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JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

“But Isn’t the Teacher Supposed to Tell Us?": Illuminating Transactional Reading Processes Through Transmediation

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Abstract: This article explores the ways in which transmediation (Suhor, 1984), the translation of meaning from one sign system into another, can support students in developing their confidence and capabilities as readers. The author, a 10th grade English teacher, details a literature workshop (Blau, 2003) unit in which students worked collaboratively to develop reading strategies, utilizing the arts as a central means of comprehending text. This approach to reading instruction, refined over the course of three years, mixes art-making with metacognitive reading comprehension strategies as students create a variety of informal and formal multimodal texts in response to literature. By creating artistic renderings of their readings, students gained windows into their own reading processes and the reading processes of their peers. The author argues that infusing multimodal elements into reading instruction can support students in becoming aware of their own transactional reading processes and empower them to tackle challenging texts.

Keywords: transmediation, reading comprehension, arts-based instruction, multimodality, secondary



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Introduction¹

Lora snakes her page with vines, adds mountains and streams behind her letters, and fills in the center of a giant letter O with a serpentine tree. Thomas frames his text with geometrically designed soldiers in the margins to represent his vision of devils as members of an army; behind the phrase “a forest huge of spears,” he layers evergreens topped with sharp red blades. Atop her page, Van draws a cheeky looking John Milton whispering to an ethereal-looking woman, “Hey Muse...here’s what you should say in my poem” in a comic speech bubble (Figure 1).

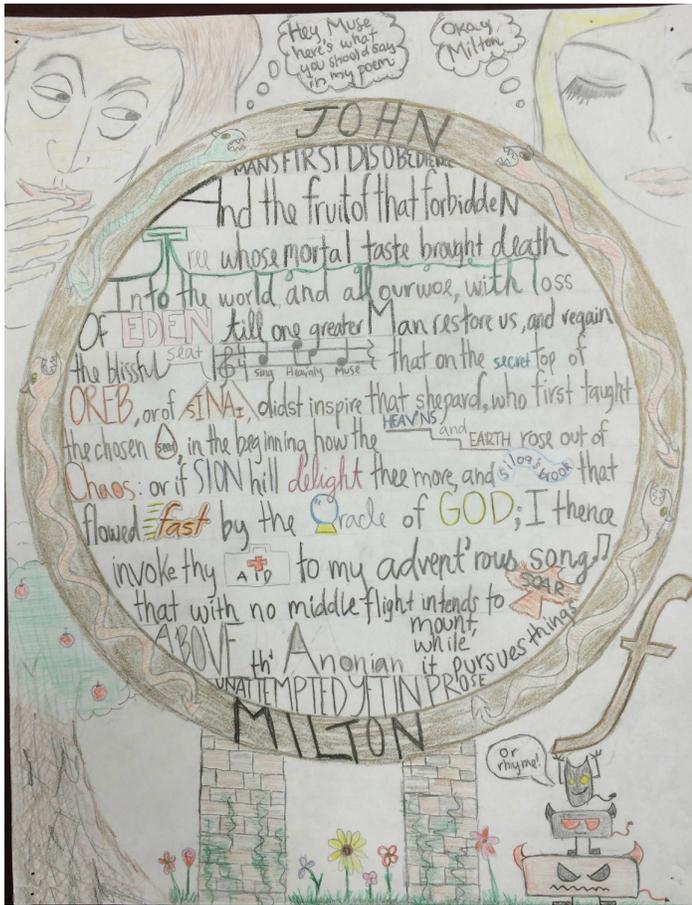


Figure 1. A student's drawing humorously reimagines the opening of the poem

We are on our second day of creating illuminated manuscript pages, artistic texts that mix images and print in one page, based on selections from John Milton's (2005) *Paradise Lost*, and students are busy translating their visions of the poem's words into pages that invite readers into the text through images. Their work follows several weeks of hard-fought struggle with the first book of Milton's epic, facilitated by a workshop approach to discussing literature (Blau, 2003) in which students made sense of the text collaboratively in small groups.

This negotiation of meaning was supported through an explicit pedagogical focus on artistic representation as a way to discuss and develop an awareness of reading processes. As a capstone project, students created artistic representations of sections of the text inspired by a study of contemporary and historical multimodal texts, those that mix multiple modes of communication such as written language, visual images, gesture, or sound within one text (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). These projects, and the unit that preceded them, provided a way for students to share their own detailed readings and discuss the processes by which they made meaning out of a text that, at the beginning of the unit, appeared to most students impossible to comprehend.

