(Re)conceptualizing digital literacies before and after the election of Trump

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Abstract

Purpose – As part of a larger global phenomenon, the election of Donald Trump in the USA represents a crucial moment for the (re)conceptualization of digital literacies. The purpose of this paper is to build theory with respect to what this moment means for English education.

Design/methodology/approach – This teacher reflection focuses on what digital literacies meant for my teaching before and after the 2016 election. Using a before-and-after format, I argue that the before conceptualization of digital literacies, while still relevant and useful for introducing many important ideas to English educators, was missing a direct treatment of political power. The after conceptualization takes up this topic.

Findings – Themes taken up in the before section involve a parallel between digital literacies and disciplinary literacies and a distinction between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 interfaces. Themes in the after section address the propensity for governments and other well-resourced groups to occupy Web 2.0 environments for their own ends. Methods for accomplishing these ends involve restricting, surveilling and targeting flows of information and enacting three populist practices via internet trolling: aggregating the unmet demands of disparate groups, establishing popular subjectivity and dichotomizing the social space through the persistent construction of the enemy.

Research limitations/implications – A critically conscious approach to digital literacies must consider the ways in which political entities occupy digital environments.

Practical implications – Further research should be done in English education classrooms to understand the ways in which individual online meaning making becomes entangled within a nexus of political activity. Further research should investigate how online meaning making intersects with political power.

Originality/value – The role of political entities is often downplayed or ignored in discussions of digital literacies. In an age of alternative facts, fake news and echo chambers, it is important to foreground the interplay between the social, the political and the digital in contemporary meaning making. This contribution offers concepts that can be taken up and expanded, as well as a set of questions for English educators to use in framing a critically conscious conversation about digital literacies.

Keywords Literacy, Literacy teaching, New literacies, English language arts, Critical literacy, Digital literacy, Digital literacies, Critical digital literacies, Populism

Paper type Conceptual paper

November 9, 2016 began a new reality for American politics, one with Donald Trump as President-elect of the USA. Just a day earlier, the November 8 reality was that the interrelated rhetorics of nativism, nationalism, sexism, racism, Islamophobia, homophobia and anti-immigration would likely not end in Trump’s election, although the electoral vote would be close (FiveThirtyEight, 2016). By November 9, it was clear that populism had once again taken hold in the USA. While populism has been a recurrent modality of US politics (Formisano, 2008), the 2016 election cycle demonstrated the power of digital media in its propagation. The online presence of white supremacist groups such as the alt-right, the proliferation of fake news stories from various anonymous sources, the seemingly endless
string of leaked emails from WikiLeaks, the quick and systematic spin through social media and Donald Trump's infamous Twitter account all played prominent roles in shaping the outcome of the election. As someone who studies literacies, the upshot for me was that I needed to reassess my approach to, and understanding of, digital literacies.

Beyond the election of Trump, similar populist movements have emerged across multiple countries and contexts, from European countries (Vieten and Poynting, 2016) to Australia and New Zealand (Moffitt, 2017) to uprisings such as Brexit (Gusterson, 2017). While the success of these movements has relied on political figures evoking resentment in reaction to globalization (Wodak, 2017), the digital age has introduced new contexts for exploiting such resentment.

As I worked with high school students and the college students who will one day be their English teachers, I wondered about the implications of the current political moment for them. How does this moment change the landscape of English education?

In the immediate wake of the election, this question was at the forefront of my mind. In the evening after the election, I met with my Reading, Writing and Critical Literacies class – a group of future English educators at the beginning of their teacher education program. We had a fishbowl discussion framed around the question, “What does the election result mean for you as a future English educator?” The goals of the course itself were to explore what it means to be producers and consumers of texts and ultimately imagine implications for pedagogy. In our previous in-class discussions, we had explored literacies from a sociocultural standpoint, including conceptualizations of reading comprehension (Aukerman, 2008), of literacies as ideological practices rather than autonomous skills (Street, 1984), and of culture, identity and power in English education (Alvermann, 2002).

The fishbowl discussion was spirited, heated at times and full of insight. At the time, I viewed the discussion as positive. We teased apart themes of bullying, lying and gaslighting; social constructs such as race and gender figured prominently; and the class dynamic itself, with a large majority in the anti-Trump camp and a small minority in the pro-Trump camp, was put into conversation.

