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What Could Professional Wrestling and School Literacy Practices

Possibly Have in Common?

Donna E. Alvermann

309 Aderhold Hall

University of Georgia

Athens, GA 30602-7125

dalverma@uga.edu

Andrew Huddleston

Lubbock Independent School District

Lubbock, TX

ahuddles@ttacs.ttu.edu

Margaret C. Hagood

College of Charleston

Charleston, SC

hagoodm@cofc.edu

Abstract

This paper reports on potential connections between professional wrestling and secondary school literacy practices, at least as these practices are defined by current standards-based instructional guidelines in the United States. The data sources for the examples we give are from two larger projects: a content analysis of one high school student's involvement in a thematic *World Wrestling Federation (WWF)*/literacy unit prepared by a preservice teacher, and a cross-case analysis of 30 adolescents' interpretations of and uses for a video game featuring *World Championship Wrestling (WCW)*.

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**What Could Professional Wrestling and School Literacy Practices
Possibly Have in Common?**

At first glance, any connection between professional wrestling and school-based literacy practices might seem far-fetched, or incongruous at best. This seeming incongruity, however, is what intrigues us most. It is also what drives us to wonder if governmental and media sources that regularly proclaim a crisis in youth's literacy achievements might be overlooking some potentially rich intersections between young people's personal and school literacies. Finally, we can't help but wonder, along with columnist Patrick Clinton (2002), if the "real" crisis isn't the disaffection of too many school-age youth—the ones Clinton describes this way:

They're in the last row, wearing a look that all teachers know, one that says, "I'm invisible. I have nothing to say. Don't call on me." They don't have their books. They didn't read the assignment: They forgot; they had to work; it was just boring....There are kids like these in the back row of almost every high school classroom in America. In some poor schools, they're in all the rows....High school teachers will tell you [these are kids who] can read the words but not the content. (pp. 4-5)

If these students are not reading content, but they can read, just *what* are they reading? Although there are no hard numbers, the International Reading Association's Commission on Adolescent Literacy, in its position paper (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999) painted the following picture: Kids of the Net Generation, some 20 million strong, engage in multiple literacy practices—e.g., they email, Instant Message, surf the Web, read video game magazines for tips on how to win, participate in online chat rooms, read bulleted information on teacher handouts, but they do very little reading from the traditional textbook. Are these the literacies of the Net Generation only, or are they similarly *our* literacies—inclusive of the preservice teachers, classroom teachers, university professors, and researchers amongst us? To the authors' way of thinking, "understanding literacies within and across generations is not a matter of defining what the term *literacy* means to different generations, but rather what the term implies in various contexts to furthering or undermining the stability of fixed categorical understandings, such as generational literacies" (Hagood, Stevens, & Reinking, 2002, p. 79). Regardless of age, academic position, and any number of other identity markers, it is our personal literacies (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 2000) that largely influence what we read and the uses we make of popular culture texts.

In this article, therefore, we look at our data sources not through some arbitrary divide that separates adults' uses of popular culture from young people's uses, but rather through the lens of the user—the individual who regardless of generational label participates daily in a technologically-mediated environment, one rich with texts of all kinds (visual, iconic, digital, and print). Specifically, we focus on the uses of popular culture texts embedded in the discursive practices (Gee, 1996) that make up the *World Wrestling Federation (WWF)* and *World*

Championship Wrestling (WCW)—practices that have the potential to inform how we think about personal and school literacies, including whether or not the two might intersect at times.

A Thematic Wrestling/Literacy Unit

When a professor of applied linguistics at a large university in the southwestern U.S. asked our class to create teaching units that incorporated popular culture into a language arts classroom, I (Andrew) immediately thought of my younger brother Daniel. Daniel (age 17) has passionately loved professional wrestling for several years. In fact, Daniel claims that he first became interested in wrestling when I watched it as a young boy. As I grew older, my interest in wrestling faded, but Daniel's has remained strong. I felt sure that describing Daniel's love for wrestling would be easy, but how could I possibly connect the violent and sometimes vulgar *WWF* to literacy? Much more, how could I justify creating a *WWF*/literacy unit in the standards-based political climate of Texas? Little did I know about professional wrestling and the numerous literacy strategies and skills my brother was using when he enjoyed his after-school pastime.

