

Reel Literacies: Digital Video Production as a Multimodal Literacy Practice

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Abstract

Literacy is something that people do and use in everyday life in ways that are shaped by social, cultural and personal contexts and problems. In this paper, I describe how students, when given the opportunity in school, are using digital video production as a form of multimodal literacy to address problems in their everyday lives. The data for this paper comes from a two-year study in two high school classrooms using ethnographic methods. Field observations, interviews, pre-production texts (storyboards, scripts, screen plays etc.) and student films are analyzed to describe what language and literacy looks like when students use digital video production and distribution in school to tell their stories. This paper foregrounds two movies that students created in two different schools. The first film entitled *How to be Happy* was created by a student who was struggling with depression and an eating disorder during the making of his movie. The second film, *Welcome to the City*, was created as a response to a fellow student's fatal shooting. Using digital video technologies such as digital video cameras and I-movie, a number of film festivals and a public television channel, the students in each case were able to create and distribute their multimodal texts to a large audience. The data in this study suggests that students are finding agency in their films to express emotions, deal with personal and community problems and even draw on these expressions as a form of healing. In this sense, students are using digital video production in school to help them to make sense of their problems while attempting to make changes in their lives and communities. I argue that schools must expand what counts as literacy in order to offer students more opportunities to make sense of their lives and develop communicative competence with this emerging form of multimodal literacy.

Introduction

The early twenty-first century is seeing new transformations and combinations of communicative modes in the Internet, the rapidly-changing screen-based technologies, and the combinatorial possibilities of new digital formats for still image, moving image and sound.....As the multimodal nature of high-technology society grows, these societies will reassess what communicative competences are needed by their citizens and how these are to be acquired and judged (Burn & Parker, 2003 p. 9).

All about us, there are unmistakable signs that what counts as a text and what constitutes reading and writing are changing-indeed, have already changed and radically so-in this age of digitally afforded multimodality (Hull & Nelson, 2005 p. 224).

Tom visits the coffee shop where he will shoot his film over the coming days. Armed with a pen and a sheet of paper, he writes down his shot list while re-working his

script and changing the overall plot for his movie. The next day he will look through the camera lens while directing the actors where to go and what to do for the next scene. His film tells the story of a young man who is fighting depression and looking for happiness in all the wrong places. Julisa writes a powerful poem, selects a Tupac Shakur song for her soundtrack, shoots video footage of her city neighborhood and browses the internet for images of handguns and other symbols that she can use to tell her story. Over the coming weeks, she will spend countless hours at the computer editing her film into its final cut. Her film is both a tribute to her innocent 17 year old friend who was gunned down days before on the street as well as a public statement about the senseless violence that plagues our city. While still emerging as an option for a small number of students in a limited number of school settings, these activities represent rich multimodal literacy practices and show how digital video technologies can offer new opportunities for students to use literacy for their own purposes and development.

Research on digital video production and distribution in school settings is just beginning to emerge with a small number of studies that primarily look at video as a technical literacy skill that helps students become more “media literate” (Burn & Parker, 2001; Parker, 1999; Sefton-Greene & Parker, 2000). A smaller but promising segment of studies, primarily conducted outside the formal school setting, have looked at how students are *using* the opportunity to create and show digital movies (Burn & Parker, 2003; Dowdy, Reedus, Anderson-Thompkins, & Heim, 2003; Hull, Kenney, Marple, & Forsman-Schneider, 2006; Hull & Nelson, 2005; Morrell, 2005). Glynda Hull’s work in Oakland’s Digital Underground Story Telling for (You)th (DUSTY) and Stephen Goodman’s work in New York’s Educational Video Center (EVC) are indicative of research that looks at how students are *using* the opportunity to create multimodal texts to do things in their lives like construct identities (Hull & Nelson, 2005), re-define gender (Hull et al., 2006) and participate as citizens in critical thought and democratic social change (Goodman, 2003; Morrell, 2005). Hull’s research has illuminated some of the purposes and uses for students’ digital stories such as exploring alternative definitions of masculinity, offering a tribute to family members or friends, recounting or interpreting a pivotal moment or key event, representing place, space, or community, preserving history, creating art or an artifact; play or fantasize, heal, grieve, or reflect, reach, inform, or influence a wider audience (Hull et al., 2006; Hull & Nelson, 2005).

