution of social power and the "fact that digital tools reflect and amplify power of social constructs" (Mirra, Morrell & Filipiak, 2018, p. 14). Therefore, learners must consider how power might be represented in the media they consume and produce. While digital tools offer access to vast amounts of information, "being well-educated is about being able to acquire knowledge in order to investigate and interrogate that knowledge" (Thomas, 2018, p. 21). Digital media offer unique opportunities for such inquiry because they allow access to multiple texts to analyze a situation, which prepares students to consider multiple perspectives and "set their biases aside and work through a critical lens" (Williams & Woods, 2018, p. 74).

Today's learners are inundated by arguments, many unsubstantiated or even false, disseminated in digital media (Turner & Hicks, 2017; Wineburg, 2018). Being able to deconstruct and analyze such an argument requires knowledge of rhetoric and an understanding of how form affects that argument (Turner & Hicks, 2017). Therefore, students should deconstruct arguments but also "question the nature of the argument itself" (Hicks & Turner, 2018, p. 28). Because social media often allows users to share unedited thoughts or unsubstantiated claims, students ask questions of evidence itself, such as: "What counts as

evidence? For whom? In what context” (Hicks & Turner, 2018, p. 28). The self-directed manner of this questioning builds authentic conscientization (the “guiding tenet of critical literacy”) among students, but students must be able to direct their own praxis for this to become an authentic experience (Williams & Woods, 2018, p. 71).

**Historical arguments.** Historical arguments in any modality must include an understanding of subtexts. Through the study of subtexts, the historian looks at what rhetorical choices reveal about the author’s worldviews and belief systems (Wineburg, 1991, 1998). This requires students to bring their full intellect to the text, not just their content knowledge of the historical time in which it was placed (Wineburg & Reisman, 2015). To do so, the learner needs access to multiple texts that are rich in authorial voice and allow for varying perspectives into the past (Vansledright & Kelly, 1998; Monte-Sano, 2010). Therefore, allowing access to a wide variety of sources becomes critical to disciplinary literacy in history (Wineburg & Resiman, 2015).

### **Methodology**

Our study’s guiding question became: Because new literacies expand choices students must make through multimodal composing, how can multimodal composing support students’ agency and critical thinking about historical time periods? We were also interested in exploring the relationship between the two disciplines, history and English, as the students engaged in their multimodal arguments.

### **Overview of the Project**

The study took place in the classrooms of Schneider and a colleague in the English Department. Walsh-Moorman worked alongside them as a literacy coach to create a cross-



disciplinary project in which students explored how understandings of history change as time progresses. The collaboration began in response to a discussion about student argumentation skills. Schneider, an Advanced Placement United States History teacher, worried that her students' historical argumentation emphasized structure and style over substance. Working with a colleague from the English Department, who taught the same sophomore students in her Honors English 10 class, Schneider wanted to find ways to build an authentic voice in her students. In her capacity as literacy coach, Walsh-Moorman suggested multimodal composing and digital inquiry might address both of these disciplinary concerns.

Because Schneider had found her students' historical arguments tended to lack deep understandings, she wanted to build her students' historical thinking skills. According to [teachinghistory.org](http://teachinghistory.org), historical thinking is “knowing and doing history” by building students' understanding of history through consideration of multiple accounts and perspectives, examination of primary sources, exploration of a source's origins, deliberation of a source's context, and evaluation of how a source's claim is supported by evidence (National History Education Clearinghouse, 2018, para. 1). Her colleague in the English department felt such skills might strengthen her students' understanding of rhetoric. Together, we developed an essential question to guide our cross-disciplinary work: “They say facts don't change, but our opinions about them do. Why do understandings of history change through time even though the facts of that history have not?”

Importantly, both classroom teachers found that their students, who were placed in the courses largely based on standardized testing scores that put them in the 85<sup>th</sup> percentile or higher on verbal reasoning skills, worried more about meeting teacher expectations than finding something authentic to say in their evidence-based writing. Understanding authentic argument as

a “social act, one that included talking, examining evidence and considering evidence” (Kohnen, 2016, p. 434), we designed learning tasks that required students to conduct multimodal research and produce a video essay which incorporated both historical and literary artifacts of various modes: photographs, artwork, music, video and textual. It was our hope that this might allow the students to draw from what they learn during their inquiry and bring new understandings, weaving together what they already know with “alternative perspectives and more academic skills” (Cazden, 2006, p.2).