“Learned Helplessness”: Reading Instruction in High School

At the beginning of the unit, a colleague joked wryly with me about what students learn from Milton: “I think we’re teaching learned helplessness.” For the most part, students found the text incomprehensible on their own; they expected to have its meaning elucidated for them by the teacher. In this way, they

¹ I acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that I can use when referring to individuals in my writing. Throughout this article I use

pronouns to refer to individuals that correspond with the pronouns that they use to refer to themselves.

may have learned something about the poem, but they also learned that they themselves were not able to tackle difficult texts; they could only consume their teacher's reading. How the teacher got to that reading remained mysterious and invisible. As such, the teaching of literature served to impede, rather than support, the teaching of reading.

In middle and high schools, students are often expected to make sense of large quantities of difficult text, even as the teaching of reading often disappears from the curricula as students move out of elementary school (Tovani, 2004). Many secondary English teachers feel confident teaching literature but do not see themselves as teachers of reading and have not been trained as such; many "assume that students will learn to comprehend merely by reading" (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). Moreover, they may not understand the degree to which students struggle with texts that teachers themselves find comprehensible (Kershen, 2018; Ness & Kenny, 2016). Without a more developed sense of what it means to teach reading with challenging texts, however, we can wind up teaching students particular textual interpretations rather than the skills needed to construct interpretations on their own (Blau, 2014).

The Arts and Transmediation in English Classrooms

This classroom narrative details a unit in which the incorporation of the arts, specifically the process of transmediation (Suhor, 1984), the translation of meaning from one sign system into another, can support adolescent students' development of their own capacities as readers. By making their thinking as they read visible via the arts, students create windows into their own reading processes that can be shared with others; you cannot see someone else's reading, but you can see their art. The physical product allows readers to compare the ways that

each of them imagine texts inside of their heads and hold discussions about the situated and interpretive nature of reading (Rosenblatt, 1994). Students learn not only about the text but also about their own reading processes, becoming increasingly empowered to tackle new reading challenges with or without the aid of a teacher.

Work on transmediation in classrooms has highlighted the potential of the arts to impact English classes and reading instruction. Researchers have explored transmediation using fairy tales and visual art (Altenderfer, Doerfler, Poblete, Williamson & Yenika-Agbaw, 2012), poetry and dance (McCormick, 2011), rap music and illumination (Lynch, 2007), and essays and digital video (Smith, Kiili, & Kauppinen, 2016). Wilhelm's (2007) extensive work with struggling readers across a school year illustrated the potential of the arts for helping readers experience stories on their own and enter into textual worlds. Across these studies, researchers have echoed Eisner's (2002) argument that the arts allow students to develop new understandings, think in complex and nuanced ways, and take on new perspectives about texts.

Secondary schools, however, particularly English classrooms, tend to privilege the written word above non-written communication (Whitin, 2009). While arts-based lessons are common for younger students, "the invitation to compose in image, using a variety of media...alongside the printed word is persistently missing...[after]...elementary grades" (Vasudevan, 2010, p. 45). Despite the emphasis on alphabetic print in upper grades, the need to communicate using other semiotic modes does not disappear as students get older; in fact, it is only increasing as digital texts blur the boundaries between modes and mediums, the technological forms through which information is communicated, such as paper, stone tablet or Android tablet (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996).

Context

The unit this article draws from was part of a non-tracked 10th grade ELA course at a semi-urban high school in the Southwest of the United States. As the teacher of the course, I developed and iterated on the unit over the course of three years, engaging in practitioner-inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) to explore the ways that changes to classroom structures could support students' development as readers. As I expanded the unit, it grew from a three-week study of the poem itself to a five-week unit that emphasized reading comprehension and transmediation. Several teachers at the school were working to include artistic elements in their curricula as well: along with myself, several English teachers used drawing as a strategy for visualization and the 10th grade history classes included discussions of art history in their curriculum.

While I have utilized an arts-based approach with a variety of texts, including works by Chinua Achebe, Laurie Halse Anderson, Octavia Butler and countless works students chose on their own, I focus here on Milton's epic, not to exalt it above any other text, but because its extreme difficulty helps illustrate how a dual focus on metacognition and transmediation can support students in developing their own capacities as readers in a situation in which they might otherwise be inclined to use external supports.