I began our unit together on a Friday afternoon in the summer by having Daniel complete a questionnaire that included several questions such as how he first got interested in professional wrestling and why he liked it so much. I assumed that he liked wrestling for the violence, suspense, and action. Indeed, these were all contributing factors, but they were not what captivated his interest. Daniel said he enjoyed wrestling for the continuous story or saga, even comparing it to a soap opera: "It is a male 'soap opera.' Just like *Days of Our Lives*. If the story is interesting, people will want to continue watching. As soon as one episode is finished, everyone wants to know what will happen next."

It was at this point that Daniel introduced what is referred to in professional wrestling as “the storyline” in order to better help me understand what is real and what is just acting in wrestling. Every move a wrestler makes is plotted long before the match to “fit-in” to the ongoing saga or storyline. This is what provides the *WWF* with the atmosphere of a daytime drama. Who will win, who will fight, who will get mad and threaten whom, and who will interfere in specific matches? All of this, Daniel explained, is determined beforehand by *WWF* managers and is written into the storyline:

[T]he chairs are real, the tables are real, the ladders are real, everything is real. People just say it’s fake because before going into the ring the wrestlers know who will win and what moves will take place... People that say wrestling is stupid and fake, I don’t think they know how much athletic ability it takes. They have to know every move they’re going to do and when before the match even starts.

This distinction between what is real and what is acting led us into a conversation of how professional wrestling is, in essence, drama. The actors (wrestlers) perform according to the written script or storyline. Instead of using a traditional stage, the *WWF* uses the wrestling ring, and just as dramatic plays have protagonists and antagonists, professional wrestling has what is referred to as faces and heels. In wrestling, the faces are the good guys and the heels are the bad guys, though those who appear to be good at first may turn-out to be evil or vice versa.

After completing the questionnaire, Daniel and I began an activity comparing *WWF* matches to Freytag’s Pyramid (Harmon & Holman, 1996). Freytag claimed that all five-act tragedies have similar plot lines that consist of elements such as an inciting moment, rising action, climax, falling action, and moment of last suspense. We were curious to see if professional wrestling matches followed a similar pattern. I had Daniel graph the plot lines of his

three favorite wrestling matches and label if and when elements such as rising action, climax, and moment of last suspense occurred. Neither Daniel nor I was surprised to find that the plot lines of these wrestling matches did follow Freytag's Pyramid very closely. In many of the matches we watched, the face would begin the match by losing to the heel thus producing a definite rise in tension. The tension level would then rise and fall depending on who appeared to have the upper hand. Interestingly, in many of the more recent matches we watched, the climax was often brought about by a third party who interfered in the fight. The moment of last suspense usually occurred when one of the wrestlers was pinned to the floor for a three second count.

Throughout all of our exploring together, Daniel and I talked about visual images, tone, and symbols that we saw. Our next activity was for Daniel to list the different visual images he encountered as we explored the different types of wrestling media together. The activity asked specifically about images with regard to colors, music, fireworks, smoke, dress, lighting, atmosphere, women, and audience. Daniel noted a large variety of images with lots of red and black coloring, darkness, bright lights, loud music, yelling, threatening, violence, intensity, and seductive women. He believed that these "extras" added significantly to the intense and violent atmosphere of the *WWF*. However, he then went on to compare these images of present day wrestling to the professional wrestling of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Much to my surprise he began talking about the "persona" of the wrestlers and how it had changed. He said that the word persona is often used in the *WWF* to refer to the images wrestlers portray. For example, in the 1980s wrestlers such as Hulk Hogan helped transform wrestling from being popular only in bars to a more family and child appropriate form of entertainment. Today, however, the persona of many wrestlers is once again more violent and darker. There is less traditional wrestling and

much more violence and special effects. According to Daniel, wrestling today is “bright lights and blood. It has become more of an entertainment than a sport.”

