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Digital Media Literacy in a Sports, Popular Culture and Literature Course

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Abstract

This article considers how media sports culture is an apt space for digital media literacy instruction. Describing a senior year high school English course that requires students to deconstruct and compose with sports media texts, the author outlines how learning modules, analysis of curated collections of texts through heuristics, and mentor texts help students achieve higher literacy levels. The author argues that sports media literacy, due to its authenticity and relevance, can be a model for traditional literacy classrooms as ways to infuse multimodal texts and help students to gain both enhanced communication skills and critical distance from media rhetoric.

Keywords: *digital literacy, media literacy, sports literacy, multimodality, heuristics, higher-level reading skills, mentor texts, curation, authentic, relevance, secondary education, English*

We now live and learn in a culture in which information is fluid, and technologies allow individuals to be linked 24/7. Networks, which create tremendous and vibrant opportunities for teaching and learning, demand that today's students be literate in print, visual, and digital forms of expression. Indeed, since digital resources now mediate the world (Buckingham 2009), teens must switch from print-centric school decoding and encoding strategies to symbol-based approaches for social media comprehension. With the shift from page to screen, schools can help students to better read their digital worlds by offering fresh tactics, inquiry-driven dispositions, and varied social reading practices (Coiro et al. 2009; Leu et al. 2010) as part of multimodal classroom literacy learning experiences.

Modes are organized sets of resources that help us make meaning. They are cultural work that becomes representative of deeper signification due to their frequency of social use, and, according to Jewitt and Kress (2003), modes now replace what was once called "grammars." Since so many students play video games, write fan fiction, shop, seek health information, view films, and chat online, schools

have an opportunity in the 21st century to increase students' online as well as offline literacy skills and structures. Indeed, according to the Internet and American Life Project (2009), 62% of U.S. teens use the Internet to access information on news and politics, and 64% spend a significant amount of their after-school hours creating web content. Numerous pedagogical possibilities exist to make visible teens' digital reading and composing and to keep pace with students' literate identities (Alvermann 2011).

Many teachers do immerse music, photography, art, film, and television into curricula, yet, with their out-of-school exposure to popular technologies and leisure time for online experimentation (Mietlicki 2009), today's digital natives (Prensky 2001) require academic forums to strengthen their engagement with digital information (Knight Foundation 2009). Generic instruction in higher-level reading skills, however, is often insufficient for teaching students to read, write, and discuss networks of assorted symbols, relationships, and underlying assumptions across core disciplines (Alvermann et al. 2011). Teachers can call upon social connections that encourage peer teaching and

learning through a media literacy rich curriculum, which can lead students to read at higher levels of comprehension (Hobbs & Frost 2003). Thus, it is helpful to ground digital literacy learning in media texts, and the world of sports, particularly, offers an efficacious space to merge digitally mediated texts with teens' predispositions to meet, develop, and maintain relationships in virtual reality (Hiestand 2004).

A student whose eyes glaze over when presented with rich literature like *The Great Gatsby* or *Wuthering Heights* will grab a smartphone as soon as a flash comes in about the latest major league baseball (hockey/ football/ basketball) revelation. Students who have FOMO (fear of missing out) tweet about their favorite athletes between classes, text their BFF (best friend forever) about today's starting line-up, read the sports section of their school's daily online newspaper, absorb the exposes of their area's rising stars, and manage their fantasy teams between tests and lectures. Sure, those waves of sports sound bites are ephemeral glimpses into idealized worlds in which adults play children's games, but these same media sports messages present scenarios about real-world ethical dilemmas, career-ending injuries, and salary cap economic decisions. Their players are narrative heroes, and athletes' occasional crises of confidence offer glimpses into adult disappointment as well as to the human capacity for resilience. Some sports stars lack redemptive value, which itself can be quite instructive. Through media sports message analysis, students can build on traditional literacy skills by conferring the ability to assess, evaluate, analyze, and communicate (NAMLE 2014)

