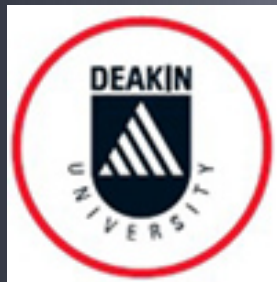


*Creativity as capital in the literacy classroom:
Youth as multimodal designers*

Dr. Christopher Walsh



Introduction

Many school literacy practices ignore adolescents' new "cyber-techno subjectivity" (Luke & Luke, 2001) and creativity in 'new times' (Luke & Elkins, 1998) and the 'new media age' (Kress, 2003).

*Youth possess sophisticated repertoires of practice allowing them to use their **imagination** and **creativity** to combine print, visual and digital modes in combinations that can be applied to new educational, civic, media and workplace contexts.*

It would have been easy to underestimate the social and cultural capital of my 12- and 13-year-old first and second-generation Chinese immigrant students, many of whom were living with extended family members in crowded conditions.

Most were living below the poverty line and helped their parents with factory work or small family-run businesses after school and on the weekend. Chinese was spoken at home and as **second language learners** they often struggled with producing fluent writing at school. However, at the time of this study, all students had a computer with Internet access because their parents believed computers increased their children's chance of academic success.

Research context

*I report on research in two year 8 classes in New York City's Chinatown, where adolescents' **creativity** was recognised and validated when they were encouraged to critically re-represent curricular knowledge through **multimodal design** (New London Group, 1996).*

*The curriculum, rather than privileging print-only representations, recognised the linguistic, social, economic and cultural **capital** that different students brought to school (Bourdieu, 1986; Comber, 1999).*

*The findings suggest schools should recognize youths' **creativity**—that often manifests itself through their capital resources as **multimodal design**—when they integrate and adapt to the new digital affordances acquired through their out-of-school literacy practices.*

My classroom 1997-2002

- **Balanced literacy** (*Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1991, 1994, 2000*)
 - The reading and writing workshop

The problem:

The workshops worked well in making students literate in particular ways....

Two events early in the school year signalled to me that there was a significant gap between students' struggle with print texts at school compared with their fluent out-of-school digital literacy practices.

- The first occurred when students shared their online blogs at www.xanga.com. These were sophisticated sites incorporating music, graphics, moving images, video and links to outside sites. I was surprised at their capacity to utilise such complex linguistic, **semiotic** and **digital modes** in their **designs**.
- Then students requested that I **post** their homework online.

My literacy instructions was at odds with students' lifeworlds...

As students became “**wired**” and their social practices moved in and between online spaces, the workshop model worked more to divide and subordinate students in my classroom than build community because it ignores students' hybrid identities and the identity fluidity needed to survive in the postmodern world (Gee, 2000).

The curriculum did not take into account the multimodality of students' out-of-school digital literacy practices or their proficiency as designers and producers of online texts.

An early response...

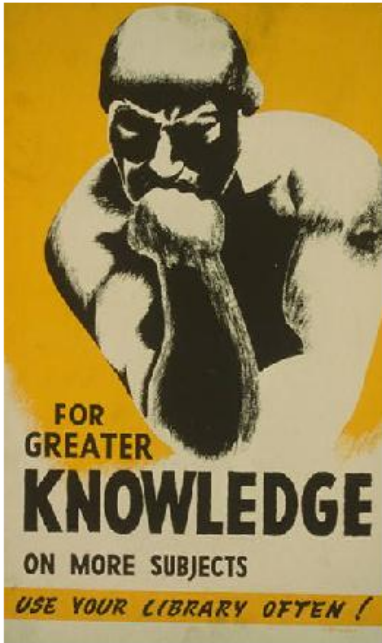
humanitieslinksfeb - Microsoft Internet Explorer provided by OptusNet

File Edit View Favorites Tools Help

Back Search Favorites

Address <http://www.nychumanities.com/humanitieslinksfeb> Go Links SnagIt

Chris's 8th Grade Humanities Web



Class Links

- Homework
- Student
- Grades
- Portfolio
- Requirements
- Essays Assigned
- Dia Center Partnership
- MAT Track
- Allstars
- Collective Memory
- Work
- Class 801 Websites
- Class 802 Websites
- Unit Articles
- MAT Insider
- Grammar

Unit Links

- Media
- Immigration
- Industrialization
- Migration
- Wars

Useful Links

- NYC Board of Education
- National Public Radio
- The History Channel
- The Discovery Channel
- National Geographic
- Today in History
- The History Net

Done Sunday, September 11, 2005

I interrupted the literacy curriculum by making the arts (multimodal texts) central to a **multiliteracies** curriculum.

This coupled with acknowledging students' lifeworlds and their out-of-school digital literacy practices, set up the context necessary for students to **creatively re-represent curricular knowledge through multimodal design** (New London Group, 1996).

The interruptions broke through the workshop routine and it is my conviction that these informed engagements with the arts released my students' imaginative **creativity** as we collectively worked to combat standardization.

Creativity in the new media age

Facer and Williamson (2004) view **creativity** as vital to youths' "abilities to work imaginatively and with a purpose, to judge the value of their own contributions and those of others, and to fashion critical responses to problems across all subjects in the curriculum" (p.2).

Central to their idea is also the notion of **collaboration** in creative learning and youths' capacity to evaluate and rationalize their opinions; to gather knowledge with/from others; to share their knowledge with others; and to transform their existing understandings as learners in a constant process of personal and social development.

The world is changing..

