
Rethinking Composing in a Digital Age: Authoring Literate Identities Through Multimodal Storytelling

Written Communication
27(4) 442–468

© 2010 SAGE Publications

Reprints and permission: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

DOI: 10.1177/0741088310378217

<http://wcx.sagepub.com>



Lalitha Vasudevan¹, Katherine Schultz²,
and Jennifer Bateman²

Abstract

In this article, the authors engage the theoretical lens of multimodality in rethinking the practices and processes of composing in classrooms. Specifically, they focus on how learning new composing practices led some fifth-grade students to author new literate identities—what they call authorial stances—in their classroom community. Their analysis adds to the current research on the production and analysis of multimodal texts through an analysis of the interrelationships between multimodal composing processes and the development of literate identities. They found that by extending the composing process beyond print modalities students' composing shifted in significant ways to reflect the circulating nature of literacies and texts and increased the modes of participation and engagement within the classroom curriculum. These findings are based on an ethnographic study of a multimodal storytelling project in a fifth-grade urban classroom.

¹Columbia University, New York

²Mills College, California

Corresponding Author:

Lalitha Vasudevan, Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th St, Box 8,
New York, NY 10027

Email: lmv2102@columbia.edu

Keywords

multimedia, adolescent literacy, narrative writing, new literacies, English curriculum

Michael stood proudly next to his desk, on top of which he had placed a shoebox that contained artifacts for his memoir pocket. It was his turn to share with the entire class, and he pulled out a family photograph from his construction paper pocket. His explanation for the photograph focused on the family's weekly attendance at church, where Michael had recently been asked to take on an additional responsibility. He smiled shyly as he shared this story, a gesture not entirely uncharacteristic for a boy who was more often quiet during academic conversations and boisterous on the playground. Next, Michael used a page he had torn out of a magazine that showed a basketball player in midair to describe one of his passionate interests. As he narrated these stories, Michael's tone became more animated.

When he entered her classroom in September, Michael's fifth-grade teacher had been told by her colleagues to keep an eye on Michael. On a typical day, bursting with enthusiasm that on some days he barely contained, Michael gravitated more quickly to talk about a recent football game than to more traditionally academic tasks. As we describe in this article, the introduction of multimodal storytelling—or narrating stories through a range of print, visual, and audio modalities—allowed Michael and many of his peers to draw on their knowledge, experiences, and passions nurtured in their home communities to tell new stories and become more deeply engaged in the academic content of school. We argue that the introduction of new composing tools and processes provided students with the opportunity to take on a broader range of available identities as “successful” students in an academic setting.

In this article, we analyze what happened when a multimodal storytelling project was introduced in a fifth-grade urban public school classroom. Our study investigated the following questions: “What is the range and variation of literacy practices in this classroom?” “What literate identities do students develop and perform within the context of a yearlong multimodal storytelling project?” “How does multimodality help us rethink and reimagine composing processes?” In particular, we focus on how learning new composing practices led some students to author new literate identities—what we call authorial stances—in their classroom community. Through these new composing processes, youth developed a stronger and more engaged presence in the classroom community, shifting their modes of participation and sense of themselves as “students” (Schultz, 2009). Our analysis is grounded in the

ways adolescents embraced opportunities to become more fully engaged in the traditional English/Language Arts curriculum by drawing on their home, school, and community lives and telling stories through multiple modalities and genres. In doing so, we focus on the nature of composing as a dimension of authoring and we explore how the theoretical lens of multimodality is helpful in rethinking the practices and processes of composing.

We build on existing notions of how students' identities are shaped and their subjectivities are expressed through the literacy practices that youth engage in across settings. We add to the current research on multimodal text production and analysis (Jewitt, 2002; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Ranker, 2008; Rowsell & Pahl, 2007) by foregrounding an analysis of the interrelationships between multimodal composing processes and the development of literate identities (Vasudevan, 2009). In this article, we attend to the ways in which the youth, through their engagement with multiple modalities and the production of multimodal texts, shifted their modes of participation in the school curriculum.

In recent years, with the advent of new technologies and the attendant new media, researchers have begun to reframe theories on writing and composition (Schultz, 2006). Although youth are often deeply engaged in a wide range of literacy practices outside of school, the prevalence of high stakes testing and mandated curriculum in the United States and elsewhere has meant that the literacy curriculum taught in school is often tightly regulated and controlled. The focus on narrowly defined evidence of academic achievement has led to fewer opportunities to connect school learning to students' interests, knowledge, and experiences from outside of school (Schultz & Hull, 2008).

Through a close examination of the multimodal composing processes of youth, we seek to add to the literature on writing composition. In early studies of composition, researchers documented the stages of writing development through the examination of children's written products (e.g., Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, & Shoer, 1963). In the 1970s, researchers described the composing processes of individual writers (e.g., Emig, 1971; Perl, 1979) by asking writers to talk aloud about how they wrote. More recent research locates composition processes in the social interactions between and among peers (e.g., Dyson, 1988, 1989; Lensmire, 1994; Schultz, 1997). While text analysis was useful to understand the increasing complexity of written products, the introduction of qualitative methods allowed researchers to document and analyze the writing processes of individuals and groups. Visual methodologies and the use of multimedia in composing, along with attention to writers' identities, have shifted the current understandings of writing development. Scholars have begun to document growth or development in writing through

the choices of media and modalities writers make as they compose (e.g., Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress, 2003), in addition to the sophistication or complexity of the writing process and product. We were particularly interested in the relationships between new modes of composing, school identities, and participation.

Data were collected for this study just prior to the preponderance of Web 2.0 technologies, which means that the multimodal storytelling in this project does not reflect the composing affordances of mobile technologies such as smart phones, customizable handheld video game consoles, music players, and the like. In recent years, significant changes in the infrastructure of Web technologies has given rise to the evolution of a World Wide Web where the practices associated with knowledge production, communication, and self-representation have become increasingly social and participatory (Ito et al., 2009; Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2006). This new digital landscape presents important and largely untapped implications for composing and literate identities in the classroom, which we discuss in the conclusion of the article.