But upon reflection in the coming weeks, I felt increasingly unsettled with how our discussion went. Something was missing. I kept coming back to the idea that the discussion did not substantively address the interplay between digital environments and the political moment. What was left undertheorized was power: that is, the ways in which digital environments open up new strategies for governments and other well-resourced groups to forward their agendas. My goal in this article is to build theory with respect to power in digital environments. The following discussion is organized in a before-and-after format, emphasizing that my before conceptualization of digital literacies, while still relevant and useful for introducing many important ideas to my students, was missing a direct treatment of political power in digital environments, something I address in the after conceptualization. I conclude by offering a more critically conscious framing of digital literacies.

Before
My approach to digital literacies at the time
Before 2016, I envisioned digital literacies as fitting within a constellation of three bodies of work. The first was the New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 2000; Street, 2003), a line of scholarship foregrounding a paradigm shift in how literacies have been conceived by scholars and teachers, with a focus on the social conditions out of which meaning making arises. I was drawn to this paradigmatic shift for its positioning of literacy as “a repertoire of changing practices for communicating purposefully in multiple social and
cultural contexts” (Mills, 2010, p. 247). In this way, digital environments could be understood as various social and cultural contexts for meaning making, complete with their own repertoires of changing practices.

The second was multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996), a body of work, closely related to the NLS, emphasizing a pedagogical approach to literacy that accounts for the cultural and linguistic diversity within “increasingly globalized societies” and “the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies” (p. 61). Drawing on this work, digital literacies can be imagined as interconnected with globalization, with digital texts as conduits for accessing the cultural and linguistic diversity of the world, and by extension, for accessing work, power and community.

The third was new literacies (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011), a body of work maintaining the paradigmatic shift of the NLS while also emphasizing an ontological shift. Regarding ontology, Lankshear and Knobel (2011) argue that “[new literacies] consist of a different kind of ‘stuff’ from conventional literacies we have known in the past” (p. 28). For example, meaning making in the digital sense traverses time and space via “encoded texts” (p. 40), i.e. texts that have been freed from their original context and don’t depend on people to transport them.

The nuanced differences within these bodies of work are helpful in pursuing the changing complexities of meaning making in digital environments. For example, embracing the new as a paradigmatic shift toward the social, as in NLS, implies one line of inquiry (e.g. What role does social interaction play in making meaning in digital environments?); and embracing new as an ontological shift, as in new literacies, implies another, one that calls forth the changing “stuff” of digital technologies for the production and consumption of texts (e.g. What do the affordances of, for example, YouTube imply for readers and writers as opposed to the affordances of, say, Facebook – and also as opposed to traditional print formats?).

With this scholarship in mind, I framed digital literacies in two ways. First, I saw digital literacies as running parallel to disciplinary literacies. Although not the same, some of the concepts circulating within disciplinary literacies seemed also applicable to digital literacies. Second, I approached digital literacies through the lens of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2009), highlighting Web 2.0 technologies as introducing a range of affordances and challenges that educators should consider. I turn to these ideas in separate sections below to produce a broad portrait of my thinking at the time.

The digital as disciplinary. Disciplinary literacies are founded on the idea that different academic disciplines call on different knowledges, language conventions, and modalities of thought. Drawing a parallel to digital literacies, I aligned with Gee and Hayes’s (2011) emphasis on “specialized knowledge and language” arising from digital environments (p. 88). Knowing what hashtags are and how to use them on Twitter, understanding how to communicate and coordinate with team members in a video game, and demonstrating proficiency with the highly situated nature of “proper etiquette” on various online communication forums: these are all examples of specialized knowledge and language that a disciplinary understanding of digital literacies tends to highlight. From a teaching standpoint, a clear parallel could be drawn between the conventions of meaning making emerging from digital environments to the conventions of meaning making emerging from particular disciplines (e.g. science, art, English). Addressing issues as a scientist would involve playing by a set of implicit and explicit rules; likewise, anyone who successfully navigates the digital world (e.g. Facebook) must be tapping into some set of socially and culturally constructed guidelines for how to do so. Following Lankshear and Knobel (2011), I saw “the ‘non-print’ bits, like values and gestures, context and meaning, actions and objects,
talk and interaction, tools and spaces” (p.13) as inseparable from digital texts. Playing video
games, using services such as Google or Netflix, and participating in social media all
represent ways of being in the digital world.