Thinking about creativity this way—in the **new media age**—is sensible because we are born into a world that is for the most part is entirely social and much of our learning develops by participating in a world where the presence of others always and already mediates.

The change in media, largely from book and page to screen along with the change from print-based media to new information and communication technologies, has changed what counts as literacy because of the affordances of the multiplicity of modes made available.

Literacy in the new media age

Those who have been socialized into the contemporary media world may be disposed to see the screen as their point of reference for strategies of reading; those who are socialized into the former media world may see the page as their point of reference. For members of the two (or more) groups, what appears to be the same text calls forth different strategies of reading, and gives rise to different readings of what are in reality different texts.

(Kress, 2003, pp. 164-165)

Teaching Creatively

In making arts and **multimodal texts** central to my curriculum, I put aside our textbooks and taught students about the *Dustbowl Migration* and *The Great Migration of the Negro* through photography, painting, folk music, the Blues, jazz and film.

The Migration Unit explored the two migrations initially through the arts, and then incorporated print texts reading them intertextually; assessing their sources and purposes and their location in historical contexts.

Teacher designed texts...

NYChumanities.com - Woody Guthrie - Microsoft Internet Explorer

File Edit View Favorites Tools Help

Address: <http://www.nychumanities.com/woodym/>


Search Web Mail My Yahoo! Games SnagIt

Woody Guthrie
In the Thirties and Forties Woody Guthrie transformed the folk ballad into a vehicle for social protest and observation

[home](#)


[The Woody Guthrie Foundation Archives](#)
[Woody Guthrie's Biography](#)
[The Woody Guthrie Folk Festival \[Class trip anyone?\]](#)
[Woody Guthrie: Library of Congress site](#)
[Woody Guthrie: Library of Congress site](#)
[The Songs and Writing of Woody Guthrie](#)
[Woody Guthrie: Dust Bowl Balladeer](#)
[Woody Guthrie: Discography](#)
[Woody Guthrie Museum](#)

[Rollingstone Magazine: Woody Guthrie](#)
[Woody Guthrie \[Site with sound clips\]](#)
[Woody Guthrie \[Site with lyrics\]](#)
[Woody Guthrie \[Mudcat Cafe site\]](#)
[Woody Guthrie \[Gallery of pictures\]](#)



---- Select Woody Guthrie Blues Songs ----

Mp3s take a short while to load on a 56K modem.



start | dissertation images | Internet Explorer | Chapter 4_august24... | Internet | EN | 11:01

Teacher designed texts...

The Blues and The Great Migration - Microsoft Internet Explorer

File Edit View Favorites Tools Help

Address <http://www.nychumanities.com/blues.html>

Search Web Mail My Yahoo! Games SnagIt

the blues.....

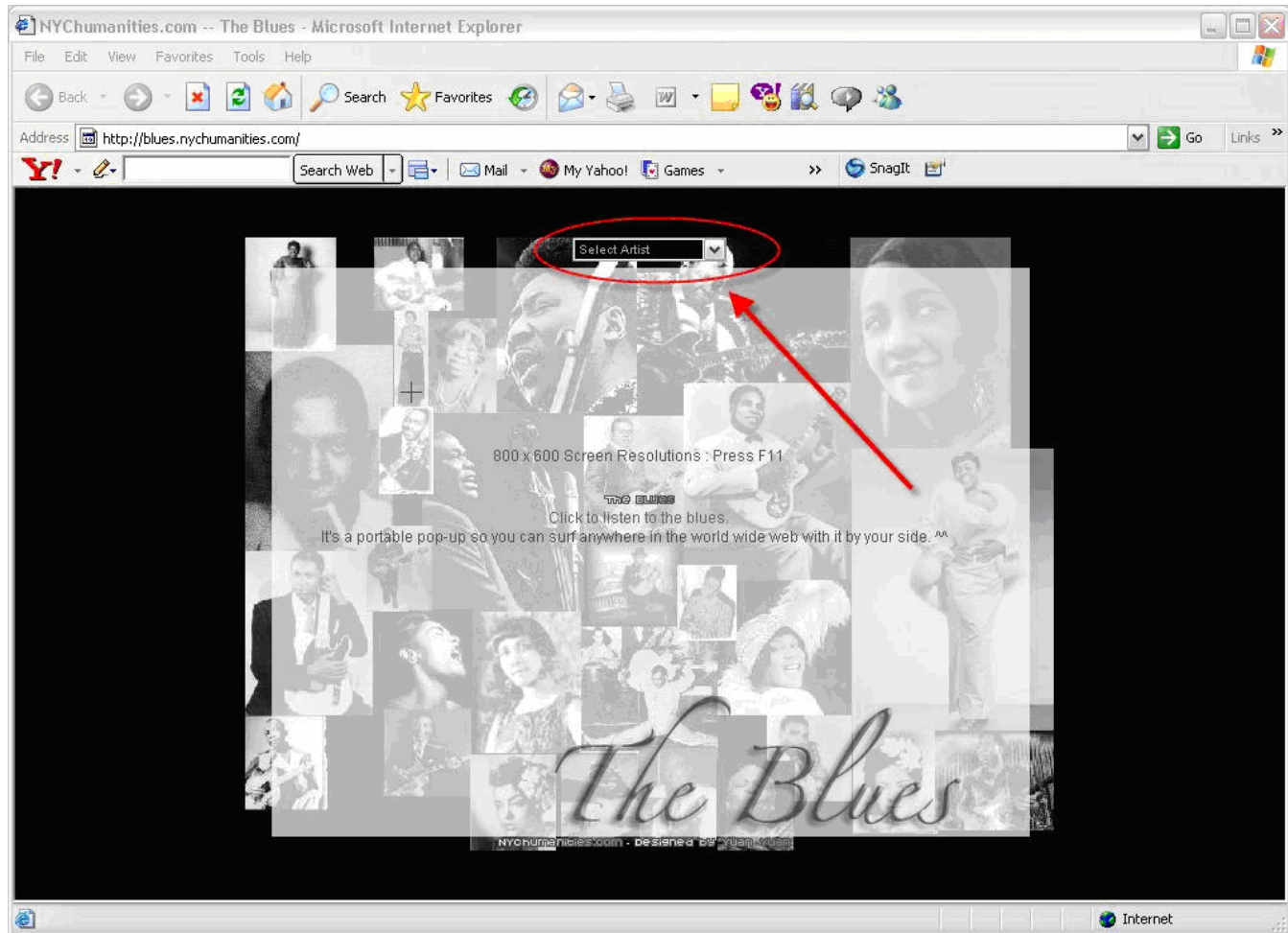
- [the blues...a good summary](#)
- [the blues...a good site by northbysouth.org](#)
- [the rythm and blues primer](#)
- [The Chicago Blues](#)
- [Origin and History of the Blue](#)
- [Black Blues and Blues Migration](#)
- [Deltabluesnet great site!](#)
- [Music and Migration: A Great Essay 1880-1920](#)
- [Chicago Blues with Links to Music](#)
- [Fatal Flood: The PBS Site](#)
- [The Mighty Mississippi](#)
- [Blues Resources](#)
- [Blues Music and African Influences](#)
- [The Mississippi Delta](#)
- [The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame](#)
- [Bluespeaks.com documenting black female singers 1920s](#)
- [Harlem Renaissance 1918-1933 Great Bios of singers, writers, and artists](#)
- [The Classic Blues and the women who sang them](#)
- [Railroad Blues](#)
- [An interview with two "Bluesmen"](#)
- ["Times is Gettin Harder:" Blues of the Great Migration](#)