Conceptualizing Literate Identities

This study is grounded in sociocultural theories of identities and literacies, which allow us to conceptualize how students authored literate identities in a multimodal storytelling landscape. More recent sociocultural theories offer explanations of how individual and group norms are always constructed in the moment. For instance, Wortham (2006) offers an explanation for social identification based on the theory that individuals draw on models of identity that are locally produced and, at the same time, widely circulating across time and space. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) describe what they call “identity in practice” (p. 271) and explore its relationship with agency. According to Holland and her colleagues, people construct their identities within contexts of “figured worlds” or culturally shared practices. The authors highlight the importance of improvisation as a practice that describes “where—along the margins and interstices of collective cultural and social constructions—how, and with what difficulties human actors, individuals, and groups are able to redirect themselves” (p. 278) or act with agency. According to these theories, people take on identities in relation to context and experience. The identities are not intrinsic or separate from social contexts and interactions; rather they are embodied and enacted in practice.

Research on literacy practices has traditionally proceeded on two separate pathways. School-based research has focused on reading and writing in

classrooms, with the goal to improve students' academic performance. Out-of-school research has documented the myriad literacy practices that occur in a range of institutions and social spaces. Often the purpose of this research is to document the wide range of possibilities for youth. Although important conceptual advances in literacy studies have been made in recent years, there continues to be a divide between the engagement claimed for many youth through out-of-school literacy practices in contrast with their alienation from school-based reading and writing (Hull & Schultz, 2001). Despite a proliferation of opportunities for multimodal composing outside of school (e.g., blogging, social networking), all too frequently youth only read and compose paper-based printed texts inside school. Students like Michael are rarely invited to bring their out-of-school knowledge and interests into the classroom because it does not easily fit into the mandated daily lessons or the routinized modes of school participation. When and if youth are invited to draw on their out-of-school lives, they often do so within predetermined templates and primarily in written texts. In a time when academic success is predicated on test-taking and participation in a narrow range of literacy practices, there is also an increasingly narrow scope of literate or academic identities available for youth in school. Their sense of themselves as students and as literate is circumscribed by the restricted range of opportunities available to display their knowledge and to engage in meaningful participation in the classroom.

Even within a climate where students' identities are increasingly circumscribed, however, there continues to exist possibilities for productive disruption of these normative definitions of what it means to be literate within classroom boundaries. Researchers have begun to document how the introduction of storytelling in various forms such as personal narrative texts, journal writing, and more recently digital storytelling provide opportunities for youth to develop and display different literate identities (Skinner & Hagood, 2008). We understand the significance of stories for shaping social realities (Bruner, 1991; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001) and for providing opportunities for storytellers to assert narrative authority in crafting one's cultural identity (Dyson & Genishi, 1994). All too often, however, there is little room in the curriculum of urban classrooms for practices that are responsive to the individual needs and proclivities of adolescent students given the state and local mandates and high stakes testing (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006).

A multimodal understanding of composing practices widens the lens of composing to include the modal affordances, identities, participation structures, and social interactions and relationships that shape and are shaped

through the engagement of multiple modalities for the production of meaning (Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress, 2003; Siegel, 2006; Vasudevan, 2006). The use of multiple modalities for composing is evident in emergent and existing genres such as digital stories, documentary filmmaking, and podcasts, all of which are gaining popularity in out-of-school organizations for youth and adults (Goodman, 2003; Hull & Katz, 2006; Soep, 2006). For instance, in a community center located in Oakland, California, Glynda Hull and her colleagues worked with youth and adults to compose and perform sophisticated digital stories that combine a variety of semiotic systems and technologies (e.g., Hull, 2003; Hull & James, 2007). In their analysis of one digital story, Hull and Nelson (2005) focused on the multiple modes of meaning that are found in digital stories and argue that new meanings, identities, and roles are made possible when youth are able to use more than one mode to convey their ideas. Through the engagement with a diverse range of modalities, youth produce new texts for new audiences and participate across online and offline spaces, transcending local and global boundaries (Maira & Soep, 2005; Nayak, 2003). In the process of this multimodal text production, their identities become sedimented over time (Rowell & Pahl, 2007). Contexts that are rich with multiple modalities provide adolescents with the opportunities to develop and express their identities across the production of multiple kinds of texts that represent a variety of stories and use a range of modalities. In our study, we drew on research about digital storytelling but used the term multimodal storytelling to encompass the wide range of digital and nondigital composing in which the students were engaged throughout the project.

Recent work documents the use of multiple modalities for composing within classroom contexts. Kinloch (2007, 2010) illustrates how students used mapping, photography, and video interviews to document the gentrification of their Harlem neighborhood for a project that grew out of classroom conversations. Video, Kinloch argues, opened up a new space for critique and demonstrating literate identities. Similarly, a group of young women engaged in critical inquiry projects within an autobiographical writing and photography elective in an urban, public charter school (Wissman, 2007). In this course, they composed written and photographic self-portraits, narratives, and essays while displaying myriad literate identities that were reflective of their personal histories and collaborative inquiries. Wissman (2008) frames photography as a “medium of seeing” through which the young women could be recognized “as social beings with historical legacies, emergent identities, and social commitments, all of which can inform the production of the images” and other personally relevant visual texts (p. 14). In addition to opening up new spaces for composing (Kinloch) and providing a lens into the myriad

contexts of composing (Wissman), multiple modalities, whether digital or not, open up new ways to think about and engage in teaching and learning relationships. For instance, some adolescents are engaged in critical inquiry and engagement with hip-hop texts through which they assume positions of textual authority in the classroom context (e.g., Hill, 2009; Morrell, 2002). Hill (2009) argues that embodying a stance of culturally relevant teaching requires both a recognition of the texts and practices that youth bring into the classroom and meaningful pedagogical engagement of these community-based artifacts.

Our study pays particular attention to the interrelationships among new composing practices, participation, and the emergence of literate identities through curricular opportunities in school. We understand storytelling as a discrete literacy event and a composing practice that occurs across space, time, and modes. With a focus on students' composing practices as well as the stories that emerged through their multimodal engagement, in this project we attended to the scripted as well as unscripted moments of multimodal engagement. These revealed the various ways in which students carried traces of their literate practices that circulate across community, home, and school contexts. This research contributes knowledge about the possibilities of these curricular and pedagogical practices for attending to and cultivating literate identities in the classroom. In addition, we suggest that these understandings gained from attention to multimodal composing practices add critical dimensions to composition theory.