Our last activity in the unit consisted of connecting *WWF* wrestling to classical literature. I selected three texts that I believed contained at least some similarities to the drama of professional wrestling: *Julius Caesar*, *Beowulf*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Daniel had read *Julius Caesar* in his sophomore English class, and I introduced the stories of *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to him. We quickly concluded that all of these works had plots that resembled Freytag’s pyramid. Also, all of these works were intense, action-packed stories that shared themes of violence and warfare. Daniel and I concluded that what appeals to people in popular culture today also appealed to people years ago. This realization of how the plots and storylines of popular culture texts cohere with those found in more traditional texts is not a particularly new or unique finding, as one of the reviewers for this article noted: “Even mass mediated texts, like the film *Dangerous Minds*, depict the teacher as savior who hooks into students’ [everyday] fandoms to connect with, typically, classic literature.” Nonetheless, we maintain that it is a finding that has yet to have a material effect upon literacy teaching, and perhaps for good reason if one is opposed to postmodern practices of recognizing the mix between everyday culture with so-called high culture, which we’re not.

As Daniel and I created the wrestling unit together, I was struck by the fact that connecting the *WWF* to the traditional English curriculum was no stretch at all. In fact, numerous similarities between wrestling and drama were much more obvious and richer than I ever could have imagined. Not only was Daniel using skills such as comparison/contrast, making connections, and visualizing, but he was also learning about plot development, story grammar, symbolism, and persona. He was using and learning objectives that his English teacher was

trying to teach in a more traditional format. He was daily using skills that would be tested by Texas' standardized accountability instrument, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills. Moreover, he used an amalgam of personal and school literacies across media texts to synthesize his thoughts.

Cross-Case Analysis of a Media Club's Uses of *WCW* Text

While Daniel appeared to eagerly engage with Andrew in making connections between professional wrestling and school-based literacy, we (Donna and Margaret) discovered some resistance when we worked with students playing wrestling video games in an after-school program. We met weekly for 1 _ hours after school in a public library with each of three different groups of youth in grades 6-9 as part of a 14-week-long Media Club study (Alvermann, Hagood, Heron, Hughes, Williams, & Yoon, 2002). The young people recruited to participate in the study were all performing at the lowest 25th percentile on the district-wide reading achievement test. School officials described them as being "at-risk" of dropping out of school. Although our objective initially was to develop their critical awareness of what it means to be a consumer of popular culture texts, we made significant modifications in planning as the study progressed.

Why did we choose this particular group of young people for our research project? Our assumption was not that youth who scored lower on a reading achievement test were less critically literate than peers who scored higher. Nor was it our assumption that youth in general are less critically aware than other age groups. Indeed, we would argue for doing away with such overly simplistic categories as adolescents and adults so that students and teachers alike will have an opportunity to "develop a different view of how *people* may act, provisionally, at a particular time and within particular conditions" (Morgan, 1997, p. 26, emphasis added). What

we had hoped to accomplish by introducing activities designed to develop club members' already existing critical awareness was a better understanding of how they were positioned (and positioned themselves) in the production and consumption of popular culture texts. That this goal was not achieved resulted from our understanding midway through the study that by allowing club members to pursue their own uses of popular culture texts, we were better able to observe how personal and school literacies sometimes intersect.

At the time of the study, professional wrestling was a nationwide pastime. An average of 5 million households watched it weekly, and *Raw is War* was the highest ranked show on cable (Leland, 2000). The popularity of wrestling among adolescents and adults alike seemed to make it the perfect topic—or so we thought—for a discussion about the pleasures of viewing mixed with a bit of critical media literacy instruction. Using the *WCW* video game as a springboard for learning about club members' interests in the spectacle, Margaret suggested that they do a search of the Internet to learn more about the wrestlers who were featured in the game and to create their own imaginary *WCW* characters, using traits they found appealing. The activity had barely begun when it fell apart. Several club members let it be known that they preferred to spend their time searching the Internet for rap lyrics, news about their favorite musical artists, sports celebrities, dirt bikes, *DBZ*, and *Fantasy Football*. Others were more guarded in their responses.

For example, in an email discussion with Margaret about *WCW*, Shawn wrote:

“Hi, this is Shawn. I don't like wrestling that much but when my mother look at it everybody and the house has to look at it too. Sometime I like looking at people get hurt but sometime I fell [sic] sorry for them.