We placed students into groups of four, and groups selected from a list of 20<sup>th</sup>-century time periods and were asked to find documents that trace the public understanding of that time period when it happened and as we have moved beyond it. In English class, the students searched for literary texts that included artwork, poetry, fiction, movies, and songs. In history class, they were asked to find primary and secondary sources, video documentaries, speeches, and other historical artifacts. Finding and sharing sources was a powerful inquiry tool that supported students as they organized and made sense of their learning (Mihailidis & Cohen, 2013). Students shared their curated artifacts on a digital bulletin board, Padlet, which allowed them to upload, comment on and link to multimodal texts they found in their research.

After the students completed the curation, they worked together in groups to identify themes (i.e., at the time of the Internment camps, the public was very scared; by the 1980s, the public sentiment was largely apologetic about the camps). In informal compositions, called literary critic and historian notebooks, the students used textual evidence from the curated texts to develop those themes. In the final step of the unit, students created video essays to address the essential question, and those multimodal essays were incorporated into their AP U.S. History semester exam. The choice of a multimodal essay offered a chance for students to engage deeply

with the curated artifacts as they made composing choices that required them to “wrestle with meaning on a number of levels” and asked them to “think about how to best support their writing—through text, talk, image, sound, video or some combination of these elements” (Hicks, 2013, p. 136). Details of the learning tasks are included in Table 1.

Table 1

*Student Tasks in Study Design*

Student Task	Locus of Performance	Notes on Multi-modality
Curate sources for shared Padlet	History and English classes	Students curated print-based, video, audio and visual texts about their topic
Historian Notebook	History class	Students wrote informal, print-based essays finding themes from informational multimodal texts on shared Padlet.
Literary Critic’s Notebook	English class	Students wrote informal, print-based essays finding themes from literary multimodal texts on shared Padlet.
Video Essay	History class	Students created video essays to address the prompting question, “They say facts don’t change, but our opinions about them do. Why do understandings of history change through time even though the facts of that history have not?” Videos were uploaded to the class learning management site.
Class Viewing of Video Essays	History class	As part of the course final, students viewed classmates’ uploaded video essays, left comments and completed a print-based reflection of the process that included this prompt:

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“Why do you believe humans change interpretations of historical events? What evidence in your own project or those you viewed can back up the points you raised?”

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### **The Participants and Research Context**

Hailey and Sarah were strong students and carried A averages. Before the study, Schneider shared her observations of both girls. She reported that Hailey was quiet. Her true potential was most evident in her writing; in class discussions, she would often agree with others and did little to draw attention. However, Schneider recalled seminar discussions in which Sarah offered different perspectives on economic or social justice issues. Still, she reported that Sarah rarely made her points political, largely keeping the discussions around shared values and rooted in the Catholic traditions of the school community. The study site was a Catholic school located 30 miles north of a large, Midwestern city. While the school draws from about a 50-mile radius, it is located in a solidly conservative area. For instance, a look at the Board of Elections Data showed that the county voted Republican in the last five elections and voted for President Trump by just over a 25-point margin in both 2016 and 2020 (anonymized election board for confidentiality).

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected through observation of Hailey and Sarah’s class work time, analysis of work product and interviews. Interviews were conducted at key points in the project, including during curation and analysis of literary and historical texts, at the start of the video composing process and at the conclusion of the project. About eight hours of observations and an hour of interviews were transcribed and analyzed for the study. Work product evidence included written

assignments, such as the literary critic and historian notebooks, curation notes shared via Padlet and transcriptions of the video essays. As practitioner researchers, we remained mindful of our positions within the study and followed ethical guidelines for action research; importantly, we created “as democratic as possible” a relationship with the girls by offering Hailey and Sarah latitude in scheduling interviews, including wide choices in the project and sharing our findings with both girls as they unfolded (Nolen & Putten, 2007, p. 405).