Research Context and Design

In this article, we report on our documentation and analysis of adolescents' composing practices while they were engaged in a multimodal storytelling project. The study took place in a fifth-grade classroom located in a multiracial and multinational urban public school. Working as researchers and practitioners, we collaborated closely with a classroom teacher to introduce students to diverse visual and aural resources with which to compose a range of texts. We attended to the multiple ways in which adolescents selected a range of digital modes such as digital photography, video, audio recording, and video editing software to compose stories in the classroom. We investigated how they enacted their identities through these varied and multimodal composing practices. In addition, throughout the project, we sought to understand the possibilities for increasing student engagement in learning by adding digital modalities and creating opportunities to bridge home and classroom worlds in a language arts classrooms located in an urban district.

The large brick building housing the K-8 school where this study was located covers an entire city block. Wide hallways separate the sizeable classrooms that are framed on one side by windows extending up to the ceilings. In the year of the study, the fifth-grade classroom was filled with desks clustered in groups of six or eight with books, posters, and old computers lining the walls. Several rectangular tables were arranged near the windows and served as the location for most of our work with students. Although at first glance the racial composition of the class seemed to mirror most schools in this urban district, which are typically 98% African American, a closer look at the students revealed greater ethnic diversity, including recent immigrants from Cambodia, Bangladesh, Puerto Rico, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Haiti, among other countries. Throughout the school, more than 20 languages were spoken.

The study reported in this article was initiated as a collaboration between two researchers (Lalitha Vasudevan and Katherine Schultz), a community artist (Jennifer Bateman), and a classroom teacher (Amelia Coleman). From its inception, the researchers, artist, and classroom teacher worked closely together to articulate the research questions and goals of the study, design the classroom activities together, including data collection and analysis. Researchers often acted as teachers, working closely with the students in a range of ways throughout the school year. Likewise, the classroom teacher was intimately involved in formulating research questions, data collection, and the ongoing analysis that characterized our iterative research process.

We introduced a series of interconnected projects throughout the year that formed the core of our work with students for this project. These projects were designed to complement the teacher's curricular plan for her students and the District curriculum. The teacher in turn created time for these projects to be integrated into the curriculum throughout the school year. Beginning with print text, as an initial assignment the students composed "Where I'm From" poems, an activity elaborated by Linda Christensen (2000). As illustrated in the opening vignette of this article, our second project was the creation of "Memoir Pockets." For this project, students were asked to bring three or four items from home that told a story about a particular aspect of their lives, placing them in a pocket made out of construction paper. The students used these items to tell stories aloud to their classmates and later to compose at least one story that drew on their home, family, and community knowledge.

Later in the fall, students went on neighborhood walks in small groups with the goal of identifying and photographing buildings that held stories for

them in a project we called “Buildings Speak.” After they photographed these buildings, students recorded stories on site that they later transcribed, expanded through writing, and revised several times using the photographs and oral renditions of the stories. In a subsequent project, students gathered sounds from the community to tell a story. To create these “Sound Portraits,” students used audio and video recorders to collect a variety of sounds, using these audio artifacts to compose stories from their communities. As a culmination of this yearlong project, students drew on each of these modes (visual and aural) and modalities (writing, cameras, digital voice recorders) in order to compose a story about themselves as readers and writers using the iMovie video editing software. For this final project, students were instructed to select a lead mode from which to tell their story. The lead modes varied: some students began with a written text, while others composed the story by beginning with a series of pictures, and still others started with a soundtrack. We called this entire process multimodal storytelling, which we envisioned as a curricular approach to the study and integration of multiple expressive modalities in composing. Our systematic documentation of the process of composing these stories is at the center of our research (see, Schultz, 2009; Schultz & Coleman, under review).

We used interpretive methods to gather data including detailed field notes, audio and video tapes of whole class and small group discussions in the classroom and outside of school, formal and informal interviews with students and the teacher, and artifacts including student writing, a variety of multimodal artifacts such as the multimedia documents that students produced using iMovie software, and teacher memos. The multimodal documentation also included youth productions from neighborhood walks and other projects when the students used documentary modalities such as the video camera and audio recorder to capture the activities. Documentation of this project proved challenging as researchers were often engaged in leading activities while documenting the process. Thus the doing of the project was tightly integrated with its recording and representation. Data were analyzed through systematic document review to elicit patterns and themes that were checked among researchers and across data sources. From this analytic process, case studies of students were constructed to illustrate patterns of participation in the multimodal storytelling project. In this article, we highlight the composing processes of two students, Michael and Saima, which illustrate central themes and patterns from across the data set. We use these cases to elaborate two different authorial stances taken up by the youth, which allow us to argue for new ways to reconceptualize composing and pedagogical practices across school and community contexts.

Michael: Composing New Literate Identities Across Contexts

An examination of the writing and composing practices of one fifth grader, Michael, illustrates the interconnections between how this student composed multimodal texts and how he took on literate identities as he moved across community and school contexts. It highlights the relationships between writing and context in his literacy practices and identity construction. Michael was an outgoing and energetic African American boy who was sporadically engaged in school activities and assignments. His investment and attentiveness in the classroom was highly dependent on the amount of personal attention he received from teachers and other adults in the classroom. For instance, when Michael participated in the neighborhood walk, he invited his small group into his family's apartment. His level of interest and engagement in writing and school-related tasks changed dramatically in response to this event and particularly in response to the attention the group leader gave to him as they worked together in a small group. To illustrate this point, we begin with a vignette from the Buildings Speak project.

Breaking the Frame of Where Students Compose Stories

We are standing outside of the stone-lined entrance of the apartment building. "Are you sure that it's okay just to stop by? Or do you think we should call them first?" I ask Michael for the third time. Michael disregards my concerned questions; he's already reassured me several times that his parents will not mind our unannounced visit. He has explained to me, and the other four students in our group, that it is imperative that we visit his home and meet his family. As the front door to their apartment swings open, Michael's mother looks slightly surprised to see her son, several of his classmates, and me (a White woman they have never before met) standing in their doorway. Just as I open my mouth to explain the purpose behind our midmorning visit, Michael interrupts with a clear explanation. We are working on a project in school, he explains, and he needs to collect photographs and objects that represent important aspects of his life. Michael's mother warmly invites us to join her in the living room as Michael hurries off to photograph his bedroom and collection of trophies. Scattered throughout the living room are many photographs including pictures of Michael and his brother, their cousins, grandparents, friends, and neighbors.

