

# Teaching Out-of-School Multiliteracy Opportunities: Tools for Fostering Literacy Among Newcomer and Generation 1.5 Urban Learners

**Immaculée Harushimana**  
*Lehman College, CUNY*

*This paper develops the argument that new literacies constitute an indispensable foundation for developing school discourse among 1.5 and newcomer urban adolescents. A mother and literacy educator presents insights learned from indirectly participating in co-constructing Standard English discourse with her newcomer adolescent son through videogames, teen chat sites, and hip-hop discourse. An urban discourse perspective and the new literacies framework are evoked to support the need to reconcile old and new literacies in providing literacy instruction to today's generation of urban youths.*

In an era where hip-hop and Information Communication Technologies (ICT) discourses prevail in the youth discourse (Alvermann, 2004), urban schools face the challenge to impart formal discourse to urban adolescents. This problem is more pronounced with 1.5 generation and newcomer English Language Learners (ELL's) who are mainstreamed in regular classes within a linguistically and ethnically diverse urban student population (Coulter & Smith, 2006; Duff, 2001; Elliot & Punch, 1991). Both Generation 1.5 and newcomer students are likely to find themselves in a very difficult situation unable to sift through the hip-hop and ICT-dominated discourses of the peers, both at school and in the wider community, and the standard discourse of schooling. Research on the writing proficiency of 1.5 learners indicates that these students graduate from U.S. high schools and enter college while still in the process of learning English (Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999; Goldschmidt & Miller (2005). There is a need for more scholarship focusing on the educability of this increasing population of students in U. S. high schools and colleges (Harklau, Siegal, & Losey, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 2003, Wurr, 2004). In this article, a mother and literacy educator share insights learned from indirectly participating in co-constructing Standard English discourse with her

newcomer adolescent son through video games, teen chat sites, and hip-hop discourse.

### **New Literacies Pedagogies in the New Millennium**

Given the proliferation of technological, and other fun, non-conventional forms of literacy in today's world (Street, 2003; Gee, 2000), one of the major issues confronting newcomer immigrant youths from less technologically advanced societies is how to reconcile their original education with the emergent, youth-alluring, new literacies prevailing in the host society. The ubiquity of newly invented digital devices (e.g., computers, video games, digital music players, video cams, and cell phones) among today's youths has acquired them new designations, as "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001) or the "net generation" (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). Also of importance is the global influence of hip-hop discourse on 21<sup>st</sup> century, post hip-hop generations (Asante, Jr., 2005).

Educating today's generation of learners implies taking into consideration the influence of hip-hop culture and digital literacies, as well as the fluid and dynamic nature of literacy, whose meanings are subject to change according to the cultural context and societal needs (Bandura, 2002). It is also critical that today's educators and educational policy makers, while embracing innovations in teaching, recognize the needs and experiences of foreign-educated immigrant youths. Newcomer immigrant students who transfer at the secondary school level might be at a cognitively delicate level, involving a multi-layered understanding of and careful socialization in the new school culture (Carrasquillo & Rodriguez, 1996; Cummins, Bismilla, Chow, Cohen, Giampapa, Leoni, Sandhu, & Sastri, 2005). Out-of-school literacy practices play an important role in an immigrant child's linguistic and cognitive adaptation processes (Haneda, 2008; Lam, 2006; Yi, 2005, 2007). This article illustrates how these practices, especially videogaming, online teen chatting, rapping, and TV watching, can be instrumental in newcomer immigrants' development of English proficiency.

### **Literacy through video games: A brief overview of the literature**

Emergent digital game research indicates that, in the field of education, videogaming is gaining recognition for its potential to

promote learning engagement, social skills development, and literacy abilities (deHaan, 2005; Gee, 2003; Norton-Meier, 2005; Prensky, 2002, 2006; Squire, 2003). Many of the scholars who have made these observations did so based on their personal experiences as gamers and video game designers (Gee, 2003; Squire, 2003; Paras & Bizzocchi, 2005; Prensky, 2002). On the other hand, it is only logical given the complex commands involved in video games to believe that video game enthusiasts will develop various skills as a result of losing themselves in the game. Recently, video gaming has remarkably captured the interest of educators and education stakeholders, probably upon the realization that gaming occupies an important place in the lives of the majority of young people between the ages of 8-18 (Heeter, Chu, Egidio, Mishra, & Graves-Wolf, 2004; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002, 2005).