Sports as Authentic Digital Media Literacy Learning

Student disengagement takes place in many subject areas and across grade levels but is particularly evident in the latter part of grade twelve in the U.S. As Desautel (2013, 1) writes, "Year after year in many public high schools, seniors in their second semester subconsciously take four months off, becoming increasingly bored, restless and unproductive." Due to *senioritis*, a condition in which students accepted to colleges or committed to

careers decline to study, express ennui about school's significance, and fail to report to classes, the English department at Taylor¹ High School offers second semester, senior year course strands. Taylor High School is the only secondary school for a northeastern U.S. small city with a 2014 population just above 30,000, of whom about 96% self-report as white. Course designers envisioned senior year English strands variously as harnessing students' literacy engagement until graduation, grounding literacy learning in digital media, and/or infusing social justice into literacy pedagogy.

Sports, Popular Culture, and Literature (SPCL). In the four years this course has run, enrollment has varied from 45-80 students in a senior class that totals about 350 students.² The other course strands from which seniors can choose are The Art of Film, Children's Literature, Conspiracy Theory, Deconstruction, and Psychology and Literature. About 90% of those who enroll in SPCL are male. By investigating five units over a 15-week semester, SPCL students read how sports culture is constructed and codified while deepening their print and digital decoding, encoding, and composing skills. The course is designed to achieve multiple literacy objectives, such as: (a) acknowledging in-school and out-of-school differences in adolescent literacies (Alvermann & Moore 2013); (b) offering inquiry into topics that arouse teen passions and agency, which may manifest itself in complex ways during school literacy activities (Dyson 2003); (c) engaging students in digital literacy learning so they acquire 21st century skills and structures (Kist 2005); (d) balancing opportunities for analysis with original composition so that critical examination does not become negative and reductionist (Wilhelm &

¹ This school name is a pseudonym as are the names of the students.

² High enrollment was limited after the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) declined to approve the course as a core English class in year three, although courses including "Deconstruction," "Children's Literature," and "Conspiracy Theory" were approved. As a result, Division One-bound athletes cannot take the Sports, Popular Culture, and Literature course. Surprisingly, "Psychology and Literature" and "Film and Literature" also have not been approved. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has not provided comment as to why any of these courses has been denied.

Novak 2011); and (e) thinking of literacy as socially inclusive, inspiring civic participation, and having the capacity to develop lifelong learning (Freire 1993).

The Problem: Mediated Messages and Sports Texts. So much more than entertainment, sports today invoke a utopian emotional response (Dyer 2002) through some of the best technical performances by camera crews and technicians, editors, and producers. Coakley and Donnelly (2003) argue that the media are bridges between us and the rest of the world, directing our attention to selected items of information, experience, images, and ideas. Roles for the sports media include information communications, harnessing a consumer audience, community integration, and social change. Media sports are dynamic, due to the high number of composers who contribute to the production and transmission of electronic, visual, audio, and print sports sources, and media composers are motivated to represent sports reality in several ways: to make profits, shape values, provide public service, build media reputations, and express in technologically-artistic forms. Yet, because media coverage offers only one of many possible sets of images and messages related to an event, sports media coverage limits and defines the experiences of spectators. Popular opinion about sports' ability to create something beyond mere participation has been a deeply entrenched belief (Houlihan et al. 2009), but this position has not been verified through quality or quantity of available evidence (Haudenhuyse 2012). To answer this need, this article examines how SPCL students consider the ways that media sports messages leak into each other (Fiske 1987) by examining economic, political, and cultural sports spaces. As a result, students become better readers of their world (Freire 1992). Since sports texts are mediated messages that compare athletic action to different aspects of contemporary life, sport messages tell us a great deal about our society and identities. Such academic inquiry is consistent with the recent Common Core State Standards, so that "the need to conduct research and to produce and consume media is embedded into every aspect of today's curriculum" (CCSS 2010).

Sports media hold tremendous power to mold people's outlooks, actions, and beliefs. For this

reason, two essential questions ground the SPCL course: (1) How are sports a reflection of society? (2) How can sports be a mechanism to improve society?