the musicians

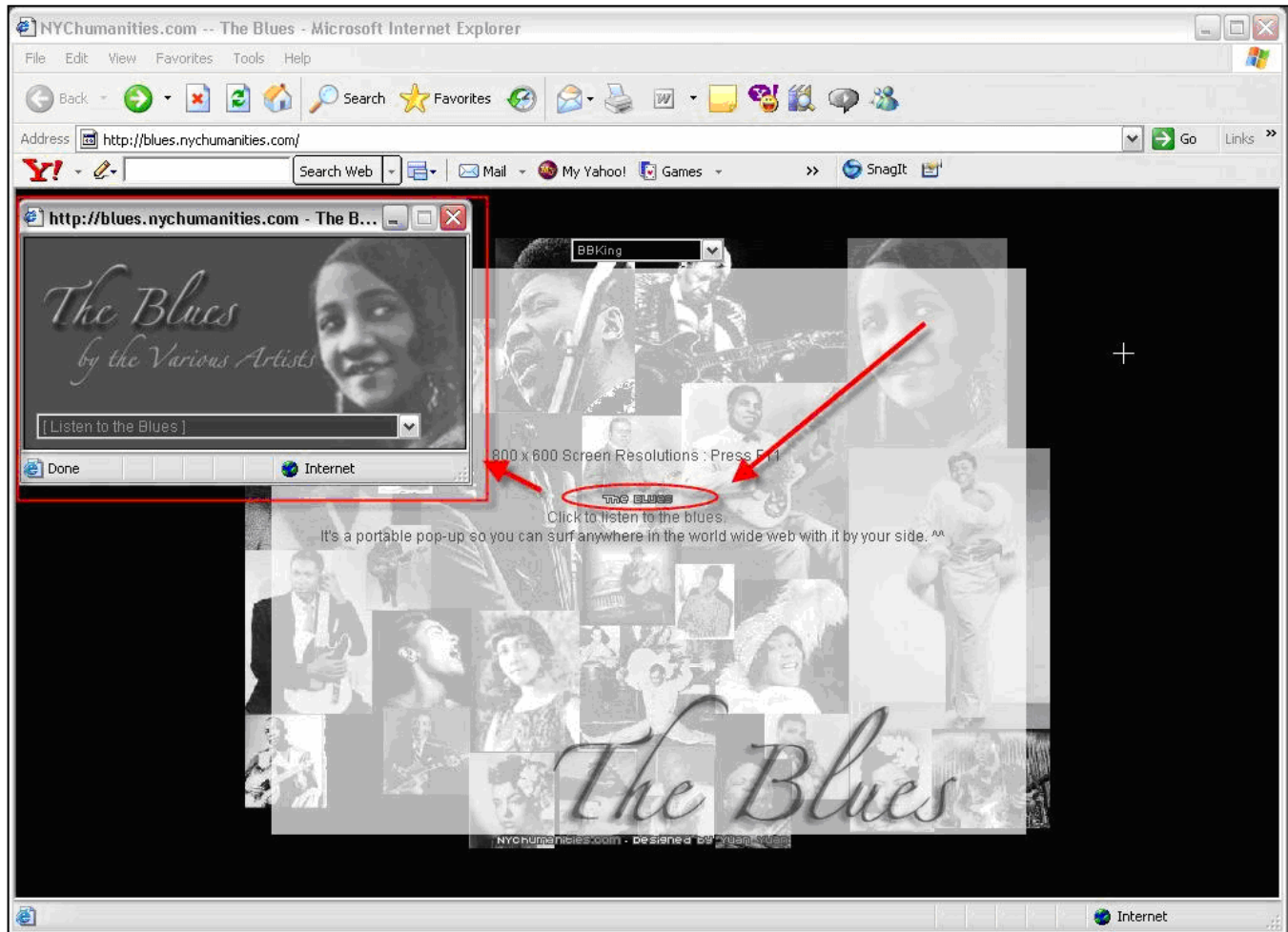
- [Bessie Smith](#)
- [Blind Lemon Jefferson](#)
- [Muddy Waters](#)
- [Howlin' Wolf](#)
- [B.B. King](#)
- [Wille Dixon](#)
- [John Lee Hooker](#)
- [Elmore James](#)
- [T-Bone Walker](#)
- [Ida Cox](#)
- [Robert Johnson](#)
- [Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup](#)
- [Ma Rainey](#)
- [Alberta Hunter](#)
- [Billie Holiday](#)
- [Big Mamma Thornton](#)
- [Dinah Washington](#)