Analysis of all transcriptions and field notes were initially done using constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) by highlighting and coding data we found relevant to the research question. See Table 2 for an explanation of key codes. Using word processing programs, we grouped data by emerging codes, creating largely theoretical categories that we could separate one from the other (Maxell, 2013) and returned to our coding to allow for inductive observations, looking for balance, nuance, and detail in the process (Rubin & Rubin, 2013).

Table 2

*Coding Examples*

Coding Category	Reasoning	Examples
Historical reasoning	This allowed us to see examples of students demonstrating use of subtexts and understanding of the audience to bring meaning to the text.	“I had to use the responses from Japanese Americans to figure out the real American opinions.” “The articles were written by White Americans, and I knew they were lying....”
Literary analysis/insight	This allowed us to record when the literary texts offered students insight into the	“A lot of sources talked about silence, and being fenced in...”

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	essential question.	“(The poems) let me see the Japanese viewpoints. It was harder to see that in the primary documents.”
Tension between literary and historical texts	This allowed us to follow how students negotiated the different disciplinary demands when working across English and history classes.	<p>“History is more fact-based...in English, you were looking at people’s reactions and so you had to sort it out.”</p> <p>“I was having a hard time sort of...I could define the right sources for each class, but when it came to writing, things got all jumbled.”</p>

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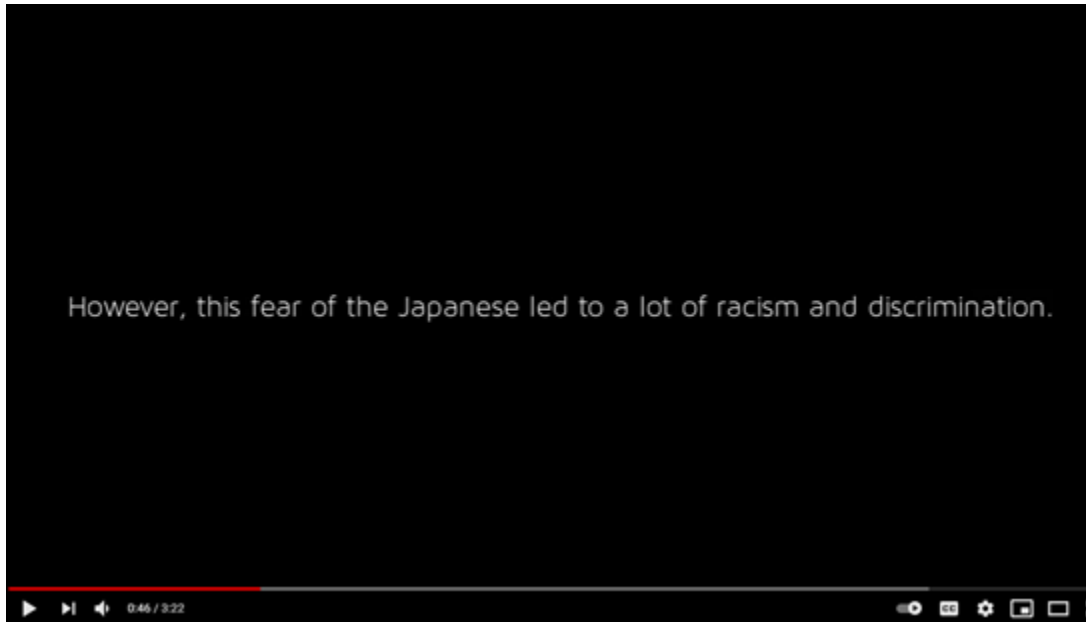
## Results

### The Video Essays

Both girls used an online video editing platform no longer available to create their videos. The company announced its closing in the final days of the project, but there was no disruption to the study or the project. The web-based program allowed students to record or insert a soundtrack, insert text between images, and edit streaming videos directly in the software. Sarah was able to upload her video to YouTube before the company closed, so a copy of her video can be found on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=fwNvspC9qLo&feature=youtu.be>)<sup>1</sup>. In the following section, we describe both participants’ final project.