Michael returns to the living room with his arms full of trophies, CDs, DVDs, and a small pile of wrinkled photographs. "My trophies represent that I love basketball," he states as he artfully arranges them in a row and then stands back to snap a photo. "And they represent me getting to play with my cousins [and] my friends," he continues. Using the language of representation we have introduced in the project, Michael goes on to share the meanings of several CDs and DVDs to him. He sums up each description by stating their significance in relation to his family, friends, or their family celebrations. "This [CD] represents that my dad got it for his birthday and then he gave it to me." "So, it represents your relationship?" I ask. "It represents that he loves me," he replies easily. As we rise to leave, Michael snaps several photos of his parents—one of his mother holding up the book that she was reading when we arrived, and another of both his mother and father posing side by side. (Field notes, 11.14.03)

This was just one of the many stops that the group of 4 students and one researcher made during this group project to photograph buildings that held stories for the students. Entering Michael's home added a new dimension to the project and enabled his teachers and classmates to learn about the people and artifacts that held meaning for him, revealing a range of identities we had not seen in the classroom. We saw, for example, how Michael was intimately connected to his immediate and extended family. We witnessed how he loved sports, enjoyed rapping and sharing music with friends and family, and reveled in telling and retelling stories about them. This visit uncovered central aspects of Michael's out-of-school life including his funds of knowledge, resources, identities, lived experiences, interests, and passions that had not been evident in the traditional classroom activities inside of the school walls (Moll, 1992; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).

Throughout his schooling, Michael had earned a reputation for being disengaged from school tasks. In contrast, following this visit to his home, Michael began to write and share stories in class that were connected to the artifacts he had selected and photographed for this multimodal project. In the weeks following the walk, Michael used a digital voice recorder to record several stories about activities he shared with his family and friends, such as playing basketball or football on the weekends. In these recordings Michael retold many of the same stories from the neighborhood walk. With each telling, Michael infused the stories with finer detail and a stronger emphasis on his love for his family. These stories, initiated outside of the classroom, were continually reshaped and transformed as Michael moved back and forth across the boundaries of home, community and school, both literally and

figuratively, to compose his stories. For example, he recorded spontaneous oral texts about his passion for basketball, which was reminiscent of the row of trophies he proudly photographed during our visit to his home. At the end of the year, Michael included images of himself playing basketball in his final multimodal story. The accompanying narrative was familiar in its refrain (“I like playing football, playing basketball”); however, it was transformed as Michael drew on new modes and modalities, which yielded new texts that Michael used to compose new stories. These new texts ultimately shaped and were shaped through the movement of stories across contexts and modes as we describe below.

The opportunity to go outside of the classroom and engage the surrounding neighborhood landscape provided Michael and his classmates with new resources for composing new stories. For perhaps the first time, Michael willingly and enthusiastically shared his schoolwork with his parents and brought his home life intimately into the classroom. By doing so, the project attended to his literate identities and practices he previously had held at a distance from the classroom. We use the phrase “breaking the frame” to indicate how the norms of school were purposefully transgressed to open up new spaces for students to compose new texts and identities. Using audio and visual modalities to create explicit links between his home and school activities broke the frame of school for Michael and introduced new ways outside of the traditional curriculum to incorporate these practices. Extending the process of composing into the physical location of Michael’s home allowed Michael to shift his school identity away from that of a student who does not write to that of a writer and raconteur. The multimodal neighborhood walks and the other related projects such as the final multimedia narrative not only extended the boundaries of school but also explicitly recognized homes and communities as sources of inspiration and knowledge for the students’ composing practices. Throughout the recursive processes of narrating, photographing, and writing, Michael deepened his interpretation and analysis of the extensive literacy tradition present in his life. This kind of authoring mediated a new connection to school and presented new modes for telling his stories. He was neither limited to writing a text nor to ideas inside of a textbook or classroom. When the barriers between his home and school lives were removed, Michael composed impassioned and highly personal narratives. In the culminating project for the year, Michael drew on this experience using a range of digital expressive modalities to compose a digital story that included family photographs, a carefully selected soundtrack, and a scripted voiceover.

Creating New Entry Points Into School

Addressing the needs of all students in a classroom can be a daunting endeavor, made more challenging by the pressures of scripted curricula and high stakes testing. In contrast, projects that engage students' out-of-school lives and have multiple entry points have the potential to invite students into school learning, rather than reinforcing failure. Students like Michael, whose school performance did not reflect the richness of his literate traditions at home or his own abilities as a storyteller, are better positioned to be welcomed into learning through intentionally structured opportunities to compose through multimodal storytelling.

For the Buildings Speak project, Michael chose to photograph the entryway and front steps leading to his apartment (see Figure 1). This entryway held stories that reflected his activities in and outside of his home including people and events that were significant to him. After taking a few pictures, Michael sat on the steps and recorded his conflicting feelings about life in his neighborhood.

In his story, Michael noted that he had gone from being a small child new to the building to a boy with many friends and cousins who shared his desire to play sports on the sidewalk every minute of the day. Simultaneously, he pointed out the persistent violence in his community that at times made him wish he could move away. By bringing together a photograph and recorded narrative, Michael composed a powerful story rooted in a particular geography and reflective of his deep connection to family and friends. He characterized his neighborhood with disparate terms, conveying both his experiences of happiness and his desire, at times, to leave his community. Through composing this story, Michael asserted his authority on the subject, which afforded him an entry into the academic discourse of his classroom as someone with knowledge or expertise. Central to the narrative are the ideas of relationship and protection reflected in his initial reference to his brother and his mention of his friends in the final sentence. It is notable that Michael concludes with an upbeat statement, a stance that characterized much of his composing that year.

For Michael, as for many of his classmates, writing for school represented only a small fraction of the texts he composed, both written and visual, and did not often draw on the richness of his home- and community-based identities and communicative resources. Multimodal storytelling allowed Michael to connect his home, community, and school contexts and take risks in his composition of stories, including their content and genres. Throughout the rest of the school year, Michael drew on his Buildings Speak project and developed an ongoing narrative that conveyed the importance of his family to



I lived in my building for eight years now. When I first moved around here, everybody that I saw was all bigger than me and I was only two. And I started going outside with my big brother and anybody that messed with me, he would take care of me. He would stick up for me. And so, as I got older, everybody just started playing with me and stuff. But sometimes it makes me want to move because every night while people trying to have fun, you hear gunshots and everything. And when you come outside in the morning on the way to school, you see traces around people dead body, traces around bullets and stuff. And sometimes it make me want to stay cause all my friends is here. And we always play football and basket-ball out back...that's my story.