I tempered this understanding with Leander and Boldt’s (2013) concern that concepts
emerging from NLS, primarily the notion of “multiliteracies,” have directed attention of the
field to texts-as-endpoints as opposed to texts as emergent from social practices. In other
words, the sociocultural underpinnings of NLS have tended to produce, ironically, an overly
text-centric view of literacy. Rather than driving toward a textual endpoint in more or less
rational ways, which is “a domestification that subtracts movement, indeterminacy, and
dependent potential from the picture” (p. 24), literacies involve elements not so easily
rationalized away. Thus, with digital literacies, I tried to avoid working backward from any
particular family of digital texts. While I often explored ideas by calling on particular digital
texts (e.g. on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube), I tried to frame discussions that included these
interfaces while not being bound by them – e.g. How do digital environments shape your
social world, your relationships and your desires?

Turning an eye toward practice, I drew on Moje’s (2015) four-part framework for
disciplinary literacy: engage, elicit/engineer, examine and evaluate. We should engage with
digital environments by using social media and video games and blogs, among others, to shape
our intuition. We should elicit knowledge of the digital domain by allowing students a space to
demonstrate their insights about, for example, social media; and we should engineer in-class
activities that would offer students space to exercise and extend their knowledge. We should
examine digital “ways with words” by looking at how people use digital interfaces to perform
identities and achieve their goals. Finally, English educators should evaluate uses of language
by looking at why, when and how they emerge in digital environments.

Like disciplinary literacy generally, casting the digital as disciplinary involved attention
to “epistemic understandings” and “routine practices” (Moje, 2015, p. 257) emerging from
digital environments. To characterize these digital environments with more precision, I
relied on the terminology of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0, addressed below.

**Web 1.0 and Web 2.0.** Within scholarship on digital literacies is an important distinction
between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 technologies. These terms signal a qualitatively different set
of affordances for literacy practices. Broadly, Web 1.0 refers to the read-only model of the
internet, while Web 2.0 refers to interfaces that are built on the premise of user participation
(O’Reilly, 2006). For example, an online encyclopedia that is essentially a digitized version of
the print version, e.g. Britannica Online as the digitization of Encyclopedia Britannica,
would be Web 1.0. An online encyclopedia that depends on user participation to produce
content, such as Wikipedia, would be Web 2.0. However, the dividing line between the two
can be fuzzy, as O’Reilly (2006) explains, “Like many important concepts, Web 2.0 doesn’t
have a hard boundary, but rather, a gravitational core” (para. 8). For example, a newspaper
site like The New York Times presents information in a digitized version, similar to what
would be available in a print version of the newspaper. That dynamic is suggestive of Web
1.0. However, the online version of The New York Times has comment sections for the
articles, a continuously updated list of what stories are popular, and a way to share stories
via social media. In addition, the company collects data related to user clicks for a variety of
purposes. These features rely on Web 2.0 principles in that users are not merely passive
recipients, but perpetual creators, disseminators and evaluators of content.

On the side that is clearly Web 2.0 are social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram,
Reddit, Twitter and YouTube. Users are the primary content producers for these sites.
Search engines such as Google or Bing are similarly user dependent in that their search
algorithms are responsive to, and become refined through, user data.
For sociocultural scholarship on digital literacies, the online spaces designed with Web 2.0 principles of interactivity, participation and decentralization have provided an evolving context for analysis. Considering these digital contexts, Duffy (2008) contends that a new “learning ecology” has emerged and that “some care should be taken to think deeply about the impacts of Web 2.0 on the processes and practices of pedagogy” (p. 119). Applying the particular affordances of Web 2.0 in the classroom compels teachers to connect their technological knowledge to particular pedagogical stances (Mishra and Koehler, 2006). Such application involves framing out literacy engagements using, e.g. blogs, wikis and podcasts. These digital tools provide new methods for giving feedback to students and new ways to grade student work by appealing to, for example, multimodality, hypertextuality and interactivity (Beach, Clemens, and Jamsen, 2009).