While Hull’s ground-breaking research has mainly focused on how students are using their digital stories to construct identities and mediate gender roles with this form of literacy, she has yet to explore some of the other purposes that she and Mark Nelson have identified above. I am interested in the benefits for the person who creates a multimodal text. What do students gain beyond identity, citizenship and technical skills, if anything, by constructing a digital video? This paper is an attempt to look at some of the other purposes that Hull has identified with a focus on the transformative potential of multimodal texts, especially the personal problems that high school students often face and how creating short films helps students make sense of their situations and emotions. The analysis of student films, excerpts of interviews with student filmmakers and ethnographic field notes indicate that students are using multimodal text production to address personal problems and to try to make changes in their lives and their communities. Based on Barton and Hamilton’s (1998) finding that literacy is something people use in their everyday lives to solve problems, this paper describes the process that the aforementioned students and their classmates used to

construct their stories and the ways in which students are using digital video production in school to deal with personal and community problems.

Multimodality, Moving Images and School

It seems superfluous to declare that we live in an increasingly multimodal world, when so many meanings in our society are constructed, interpreted, communicated and appropriated through the combination of various modes of communication. *Modes* of communication refer to an organized set of cultural resources for meaning-making such as sounds, printed texts, gestures, visual images, music, and moving images (Jewitt & Kress, 2003). Single modes of communication possess both strengths and weaknesses in their ability to construct, represent, and mediate meaning. For example, sound is particularly strong at communicating what people might hear in a given situation yet particularly weak at communicating a person's facial expressions. *Multimodality* refers to the ways in which meanings are produced and distributed through the combination of different modes in a cultural context (Jewitt & Kress, 2003). For example, video is a multimodal medium in that it is able to combine many modes such as still image, moving image, text, music, etc. to express meaning. Because of its multimodal nature, video is able to combine modes that compliment each other, foreground modes within parts of a text depending on the mode's strengths, and background a mode because of its limitations; thus offering unique affordances for making meaning and solving problems. Affordances, based on the work of Gibson (1979) and Kress & Van Leeuwen (2001), refer to the ways in which different modes have different advantages and disadvantages, depending on the purposes and discourse community in which it is used.

Recent changes in digital technologies have placed the affordances of digital video production in the hands of more people including some students and teachers in schools. Changes such as: 1) the fact that every personal computer now comes with free digital video editing software and video digitizing interfaces like USB2 and Firewire i344 2) the cost of digital video camcorders has come down drastically from thousands of dollars to hundreds of dollars 3) the video distribution capabilities of the Internet have increased through larger bandwidth and streaming capacity. As a result of these changes, the Internet possesses a vast collection of music videos, short films, and animations from amateurs as well as professional filmmakers (see www.YouTube.com, www.Vimeo.com, or www.video.google.com). As of April, 2006, Youtube.com, an internet site that contains amateur films, boasted 15 million page views per day.

The increased ability to produce and distribute digital video marks one of the ways that the world has changed the concept of literacy and in turn how the world is changed by literacy. As such, when society changes (i.e. technologies, language, etc.), there are new possibilities for defining what it means to be literate (Gee, 2000; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2002; 2003) and what is required to fully participate in society (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996) and what one can do with literacy in the everyday life. This is what Gunther Kress (2003) refers to as a shift in ontology and epistemology from "page to screen"(p.22) in that texts are now primarily produced, distributed, and consumed on TV and computer screens as opposed to printed text on paper pages. Literacy, in this sense, is changed by and changes technology and is defined as the ways in which people use a wide range of semiotic resources and texts in order to communicate meaning, solve problems, and

make sense of the world in a variety of social and cultural ways for specific purposes (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Fairclough, 2000; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001).

The problem that I address in this paper is two-fold: First, a small number of schools offer all of their students the ability to expand their literacy practices with digital video, thus denying a large majority of their students of the ability to develop communicative competency in ways that are particularly relevant for making meaning in today's multimodal society. By not offering students these opportunities, schools are putting students at a tremendous disadvantage in global information society that requires efficacy with video and other multimodal texts in order to participate in contemporary life. This is particularly important for students who lack the economic resources as compared to many of their more affluent peers, many of whom have already gained access to the tools of video production and distribution at home (see Youtube, Google video, etc.). Second, when schools are providing these opportunities, there is little research on how students are actually using digital video production to accomplish things in their lives. Without empirical research that shows how digital video production could be used in schools to expand literacy practices, and how students are using multimodal literacy to do things in their lives, it is hard to argue for changes in curricular policies, instructional practices and state assessments. It is for this reason that I use this paper to describe how students are actively using multimodal texts like digital video to address a range of issues in their lives.