Figure 1. Michael's photograph of the entryway to his apartment complex taken for the Building Speaks project

his identity as a learner and composer of stories. Themes such as family, sports, friends, and the neighborhood all reappeared in his final digital story signified by photographs, narration, and music.

Among the visual texts that were reintroduced into his culminating multimedia narrative, which was intended as a reflection of his past, present, and future centered on his fifth-grade year at school, were the images of his

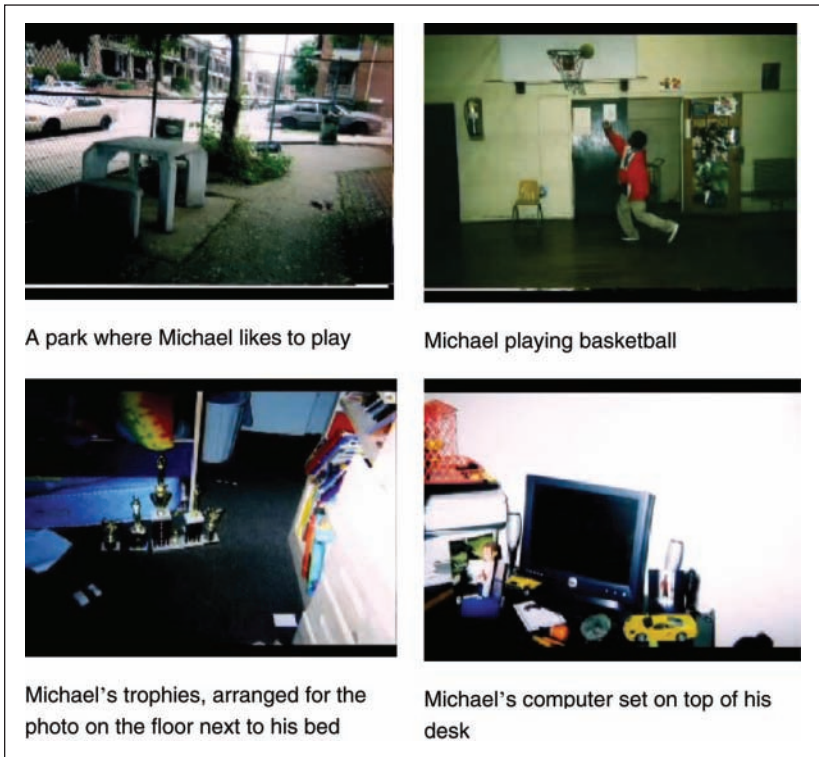


Figure 2. Images from Michael's culminating multimedia narrative project

trophies and the computer on top of his desk, both of which were initially produced during the neighborhood walks (see Figure 2). Throughout the duration of his 4-minute movie—comprised of digital photographs, titles, soundtrack, and narration—Michael maintained his composing focus on his community contexts. Of the 13 images he featured in his final project, only 4 were located on school grounds and of those 4, only 2 depicted classrooms. The remaining two images produced at school showed Michael throwing a basketball in the school gym and the exterior of the building. When asked to compose a multimedia narrative about himself as a learner, he brought to the foreground the artifacts that represented his community-based literate identities.

Michael's selection and use of digital modalities opened up possibilities for stories that could not be told through print alone (Hull & Nelson, 2005),

and which had been absent from his previous classroom writing. This illustrative example suggests the power of multimodal storytelling to weave together home, community, and school contexts as sources for youths' composing processes in school. Michael's literate identities were cultivated through the various opportunities to bring in and compose artifacts that built on his lived and embodied knowledge located in his family history and authentic experiences. For students like Michael, who were disengaged from routine and disconnected curricula, the chance to break the norms and boundaries of school for the purposes of composing can have an impact on their relationship to school by allowing them to take on new identities as students and writers.

Saima: Claiming a Classroom Presence Through Multimodal Composing

We worked with Amelia Coleman, the fifth-grade teacher, to design a culminating portfolio told through a multimodal story that captured the students' yearlong experience in her classroom. She understood students' current experiences in her classroom as connected to their past and future and wanted the students to consider how their work together might endure when they left her classroom. As a result, the framing questions selected by Amelia for the final project were "Who was I?" "Who am I?" "Who am I striving to become?" These questions gave the students an opportunity to reflect on and use their learning and multimodal compositions from across the year in order to construct a new text in response to these prompts.

Saima was a shy and physically small girl who wore a traditional Islamic headscarf. She had arrived in the United States from Bangladesh during her fourth-grade year and had only been in the country for several months when she started as a new fifth grader in this classroom. From the beginning, it was clear that Saima strove to perform well in her academic work and, as her teacher observed, Saima displayed tremendous improvement in her academic reading and writing practices as she rapidly learned a new language and a new way of doing school. In fact, we were routinely impressed by how she used language in sophisticated ways to convey her thinking and noted her growing level of comfort in sharing her work publicly as the school year progressed.

Learning School Norms for Writing

For the initial assignment of the multimodal storytelling project, students were guided to write "Where I'm From" poems that reflected salient aspects of their lives and heritage. Saima opened her poem with this stanza:

I am from chicken, fish, and rice. From fighting, jogging, and running. I am from French fries, fried chicken, and chicken nuggets. From talking, laughing, and joking. I am from trees, bushes, and flowers.

In this initial poem, Saima wrote about her life in generic terms, describing herself as being “from Asian culture” and “from chicken, fish, and rice.” Her poem contained the requisite elements for this assignment; however, it lacked intimacy and specificity that were present in her later compositions. It contained the outlines but not the details of her life and as such was typical of most of the students’ writing in this classroom at this early point in the school year. This poem suggests the constraints Saima may have felt in composing a written text for a school assignment. She was compliant in following the instructions, yet she did not reveal very much about her life, which may have helped her blend into the unstated norms of the classroom. In fact, there were sections of the poem that seemed disconnected from our knowledge of Saima’s heritage as reflected in the following section of this same poem:

I am from country music, and country movies. From tag, hide and seek and freeze tag. I am from car, bus, and trucks. From winter, summer, and fall.

