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Young People's Relationships with Reading

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> *The day that Grady, a ninth-grader who generally disliked reading in school, explained to me that he had spent his Thanksgiving vacation poring over a* Pokémon *training manual in order "to get ahead" in his gaming skills was the day I recognized the power of popular media texts to influence young people's perceptions of themselves as readers and what reading can do for them. What else, I wondered, might classroom teachers, teacher educators, administrators, parents, and community workers learn from observing (either firsthand or through professional journals) the multiple literacy practices that adolescents use to navigate popular media texts—the very texts that are so central to their everyday lives.*

Young people's relationships with reading are full of contradictions. On the one hand we read that adolescents' interest in reading declines as they move through the middle grades and beyond, at least as reported by the National Association of Secondary School Principals in their professional journal, the *NASSP Bulletin* (http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3696/is_200209/ai_n9086786. Yet a quick scan of

the latest results of achievement trends among adolescents enrolled in grade 8 as reported in the *Nation's Report Card on Reading* (results for grade 12 students will be released in the spring of 2006) (http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nrc/reading_math_2005/s0002.asp?printver=), we learn that White, Black, and Hispanic students scored higher, on average, in 2005 than in 1992. Thus, if there is a relationship between youth's reported interest in reading and their achievement as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, it is not easily discernible.

Throw into this puzzling mix, the following media blurb, "'Go to your room!' sends many kids to multimedia hub" (Armas, 2005) and one sees instantly just how complex this whole notion of reading interest among youth has become. Reading in what form? Multimedia? Textbooks? Trade books? Web sites? Blogs? Instant Messaging? The list is long and grows even longer if one's definition of reading includes the interpretations of noted essayist Alberto Manguel (1996) in his widely acclaimed book, *A History of Reading*.

All this aside, my focus in the present article is not with the complex issues surrounding adolescents' relationships with reading per se, but rather with an examination of the challenges and opportunities that surround such relationships. In particular, I want to explore why it is that at a time when more and more scholars in the field of New Literacy Studies (Gee, 1992; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Street, 2003, 2005) are writing about the need to value young people's multiple literacies, including their fascination with popular media and the Internet (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2001; Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2005), relatively little has changed in terms of how secondary schools and colleges of teacher education conceive of academic literacy instruction (Alvermann, 2006; Hagood, 2000; Sturtevant et al., 2006).

Challenges: A Dose of "Reality" in U. S. School Reform

With the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), a relentless preoccupation with organizing class time and selecting appropriate teaching materials has opened the way for school-based literacy instruction to take on an air of authority—one that for all practical purposes threatens to isolate young people's academic literacy practices from their everyday reading and writing interests. Although it is the case that in the past adolescents have typically found ways of subverting official or authorized forms of literacy (Finders, 1997; Moje, 2000; Neilsen, in press; O'Brien, in press), it is also the case that doing so today puts them at greater risk of failing to meet the requirements needed for high school graduation and/or advanced placement courses.

That the current emphasis on academic literacy (to the near exclusion of popular media literacies) is not simply the result of No Child Left Behind legislation goes without saying. For even if some of the NCLB sanctions were lifted in the foreseeable future, the fact remains that educators in the U.S. have traditionally remained lukewarm (at best) to any attempts aimed at connecting students' popular media literacies to the language arts curriculum (Alvermann & Xu, 2003; Hagood, 2003; Short, Schroeder, Kauffman, & Kaser, 2003). Although the reception of such overtures among parents and community workers in after-school settings has been somewhat warmer (e.g., see Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2005; Hill, 2004; Hull & Zacher, 2004), there is still considerable resistance to the idea of inviting adolescents to bring their everyday literacies into the classroom. And, maybe with good reason, especially if one considers how such literacies, once co-opted by the "official" curriculum, may lose their appeal to young people (Dressman, 1995).