Theoretical Lens: New Literacy Studies

New Literacy Studies, with its emphasis on the cultural, historical and political ways in which texts are produced and used, is a starting point for addressing my research questions regarding how students are using digital video production in American High Schools to deal with problems and make sense of their everyday experiences. New Literacy Studies identifies social context and purpose as paramount in that we never communicate or make meaning in general but instead operate in specific social domains of practice for specific reasons (Gee, 2000; Street, 1995). In this sense, New Literacy Studies draws heavily on the work of Lev Vygotsky in the way it treats literacy as a social practice. Vygotsky's theories of sociocultural ways of thinking (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986) challenge individual cognitive psychology approaches to learning and play an instrumental role in the "social turn" that spawned New Literacy Studies. This perspective constitutes a divergence from traditional behaviorist and individualistic approaches to reading and writing that reduce literacy to the cognitive act of decoding and coding words in one's mind regardless of the social context or purpose. Unfortunately, despite what research has been telling us about the social nature of literacy, many schools operate on policies that view literacy as an individual, cognitive act.

With a "social turn", New Literacy Studies have taken on the project of defining and situating literacy as a social practice as an alternative to the prevailing autonomous definitions of literacy which dominate school literacy practices (Camitta, 1993; Street, 1993, 1995). An autonomous definition of literacy refers to the way that reading and writing is often reduced to a discrete set of technical and phonetic skills in school. This is exemplified by school reading programs that emphasize a "back to basics" approach whereby students develop efficacy with coding and decoding printed words. These skills are seen as common

and universal, thus separating literacy from all the ways that people use literacy in everyday life. NLS offers an opposing view of literacy that considers the ideological nature of literacy and that literacies are always bound to power relationships (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Street, 1995). Ideological models of literacy help us to see that there are many ways of being literate depending on the local and larger societal contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Gee, 2000). Without an ideological approach to literacy, all literacy is reduced to the dominant culture's definition of what it means to be communicatively competent without respect to social, cultural, and historical arrangements and changes.

New Literacy Studies therefore expands the possible definitions for what counts as literacy by rethinking the wide range of experiences students have with texts (Cazden et al., 1996; Gee, 2000). This involves moving beyond the traditional definitions of literacy which is limited to printed texts (Street, 1995) to include every day literacy experiences (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Knobel, 1999) that youth encounter and appropriate to solve problems and make sense of their lives (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Without New Literacy Studies framing literacy as a social practice, it would not be possible to see digital video production as something that students actively use to make sense of their lives. Rather it would only be possible to consider digital video production as a universal technical skill that someone either has or has yet to acquire. Without seeing literacy as a social practice, it would not matter that students are using digital video to address problems and make changes in their lives. By framing literacy as a social practice, we can see beyond video production as a set of autonomous skills such as using the camera, writing scripts, and editing their footage. This distinction also reminds us to consider how film making is contextualized as a literacy practice within school and to wonder if we are, in fact, looking at new ways of being literate in school or simply reducing potentially rich opportunities to autonomous forms in what Lankshear and Knobel (2003) refer to as *old wine in new bottles*.

Classroom Contexts

This study took place in two distinctly different American high school classrooms in a mid-size city in Western New York that I call Lakefront during portions of the 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 school years. Lakefront, NY, provides an appropriate setting for the study due to its rich history with filmmaking and its connection to the Civil Rights and Suffrage Movements. Lakefront is home to an International Museum of Photography and Film as well as the longest running independent film festival in the country, the Lakefront International Film Festival which was started in 1964 by a local organization known as Movies on a Shoestring. Lakefront also plays host to an annual international film festival that showcases exceptional work by women in film and video. Given that this study examines how student films are produced and distributed, Lakefront provides a unique opportunity for research in a community that places a high value on the moving image.

Garcia High School is located in a suburban area, approximately 12 miles outside of Lakefront, New York. Much like many other suburban schools in the United States, Garcia represents the segregation of races and classes in school districts and communities. The Garcia High School student population is approximately 92% white and has a low poverty rate, with 8% of the students receiving free and reduced lunches. 98 % of Garcia High School students go on to attend two or four year colleges. The participants for the pilot study consist of 20 Caucasian students (17 male and 3 female). In addition to the race and

class differences, the two schools in the study offer film making in different curricular areas. Munson High offers students the opportunity to make films in a year-long course in the Art department while Garcia students take two half-year courses together, one in *Analysis of Film* in the English Department and *Production of Film* in the Technology Department.