### ***Some relevant statistics***

While the label “Nintendo Generation” is known to designate the 1970-1980 generation, statistical reports indicate that video games permeate the lives of the post-Nintendo generation (Covi, 2000), also known as Generation M (Media-saturated generation) (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005). In 2004, a survey study by Carrie Heeter, a professor of digital media design at Michigan State University, reported that on a total of 149 fifth- through eighth-graders, only 37.5 of girls and 6.6 percent of boys claimed *not* to play video games (Table 1). In 2002, a Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) study of children and video games had indicated that the majority of male youths, between ages 8-18, particularly African Americans and Hispanics from low and middle income communities spent more time playing video games than kids from high income areas (Insert Table 2). Two years later, in 2004, another Kaiser Family Foundation study, which was conducted in media use among 8-18 year olds, showed that the popularity of video games keeps rising. In the study, 85% of high school participants indicated that the video game was the sole media device available in the home, whereas 49% reported that they owned their personal video game console (2005, p. 13). The study further indicated a double increase, from 30% to 63%, among boys who owned a personal video game between 1999 and 2004 (2005, p. 15). Video games also ranked at the top among the activities that “tweens” (pre-teens) and teenagers, especially boys, engaged in daily for at least an average of 42 minutes (2005, p. 30) (Insert table 3). The study highlighted the fact that pre-

teens and teenagers spent a significant amount of their spare time interacting with screen media, whereas their engagement in reading print media showed a declining pattern. With the rise in number of statistical reports which indicate that a significant number of young people spend most of their time playing video games, there has been a rising trend at different schools and universities to incorporate video games in the classroom.

*Video games in secondary schools.* In June 2008, news headlines featured the story of a Japanese junior high school which decided to use Nintendo DS to teach English (Sloan, 2008). In April 2008, Scotland educational minister had issued a decree that game design was going to be added to the curriculum in the aim “to produce informed, skilled, adaptable and enterprising citizens of the future” (Gibbon, 2008, n.p.). Video game school projects were also reported in the United Kingdom (BBC News, 2007), New York City (Chaplin, 2007), and Minneapolis (DeRusha, 2006). Additionally, the literary value of video games was notably endorsed by university professors.

*Video games in universities.* Doug Thomas, Associate Professor at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communication, is said to have developed a game for students ages 10 to 12 that aims to teach ideas and skills not found in traditional textbooks (Groom, 2007). At Abilene Christian University, a team of faculty and staff conducted an Immersive Literature Initiative research project, which involved Honors students in the designing process of a video game to find out if that process could promote a better understanding of classical literature (Tucker, Wade, & Darby, 2005). It has also been noted that Roger Travis, Associate Professor of modern and classical languages, routinely uses video games in his classes on classical literature (Brinckerhoff, 2007). As a literacy educator and a mother of two adolescent boys of African descent, I also encountered an intriguing situation that made me join the bandwagon of college faculty who believe in “edutainment”. Through covert observations of and involvement in my son’s interaction with video games and other digital forms of entertainment, I witnessed first-hand the power of these devices to help their users to develop English language proficiency and other literacy skills.

### **English proficiency versus other forms of youth literacies**

In my double role as a parent and a literacy educator, my perception of youth literacies is twofold. As a parent of two teenage boys, I blame

youth literacies, such as video games, teen chat sites, i-pods, and mp3s, for my children's low interest in schoolwork. On the other hand, as a literacy educator, a TESOL specialist, and a mother of two newcomer immigrant teenagers, I recognize the educational potential of these media to help English Language Learners (ELLs) and generation 1.5 to develop English proficiency. Understanding video game instructions was the main reason why my adolescent son Jay, (pseudonym), tried all means, including online word games, teen chat sites, online and TV news, and hip-hop music downloads, to expedite his mastery of the English language.

Along with video games Jay teen chat sites have been infamously portrayed as a major danger for young people; nevertheless, they constitute an important center of attraction for today's adolescents (Carter, 2007). Second Language Acquisition scholars (Tudini, 2003; Yi, 2005, 2007) have provided evidence in support of the educational value of chat sites for second language learners. Jay's experience provides additional evidence. To prevent the interference of hip-hop discourse in his writing, Jay exercises extreme caution when he is chatting with native English speaking (NES) peers from Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada. "Chatting with NESs in a chat room where only the target language is spoken not only provides Jay with an authentic and purposeful cross-cultural experience" (Tudini, 2003, p.157), it also gives him the opportunity to cultivate linguistic awareness and acquire new vocabulary.