Rather than using this project to explore her family background or express personal connections to texts or communities, as many of her classmates did, Saima seemed to simply complete the assignment by following directions. It did not appear to capture her imagination and she treated it like other, more scripted, assignments she had been asked to complete in school.

In contrast, a few months later Saima used her “Buildings Speak” project to tell a personal story of her arrival in this country as a new immigrant (see Figure 3). Through this project, she was able to transcend the typical boundaries of school assignments to compose in a new way through new modalities. In place of a formulaic story, she told a story that held meaning for her. Paired with an image of her best friend’s bedroom window, Saima’s gentle voice narrated a story of how she initially approached this friend after hearing her speak Bengali.

The simplicity of the words and photograph convey an important moment that connects her home and school experiences in a story that transcends words or image alone. Throughout the subsequent projects that involved composing with a variety of digital modalities, Saima’s transnational narrative continued to evolve.



Hi, my name is [Saima]. I took a picture of my friend's house because first when I came to America, I didn't know nobody and I didn't know how to speak English. Then I saw them, I thought they were my country's people and I talked to them and finally became best friends. And that's why I took the picture.

Figure 3. Saima's photograph of her best friend's bedroom window

Achieving a Presence Through Multimodal Compositions

For her culminating project, Saima composed a multimedia story in which she brought together several threads of a single story through digital artifacts that represented various aspects of her identity. As we watched and listened to this story, we were struck by the ways that Saima's acquisition of a louder voice in the classroom coincided with the availability of a wider range of modalities with which to "speak."

As the students explored various digital modalities to represent themselves, Saima began to include new and different details in her texts. To begin this final project, Saima composed three pieces following the three questions posed by her teacher and the researchers. These new pieces of writing were markedly different from her initial poem, enriched by her simultaneous use of visual image, music, and her own voice narrating the text. The section composed in



Figure 4. Images from Saima's culminating multimedia narrative project

response to the prompt, "Where I am from," a prompt that was comparable to her initial poem described earlier, opened with the following line: "No one can take away from me, my name, for it is mine. Bengali am I." Here, she claims her national identity as she recounts her past and present and imagines her future. Her words and images are significant departures from her descriptions of eating chicken, fish, and rice and listening to country music.

Saima's final multimedia story was rich with images of Bengali culture, traditional music, and her soft, yet strong, voice narrating textured accounts of what it meant to bring together her past and present to imagine her future as a doctor (see Figure 4). The poetry, writing, photographs, and music all gave Saima the opportunity to tell her story. When she entered into the storytelling process through the modes of image and sound, Saima's texts became more

complex and powerful. The ability to communicate and share her stories using more than the modality of writing allowed Saima to compose for different audiences. Although her initial audiences were her teacher and sometimes her parents, through her multimedia texts Saima composed for a more public audience. By bringing in images and sounds—her voice and the Bengali music—Saima was able to compose a new narrative made uniquely possible because of the interweaving of these modes. Furthermore, projecting her story on a screen for an audience of classmates, teachers, and families, allowed this quiet student to tell her story loudly.

By extending the composing process beyond print modalities, students' composing shifted in significant ways. Beginning with different lead modes, such as digital photography and music, was generative of not only different ways to tell stories, but led to the construction of novel and layered texts. Offering a wider palate of digital composing modalities to students allowed them to document and include elements of themselves that either could not be or were not reflected in their written texts. In addition, for students like Saima composing in this way encouraged them to take risks that widened the scope of their composing practices.

Going Beyond Classroom Texts and Off the Printed Page

By turning our focus away from how teachers integrate out-of-school literacies into the classroom curriculum to a focus on the identities and practices themselves, we observed the ways in which students assumed authorial stances in their multimodal composing practices. We define authorial stance as the practice of taking on literate identities and claiming a presence as an author and narrator of one's own experiences. For students like Michael, multimodal storytelling allowed them to take on an authorial stance by providing a conduit for their home and community narratives and identities to become central texts in their classroom writing. And for students like Saima, the opportunity to compose multimodally changed how they were positioned and recognized within the classroom.

When he was given the opportunity to document and include multiple aspects of his identity in his school writing, Michael became more engaged in school tasks. Furthermore, his school identity evolved from being a student with a reputation for restlessness and resistance to being a composer of stories, who learned new software quickly and became a leader in helping his fellow classmates learn the technology. As a result, he took on a recognizable literate identity in his classroom experience that positioned him differently in

relation to his peers. The introduction of various modalities provided a platform for students similar to Saima to take more prominent roles in the classroom community. Saima's authorial voice grew in volume and depth when she entered the storytelling process through images and music. Previously, Saima had composed in solitude without the benefit of her classmates' input. Multimodal storytelling allowed her make a new kind of contribution to the classroom community. In response to these new affordances and opportunities, she was willing to proclaim her identities as a child of recent immigrants from South Asia with both struggles and ambitions.

Our analysis of authorial stance leads us to recognize two dimensions that mediated the evolution of students' literate identities: the circulation of literacy practices and increased modes of participation and engagement within the classroom curriculum. We define circulating literacy practices as the identities and socially situated ways of using texts that students carry with them as they move across the boundaries of home, community, and school (Schultz, 2006). The concept of circulating literacy practices allows us to trace the transformation of texts, composing practices, and identities across school, home, and community contexts. All too often, scholars focus on one context or the other, rather than focusing on the movement of texts and the subsequent changes in the texts and in the students' themselves. This movement is especially evident in the hybrid and socially mediated literacy practices of youth who traverse digital landscapes through their participation in new spaces and the production of multimodal texts. For instance, youth are composing social networking profiles, designing virtual world avatars, producing and sharing a variety of multimedia texts. All of these are examples of practices that have been made available by portable technologies, such as smartphones, blurring the lines of the in- and out-of-school contexts in which youth composing is situated.

This analysis leads us to conclude that the construct of boundaries between home, school, and community is no longer useful in understanding adolescents' literacy practices as these boundaries are increasingly permeable and overlapping in adolescents' lives (Leander, 2007; Schultz, 2003). The opportunity to compose using an array of digital technologies highlights this permeability and suggests ways that teachers with limited access to digital technologies might still draw on their students' knowledge and facility with literacy practices from their homes and communities when developing assignments and projects in school.