Internet

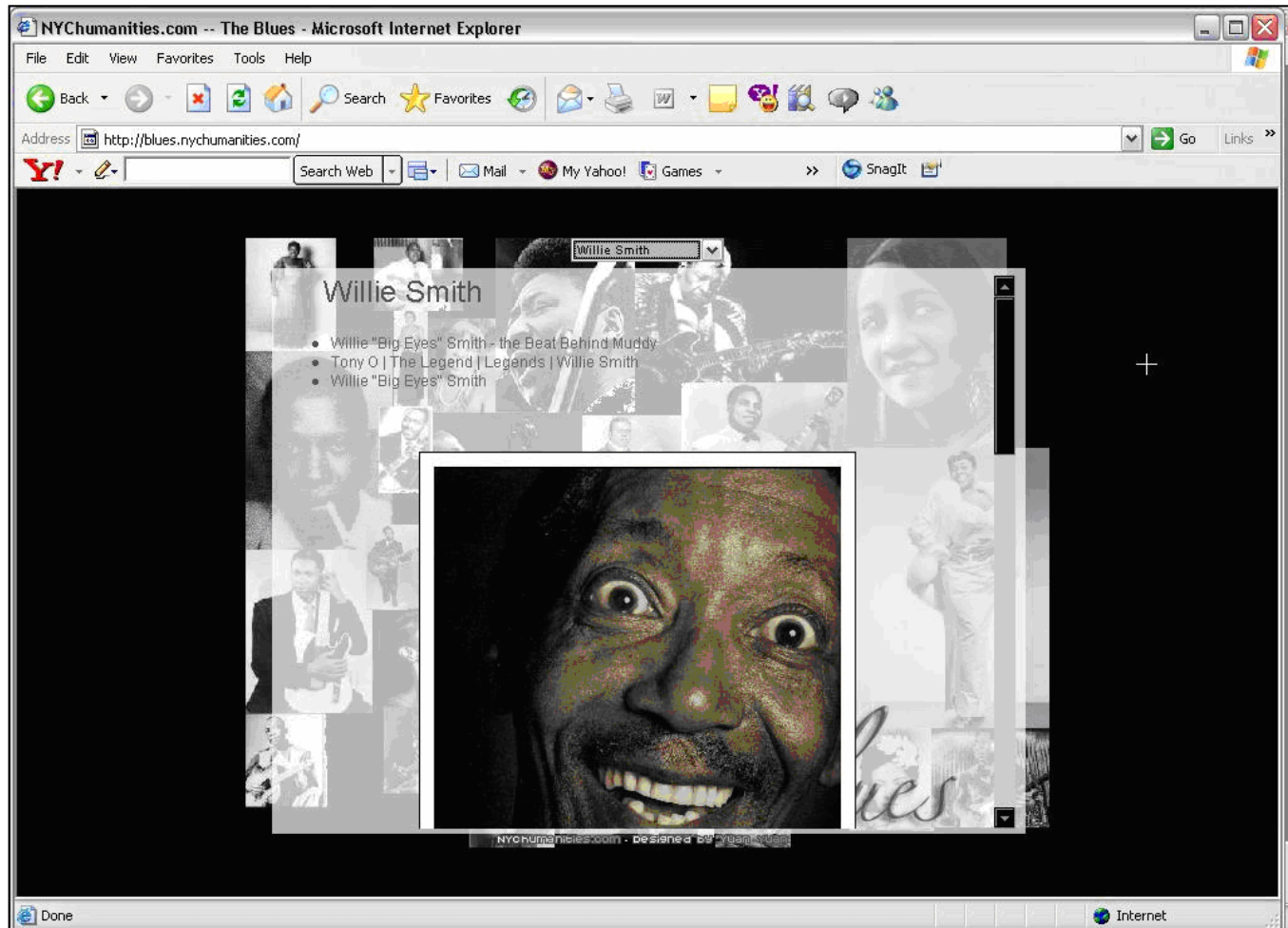
Student designed texts...