Given the situation just described, imagine the difficulty one might experience when attempting to reconcile differences in the professional literature on adolescents' relationships with reading, multimedia, and new information communication technologies, particularly in

respect to the current definition of what counts as "scientifically-based" reading instruction in the United States. When I initially agreed to take on such a challenge by writing a short response to a new book on popular media literacies and their potential for engaging young people in reading (Marsh & Millard, in press), the impact of the federally legislated No Child Left Behind Act (2001) had yet to be enforced widely at the secondary school level. Even so, the contradictions inherent in such a task became all too clear.

For instance, at a time when being sent to one's room is no longer viewed as a punishment but as an opportunity to engage with media of various kinds—or when reading a book on one's cell phone is viewed as yesterday's technology—the notion of an idealized, print-centered curriculum is looking more and more suspect to me. A holdover from earlier times, the printed word will survive and rightfully so, but it is quickly becoming just one among several other textual practices vying for younger (as well as older) people's attention. Heim (cited in Lankshear & Knobel, 2003) astutely describes the situation this way:

> [The] word now shares Web space with the image, and text appears inextricably tied to pictures. The pictures are dynamic, animated, and continually updated. The unprecedented speed and ease of digital production mounts photographs, movies, and video on the Web. Cyberspace becomes visualized data, and meaning arrives in spatial as well as in verbal expressions. (p. 170)

Given what might seem to be the inevitable, why is it that so many teachers—preservice, inservice, and teacher educators—remain, to varying degrees, skeptical of the contribution of popular media culture to young people's relationship with reading, and especially reading that involves subject matter learning.

One reason, it seems to me, is largely explained by what Dyson (2003) has labeled "the 'nothing' assumption—the decision to make no assumption that children have any relevant knowledge"(p. 101) when it comes to knowing things that are pertinent to literacy learning outside an idealized, print-centered environment. The 'nothing' assumption is undoubtedly at work when, for instance, one hears the common lament that adolescents spend far too much time pursuing interests on the Internet that have little or no direct link to their school studies.

Yet, some scholars such as Garcia-Canclini (2001) and Maira and Soep (2005) argue that young people's access to the Internet is having a major effect on how they define themselves as readers. Rather than view themselves as local (and all too often passive) learners situated in conventional institutions such as schools, many of today's young people see themselves as global citizens connected through popular media literacies and interactive digital technologies. The question for me, then, becomes: How do I, as a literacy teacher educator, work with my new found knowledge of young people's changing perceptions of their relationships with reading?

Possibilities: Taking the Plunge

Lest readers of this article think the foregoing question is an easy one to answer, let me share a personal story. It's a true account, and one that I've written about elsewhere (Alvermann, 2006). The story began when I was enlisted on relatively short notice to teach a literacy methods course designed for secondary English Education majors. A relevant piece of information here is that having minored in history all through my undergraduate and master's degree programs, I do not consider myself a teacher of English literature. (Typically, I teach the content area methods course for education majors who want to become more proficient in helping their students learn how to comprehend informational or expository texts—not novels and other forms of literary texts.) Yet, there I was—the instructor of record for 17 preservice secondary English teachers.

After getting to know the students a bit better, I learned that they considered my course to be fairly redundant with one they had had earlier in the professional sequence for preservice teachers leading up to and including their senior year teaching practicum. Rather than risk boring them further, I wisely (or perhaps not so wisely) decided to introduce a new topic for class discussion. Drawing on my own interest and expertise in studying adolescents' popular media literacies and their use of newer communication technologies (Alvermann, in press; Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999), I posed the following question: Does teaching about media literacy have a place in preservice teacher education classes, such as the one in which you are presently enrolled?

To ensure that the question was as timely as possible, I embedded the following sub-question: How would you react if your principal told you that you should consider incorporating an episode from *Joe Millionaire* in one of your lessons as a way of creating a situation in which you could address the new state standards on media literacy? (I deliberately chose *Joe Millionaire* to take advantage of the fact that this reality show was popular at the time and I assumed, watched, at least by some of the students in my class.)