To impress his NES online buddies, Jay usually makes sure that his statements are meaningful and relevant to the conversation being held. On several occasions Jay has had to confirm with me the meaning of unfamiliar expressions used by one or the other party before sending them his response. He would excuse himself through the "brb" code (be right back) to find out the correct spelling or the accurate definition of a given word. Adult-monitored online chats between native and non-native speakers could assist in the development of second language competency.

Blogging is another aspect of online teen chatting that contributes to the development of literacy and language proficiency. Research on adolescents' use of blogging is rising (Huffaker, 2005; Oravec, 2003; Penrod, 2007). Advocates of literacy through blogging strongly believe in its potential to "inspire students to develop articulate critical voices and relate to reader feedback" (Oravec, 2003, p. 232). As one of the

boys who “really responds to blogging” (Whelan, 2007, n. p.), Jay has learned to appreciate the importance of choosing words carefully and editing the language he blogs in. Another domain that had a major impact on Jay’s development of English proficiency and literacy ability is hip-hop discourse.

Like video games and chat rooms, hip-hop has been depicted as the antithesis of decency, morals and values (McWhorter, 2003); yet, it exercises a global influence on 21<sup>st</sup> century youth (Insert Table 4). Some cultural studies scholars (Mahiri, 1998; Morrell, 2002) have strongly advocated its integration in the curriculum. As a young black male growing up in the South Bronx of New York City and attending school in Harlem, New York, Jay seems to be a good candidate for a hip-hop enhanced curriculum, as advocated by Mahiri (1998) and Morrell (2002).

Given the prevalence of hip-hop culture in Jay’s life, both at school and in the wider community, his primary discourse (Gee, 1996) is deeply rooted in the hip-hop culture. To fit in with his age mates both around “the block” and at school, Jay has had to learn to talk the hip-hop talk and walk the hip-hop walk. Morrell’s (2002) view that “hip-hop music is the representative voice of urban youth” [and that] “the genre was created by and for urban youth” (n. p.) is well reflected in Jay’s relationship with Rap music. As a newcomer to the hip-hop culture, Jay seeks inspiration from his favorite rap artists, whose lyrics he tries to emulate in his apprentice rapping (Hall, 1998). Jay’s rap song writing is nothing close to professional; however, his lyrics reflect inspiration, adaptation, and innovation. Through rap song writing Jay has discovered the versatility of poetry and metaphor. Moreover, through committed exploration of implicit messages behind political rap, Jay developed critical thinking abilities.

While hip-hop and other forms of youth literacies have the potential to serve as a scaffold for school literacy among urban youngsters, without proper guidance they also have the potential to alienate the youth (McWhorter, 2003). Even though my participation in Jay’s out-of-school literacy was not systematic, it made him learn to communicate through the standard discourse, which I advocate. Katz (1980) rightly observed that teachers who are also mothers may have elevated expectations for their children, as well as of themselves. I feel that it is my responsibility to teach my child to communicate properly in English, and I exhort pro-new literacies educators to seriously

regulate their students' overreliance on new literacies during classroom interaction. Similarly, parents, regardless of their literacy level, need to monitor their children's use of Hip-hop language in the home.

## Conclusion

To some critics, Jay's journey to English proficiency may not reflect the reality of the majority of newcomer immigrant children, whose parents may not be as savvy in matters of literacy. On the other hand, as a teenage newcomer, Jay is confronted with the same issues that newcomer and generation 1.5 immigrant minority children in an urban setting go through regarding the acquisition of standard discourse. Despite the fact that a care giver may try to instill certain values in a teenage child, the uses and practices of literacy that prevail in a newcomer child's social environment play a significant role in the shaping of his/her social, linguistic, and cultural identity. I maintain that video games, teen chat sites, and hip-hop discourse constitute potent ways to improve English proficiency among 1.5 and newcomer learners in urban school settings. Literacy educators need to find ways to reconcile old and new literacies by using out-of-school literacy opportunities to scaffold their students' development of proficiency in Standard English.

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