Munson High School is located within the city limits of Lakefront and is comprised of mostly African-American and Latino students, many of whom are eligible for free and reduced lunch. Munson High School is 1 of 15 high schools in the Lakefront City School District and is considered a comprehensive high school as opposed to the selective magnet schools that specialize in The Arts, Sciences, etc. In February, 2006, the Lakefront local newspaper reported statistics that indicate that only 41% of the students that enter Munson High School as freshmen go on to graduate. Munson HS is representative of many urban schools the United State's highly-segregated education system in that the student population consists of 86% black and Hispanic as opposed to the suburbs of Lakefront that are 95% white. Poverty is a pervasive problem with over 80% of the students eligible for free and reduced lunch. Munson High School is located in a working-class neighborhood of Lakefront but students who attend the high school come from all parts of the city. According to the *2005 FBI Report of Offenses Known to Law Enforcement*, the city of Lakefront had 54 murders in 2005 including 8 murder victims under the age of 18 years old. In fact, 3 of those 8 murder victims were students at Munson High School at the time of their death. The class where I collected data for the pilot study consisted of 9 students (5 male, 4 female: 2 Caucasian, 3 Hispanic, 3 Black, 1 Asian American).

Data Collection and Analysis

Ethnographic methods of data collection were used to document the language and literacy practices of students at both schools as they made and showed their digital videos. Data sources for the study include participant observation field notes and video tapes, interviews with students and their teachers, and various print and non-print texts such as scripts, storyboards, and assignments as well as the students' films. I videotaped students as they wrote their scripts, drew their storyboards, shot their footage, edited their files, and exhibited their films. On two occasions (during the making of *How to be Happy* and *Welcome to the City*), I videotaped students outside of school while they shot their footage. The collection of data over the course of the study resulted in a corpus that consists of approximately 300 pages of field notes, 110 hours of video-taped classroom activities, 30 student interviews, 8 teacher interviews and video footage from 3 film festivals. It also resulted in 122 classroom documents, 65 digital images and 21 student-produced movies.

In both schools, my role was highly participatory. Given my background in digital video technology, students at both sites would often ask me how to do something or how to fix a problem with their computer. Many students also asked me for my input on the content of the films in terms of story and characters. Others needed actors to be in their films and as a researcher who believes in reciprocity, I tried to help students make their movies when I could. I did act in a number of the students' films and on occasion would make a call on their behalf so that they could shoot scenes at local businesses. Many times, I would ask questions of students in an informal manner while they worked on their films in order to understand their decisions in the filmmaking process. For example, I often asked students to tell me about the meaning of their film through open-ended questions such as: Could you

tell me about your film? Why this song? Why this camera angle? I then developed further questions based on students' responses in order to get them to "unpack" what they mean. For example, if a student said that they did not want their film to be "the typical high school movie", I asked them what they meant by "the typical high school movie". I also conducted approximately 8 short (15-30 minutes), semi-structured interviews with each of the teachers at each school. This allowed me to ask about their thoughts regarding the structure of the class, the meanings contained in the films, the purpose of the class, etc.

In order to analyze the data, I used the constant comparative method for reducing the data sources. The constant comparative method is an inductive process of data analysis that is often used in building grounded theory from the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The constant comparative method involves inductively coding, categorizing, connecting and collapsing data in order to identify patterns, construct themes, and make knowledge claims (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I used the constant comparative method in order to go back and forth between reducing the data and putting it back together into possible explanations. All data that was collected during the study was reduced through a process of open coding. From these codes, I wrote memos comparing different data sets to each other and begin to develop categories, constantly searching for evidence in the data that disconfirmed any emerging ideas. I identified themes inductively from the data and then deductively apply these themes back to the data in order to develop new ways of looking at the data. This back and forth comparison between moving in and out of the data is referred to as fragmenting and connecting data analysis (Dey, 1993).

By going through the constant comparative process, I identified student films as something that deserved foregrounding in my analysis. Drawing on New Literacy Studies, I viewed the students' multimodal texts as important tools that students use to mediate their experiences in the world. As such, the multimodal texts that students constructed served as important evidence for determining how students are using digital video production in school and what purposes these texts are serving. After summarizing and coding each of the 21 student films scene by scene, I developed larger categories by focusing on possible uses and messages contained in the student movies. I also interviewed students after watching and summarizing their films to ask them specifically what they were trying to say and do with their movie. One of the prominent themes that emerged from the data is the idea that students are using their films to address problems. For this paper, I selected two out of the twenty-one films as representations of how students are attempting to deal with their problems through their films. I include descriptions of the films along with excerpts from interviews with the student filmmakers.