"This is Impossible": Starting Milton with 10th Graders

While the students I worked with grew as readers through their engagement with arts, many began the unit lacking confidence in their own reading abilities. On the first day of the unit, I had students

read the opening stanza of *Paradise Lost* at their seats. When they finished, I asked for questions. No hands raised. "Okay," I told them, "if there are no questions, let's do a quiz." Faces turned from quizzical to panicked in a matter of moments. Students looked to each other, confused, forlorn. Ari, a boisterous but engaged student, quickly broke the ice:

Ari: "That's not fair...we have no idea what it says."

Me: "Okay. How could you figure that out?"

Ari: "Isn't the teacher supposed to tell us what it means before we get a quiz?"

Me: "You just got through the story unit on your own. You've been reading books for years without me telling you what they mean."

Ari: "They weren't like this though – this is impossible.

When it's a school book, the teacher's supposed to tell you."

"Ari: 'Isn't the teacher supposed to tell us what it means before we get a quiz?'"

I never did give a quiz, of course, but Ari's comments sparked our discussion of what exactly was so difficult about the poem. The allusions are almost too numerous to count, many of the sentences don't seem to follow any clear logic until the reader has revisited them several times, and the diction is obscure.

Shining Light on Reading Processes

Before rereading, we began brainstorming strategies for tackling difficult readings like this one. We talked about habits – where you read, whether you listen to music, if you have the TV on in the background. We talked about re-reading, monitoring comprehension, giving quick summaries

at the end of sections, noticing punctuation, and looking up words on smartphones. Slowly, we filled the board with suggestions for tackling the poem. None of them were *about* the poem itself, but rather about how readers could navigate and interact with the poem.

On the third day, we built on our general discussion of reading by tackling the poem in earnest. Daily reading-focused mini-lessons were followed by literature workshops (Blau, 2003): students read slowly in small, self-selected groups, marking difficult references, re-reading at the sentence level (which students found more useful for comprehension than emphasizing line breaks), testing hypotheses for what a segment might mean, and adjusting their understandings through discussion and debate, tracking their progress on the wide margins of the page.

I circled the room as they worked, visiting clusters of students to listen to their difficulties and usually, push questions back to them: “Did you try finding the place that the sentence began?” “What in this chunk did you understand?” “How could the rest of the sentence fit with that fact?” “What would this look like if you saw it in real life?” My questions generally prompted them to return to work with each other, emboldened by the realization that they did, in fact, have the tools to interpret the poem without being handed an answer.

My questioning occurred in tandem with students’ own negotiations of the text’s meaning; mostly its literal meaning. As obscure and allusive as *Paradise Lost* can be, the plot of the first book is not terribly complicated. Much of it involves Satan moving from place to place and organizing a rally. Once students began working together and focusing on their reading processes, they were largely able to build meaning together. They often debated the best ways to approach a line, performing multiple readings,

going back to different starting points, and sketching diagrams. These experimental approaches served as beginnings for what would become a more in-depth application of artistic modes to understand both the poem and themselves as readers.

Arts-based mini-lessons. Many of our mini-lessons focused on mixing notation with other modes of communication to support students’ developing understanding. As we began, I pointed to the broad, two-inch margins on our printouts of *Paradise Lost*, meant to give students space to write, draw, and play with ideas. I modeled my own thinking with a few lines of the poem, circling certain words, using the margin to chart my understanding, and drawing a diagram with pictures and arrows to show a demon moving from one part of a fiery lake to another.

The next day, we utilized the segmented structure of a comic book to focus our attention on the many visual details densely embedded in the text. This segmentation mirrored the multi-part structure of Milton’s sentences and helped students understand the whole by working carefully on smaller chunks. We practiced drawing the allusions and descriptions that litter the poem and performed short dramatic readings from Satan’s speeches. Through these activities, students were developing their understandings through transmediation, using artistic approaches to imagine and make sense of a world initially communicated through printed text.

Sometimes I asked students to lead mini-lessons for each other, sharing with the whole class approaches they had used in their groups to make meaning. Maria shared her daily drawings of Satan, which she continually expanded with new details as she read. Jason showed the class how he compared Milton’s boastful invocation of the muse to the boastful introduction of a rap album. In each instance, students were sharing their own arts-influenced

reading processes to help each other develop as readers.