Later, however, we observed that several boys in the club regularly sought out the *WCW* video game during free choice time. Then, about halfway through the study, a few girls (never

more than two or three at a time) also indicated an interest in the game. They typically played in a corner of the library's auditorium that was near the boys' playing area, but they were neither invited, nor did they try, to join the boys. Seemingly content to play in the all-girls' group, Chocolate and Peaches (both self-chosen pseudonyms) nevertheless used language that was representative of the all-boys' groups:

Chocolate [setting up the game, which allows players to take on the role of actual *WCW* contenders, and directing her comment to Peaches]: "Play wrestling, so you can fight until you can't fight anymore."

[Peaches immediately chooses Sting as her character. Her choice is deliberate; she had to search through several other options until she found him.]

Chocolate [to Peaches]: "You gonna die!"

Peaches [changing her mind about her choice in characters]: "The giant, that's the one I want. How do I choose? [Looking at Chocolate]: "Show me." [She figures it out for herself, and the two girls commence playing.]

Chocolate: "Peaches! You're killing me! And I was talking about beating you up.

Peaches, stop killing me. You killing me! Ahh! I don't know how to punch!"

[At this point, Peaches wins the match.]

Chocolate: "I hate when you killing me."

[They return to the video game screen that allows them to choose different wrestling characters.]

Peaches: "Don't choose him (referring to the giant). That be mine the whole time. You get Sting."

Chocolate: "I want a fat man."

Peaches: “Get that black man.”

[They begin the next game.]

Chocolate: “Oh, you’re a scared punk. You be like Jimmy, always running away.”

Peaches: “Get him, Nash. He beat your butt. I’m getting tired of you killing me. I’m going to kill you next.”

This exchange between Peaches and Chocolate shows the two girls fully engaged in the consumption and production of taking on the identities of their favorite wrestling characters. It also shows them performing, with seemingly good accuracy, the personas that professional wrestlers create for themselves—the same personas that Daniel described to Andrew and that the girls would have observed while leafing through the Media Club’s collection of wrestling magazines. Although Peaches and Chocolate had shown little or no interest during an earlier club activity in producing their own wrestling character by searching the Internet to learn more about the wrestlers who were featured in the *WCW* video game—perhaps because the activity had seemed too contrived or school-like—they showed no hesitancy in producing characters’ personas in their own discourse when engaged in real time video game playing. It was as if they had discovered something about *WCW* that appealed to them personally and with which they could call on personal literacies to produce their characters.

Gallego and Hollingsworth (2000) explained that personal literacies, as differentiated from school literacies, reflect how people “believe they should join in socially accepted discourse communities and the private ways they know they can and would like to be able to participate” (p. 15). For Peaches and Chocolate, their engagement in *WCW* video wrestling provided them with opportunities to demonstrate that they knew the wrestling Discourse (Gee, 1996); that is, they understood the importance of talking tough, being aggressive, not backing

off, and so on. This form of socially accepted wrestling Discourse in video game playing was one that needed no mediation on Donna's and Margaret's part. If anything, our own personal literacies would probably have put us at a disadvantage if we had attempted to intervene or join in the girls' play.

Analysis of the Two Projects in Relation to Each Other

Undoubtedly, quite a contrast exists between Andrew's project and the Media Club study of the world of professional wrestling. Participant engagement varied considerably, especially with regard to the teachers' knowledge of wrestling, their willingness to engage in mediation, their familiarity with possible links between professional wrestling and school-sanctioned literacies, as well as the students' reactions to mixing personal literacies with school-related practices (e.g., Freytag's Pyramid and Internet research on *WCW* wrestlers). There are several reasons why this difference in engagement may have occurred. First, while Donna and Margaret were professors researching possible connections between popular culture and literacy, they had little personal experience with the genre of professional wrestling. Andrew, however, was a preservice teacher who had watched wrestling as a boy. The fact that Daniel's interest in wrestling was a result of his older brother's earlier viewing, made Daniel feel quite comfortable in catching Andrew up on the latest developments in the wrestling world.