How to be Happy

How to be Happy was a film created by Tom, a 16 year old white, male student at Garcia High School. *How to be Happy* is a story, according to Tom, of "a man who is very lonely and depressed and feels like he is nothing. He discovers through little notes and clues and going places that he is depressed cause he really misses his friends. But what he does not know is that his friends are slowly giving him clues to lead him back to their lost friendship." The movie starts with the lead character, Larry, reading a note while walking down the street. The note tells Larry that his first step towards happiness is to be found at Spin Café. Both the viewer and Larry do not know where this note came from or who wrote it. While at the

café, Larry receives another clue that leads him to another spot in his neighborhood. At each spot, he has flashbacks to happier times but maintains a frown throughout the movie. What Larry does not know but the viewer finds out is that at each site, his friends are behind the clues that lead him to another spot. When Larry receives his final clue, he is lead to a pool hall where his friends are waiting for him to show him that true happiness and the way to feel better is to spend time with friends and family. Throughout the film Larry carries with him a book entitled *How to be Happy*. At the end Larry throws the book away symbolizing that happiness cannot be found through book knowledge and is rooted in experiences with his friends.

Tom made *How to be Happy* with help from his friend Jeff in response to a specific assignment from the teacher in his *Production of Film* course. The class assignment instructed students to make a music video using a three act structure that lasts less than three minutes. At Garcia HS, the process of creating a video is highly structured and linear and has developed over the past nine years of offering *Production of Film* to students. The teachers were convinced that this structure led to better movies. They recalled in interviews that when they started the class, students were given a camera and told to make a movie without much direction from the teacher. Over time they developed assignments and structures to guide students to make better movies by having a more coherent story. The process that they designed is divided into four stages: pre-production, production, post-production and showing/distribution.

In the pre-production stage, students are told to take the following steps: 1) draw a storyboard, 2) complete a three act storytelling guide, 3) write a script and 4) develop a shot list by blocking their film. Several of the steps are collected at set deadlines and graded by the *Production of Film* teacher. The storyboard is a set of boxes where students are expected to draw out the overall plot for the story in a visual manner. Each box serves the purpose of depicting various shots that will be used to construct a scene. When completed, it looks a bit like a cartoon rendition of the story. The *Storytelling Guide for Directors* is a worksheet that the students are given by their teachers in order to define the characters and the conflict in act one, escalate the conflict in act two and resolve the conflict in act three. The teachers at Garcia insist that students stick to the three act structure and reinforce this by repeating the mantra “if you don’t have a story, you don’t have a movie.” The top of the *Storytelling Guide for Directors* worksheet reads:

Directors are storytellers. If you want to be a director, you first have to create a story to tell your audience. While your Super Short video project will be short on character development and conflict development, there should still be a basic story with a character and a conflict.

Tom and Jeff take a couple of weeks to work out the plot for the story and fit it into the three act structure for the *Storytelling Guide for Directors*. In fact, there is a lot of tension between the two filmmakers as to what the story will become. The main source of tension is how the movie will end. Jeff wants the ending to be more definitive with the friends getting together to form a band. Tom wants to leave the ending more open-ended so that the viewer has to wonder if and how Larry will find his happiness. In fact, over the course of three weeks, the story changes dramatically from initial idea to storyboard to final cut. Many people along the way offer Tom and Jeff suggestions and ideas about their film including

me, their teachers, fellow students and the actors. To say that many people had input as to how the story turned out is an understatement.

The latter two steps in the pre-production stage are less formal for the class. Students are not required to submit their script or shot list but are encouraged to do so. While Tom and Jordan created a detailed script and shot list, many of the students skipped this stage for their music video project. I go with Tom when he blocks his movie a couple days before filming. Blocking involves going to the sites without actually shooting but instead planning the shots that are required to tell the story. The following excerpt from my field notes that day reveal that Tom figures out the movie details as he goes from site to site.

As we go from place to place, Tom talks about angles, moving cameras, establishing shots, etc. As he goes on talking about the shots he is also working out the details of the story and determining what could happen.

Once the students complete their pre-production activities, they are expected to move on to the production stage. This involves arranging for actors, finding a location, directing their actors and capturing their video footage. This stage often takes place outside of school hours. It is also important to note that, concurrent to *Production of Film*, students take a course in the English department called *Analysis of Film*. In *Analysis of Film*, students read printed handouts that their teacher has selected. The handouts are about how movie directors use film language and techniques (i.e. Camera angles, soundtracks, mosaic editing) to tell their story. They then see examples which demonstrate the film techniques that they are reading about by watching teacher-selected clips from popular music videos, Hollywood movies, independent films and past students' video productions.

For the production stage of *How to be Happy*, Tom arranged for 6 actors to show up at each of three locations and instructed the actors on what to do for each scene. He shot multiple takes of each scene from different angles. Because there was no dialogue in the film, he spent a lot of time instructing the actors as to which emotion he wanted the actor to convey through facial expression and body language. While operating the camera, Tom would often refer to his shot list which served as reminders that he wrote to himself during the pre-production process. Below is an excerpt from his notes:

He's very sad, holding the depression book in his hand. Make sure you get several shots here. Close up of his face, of the book, of the note. Do that several times. He sits down and looks rather unpleasant. Show shots. Remember to develop the character through shots.