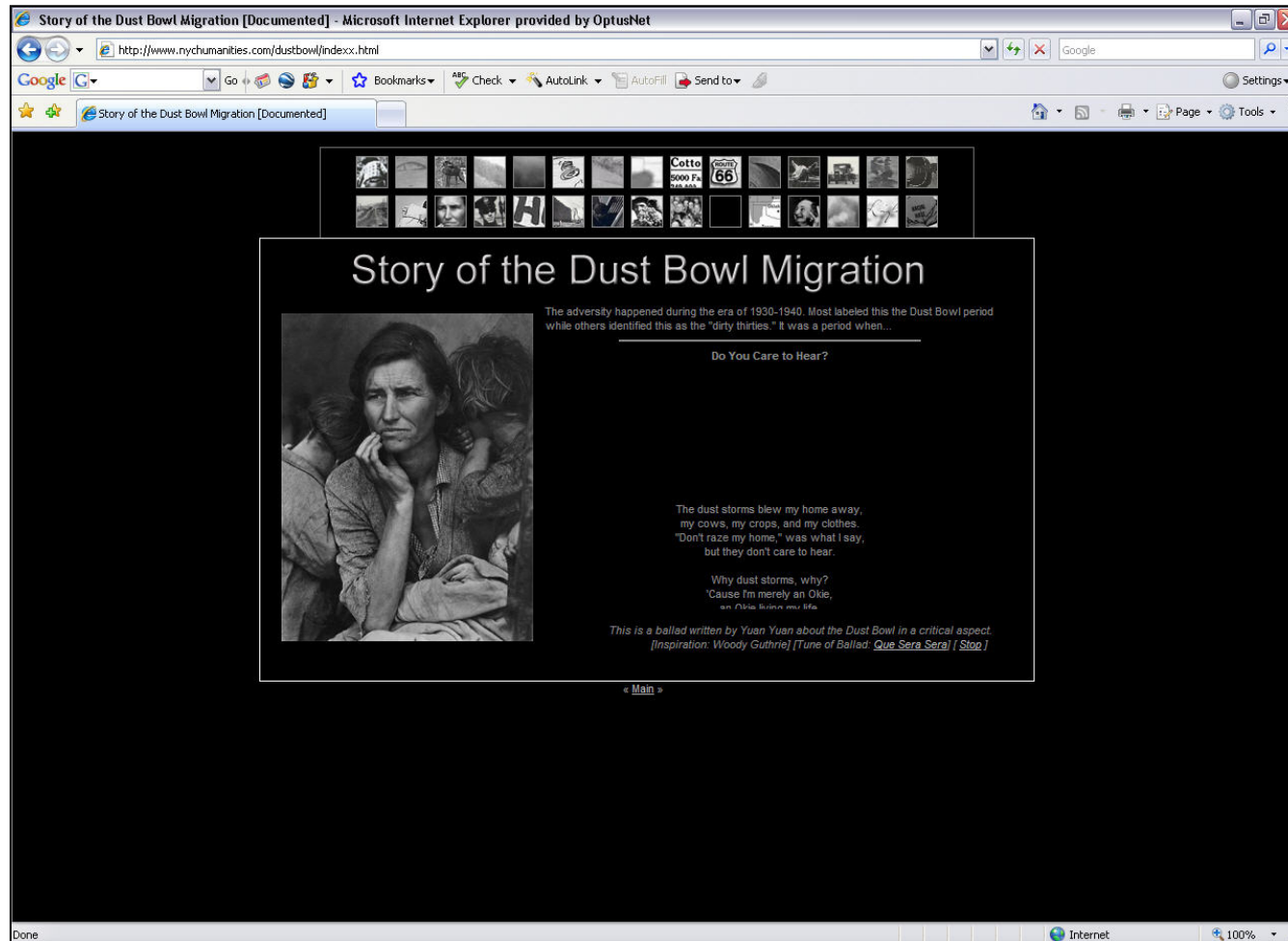
Student designed texts...



Student designed texts...



Ling's website



<http://www.nychumanities.com/dustbowl/>

Story of the Dust Bowl Migration

Ling designed “Story of the Dust Bowl Migration” entirely using HTML, which she explained in interview she had taught herself because she did not have high-speed Internet access at home and using HTML was a faster way to engage in website design.

For a 12-year-old, her website is sophisticated, smart and captures the rather gloomy feeling of what is often referred to as the ‘Dirty Thirties’. Her site is entirely composed in black and white, similar to the photography of the time. Interestingly, her site is semiotically organised along the dimensions of centre and margin –uncommon – in contemporary Western visualisation, yet common among Asian designers (Kress and vanLeeuwen, 1996).

Mei's website

Untitled - Microsoft Internet Explorer

File Edit View Favorites Tools Help

Back Forward Stop Refresh Home Search Favorites RSS Feeds SnagIt

Address http://www.geocities.com/dust_bowl_images/index2.html Go Links SnagIt

[\[Intro \]](#) [\[During the Dust Bowl \]](#) [\[Along the Migration; Route 66 \]](#) [\[Migrant Mother \]](#) [\[Life through Primary Sources \]](#) [\[California Life \]](#) [\[Other Sources \]](#)

[The Story Begins...]

The Dust Bowl Era was a horrible era that happened in the 1930s. It was when the drought hit the Dust Bowl panhandle area causing many people to leave their homes and migrate to California. The Dust Bowl Migration was one of the largest migrations of all time and through these images you can see what was life like back then. Use the images to understand the story of the lives of the migrants who had to suffer it all.

Here is a poem written by me to help you understand their lives a little better:

it happened a long
time ago
but yet we still look
upon that day
that day the dust came
it was the 1930s and

Click on the Links Above to Start Story. Double click on the pictures to view the captions!!
[hint; placing mouse on scrolling pictures will cause it to slow down; displacing it will cause scroll to move faster.]