The introduction of multiple modalities gave Saima, and several other students who were recent immigrants to the United States and relatively new to learning English, new resources for telling stories. Like many of her

classmates who had recently come to this country, Saima rarely contributed to class discussions. When she did speak, it was usually because she was spoken to and she spoke with a soft, barely audible voice. Multimodal storytelling gave her a way to publically share her stories without raising her voice in front of her classmates. It shifted the ways she participated in the class and gave her a more visible and participatory presence (Schultz, 2009).

In contrast, Michael was generally loud, although his talk was often not focused on academic assignments. Like many of his classmates, his mind was more often on basketball or events in his neighborhood or the playground than the official content of the classroom. The opportunity to draw on his home experiences shifted Michael's participation in his classroom. Rather than giving him a louder voice or participatory presence, as was true for Saima, it enabled him to become more engaged in the academic or official classroom activities. Opening up the curriculum to multimodal storytelling made the curriculum more accessible to students like Michael and changed the nature of their participation in official classroom events.

If one of the purposes of schooling is understood as opening up opportunities and presenting students with broad access to knowledge and tools to pursue their goals, then it is important to find ways to engage as many students as possible in learning, providing a variety of ways to enter classroom activities. If classrooms are conceptualized as sites for young people to actively participate as citizens in a pluralistic democracy, then it is critical to expand the openings for students' participation (Schultz, 2009). It is not enough to simply hear every person's voice in a classroom. It may not be sufficient, respectful, or desirable to solicit personal stories from every student with the assumption that intimacy and connectedness will come from the telling of these stories. Students, particularly those whose backgrounds may vary from the majority of students in the classroom and those who are initially shy or resistant to school, may need new invitations and modes in order to contribute to the classroom discourse.

Implications

Our analysis of the multimodal composing processes of the youth in this fifth-grade classroom led us to reimagine opportunities for composing across various institutional and community contexts. By paying attention to the traces of literate practices that circulate across community and school contexts, we discovered how educators can provide opportunities for youth to take on authorial stances through a range of technologies and modalities. We learned what was possible when a variety of multimodal tools were introduced into a classroom;

at the same time, our research led us to rethink the ways to provide opportunities for youth to draw on their knowledge and experiences with technologies in classrooms that are not equipped already with these resources. For instance, students were able to incorporate their knowledge of composing and stories that were located outside of school to participate in and contribute to their school texts with relatively simple and inexpensive technologies (e.g., disposable digital cameras, digital voice recorders, and video editing software). Our initial projects were based on few tools that were not already present in this high poverty classroom. For instance in the Buildings Speak project, students took pictures with inexpensive cameras, recorded their voices using digital voice recorders, and then put the two together using simple presentation software. We learned that recognizing and building on students' knowledge and use of technologies and finding opportunities to introduce simple ways of incorporating multimodal texts into school assignments increased the opportunities for students to engage with and shape classroom composing and curricula in meaningful ways. There are countless other tools that teachers can use to augment their use of paper and pencil for composing texts.

An examination of the multimodal composing processes of youth in relation to their new literate identities and authorial stances suggests that we rethink our understandings of composing practices and theory. The addition of new modalities for composing suggests that we rethink what we mean by authorship and textual authority. When students are invited to bring their knowledge and expertise with composing tools into the classroom, understandings of who holds expertise, and how academic or even engaged literate identities are understood shifts. Bringing together the examination of composing processes, multimodal forms of producing texts, identities, and context allows us to understand the capacities of youth in our classrooms in new ways. To pursue these relationships, this study suggests the following questions among others: "How do multimodal composing practices add to or transform our understanding of what is meant by composing texts?" "What is the relationship among the notions of authorial stance, authoring texts, and authority?" "How can an exploration of the affordances of multimodal storytelling shape our understandings of the relationship between composing texts and literate identities?"

The layered processes of multimodal composing call attention to the need to redefine composing in classrooms where all too often the focus has moved away from creativity and exploration in writing to preparation for tests. This curricular trend has reinforced an artificial separation of adolescents' literate worlds that are brimming with activity and classroom practices, which are often narrow and dull. This separation often leads scholars to give up on schools

as sites for learning in vibrant, engaging ways. We are reluctant to turn away from schools. Instead, we argue that bringing multiple digital and non-digital modalities into the classroom that allow students to use their knowledge and experience from their homes and communities holds possibilities for new understandings of authoring texts and participation in school. When texts and literacy practices are understood as circulating, it is no longer useful to separate what youth do and learn inside and outside of school. Through their engagement with multiple modalities for expression, youth are able to reflect on their past, document their present, and dream about the future.

Authors' Note

The authors wish to thank Amelia Coleman, the fifth-grade teacher who generously opened up her classroom for this work and who has been an important collaborator throughout the project. We also wish to thank the many students who have shared their stories with us and have taught us so much about the changing nature of composing in a digital world.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

This project was supported by research assistance funded by the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education and an Artist-in-Residence Grant awarded through University of Pennsylvania's Center for Community Partnerships.

References

- Braddock, R., Lloyd-Jones, R., & Schoer, L. (1963). *Research in written composition*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Bruner, J. (1991). The narrative construction of reality. *Critical Inquiry*, 18(1), 1-21.
- Christensen, L. (2000). *Reading, writing, and rising up: Teaching about social justice and the power of the written word*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools.
- Dyson, A. H. (1988). Negotiating among multiple worlds: The space/time dimensions of young children's composing. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 22, 355-390.
- Dyson, A. H. (1989). *Multiple worlds of child writers: Friends learning to write*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Dyson, A. H., & Genishi, C. E. (1994). *The need for story: Cultural diversity in classroom and community*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Emig, J. (1971). *The composing processes of twelfth graders*. Urbana, IL: The National Council of Teachers of English.