Tom took about 4 hours total to shoot his footage at the 3 locations. While shooting each scene, Tom made decisions as to what the actors do and how things will be shot. He appears to draw on terms and concepts that he hears in the *Analysis of Film* class concerning film language and repeatedly uses phrases from class such as camera angles, composition, establishing shots, moving camera, objective point of view, etc. In the excerpt from Tom's notes above he reminds himself to "develop the character through shots." This phrase came directly from his *Analysis of Film* class where students were often shown how directors like Spike Lee and Alfred Hitchcock used film language to make the viewer feel an emotion toward the character.

The post-production stage involves moving the video from tape to the computer and editing the clips into a rough cut of the movie. From there, students will make their more fine tuned edits on the computer that turn their rough cut into a final cut. The students use I-movie as the software program for making cuts, adding transitions, recording their soundtrack and writing titles and subtitles. Tom and Jeff argue extensively during this process as Tom tries to instruct Jeff on how to piece together the shots. They decided in the beginning of the project that Tom would do the camera work and directing while Jeff would be the editor on the computer. A problem arises when Tom does not like how Jeff constructs the footage and has different ideas about what the soundtrack for the movie should be. They eventually settle on a rock song called *Inasmuch* by the Autumndivers. The lyrics to the song are included below:

*i am more moved and changed
after a night full of dreams
than after a day full of experience
silver screen projects on
we see decadence
once proud manifest hopelessness
gracefully fall with me*

The song is mostly instrumental with swirling guitars that operate in a looped chord progression. By being fairly repetitive, the song gives the feeling of being stuck. Tom and Jeff arrived at this song after having many arguments over how literal they wanted their sound track to be.

One last major aspect of the process at Garcia involves showing the movies and discussing their film with their fellow students. Students first show their films to each other informally in the editing rooms before and after the final cut. Tom and Jeff show their film to fellow students and make many changes despite claiming that they are done. They also show their finished movies in class in a more formal self-reflective manner. After showing their film, they receive critical comments from their classmates and often use these comments to make changes to their video. At the end of the school year, students from the entire school body are encouraged to submit their films for judging in the Garcia HS Film Festival. This is a popular annual event at Garcia with roughly 150 people attending. In 2005, ten films were selected as finalists and shown at the festival. A panel of judges from the school and community then selected 3 of the 10 for an award. *How to be Happy* won an award for Best Music Video.

Welcome to the City

Welcome to the City is a film that was made by Julisa, a half-Phillipino, half-white student at Munson High School. The film was made in response to a 17 year-old black male student at Munson High School named Demario who was fatally shot on a sidewalk near his home in the city of Lakefront. He was shot in the back by a jealous boyfriend who did not like Demario smiling at his girlfriend. Demario was a well-liked football star and honor roll student. The film features a poem that Julisa wrote and reads out loud as a narrative audio track for her movie. The poem is below:

*A mother cries because her baby boy is gone
At 17, MVP of the football team
A friend, a student, a brother, a son
His life cut short because of the carelessness of a gun
Our heads are down as we pray
For this crazy world to change some day
I heard a girl say
"We're not safe in our own homes"
My generation has nothing to lean on
Nothing to count on
This is what the world has come to
We're shooting ourselves over a girl, a chain
It doesn't matter
It could be you
Look at the streets we walk
Look at the way we talk
We've got so much more to live for
The richest country and we're still begging for more
Guns, Knives, Blue, Red, Black, White
Start being a man
If your gonna fight then fight
Not with guns, use your hands
Have some common decency for the life of a man
Imagine the tears and the pain that it caused
3-31-2005
We all sat back and took a good look at our lives
This is the life we're living today
Stand up
Be strong
and change it in some way*

*After all that's happened
All you got to do is hope that
People will wake up in the morning the next day
And go out there and make a change*

The video also has the Tupac Shakur song "Changes" as a soundtrack along with stills and video footage of guns, Demario, his funeral, and various shots of the city – such as traffic, tall buildings, police cars and urban homes in a state of disrepair. The movie begins with a series white words in the center of a black background that come up on the screen and then fade out. "Tears" then the word "Pain" fade in and out, and last the word "Hope" fades in and out...."Fear"....then a still shot of a Do Not Enter street sign appears and fades out then "Guns Kill Dreams" fades in and out. The opening sequence is then followed by a moving camera shot of traffic in the city set to the Tupac lyrics below:

*Come on come on
I see no changes. Wake up in the morning and I ask myself,
"Is life worth living? Should I blast myself?"
I'm tired of bein' poor and even worse I'm black.
My stomach hurts, so I'm lookin' for a purse to snatch.*