One student, Darell, answered these questions this way: "Sports can be a mirror for society in that some of society's values are transferred into the world of sports. Values like the underestimation of women are often present in sports. Society doesn't care about the success of women, only that they are women. 'She's still just a girl.' Because society values male athletes as stronger beings than female athletes, society loves to see people rising to the top through hard work."

Another student, Adam, wrote: "Sports have played a very influential role in the American life. People often grow up playing sports such as football, basketball, and hockey starting as early as age five. From the early stages of childhood, children play in coordinated sports, which are organized by different leagues whether they be town recreational or larger scale tournaments. Sports teach people the benefits of working together, while also showing people that a team is made of multiple individuals, who still think for themselves. For example, the picture to the left shows a play from football, in which everyone needs to work together in order for it to be successful. Society uses sports as a tool for uniting people with different backgrounds."

Both these answers suggest that students experienced meaningful learning as a result of participating in the course.

From Theory to Practice: A Digital Media Sports Course. A [class website](#) was created using the free Google website creator tool which allows for easy teacher dissemination of information – learning objectives, assignments, Word files, images, PowerPoint and Prezi presentations, Quizlets, YouTube videos/ songs, film trailers, cartoons – through a single click. The website, which is a transparent mechanism to share information with families and the community, helps to scaffold classroom topics, build background knowledge, offer diverse writing activities, present visual analysis, demonstrate digital tools, and model mentor texts.

Each student, in turn, then creates a personal Google website, which helps move student engagement from critical analysis to composition

and transformation as students discern, collect, and recontextualize their literacy discoveries

Each unit begins with a set of inquiry-based, collegial activities that build together as learning modules; the units invite students to view professional mentor texts (Hicks 2011) and to utilize analytical heuristics to dig into media sports messages. For example, drawing upon NAMLE (2014) Core Guiding Principles, students study how persuasion occurs through the contexts in which a text is situated and how sports power becomes contingent upon a series of variables: (a) how a composer defines a situation; (b) what the setting of the message is; (c) what particular types of discourses and genres are included and excluded; (d) what actions have preceded the message; (e) who is

permitted to have a voice in the interactions; and (f) and the mental models implicit within the message.

Then students survey a curated collection of sports media messages spanning non-fiction, visual/video, audio, and literature. Finally, they write/speak/design an original composition, grounding their argumentation in the common values that emerge in their remixed collection of sports media messages.

The five SPCL units are Sports as a Reflection of Society; (Inter)National Sports and Identity; Consumer Culture and Sports; the Role of Race in Professional Sports; and, Sex and Gender in Sports. Table 1 shows each unit’s driving questions along with sample mentor texts and their genres. Some examples of students’ media compositions follow.

Table 1
Curated Collection of Sports Media Messages with Driving Questions, Sample Mentor Text and Genre

Driving Questions	Sample Mentor Text	Genre
UNIT 1. SPORTS AS A REFLECTION OF SOCIETY		
What are "sports?"	Beneful Play Commercial	Commercial
How do "amateur sports" and "professional sports" differ?	NHL Promo 2014	Promotion
What is “culture, popular culture, and sports culture?”	"Super Bowl: In the Year of the App"	Editorial
How are sports a reflection of society?	The Sports Culture: Interview with Alan Watt	Video interview
UNIT 2. (INTER)NATIONAL SPORTS AND IDENTITY		
What is a “point of view?”	The Olympic Torch's Journey to Sochi	Documentary
What is the language of international sports in popular culture?	The Sweetest Roll	Spoken word audio
How are sports, identity, and nationalism intertwined?	Iditarod Sled Dog Race Kicks Off in Alaska	Television broadcast from Israel