**Figure 1**

*Screenshot of the Written Text Sarah Used in Her Video Essay. Sarah went on to show this [image](#) after the text slide.*



Hailey's video was 4:08 minutes and included most of the texts she curated on the Padlet. She used a Japanese instrumental as a soundtrack and wrote title slides to introduce each text as she shared it. She included inferences drawn from the texts, such as when she displayed a racist [cartoon](https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/20775/bb12977599/) (https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/20775/bb12977599/) drawn by Theodore Seuss Geisel in support of the internment camps. Her introduction to that image read, "As a result of the attack (on Pearl Harbor), fear and hatred of Japanese began to grow in American society." In the first half of her video, she opted to highlight the silencing of the Japanese victims. For instance, one textual slide read: "Because they were confined, it was hard for the Japanese to speak against what was happening," and it was followed by devastating pictures of the horrible conditions in the camps. Hailey made historical connections between the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and the reparations movement led by camp survivors. She overlaid visuals of both the Civil

Rights Movement and the Japanese American activists. Before showing a video of a speech by President Ronald Reagan granting reparations to survivors, which was clipped from a longer documentary, Hailey's introductory slide read, "During Reagan's presidency, the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 was passed." She shared an image of a quote from the American Memorial to Patriotism During World War II from Rep. Daniel Inouye, a Japanese American who served during World War II. The quote reads, "The lessons learned must remain as a grave reminder of what we must not allow to happen again to any group" (National Mall and Memorial Parks, 2021). In a sudden transition, she included a Fox News clip about President Trump's proposal to reinstate a registry for immigrants from majority-Muslim countries and institute a travel ban. She ended with a slide that read, "Hopefully, we can apply the lessons learned from Japanese internment to the issues in our country today."

Sarah's video was a minute shorter and used many of the same pictures as Hailey, but she included a slow guitar medley that was available through the editing platform. She, too, used slides to narrate her video rather than recording her own voice. She used fewer title slides than Hailey and would often clarify images with a short textual slide after sharing them. For instance, after showing the same racist cartoon by Theodore Geisel, Sarah wrote, "However, the fear of Japanese led to a lot of racism and discrimination." She also noted the connections between the Civil Rights movement and the reparations movement and shared a longer clip from President Reagan's 1988 speech. Sarah's clip included the response of survivors present at the presidential ceremony, after which she shared pictures of earlier protests by the Japanese American Citizens League. She made a more overt connection between the internment camps and Muslim travel ban by including a transition slide that read, "We are seeing a reemergence of the sorrow of these camps ... This reemergence is because of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary and a possible Muslim travel ban."



Her contemporary photographs included a [protest](https://media-cldnry.s-nbcnews.com/image/upload/newscms/2017_05/1884266/afp_182c1.jpg) ([https://media-cldnry.s-nbcnews.com/image/upload/newscms/2017\\_05/1884266/afp\\_182c1.jpg](https://media-cldnry.s-nbcnews.com/image/upload/newscms/2017_05/1884266/afp_182c1.jpg)<sup>3</sup>) at an airport with a protestor holding a sign “Japanese Jew Against Targeting Entire Groups of Humans ..... #Never Forget #Never Again” and [another](https://i.insider.com/588d74c4713ba1e81c8b50fa?width=1000&format=jpeg&auto=webp) (<https://i.insider.com/588d74c4713ba1e81c8b50fa?width=1000&format=jpeg&auto=webp><sup>4</sup>) with a person holding an iconic image from the Women's March on Washington which depicts a woman in a hijab. Her final slide reads, “Hopefully everyone can remember all the painful effects of the internment camps on the U.S.”

### **Shared Meanings and Individual Choices**

In an interview after the curation process, both girls expressed a desire to challenge the political norms of the schoolwide community. Sarah told Walsh-Moorman, “I feel like not a lot of people learned that much from (the Internment camps) since we are going through almost the exact same thing with Muslims today. It’s happening all over again.” Both girls recognized the divisive rhetoric in the current debate over the Muslim ban as reflective of the same government used to justify exclusionary policies against Japanese Americans 60 years before. Sarah referenced the “manipulation that was being done” in public statements by the Trump administration and Congressional leaders.