*Cops give a damn about a negro? Pull the trigger, kill a nigga, he's a hero.
 Give the crack to the kids who the hell cares? One less hungry mouth on the welfare.
 First ship 'em dope & let 'em deal the brothers.
 Give 'em guns, step back, and watch 'em kill each other.
 "It's time to fight back", that's what Huey said.
 2 shots in the dark now Huey's dead.
 I got love for my brother, but we can never go nowhere
 unless we share with each other. We gotta start makin' changes.
 Learn to see me as a brother 'stead of 2 distant strangers.
 And that's how it's supposed to be.
 How can the Devil take a brother if he's close to me?
 I'd love to go back to when we played as kids,
 but things change, and that's the way it is.*

*(Come on, come on) That's just the way it is. Things'll never be the same.
 That's just the way it is. aww yeah...*

Julisa reads her poem throughout the movie along with the Tupac soundtrack and her video footage of her community. The video concludes with Julisa asking her audience to do something to change the violent nature of the city and our society. *Welcome to the City* is a great example of how students construct their texts by drawing on multiple modes to make meaning including still images, narration, speech by the actors in the film, moving images (including camera angles), lyrics, sounds, etc; each carrying out a specific function either on its own and/or in conjunction with other modes. By doing so, Julisa's film expresses a range of emotions and as a viewer you can't help but feel moved by her story and the death of her friend.

The process for making *Welcome to the City* was different in many respects when compared to the one Tom and Jeff used at Garcia HS. Whereas the process for Garcia students was highly structured, students at Munson were given little structure if any for their project. In fact, there was rarely ever a formal assignment in the time that I spent at Munson. The teacher could often be heard saying "here is a camera – make something". While part of this comes from the idea that the teacher wanted students to create their videos in an artistically organic manner, some of the lack of structure came from a teacher that was extremely unorganized and unprepared for class. The students were well aware of this and several of them got together and made a video about their video art teacher entitled *A Day in the Life of Mr. Clickner*. In the film, students (including Julisa) critique the disorganized and unprofessional approach that their teacher often takes by impersonating things he does on a daily basis (ie. talking on his cell phone during class, putting his feet up on his desk, not having things for the students to do, etc.). Despite the students' critique of the teacher and the course, the quote by Julisa below indicates her appreciation for the course and her awareness of the opportunities that are afforded by digital video production in her school:

*These days it's hard to believe that my generation will survive long enough
 to see the next generation. Someone's dying everyday, from a murder, a
 shooting, a car crash, or suicide. It becomes hard to try and make a change
 in a world where this kind of stuff is normal. Three years in video art has
 opened doors to three years of possible change. Through video art we get the*

ability to say anything and show it everywhere. It's become a new way of expressing our feelings. Not only does video art help make a change in the world and ourselves but we learn a sense of creativity. Mr. Clickner doesn't write the scripts, we do. We imagine what we want our video to look like, and what our message is. It's hard work, but as a senior of Munson High, video art is one of the best classes I've taken.

The day her friend was killed, Julisa wrote a poem and began to plan out her film that day. She had told me in past interviews that writing was a means for her to deal with problems:

Basically writing –everyone always asks me to talk about something I enjoy because everyone has their bad days, and everyone has to cope with those bad days, you know some people take it out by like boxing or getting into fights, or listening to music ... the one thing I do is write and that's my escape from the world is to write and I love writing poems, I love writing essays, I love writing stories and that's my way of keeping memories, that's my way of letting feelings out so I don't get into fights, so I don't do things that are stupid and that's ... I just love writing, that's always been a way out of the world for me.

Julisa recorded her poem on the computer and began to look for supporting material for the visual aspects. She searched the Internet for images of guns. When she had trouble getting online at school, she asked me to get some of the images of Demario from my home computer. I burned the images that appeared on the Lakefront Newspaper website on a CD and gave it to Julisa for her project. I also went with her as she walked around the school and the community shooting video footage for her film. She shot footage of Demario's locker where students had written farewell messages to him and the letters RIP. Julisa's friend Josh helped her when she was ready to dump the footage to the computer and to piece her material together into a final cut. Like the students at Garcia High, Julisa spent weeks using I-movie to rearrange her clips, still shots, poem and soundtrack into a story.

Julisa also had many opportunities to show her movie about her friend Demario's death. She submitted her video to multiple film festivals and had her video featured on the local public access channel. She won Best Social Commentary at the Lakefront Urban Youth Film Festival and a similar award at a county-wide film festival. She was also recognized at the Lakefront International Film Festival and had her film shown alongside world renowned, female filmmakers. By showing her video at film festivals and on television, Julisa's video reached an audience of thousands of people in the Lakefront community.