Running with the arts. As students built their understanding through the strategies we employed, the wide margins started to fill up with comments, charts, drawings and definitions. As we progressed, students increasingly used artistic strategies in their reading processes; they would go to the whiteboards in groups to make impromptu drawings of a sentence or a line, debating what a scene or character should look like, taking turns drawing their own visions.

The tangible nature of the drawings allowed them to share and inspect each other's thinking, making visible to themselves and to each other the interaction between reader and text that allows for meaning (Rosenblatt, 1994). One group took to performing as the characters, pausing the reading every line or two to negotiate meaning. In these ways, students were increasingly working to understand different segments of the poem by altering the tools and resources they applied to reach that understanding. Since each mode of communication provides different tools for understanding and creating meaning (Siegel, 1995), each new approach provided different ways to understand the text that would not have been available exclusively through print.

Visual mentor texts. To support their ongoing work with visualization and in preparation for our final project, an artistic rendering of a section of text, I shared mentor texts with the class: artists' representations of *Paradise Lost* over the centuries, including 18th century illuminations by William

Blake, Gustave Dore's 19th century woodcuts, and a contemporary comic rendering by Rebecca Dart. We discussed and critiqued the portrayals, with some students arguing that the artists had strayed too far from Milton's words or were inaccurate based on their own readings. Here, students were applying their learning to others' work, speaking back and responding critically to artists based on earned understandings of the text. They had come a long way from their initial hesitations. This response was also preparing them to begin a more formal creation process in our final project.

The Illumination Project

“The tangible nature of the drawings allowed them to share and inspect each other's thinking, making visible to themselves and to each other the interaction between reader and text that allows for meaning.”

As I saw more and more of students' annotated texts and considered the artistic representations we had studied as a class, I was reminded of the pages from medieval illuminated texts, the kind with floral lettering and embellishments that literally and symbolically highlighted elements of the printed text. To me, these illuminations had a great deal

in common, both with the multimodal texts (Kress, 2003) so often discussed today and with the informal artistic work students were already doing to process the text in class. Their annotations were a way of transforming the text, transacting with it, and, in the process, creating both a work of art and a gloss for other readers.

For our final project, each student created an “illuminated page” based on a selection from Milton, though students were able to interpret this concept loosely; while many completed more traditional illuminations, some created animations or performances supplemented with sound effects and

music. To begin this project, students chose both the passage and medium in which they would work. I had several aims in mind when designing the project. I wanted students to:

- Build formally on their growing ability to internally visualize printed text
- Take greater ownership over an “English teacher’s” text, creating something of their own in response
- Create a piece of art that could only be done through utilizing the close reading strategies we had practiced throughout the unit
- Discuss artistic choices and the ways that they had constructed meaning from the text
- Use multimodal composition to think critically about different modes of communication
- Publish their work to the school community.

The illuminated manuscript was a perfect bridge between printed words and other forms of art; it allowed students to merge text and image in the same page, keeping the relationship between the two close. Their physical proximity supported their interconnectedness.

We began the project by looking carefully at both historical and contemporary works that mixed modalities, though not texts based on Milton’s work. We examined ancient scrolls, experimental poetry, graphic novels, iPad books, audio plays and spoken word poems. Lastly, we engaged in a deeper study of the art of medieval illuminated manuscripts, often cited as precursors to the mixed-media texts that have become so common in our digitally mediated world (Siegel, 2006).

Publication & Presentation

We spent a few days in class working on the project. Kids diagrammed their pages, wrote plans in their notebooks, and embarked on their creations. Continuing the working style of the unit, the days spent creating were a mix between writing workshop and studio art class. Each day, I led mini-lessons on elements of design drawn from the work of other illuminators (Watson, 2004) before students commenced to working for the majority of each period.

While our previous focus on reading processes built the foundation of our interpretive skills, the act of creating a more formal representation of the text helped solidify the process. “It wasn’t until I had to make something to put out there for everybody that I really got it,” Van wrote in her reflection. The act of creation supported the act of reading by allowing students to translate the meaning they had created internally into an external product that would be shared with their classmates.