Another possible explanation for the differences between the two projects is the role that mediation played in each. Donna and Margaret did not attempt to intervene in Peaches' and Chocolate's video game playing, primarily because they had experienced considerable resistance when trying to engage the girls in creating their own *WCW* characters earlier in the club's

history. Andrew, on the other hand, saw himself as a mediator while working with his brother Daniel. After reading the Peaches and Chocolate vignette, Andrew wrote:

In the unit I did with Daniel, he was familiar with the plot structure of Freytag's Pyramid from school, but he probably didn't recognize the name. It was my idea to see if the plot structures of the wrestling matches would resemble the Pyramid. However, I didn't predetermine a list of skills and objectives I wanted to teach Daniel through his love of wrestling. Rather, when he shared his interest and knowledge of wrestling with me, I quickly recognized how many skills and objectives he was already using. I thought of the connection to Freytag, when Daniel started explaining the role of the storyline in wrestling, how matches are written and even rehearsed. (Personal correspondence, November 25, 2002)

In both projects, we found ourselves in a balancing act when it came to making decisions about when and how to emphasize connections between personal and school literacies. Donna's and Margaret's lack of familiarity with the Discourse of professional wrestling made thinking up potentially rich connections between it and school-sanctioned literacies difficult. Consequently, the activities they designed tended to meet with resistance, as in their earlier attempts to develop club members' critical awareness of how wrestling video game texts are produced and marketed, or how particular traits of favorite *WCW* video game wrestlers could be combined to produce a new wrestling persona. Similarly, Andrew found himself at times somewhat overeager to point out connections or assign activities relating school-based literacy to wrestling. When a heavy sigh or sign of aggravation occurred, Andrew would quickly back off and allow Daniel to share his wrestling passion in his own way. In both cases, rather than forcing any contrived links between personal and school literacies, we found it advantageous to allow students to explore

freely their own interests in (and knowledge of) professional wrestling as they consumed and produced interpretations and uses of those texts..

Finally, the participants' level of interest in wrestling and their receptiveness to the goals of the two projects varied decidedly. Daniel was extremely passionate about wrestling and was eager to share with Andrew his interest in the sport, despite the school-related terminology Andrew introduced. Although the project took place outside of school during the summer, Daniel was quite open to the possibility of incorporating wrestling into a traditional English curriculum so long as it did not become "too school-like." The experience was innovative and engaging to him, and he had no problem keeping Andrew up late at night playing his favorite wrestling videos or reading from his numerous wrestling books and magazines. The Media Club members, on the other hand, made it clear from the start that there were several other types of popular culture texts that they preferred to explore on their own. Even Peaches and Chocolate, who clearly knew the Discourse of professional wrestling, seemed not as passionate as Daniel. How Daniel, Peaches, and Chocolate interacted with the medium of wrestling seemed to mimic their involvement in the production and consumption of a wrestling Discourse. Daniel's behind-the-scene knowledge of the sport assisted in his abilities to connect to school-based literacy practices. Peaches and Chocolate, on the other hand, dealt with wrestling more on a personal literacy level, as they understood the genre through the Discourse of video gaming (Gee, 2003).

Discussion and Implications

Although Daniel's ability (with Andrew's help) to connect his personal and school literacies provides quite a contrast to Peaches' and Chocolate's situation, we see some

commonalities in the two cases. Similar to the youths in Neilsen's (1998) study of *Pulp Fiction* and Norton's (2000; in press) study of *Archie* comic books, the young people we describe in this article were well aware of how popular culture texts get "read" by individuals who apply criteria different from their own in making use of these texts. Although Daniel seemed to be able to find parallels between his personal literacy interests in *WWF* and the language of schooling, the girls' use of video games in Media Club seemed less easily linked to school-based literacy practices. That which Peaches and Chocolate appeared to claim as personal literacies about *WCW* characters, their personas, and role-playing was to remain as such—personal.