In interviews conducted during their composing process, Sarah talked about the importance of the primary source documents, especially the pictures of the Muslim ban protests, but Hailey said that she found the literary texts offered her a chance to see what was missing from that record. For Hailey, reading the poems and seeing the artwork of the Japanese Americans who suffered through the internment gave her a chance to truly understand the time period. She noted that so many of them suggested a lack of voice and depicted silencing of

others. “That’s what I focused on—the silence,” she said. Hailey observed that because the primary documents were often scrubbed of the overt fear and racism that truly drove the policies, she “had to use the Japanese responses to figure out and find the American opinions.” Sarah agreed, “I guess it comes full circle almost, because it shows how they felt they were being silenced—and how they were being silenced. A lot of sources talked about being silenced and fenced in.”

In a political environment that was largely sympathetic to the Trump administration, both students weaved these emerging political understandings into their video essays. Sarah used the photograph of the airport protest in her video, showing it prominently for more than 10 seconds and ending with a stark warning of the “reemergence of sorrow.” She included an iconic picture of the Women’s March, a divisive moment in current history. Sarah seemed concerned that her readers see the direct connections between policies she believed were too harsh and mistakes from our past. Hailey, on the other hand, focused on inviting her readers to consider what voices are dominating the current political discourse. After showing several devastating pictures of the conditions in the camp, Hailey added, “After they were released in 1944, the Japanese remained silent out of fear.” Her use of the Fox news clip demonstrates her concern that some voices were louder and more powerful than others. Finally, she ended her essay with a message of hope that “we can apply the lessons learned from Japanese internment to issues in our country today.” While both girls drew on the connections they saw, they did so in ways that demonstrated their individual understandings of these connections.

### **Discussion**

We believe multimodal composing empowered Hailey and Sarah to seek change and correct an injustice. Not only did the girls gain knowledge, but they were also given space to

“interrogate that knowledge” (Thomas, 2018, p. 21) in ways that built their capacity for critical analysis of the power imbalances both at the time of the internment and in today’s society.

Multimodality expands the opportunities and tools for students to build this identity by creating a complex writing space that offer expanded composing choices and the ability to share with peers (National Writing Project et al., 2010). The girls knew their classmates would see what they had created, yet they chose to critically frame their understandings in provocative images that juxtaposed a historical atrocity (the internment camps) with the policies of an administration that was largely popular among their peer group (the Muslim travel ban). While others in the class had come to vague and comfortable arguments, such as “we must learn to fight racism” or “we can’t let fears of others overwhelm us,” Hailey and Sarah made overtly political stances about a current situation.

Again, the networked nature of the learning was central to their emerging voices, and the composing process was critical to this transformation. We began the unit concerned that our students often lack a true sense of conviction when developing historical arguments. We wanted to build their capacity to use historical thinking skills—including exploring and examining a wide range of perspectives in ways that ask important questions about a source’s context, claims and origins—to create authentic arguments (Kohnen, 2016). Rather than simply offering students a sample of documents from which to work, they found those documents. The discipline-specific artifacts they found in their English and history classes offered a depth of perspective that invited Hailey and Sarah to think deeply about the historical legacy of the internment camps. While we had hoped that curating the sources might build greater exposure to various perspectives and opinions necessary to foster deep historical thinking (Wineburg, 1991, 1998), we were excited to see that it also invited our students to “take charge of their own thinking” by showing a

willingness to question the conventional thinking of the community, a hallmark of genuine argumentation (Hillocks, 2011, p. 103). The inquiry nature of the project inspired both girls to move beyond the traditions of the past and “enter into and participate in those of the present and future” (Applebee, 1996, p.3). The experiences with cross-disciplinary tasks and other modalities allowed the girls to begin to question their assumptions about historical writing. Early in the study, both Hailey and Sarah reported seeing historical writing as evidence of content knowledge but believed that an English teacher expects writers to demonstrate new thinking. While the video essays demonstrated complex and deep historical thinking, the girls also drew on rhetorical and composing skills often associated with ELA classrooms.