Internet

Mei's website...

Untitled - Microsoft Internet Explorer

File Edit View Favorites Tools Help


Back Forward Stop Home Search Favorites Refresh Print Mail My Yahoo! Games Personals Music Finance

Address http://www.geocities.com/dust_bowl_images/index2.html Go Links SnagIt

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[Intro] [During the Dust Bowl] [Along the Migration; Route 66] [Migrant Mother] [Life through Primary Sources] [California Life] [Other Sources]

[Life in the Dust Bowl Panhandle Region



Life in the Panhandle

Life in the Dust Bowl was horrible as most people saw it. There was dust everywhere and people had no idea what to do. Through these images you see the life of a resident in the Panhandle Area, which include the states of Oklahoma, Arizona, Texas, New Mexico, Arkansas and etc. See the realities of their lives.

[Click to Close]

Click on the Links Above to Start Story. Double click on the pictures to view the captions!
[hint, placing mouse on scrolling pictures will cause it to slow down; displacing it will cause scroll to move faster.]

Internet

Life in the Dust Bowl Panhandle Region

Mei's website, entitled "Life in the Dust Bowl Panhandle Region" is quite different from Ling's in that when the viewer first accesses the website it initially relies on the linguistic/audio of Woody Guthrie's (1937) ballad, "Do Re Mi".

Simultaneously, her own poem (represented in fluorescent pink) about the Dust Bowl rises up against the background of Route 66, in much the same way background information is provided in films. This creates a linguistic, visual and audio hybrid medium that expands when the links at the top are clicked.

Recognizing students as designers

I realized it was in everyone's best interest if I continue to learn web design, but let the students take over the design **creativity**. The sites I was designing were text heavy and linear.

Furthermore, I did not have the skills to include popup pages with dropdown menus of songs or include moving images.

My students were teaching themselves these complex design skills because their teachers could not. This is an small example of the "profound social, economic and technical world which in the end will shape the futures of literacy" (Kress, 2003, p. 176)

Our class webhub went from this...

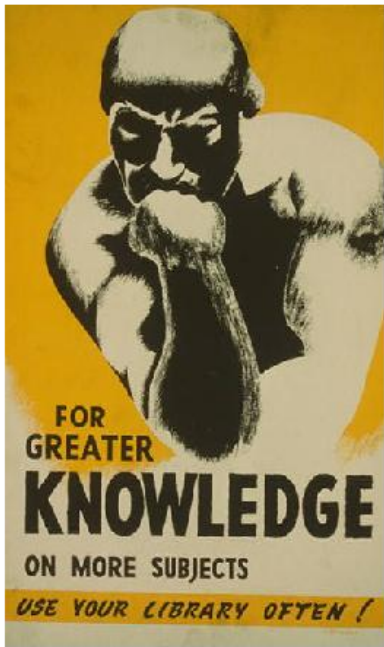
humanitieslinksfeb - Microsoft Internet Explorer provided by OptusNet

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Back Forward Stop Home Search Favorites Refresh Print Mail Stop Taskbar SnagIt

Address http://www.nychumanities.com/humanitieslinksfeb Go Links SnagIt

Chris's 8th Grade Humanities Web



Class Links

- Homework
- Student Grades
- Portfolio
- Requirements
- Essays Assigned
- Dia Center Partnership
- MAT Track
- Allstars
- Collective Memory Work
- Class 801 Websites
- Class 802 Websites
- Unit Articles
- MAT Insider
- Grammar

Unit Links

- Media
- Immigration
- Industrialization
- Migration
- Wars

Useful Links

- NYC Board of Education
- National Public Radio
- The History Channel
- The Discovery Channel
- National Geographic
- Today in History
- The History Net

Done Sunday, September 11, 2005

To this..

NYCHumanities.com: Chris's 8th Grade Humanities Web - Windows Internet Explorer

http://www.nychumanities.com/index2.html

Security Level 4 10 → Block adware / popups → Remove spyware

NYCHumanities.com: Chris's 8th Grade Hum...

Welcome to Chris's 8th Grade Humanities Web

MAT
Chris's CV
Contact

Manhattan Academy of Technology, New York, NY 10002

Curricular Links

- Humanities Links
- Current Events
- Student Work
- Writing Conventions
- Useful Links

Curricular Units

- Media Analysis
- Immigration
- Industrialization
- Migration
- Wars
- Intolerance

- New curricular unit: **Intolerance!**
- "Moving On"-Dust Bowl Migration Panels [Part 1][Part 2]-created by 8th graders of MAT 2003.
- ThinkQuest articles are published online. MAT is in the press!
- MAT's ThinkQuest 2003 team is a finalist **FIRST PLACE WINNER!** [Take a little peek.]
- MAT's ThinkQuest 2004 team is a finalist [Take a little peek.]
- The Lab School's ThinkQuest 2004 team is a finalist [Take a little peek.]
- MAT's Track Team [Allstars] St. Patrick's Day Race
- Student Responses to Wieser's *Night*.

July 10 2007, 10:48:37 pm

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Done

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My adolescent students used their **imagination** to draw on a number of textual, intertextual, and contextual creative strategies in their participation and design of different **multimodal** texts.

Within many literacy blocks, students create monomodal texts that teachers usually model in min-lessons. Thus the range of meanings—because additional modes are not present—are often restricted and that furthers my view of the inadequacy of the ideas and theories from balanced literacy approaches.

Creativity as capital: The Con ← → Texts website

A few weeks after we finished our migration unit, I learnt about the New York City *ThinkQuest* web design competition.