At the end of the unit, students presented their pieces to each other, drawing on explications they had written of their own work. Sophia explained how she depicted pages growing from the ground like grass to symbolize knowledge in the world. Ari told the class that he modelled his work after “the monks in the middle ages, with a big A to open the page and a red eye in the middle to show you there’s a devil” (Figure 2). Each student’s presentation provided windows into both the text and the mind of the reader in ways that words alone could not. After presentations, each student hung their piece on a back wall that quickly became completely covered. The following fall, the rising sophomores looked admiringly at the student work adorning the

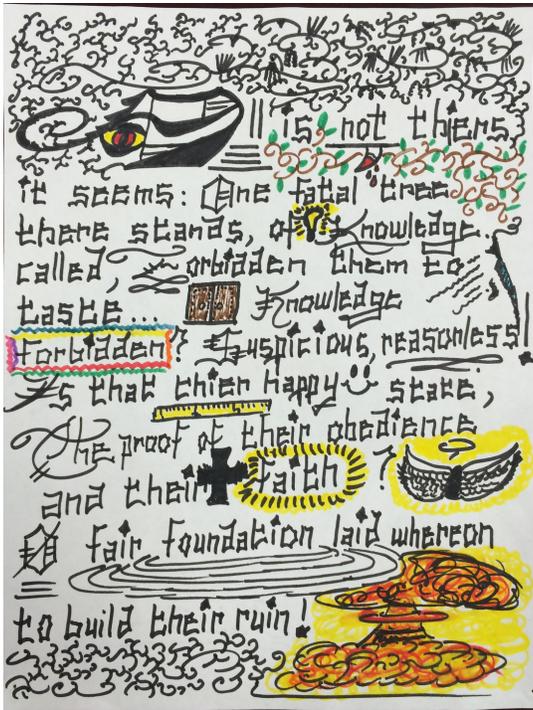


Figure 2. A student's illumination mixes annotation and art

classroom, asking throughout the semester when they too would get to make art with that book about Satan. The illumination project, then, served to inaugurate the experience of the next group of readers, even before they had decoded a single word. In this sense, they were building on both ancient and contemporary traditions, utilizing styles and materials that are anything but current to create work that reflects the multimodal textual landscape of today's world.

Discussion

One of the most difficult things about attending to reading in English classes is that the process itself is invisible, submerged within the mind of the reader. And yet, it is the “submerged associations” (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 30) that each of us bring to a text that give meaning to the words. Art is one tool for bringing the transaction between reader and text to the surface, allowing both teachers and students to see, share, and discuss meaning. As students

engaged in these discussions, meaning-making became explicitly social; initial hypotheses were revised as students negotiated the text based on each other's drawings. Perhaps the most powerful aspect of incorporating art into a unit on reading, then, was the way in which it facilitated this movement between personal and communal meaning making.

The incorporation of the arts also helped students become more critical about the modes through which they read and communicate. The dominance of the printed word in schools often means it is taken for granted as a modality; supporting additional avenues of expression entails opening the door to thinking critically about how meaning can be communicated in multiple forms (Wysocki, 2004). By examining texts using image, sound, and drawing, then, students questioned the salience of alphabetic print, developing a stronger critical sense of how different modes could communicate ideas differently.

This critical orientation toward different modes of communication is increasingly important in a landscape dominated by multimodal texts. As Ray (2010) reminds us, “The world these children live in – and will ultimately grow to be effective communicators in – is a world where the definition of text will be greatly expanded: what it means to compose a text will go far beyond composition with words only” (p.16). Yet, despite the current buzz about multimodality, it is nothing new (Siegel, 2006); the arts and the printed word have been used both separately and together in texts to expand and excite the imagination for thousands of years.

By mixing modalities in English classes, not only are we better preparing students to read challenging texts and engage in the literacy practices of a digital world, but also supporting their ability to think, compose, and read the entire world critically. The

world itself is a multimodal text and the ability to read and communicate within it are not limited to one sign system alone. Integrating the arts helps students develop into increasingly sophisticated readers, not only of words, but of the world upon which words are based (Freire, 2000).

By using material arts to practice multimodal thinking, we also open up opportunities for students and classrooms without extensive digital access to engage in multimodal literacy practices (Bomer, 2010). If we want our students to be imaginative and critical consumers and producers of texts, we must invite arts into our classrooms.

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