How do sports transmit values about culture?	Red Sox Have No Problems at All	Newspaper commentary'
UNIT 3. CONSUMER CULTURE AND SPORTS		
How is a market economy described in sports films?	Jerry Maguire	Film trailer
What are the connections among sports, media, and consumer culture?	How the Owners of All 32 NFL Teams Made their Money	Expose
How can visual analysis help us to unpack sports media messages?	Larry Johnson cartoons	Cartoons
UNIT 4. RACE IN PROFESSIONAL SPORTS		
What are the important issues to know about the intersection of race, sports, and society in U.S. history and society?	Storify on Racism and Baseball	Social media compilation
How can we be gentle catalysts for racial equity in the world?	A Review of '42: Jackie Robinson's Bitter Pill	Blog
How is racism in sports still a part of our common culture?	Vogue magazine cover featuring LeBron James and Giselle Bunchen	Magazine cover
How do we feel about race and sports?	Snowball: An All-White Basketball League	Television news comedy
UNIT 5. SEX AND GENDER IN SPORTS		
What is a social construction of gender?	Nike Commercial with Rajon Rondo and Friends	Commercial
How do gender binaries in athletics affect spectators' responses?	Sports Science: Hits Like a Girl	Docudrama
What background do I need to have about sex and gender issues in history and society?	The Bad News Bears	Film trailer
How do I feel about sex and gender in sports?	How Does This Clip about Gay Rights Make You Feel?	Television footage compilation

Unit 1: Sports as a Reflection of Society.
 Over the first two weeks, we establish heuristics for analyzing language use, create digital platforms for publishing, and connect the course literacy themes to the larger world of sports sociology. For example, we unveil how commercials design particular plots and characters which combine into narratives, connections between products, services, target


audiences, and overarching themes. We consider how we might want to gain critical distance from some media messages.

Unit 2: (Inter)National Sports and Identity
 The wide variety of international competitions available now for view and review allows students to determine how national identity is transmitted through sports broadcasts and texts. When students

work collaboratively to produce a “Sports Nationalism Television Show,” they create new meaning around sport as physical and popular

culture, global/ corporate/ media sport influences, sport as spectacle, and the social roles of media in sport, both national and international.

Figure 1
Sample of Student Web Writing



The amount of different races, backgrounds and cultures that are in the Olympics are huge. These people com from around the world to play in this event that only happens every 4 years is big. The diversity is huge here. The Olympics reflects on society in a sense that it is not just the United States but it is many different races, cultures and areas that people come from to play in the Olympics.

The female sports are huge in the US since there's a bigger demand for girls playing sports. A lot of love goes into the sports these girls play. All the time and work that these girls do with their sport, changes them as a person. This mirrors society by saying that girls can do equal things to guys. These girls are determined to play their best.




Figure 2
Sample of Student Poetry

“Practice again, back to grind
Time to put last year behind
Spirits high with familiar faces
Hopes and dreams to return where that place is
Expect the best, but prepare for the worst
Have the confidence to come in first

Endless shots into the net
Does not want to lose, I bet
With the stick, of that he wields
Hard work to champs, an obvious yield
Crowd will raise, fans will praise
Accomplishment remembered for days

Spectators will continue to look up
To those who seem to get the cup
Leaders wish to acknowledge
With goods straight from their wallets
More from places who don't see often

Champions of their time, unlike Boston

End of the day, more than the money
When sports are played, it's always sunny
Legacies live on, new ones to build
Other players await dreams to be fulfilled
Inspire many, they really do
Lucky enough to play, a few”

Unit 3: Consumer Culture and Sports.

When students work in discussion groups to define “consumerism,” many admit they don’t know the concept. Learning modules help students engage in digital inquiry to unpack the popularity of fantasy sports, why they enjoy sports performances so much, and how sports messages create revenue. Throughout this unit, students come to realize that financial recompenses are so significant in sport that they transcend the four U.S. major leagues – even the Olympics and NCAA playoffs have become lucrative commercial sources.

Consider this example from Parker's Consumer Culture speech: "Americans are full of dreams and passion, but for what? Almost any American you speak to wants more money. Why you ask? This world runs on money and the more of it you have, the better you are in the economy. Americans love to buy material items and to spend, spend, spend their money, but they always want more. Americans envy celebrities and athletes for their wealth and flashy lives. We want everything the superstars have. The exotic sports cars, the million dollar contracts, multiple mansions around the world, and the endorsements. We look up to these big names because of their wealth and popularity. For some reason, we are never satisfied with what we have. We always WANT and NEED more....One does not need wealth and fame to enjoy the good life. Do what you want and enjoy it."