Admittedly, when I asked these two questions of the 17 preservice English Education majors enrolled in my literacy methods course, I did so with trepidation. I knew they were counting the days until they could enter their own classrooms as teachers of English literature. I also recalled that they had been quite vocal about not looking for anything "extra" to teach in what they considered was an already packed curriculum. Thus, I was not surprised when one young woman told me in her written response to the sub-question on teaching media literacy that she was in no uncertain terms appalled by the thought:

> At first the idea of incorporating an episode of *Joe Millionaire* into my lesson plans is scary and unheard of. How are my students to get any literary merit or value out of a "reality" TV show that I didn't even care to watch in my personal life? I know that it is important to get students engaged in [their] learning by pulling in other texts that may be more relevant, but *Joe Millionaire*? Come on.

However, after learning that the new performance standards recently adopted by the Georgia Department of Education actually called for students to "identify and evaluate strategies used by the media to inform, persuade, entertain, and transmit culture," this young woman reconsidered her earlier response and wrote:

> Students [can] learn to read media texts just like they would do an analytical reading of a written text. For very visual students, this kind of "reading" may be more natural than written text. When students see that ideas can be presented in many different formats—written, verbal, visual—they may be more comfortable expressing themselves through any of those genres.

Thinking that it would be helpful if the preservice teachers in my class were to read and respond to the comments that their peers had written, I invited those who wished to participate to join me in discussing the implications of the new media literacy standards for them as future teachers. Picking up on the reality show theme, one young man replied:

> If my principal interpreted the state standards to mean that I had to incorporate media literacy in my curriculum, I would attempt to bridge my students' media "readings" of *Joe Millionaire* and literacy learning by introducing the issues of feminism. I would use *Joe Millionaire* to demonstrate how advertisements and popular fiction may affect an individual's consciousness. In order to function

> successfully within the social constraints created by a patriarchal society, some may argue that women are frequently compelled to adopt one of two stereotypical roles. Women are often either celebrated as vestal virgins or condemned as promiscuous harlots, and this especially holds true in the field of literature. Gerty McDowell from James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Hester Prynne from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* are two such prime examples.

In reflecting on her classmate's desperate attempt to make connections between the canon and *Joe Millionaire*, an outspoken young woman declared:

> I hate reality television. Let me just say upfront that I think this just might be the worst trend in popular entertainment yet, and I can't wait until it passes. (One of my fears is that it never completely will!) My other big confession is that…I am truly becoming one of "them." I'm not a kid anymore; instead, I have entered adultdom. Ironically, just as I am making this perilous transition, I suddenly face the task of communicating with and eliciting responses from today's teenagers. I am resigned to the fact that from here on I will probably find myself more and more removed from the cultures of my students. All in all, although I still prefer my old-fashioned fake TV, I'm grateful for this [discussion] because I suppose my ongoing task is to not completely shut myself off from pop culture, but instead to look for ways to use it to connect with my students.

In sum, what this group of preservice English teachers' comments seem to suggest is that they are cognizant of the pervasiveness of the media in young people's lives. They are also aware that due to recent changes in the state's performance standards, they are now expected to help their students become media literate and to facilitate students' relationships with reading a

broad range of texts. Although it is too early to say, the possibility exists that by perceiving media literacy as a way of "doing life" rather than simply as an object of study, these 17 teachers will come to view young people's interest in popular media literacies as an integral part of the curriculum—one that is embraced but not co-opted.

A Parting Thought

Perhaps the time is also close at hand when I will be writing something like the following in my blog on teaching media literacy, or in a professional journal's special themed issue on young people's relationships with reading:

> *There was a time, and not too long ago, when an article detailing adolescents' insights into their relationships with reading, and especially their use of popular media texts, would have been considered interesting but of little practical value to teachers. This would have been the case for literacy teacher educators as well. It was a time when most educators held themselves singularly accountable for knowing what their students needed in the way of reading and writing instruction. Although they kept young people's academic literacy needs firmly in mind while planning such instruction, for the most part they paid little attention to how certain academic literacy practices did (or did not) mesh with the literacy practices adolescents engaged in outside of school. Nor did they put much stock in asking students for their opinions about such matters. Feeling solely responsible for carrying out a school's academic literacy agenda, these educators of a bygone era typically applied what they had learned as students taught by teachers not very different from themselves. But, fortunately, times have changed and so have students' and teachers' needs.*

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