I felt the competition would be a great **sociocultural experience** for my students to use their capital resources and design a site to teach other students about the migrations we studied

Con ← → Texts:


Reading two migrations through the arts

The website utilised the intertextual and discourse analytic literacy practices we completed in the migration unit as it required viewer/users to read across and between texts.


Con ← → Texts also incorporated a range of visual and critical literacy skills as well as the technical and design skills required to design a website.

Con ← → Texts: Reading two migrations through the arts


CON <-> TEXTS: "Reading" Migrations Through Art



The Dust Bowl Migration



Reading other societal issues and problems through art.



The Great Migration

Click the circles to learn about the migrations.

"Art should not reproduce what we see. It should make us see."
-- Chinese Proverb

Historical narratives in textbooks do not provide sufficient information to understand the multiple dimensions of America's different historical times. Print text limits what modern youth could learn about the truth of our country's past and only gives us positive viewpoints of history. From the Dust Bowl Migration of the "Dusty Thirties" to the Great Migration of the Negroes, students today only learn about these events briefly when they are mentioned in history texts. We only learn of how the "Okies" migrated out of the Dust Bowl and that African Americans migrated to the North in search of a better living environment.


However, the discrimination and hardships both groups faced in different parts of the country are left out in history textbooks. Individual perspectives of these two major migrations such as those offered by the famous folk singer Woody Guthrie and the famous African-American artist Jacob Lawrence, are also excluded. It would take more than text itself to explain what different citizens of America's diverse past had to endure.

History will never be expressed solely through textbooks, we need to engage with those artists who critique societal issues. Unbelievably, many artists who offer social commentaries once had their right to the First Amendment to the United States Constitution banned by the leaders of our nation through different forms of censorship. This can still be seen today. Moreover, everyday people are obligated to contribute to the society by questioning certain injustices. We should never forget the words of Senator Margaret Chase Smith of Maine, uttered in the year 1950:


"Those of us who shout the loudest about Americanism ...
are all too frequently those who, by our own words and acts, ignore some of the basic principles of Americanism --
The right to criticize.
The right to hold unpopular beliefs.
The right to protest.
The right of independent thought.
The exercise of these rights should not cost one single American citizen his reputation or his right to a livelihood. Otherwise none of us could call our souls our own."

This site explores different forms of multi-modal texts, including art, photography, and music to show how a print textbook itself does not give a complete understanding of America's past. Guthrie's blues music and Lawrence's "The Migration of the Negroes" paintings better express what really happened to these struggling migrants and searched for better lives outside the Dust Bowl and the Mississippi Delta.


[Site Map] [About Us] [Message Board] [Credits]
© 2003 Con <-> TEXTS




Woody Guthrie's Folk Songs



Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans,
and Lynching Postcards (Photography)