Emerging Theme: Dealing with Problems

What appears most important to me about the student films at the two sites is that students used the opportunity to make a film to deal with problems in their everyday lives. I use the phrase “dealing with problems” because I cannot claim that making a movie about their problem necessarily solved the problem. Despite Julisa's powerful film, there is still a problem with gun violence in Lakefront that has yet to be solved. I can, however, claim that by making a movie, some students are using these opportunities to acknowledge their problems, make their problems visible to others and try to do something about it. One of

the things that students do with their films is clearly related to sorting out their emotions and beginning to heal. Agency is a term that Hull and Katz (2006) use to show how adults and children take control over their situations by using digital storytelling to “articulate pivotal moments in their lives and to assume agentive stances toward their present identities, circumstances, and futures” (p. 44). The analysis of the entire data corpus reveals that many of the students in this study made their films to address real problems in their lives such as: boredom in school, neglectful parents, superficial work in school, anorexia, depression, alienation from friends, suicide, breaking up with a girlfriend/boyfriend, relationship difficulties, death of a loved one or classmate, violence in the community, an apathetic teacher, divorced parents, confusion over sexual orientation, disappointment, fears, insecurity, growing up, drug use in school, the meaning of life, infidelity in relationships. This list is not conclusive, yet it shows a range of issues that students chose to address by constructing their multimodal texts.

Julisa made *Welcome to the City* in response to a traumatic event in her life when a fellow student was shot and killed. She had strong feelings about how unfair it was that her innocent friend was killed but she was also angry that she and her fellow classmates had to grow up in a place (Lakefront) where people are killed regularly by gun violence. These are difficult emotions for anyone to deal with especially a 16 year old student. Many people might not deal with these emotions and feel a loss of control in their life. In an interview, Julisa alludes to both escape and agency in her explanation of how writing and specifically multimodal writing helped her to deal with her feelings and problems.

video – I mean it’s the same kind of thing as writing, sort of, I mean I get to let out my feeling in film, I get to make a point because when DeMario died I mean the first thing I did was write and then I wanted to make a statement because I was so angry because something like this had happened and shouldn’t have happened at all ... and I get angry and video is kind of a way of escaping too just because you’re making a film about your feelings, about how you feel about something, especially about my DeMario tape, it was all about how I felt, it was about how this world is today and I just wanted to let that out. It was an escape.

... I think it’s just because I’ve seen my friends going through so many things, you know, teenage problems like with home issues and family issues, and own personal issues and I think I just wanted to get it out there that, you know, every day might be hard but you have to get through it. Just take it one day at a time and it is growing up and eventually it will all go away, you know.

I thought of the one thing that I would really make a film about, the one thing that I would really want to get out to the world because film is a way of, you know, spreading the word ... you know, rather than words I mean film you see it and you hear it and you feel it, and it’s a way to share it with other people.

Julisa refers to being angry, making a statement, letting out her feelings and escaping. She also puts a positive twist on her film by saying that you’ve got to get through it. James Pennebaker (1997) has shown that writing about emotionally traumatic events allows people to experience significant improvements in physical and mental health. Perhaps by making this movie, Julisa was able to make her emotions more visible and, as such, heal from the pain she was experiencing.

Tom also made *How to be Happy* during a time when he was experiencing the pain of his parents' divorce and a difficult break-up with his girlfriend. Over the course of two months, Tom had dropped a significant amount of weight from not eating. Tom told me how one day his mother saw him with his shirt off and became so alarmed that she took him to the emergency room. While Tom's movie is not directly about anorexia, it shows symbolically how he was feeling at the time. While Tom chose to make some bad decisions (not eating) in dealing with his problems, by making his movie he was able to bring those issues to the surface and deal with them. Maxine Greene has argued that the role of schooling is to help students make their everyday life experiences and problematic situations more visible in order to help them make sense of their problems. By making his film, Tom spent time reflecting on the problems in his life and realizing how he was feeling and how he might take steps to get better. Hull and Nelson (2005) suggest that it is the affective nature of digital stories, like the one that Tom tells that holds the true power of multimodal production. Drawing on Vygotsky (1986) they argue that telling personal narratives through the affordances of multimodal composition might represent a sight for "a dynamic system of meaning" in which "the affective and the intellectual unite"(Vygotsky in Hull & Nelson, 2005 p. 253) It is the intersection between the affective and the intellectual that I believe is happening in students movies and it is for this reason that I argue that schools need to provide students more opportunities to construct their multimodal texts and that New Literacy Studies might consider an affective turn in the ways in which literacy is theorized.

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