- Goodman, S. (2003). *Teaching youth media: A critical guide to literacy, video production, & social change. The series on school reform*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hill, M. L. (2009). *Beats, rhymes and classroom life: Hip-hop, pedagogy, and the politics of identity*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Holland, D. C., Lachiotte Jr., W., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hull, G. (2003). At last: Youth culture and digital media. New literacies for new times. *Research in the Teaching of English, 38*, 229-233.
- Hull, G., & James, M. (2007). Geographies of hope: A study of urban landscapes and a university-community collaborative. In P. O'Neill (Ed.). *Blurring boundaries: Developing writers, researchers, and teachers: A tribute to William L. Smith*. (pp. 250-289). Chicago: Hampton Press.
- Hull, G., & Katz, M.-L. (2006). Crafting an agentive self: Case studies of digital storytelling. *Research in the Teaching of English, 41*(1), 43-81.
- Hull, G., & Nelson, M. E. (2005). Locating the semiotic power of multimodality. *Written Communication, 22*, 224-261.
- Hull, G., & Schultz, K. (2001). Literacy and learning out of school: A review of theory and research. *Review of Educational Research, 71*, 575-611.
- Hull, G., & Zacher, J. (2004). What is after-school worth? Developing literacy and identity out of school. *Voices in Urban Education, 3*, 36-44. Retrieved June 30, 2010, from <http://www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE/spring04/Hull.html>
- Ito, M., Baumer, S., Bittanti, M., Boyd, D., Cody, R., Herr-Stephenson, B., et al. (2009). *Hanging out, messing around, and geeking out: Kids living and learning with new media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Jenkins, H., Clinton, K., Purushotma, Robison, A. J., & Weigel, M. (2006). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century*. Chicago: The MacArthur Foundation.
- Jewitt, C. (2002). The move from page to screen: The multimodal reshaping of school English. *Visual Communication, 1*, 171-195.
- Jewitt, C., & Kress, G. (2003). *Multimodal literacy*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Kinloch, V. F. (2007). Youth representations of community, art, and struggle in Harlem. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 2007*(116), 37-49.
- Kinloch, V. (2010). *Harlem on our minds: Place, race, and the literacies of urban youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Kress, G. (2003). *Literacy in the new media age*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Kress, G. R., & Van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The Dreamkeepers. Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. F. (2006). *Education research in the public interest: Social justice, action, and policy*. New York: Teachers College Press.

- Leander, K. (2007). "You won't be needing your laptops today": Wired bodies in the wireless classroom. In M. Knobel & C. Lankshear (Eds.), *A new literacies sampler* (pp. 25-48). New York: Peter Lang.
- Lensmire, T. J. (1994). Writing workshop as carnival: Reflections on an alternative learning environment. *Harvard Educational Review*, 64, 371-392.
- Maira, S., & Soep, E. (2005). *Youthscapes: The popular, the national, the global*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Moll, L.C. (1992). Bilingual classroom studies and community analysis: Some recent trends. *Educational Researcher*, 21(3), 20-24.
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes & classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 32(2), 132-140.
- Morrell, E. (2002). Toward a critical pedagogy of popular culture: Literacy development among urban youth. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 46(1), 72-77.
- Nayak, A. (2003). *Race, place and globalization: Youth cultures in a changing world* (1st ed.). New York: Berg.
- Perl, S. (1979). The composing processes of unskilled college writers. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 13, 317-336.
- Ranker, J. (2008). Composing across multiple media: A case study of digital video production in a fifth grade classroom. *Written Communication*, 25, 196-234.
- Rowell, J., & Pahl, K. (2007). Sedimented identities in texts: Instances of practice. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 42, 388-404.
- Schultz, K. (1997). "Do You Want To Be in My Story?" Collaborative Writing in an Urban Elementary Classroom. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 29, 253-287.
- Schultz, K. (2003). *Listening: A framework for teaching across differences*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Schultz, K. (2006). Qualitative research on writing. In C. A. MacArthur, S. Graham, & J. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Handbook of writing research* (pp. 357-373). New York: Guilford Press
- Schultz, K. (2009). *Rethinking classroom participation: Listening to silent voices*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Schultz, K., & Coleman, C. (under review). *Becoming visible: Shifting participation structures by adding modalities to a literacy classroom*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Schultz, K., & Hull, G. (2008). Literacies in and out of school in the United States. In B. V. Street & N. Hornberger (Eds., N. Hornberger, General Editor). *Encyclopedia of literacy and education, literacy* (Vol. 2, pp. 239-250). New York: Springer.
- Siegel, M. (2006). Rereading the signs: Multimodal transformations in the field of Literacy Studies. *Language Arts*, 84(1), 65-77.

- Skinner, E., & Hagood, M. C. (2008). Developing literate identities with English language learners through digital storytelling. *Reading Matrix, 8*(2), 12-38.
- Soep, E. (2006). Youth media citizenship: Beyond "youth voice." *Afterschool Matters, 5*, 1-11.
- Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2001). From racial stereotyping and deficit discourse toward a critical race theory in teacher education. *Multicultural Education, 9*(1), 2-8.
- Vasudevan, L. (2006). Making Known Differently: Engaging Visual Modalities as Spaces to Author New Selves. *E-Learning, 3*, 207-216.
- Vasudevan, L. (2009). Performing new geographies of literacy teaching and learning. *English Education, 41*, 356-374.
- Wissman, K. K. (2007). "Making a way": Young women using literacy and language to resist the politics of silencing. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 51*, 340-349.
- Wissman, K. (2008). "This is what I see": (Re)envisioning photography as a social practice. In M. L. Hill & L. Vasudevan (Eds.), *Media, learning, and sites of possibility* (pp. 13-45). New York: Peter Lang.
- Wortham, S. (2006). *Learning identity: The joint emergence of social identification and academic learning*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Bios

Lalitha Vasudevan is an assistant professor of technology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University. She is interested in how youth craft stories, represent themselves, and engage in ways of knowing using different literacies, technologies, and media. Her research has been published in *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, E-Learning and Digital Media, Review of Research in Education, and English Education*, and she is coeditor of the volume titled, *Media, Learning, and Sites of Possibility* (2008, Peter Lang).

Katherine Schultz is professor and dean of the School of Education at Mills College. Her current research includes a longitudinal and comparative study of learning to teach in various programs including university preservice program and Teach for America. In addition, through her work as a school board member, she is documenting the stakeholder's perspectives on reform in a small urban district. Her research interests include teacher education, literacy practices in and out of school and mentoring in international contexts. Recent publications include her books *Rethinking Participation: Listening to Silent Voices* and *Listening: A Framework for Teaching Across Differences*.

Jennifer Bateman is a doctoral candidate in the Applied Psychology and Human Development Program at the University of Pennsylvania. Her current work focuses on the experiences of mothers in the care of autistic children.