Accessing the potential of multimodal composing required overt instruction to prepare the students for the expanded composing choices before them. For instance, Hailey curated twice as many sources than required in part because she was “unclear” what she might need. At one point in the process, Sarah mentioned that she felt more comfortable writing a traditional history argumentative essay because “you just know what’s needed.” We included steps in the process that focused students “on the important features of their experiences and activities within a community of learners” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p.3). These steps were both formal—such as adding a written piece in which students collaborated to identify possible themes and gauge their understandings, and informal—such as when Schneider used the Broadway musical *Hamilton: An American Musical* (Miranda, 2016) to demonstrate how views of a historical figure have shifted through time. In this process, the girls were accessing a “metalanguage,” the ability to draw connections and comparisons between different modalities (New London Group, 1996; Unsworth, 2005). The varied choices demonstrated the personal nature of the decision; even as the girls used the same texts, they made different choices to share their own understandings. For

instance, both girls excerpted a speech by Ronald Reagan from a longer documentary, but Sarah chose to include shots of the tearful survivors while Hailey ended with the conclusion of the speech. The video essays allowed the girls to synthesize their personal experiences and understandings. After turning in her video essay, Sarah told Walsh-Moorman that the video essay “was bringing together what we did in history and English” and “the videos and photos really connected what I was saying through the text.”

Through the process of digital inquiry and multimodal composing, the girls were able to draw real-world connections. Cope and Kalantzis (2000, 2009) posit that transformed practice is application of the knowledge, and critical framing creates opportunities to ask questions of power in that application. The multimodal nature of the assignment supported both. The literary documents offered important clues for Hailey and Sarah that helped them ask the correct questions about the historical artifacts. Hailey and Sarah both talked about the powerful images of silence and fences that pervaded the literary documents they found. With this background, they turned to the official documents and noted the absence of Japanese American perspectives. From there, the girls drew direct comparisons to the current political situation surrounding the Muslim travel ban. The complementary nature of the assignment and expansive perspectives offered by the different text types created space for both girls to ask profound questions not just of history, but of today.

### **Implications**

It is important to note that the project’s success was due in part to an alignment of instruction across disciplines and teaching contexts. Such planning is crucial to good instruction, but we wonder how those decisions impacted the outcomes. We believe that several questions

emerged that could be addressed in future research. For instance, did multimodal composing itself shape the experiences of Hailey and Sarah and help them make such profoundly authentic arguments? What role did the cross-disciplinary process have in building their understanding? How interdependent were the different components of the project? Work in the English classroom was designed to prepare students for an evidence-based argument in a history classroom, but it is not clear how the history classroom might prepare students for a similar task in the English classroom. Importantly, we must consider to what extent the shared curriculum goals we were able to articulate and support in our various roles allowed for the transfer of skills. Would students benefit from a cross-disciplinary or multimodal process in a cross-disciplinary context if our pedagogical visions were not as aligned?

While it would appear that the use of a video essay increased a student's sense of agency, it would be helpful to delve more purposefully into why that may be. The expanded availability of semiotic signs is evident in the girls' video essays, but the curation process and cross-disciplinary aspects of the project may have contributed to that sense of agency. While choice is often cited as a factor in building student agency, multimodal composing offers complexities and expanded choice that some learners may find demanding, if not overwhelming. Both Sarah and Hailey demonstrated strong student agency, but not all of our 60 students did. Perhaps the vernacular knowledge the girls had of video as text, likely from their everyday literacy practices, helped them manage the expanded authoring choices available to them. Understanding how to help all students manage choice in multimodal composing may help create student agency more universally among our students.

New literacies, such as multimodal composing and digital inquiry, are complex because they draw on many forms of representation at once (Newman & Ogle, 2019). It is important that teachers understand the complexities that multimodal literacies introduce, but we must also embrace the opportunities they present for our students. For Hailey and Sarah, digital inquiry and multimodal composing offered them a chance to enter a community of writers who are transformed through their practice and seek to change the world with what they say. In the end, isn't that why we do what we do in our classrooms?

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