Unit 4: The Role of Race in Professional Sports. We attempt the difficult task of reconciling history and myth about racism in sport by turning to the game of baseball, which has long been regarded as a metaphor for all that is good about being a U.S. citizen. We unveil animal motifs, allusions to slavery, themes of muscularity versus intellectualism, and glamorization embedded within media representations of athletes of color. We see how White privilege extends into treatment of athletes of color when we communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to a targeted group to which an athlete belongs.

After completing this unit, Marius, a student in the course, wrote this commentary: "An Italian media story only two years ago depicted Mario Balotelli in a King Kong pose having climbed the Big Ben tower and with soccer balls being cast at him (the authors have since retracted the image and apologized, but we'll still use them as an example). To a child, this image would most likely seem fairly innocent and maybe even comedic. Balotelli is wearing a blue uniform and a goofy expression on his face. This means anyone who doesn't see the racial insult would be affected similarly to the way the child is influenced, and the cycle continues. Sports is one of the most common conduits between adults and youths. Sport can be created from literally nothing and can create the most intense competitions between humans. Racism in sports will be solved

when racism itself is solved, which will be (probably never, but) when humans find the way to change."

Unit 5: Sex and Gender in Sports. In the final unit of the semester, students explore hypermasculinity in sport and social constructions that accentuate physicality, aggression, lack of emotion, strength, and virility. Through inquiry activities, students analyze whether media sports composers have transformed or disrupted patriarchal representations of athleticism; if media confer privileged treatment to certain individuals; and, if male dominance in the sports world is reinforced daily in ways that are interconnected to our previous units of study.

During this unit, Anthony, a student in the course, wrote: "I believe that masculinity is the driving force behind sports and you cannot succeed without being an aggressive player. If you do not learn to become an aggressive player at a young age, then more times than not you will not be successful./ I honestly believe that women's sports does not get as much coverage as men because their game isn't as physical as men's. Although morally that might not be the right thing to say, however, we live in a society where sports are a battle and anything that doesn't involve brutality isn't worth watching."

Discussion and Reflections

The SPCL course is a way for students to engage meaningfully with authentic texts in their last semester of high school. The course, which continues to evolve with each year's new technology applications and my reflections as course designer and instructor helps build awareness of and forge connections about how sports issues are a microcosm of the larger society in which we live. This course increases literacy skills through surveying and deconstructing media texts. Students compose original digital compositions about the intersection of sport and culture and develop a vision for society through enhanced critical thinking and communication skills. When courses like SPCL are grounded in critical digital and media literacy, students can learn to examine composers' epistemologies and persuasive appeals. Students who interrogate their favorite media texts can come to see that people use media coverage for different

purposes: developing and maintaining social identities, feeling a personal sense of significance, engaging in social interaction, and maintaining social relationships.

Such a curriculum acknowledges that dominant discourses produce and govern the ways in which knowledge can (and cannot) be discussed (Foucault 1980): composers construct and frame powerful and dramatic discourse for readers and viewers. Curricula can be designed to help students identify ways that many intersecting identities and subject positions may be at odds with dominant depictions in media texts due to prevailing constructs like race, sexual identity, national unity, or socioeconomic status.

Composing after surveying curated collections of texts can allow students' own voices to materialize through the comparative processes of deconstruction, positioning, and envisioning a world that might be. Dialogues can illuminate how different people interpret texts differently, and, by conducting their own inquiries, students can join intellectual conversations through critical examination of the production, distribution, and meaning of media messages. As educational philosopher John Dewey said, "Ideas are effective not as bare ideas but as they have imaginative content and emotional appeal" (1939, 115). The experiences of students in the SPCL course indicate that much progress can be made to reconcile the mandates of the CCSS with the literacy needs of 21st century learners. However, educators must advocate for invigorating and authentic curricular connections between school and life literacies if students are to own the skills and structures necessary for multimodal analysis and composition.

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