The varying degrees to which personal and school literacies overlapped for the youth in our studies suggest a number of things to us as teachers. First, we believe along with Xu (2002) that it is important to encourage students and teachers—whether in secondary classrooms or in teacher education classes at the university level—to consider their own uses of popular culture texts. For example, how do they use these texts personally? With whom do they use them? Where? Are there intersections between personal and school literacies, such as those Andrew discovered with Daniel, that teachers need to explore with their students? Just as importantly, are there times when one's personal literacies deserve to remain personal, as was the case for Peaches and Chocolate?

Second, regardless of the different "readings" of popular culture texts that are available to all of us, what are some potentially interesting commonalities in the literacy skills needed to interpret such texts? For example, as Andrew and Daniel began to explore connections between professional wrestling and the traditional English curriculum, they saw the former as being analogous to a play. They noted that every move a wrestler makes is in the script or storyline. Instead of a stage there is a ring, and every wrestler is an actor. Another common skill might

involve plotting the storyline. As with Shakespearian tragedies, wrestling matches can be viewed as having a rising action, climax, and denouement. Other literacy skills are involved in watching wrestling as well. For example, wrestling matches are filled with symbolism, and viewers often question and predict who will win a match, much like Peaches and Chocolate did while playing the *WCW* video game.

Third, because wrestling is a Discourse (Gee, 1996), participants, whether in real life or in virtual worlds, assume identities and use language that makes them recognizable to others like themselves (see Katz, 2001; Tobin, 1998; Turkle, 1996). In the case of Peaches and Chocolate, their actions and language clearly indicated that they knew the wrestling Discourse and how its storyline gets played out in a video game. We contend that the storylines we've just described are not unique—neither to professional wrestling nor to the literacy practices and literary elements that comprise a traditional English curriculum. There are equally strong storylines in the high-stakes testing movement, a present-day phenomenon that seems to suggest to both teachers and students that personal literacies are to be left at the schoolroom door, unnoticed and unwelcomed. Yet we would argue, based on the cases we describe here, that tensions between these two literacies need not be viewed as simply oppositional. Rather, just as Daniel and Andrew found common ground between professional wrestling and the high school English curriculum, and Donna and Margaret observed in Chocolate and Peaches' gaming, we believe it is feasible to suggest that as teachers we need to explore instructional pathways that encourage students to make connections between their personal and school literacies. These pathways might well highlight students' pleasures in their uses of texts, such that pleasures become portals for further learning on the part of teachers and students. Having made this point, however, we would caution, as we and others before us have done elsewhere (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Luke,

1997; Morgan, 1997), that teachers need to respect and to learn from the pleasures young people experience as fans of popular culture while simultaneously engaging students and being engaged themselves in a deeper understanding (through various reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing activities; for examples, see Semali and Pailliotet, 1999) of all that is entailed in learning to be a fan of a certain person, group, or object. Indeed, popular culture should not function as the lure that hooks students to become interested in school-based literacies. But to leave popular culture and its accompanying world of texts unexplored among teachers and students furthers the divide between school and personal literacies.

Finally, as to how connections between personal and school literacies should be made and how hard we should strive to make them, we're less certain. To bind literacies by category, as personal or school-based, is to divide up engagement with texts such that people begin to believe that school-based standards can only be attributable to school-based literacies, and personal literacies get used only to achieve the ultimate—school literacies. Further, reified distinctions between personal and school literacies serve only to divorce these literacies from contextualized practices—a dangerous situation indeed and one to be avoided if teachers are to respect youth's pleasures in popular culture texts and resist following up on a discussion of the *WWF* with a five-paragraph essay writing assignment. In Media Club when we tried to force personal literacies into the mold of school literacies, students rightfully resisted. Yet, when we viewed the same students' use of popular culture as literacy on their own terms, several significant meaning-making strategies surfaced that we as teachers learned from in the process. Based on this experience and on what we learned from observing the use Daniel made of one kind of popular culture text, we are eager to explore further the connections that young people make between personal and school literacies. We believe such explorations have the potential to

yield valuable information that can benefit both teachers and students. We also believe that teachers need not wait for so-called outsiders to write up this information. Instead, we envision classrooms in which teachers and students, working together, will make their own discoveries of how personal literacies can become conduits for learning in multiple ways and for multiple purposes.

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