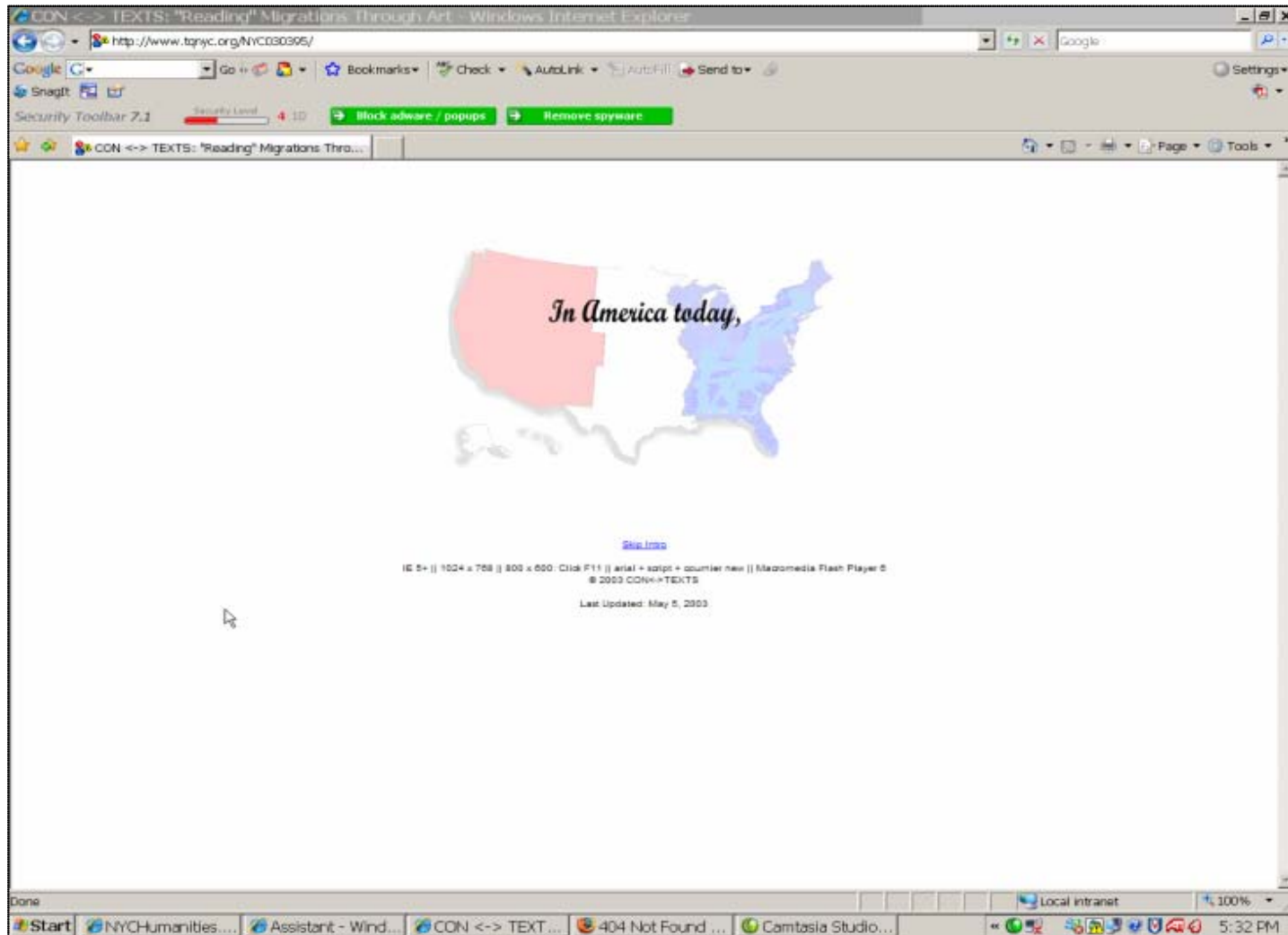


Jacob Lawrence's and
The Migration of the Negro



The Blues and Negro Spirituals

Con ← → Texts: Reading two migrations through the arts



Con ← → Texts: Reading two migrations through the arts

CON <-> TEXTS: "Reading" Migrations Through Art

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Woody Guthrie's Folk Songs

Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and Lynching Postcards (Photography)

Jacob Lawrence's and The Migration of the Negro

The Blues and Negro Spirituals

Local intranet 100%

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Con ← → Texts: The present day

CON <-> TEXTS: "Reading" Migrations Through Art

http://www.tqnyc.org/~NYC030305/migration/

Security Toolbar 7.1

Block adware / popups Remove spyware

CON <-> TEXTS: "Reading" Migrations Thro...

Con <-> TEXTS: "Reading" Migrations Through Art

The Dust Bowl Migration

The Great Migration

Reading other societal issues and problems through art.

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Woody Guthrie's Folk Songs

Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and Lynching Postcards (Photography)

Jacob Lawrence's and The Migration of the Negro

The Blues and Negro Spirituals

Local intranet 100%

Start NYCHumanities... Assistant - Wind... CON <-> TEXT... 404 Not Found... Camtasia Studio... 5:41 PM

Creativity as social collaboration

Con ← → Texts embodied Facer and Williamson's (2004) notion of creativity as a social collaboration in learning, because students needed to evaluate and rationalise their opinions; gather knowledge with/from each other; share knowledge; and transform their existing understandings through their **design work**.

Students on the team first taught themselves new software (Macromedia Dreamweaver/Flash and Adobe Photoshop), and then shared this knowledge with each other as they collaboratively designed the site.

As **multimodal designers** they used their interests and experiences with a classroom-based topic, their acquisition/understanding of multiple semiotic modes and their potential for meaning making (Kist, 2005), and the assumptions of their social environments (Kress & Jewitt, 2003), in this case the competition.

Thinking about the students' success in terms of Bourdieu's (1986) theorisation of capital

Bourdieu's (1986) theorisation of capital suggests students compete for access to the scarce cultural and social capital. In competing, students were striving for ***economic capital*** and formed a team drawing on their ***social capital*** or the sum of the resources, actual or *virtual*, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a strong network of more or less institutional relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Luke & Carrington, 1997).

As a result of their group membership, the students had access to the collective capital and creativity of all of the members in the group and the accompanying social distinction their membership allowed. The ***cultural capital*** each student brought to the team included their differing ***multimodal design practices*** (knowledge of different software programs, curricular knowledge, writing skills, etc.) they possessed that were transmissible to others.

The competition provided the context for a group of students to draw on their cultural and social capital resources—including imagination and creativity—to design a website that reflects the acquisition and articulation of students out-of-school literacy practices recognized within the curriculum.

Conclusions

I have described what happened when I intentionally created a space within my classroom to harness students' **imagination** and **creativity** by encouraging them to engage in **multimodal design** to re-represent curricular knowledge.

Recognizing my students as **multimodal designers** was vital because I was forced to become better acquainted with the concept of multimodality and include texts from youth digital culture into my teaching.

In acknowledging that adolescents could already design **multimodal texts** I sought to allow and encourage them to use their evident competence in school. This was critical because it shifted the focus of literacy instruction in my classroom from students *imitating* literacy practices that I had modeled to students becoming ingenious inventors/designers of new genres.

- This study highlights the importance of making school-based literacy practices relevant to students' life worlds.
- It also identifies implications for educators, administrators, curriculum developers and teacher educators concerning the need for broader public discussions and classroom understandings about the field-specific social consequences of literacy instruction.
 - **First, it points to the fact that literacy education, if it is to make any consequential difference in students' life trajectories, has to extend beyond the school.**
 - **It also suggests that individual teachers when thinking about what counts as literacy, could view youths' creative design or—the social and cultural capitals they possess in fields other than school—as significant in helping them acquiring more traditional school literacies.**

Educators who want to foster **creativity** may want to rethink the taken-for-granted ways in which they develop assignments and position students.

Students are acquiring different digital literacy practices outside school that teachers may feel uncomfortable letting them access in school. Yet the fact remains, youth may be able to present what they know about school subjects—drawing on **multiple semiotic modes**—better through design than they could in words alone.

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