Modalities of literacy learning, such as digital storytelling (Robin, 2008), m-learning, i.e. using mobile devices to learn (Cochrane and Bateman, 2010) and video games (Apperley and Beavis, 2011), introduce a set of pedagogical potentials for teachers and students. These modalities also present possibilities for traditionally underserved student populations. For example, Sykes et al. (2008) argue that digital environments offer L2 learners meaningful contexts for language development. Giving an example of language usages within a MMOG, or a massively multiplayer online game, the authors observe that:

To be a highly skilled player in World of Warcraft [a MMOG], one must not only be able to complete quests, gain assets, and navigate through three continents of geographic space, but also to interact with others in an appropriate manner utilizing the norms established by expert players of the game. (p. 535)

Unlike many traditional school contexts, students produce and consume texts with real audiences in real-time, allowing them to engage with language as a genuine social practice. Thus, within and through these digital environments, Sykes et al. (2008) argue, student agency can potentially “evolve beyond the confines of the subject-position associated with the conventional institutional identity of student” (p. 539).

Digital tools establish new subject-positions through what Beach (2012) calls “collaborative knowledge construction” (p. 49). Discussion forums, social media, group annotation tools, wikis and blogs all provide platforms for qualitatively different types of participation. For example, Ito et al. (2008) highlight modes of youth participation, including “hanging out” (picking up social and technological skills), “messing around” (exploring new interfaces and personal interests) or “geeking out” (gaining an esteemed reputation in a specialized knowledge group) (pp. 1-2). Digital environments, therefore, are intimately related to not just affordances in terms of what one can do, but affordances in terms of what and how one can be.

Digital literacies compel educationists to re-conceptualize what it means to do school. In terms of what that might mean for teachers, I encouraged my students to consider their stance toward digital media. Leander (2009) describes four stances toward digital media often taken up by teachers: resistance, meaning only conventional print literacies should be taken up; replacement, meaning traditional texts should be supplanted with digital texts; return, meaning digital texts should be taken up but understood through concepts belonging to conventional print literacy; and remediation, meaning the generic conventions, structures and practices of traditional literacies are taken up, folded into or re-mediated through digital affordances (pp. 148-149). These stances encompass a range of attitudes, dispositions and theories emerging from the interplay between schooling practices and digital media. In framing discussions with future English educators, I encouraged my students to work through their own stances.
After
What my approach was missing
The material above represents a broad portrait of my thinking on digital literacies before the 2016 US presidential election. What was largely downplayed, if not missing, from my thinking was the role of governments and other well-resourced groups in digital spaces. In using the collective term governments and other well-resourced groups, my goal is to call attention to political power and the wielding of such power via digital environments.

Governments refer to the activities of the more or less autonomous bureaucratic systems driving decision-making processes within cities, states, provinces, territories or countries; and governments can also refer to different parts of a governmental infrastructure operating under the auspices of a governing body, e.g. in the USA, the CIA, the NSA or the FBI (Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, respectively).

Well-resourced groups refer to any organizations outside of direct governmental control that nevertheless possess resources enough to promote an agenda on a wide scale. Examples include large corporations, presidential campaigns and terrorist organizations. Additionally, resourced is meant in a broad sense that is not limited to monetary resources but could also include, for example, access to software tools that amplify an entity’s online presence or expertise in executing quick messaging strategies via social media (e.g. with Twitter bots).

In using the term, my intention is to insert into the discussion the increasingly sophisticated methods by which Web 2.0 technologies are being taken up by governments and other well-resourced groups to shape national perceptions. While methods are always quickly evolving, I characterize two below:

1. co-opting Web 2.0 spaces; and
2. enacting populist practices via trolling.

Co-optation of Web 2.0 spaces. Digital tools provide new affordances for communication, which are often imagined as having a democratizing effect. For example, writing on the relationship between digital media and the Arab Spring, Howard and Hussain (2013) note:

Social protests in the Arab world have spread across North Africa and the Middle East, largely because digital media allowed communities to realize that they shared grievances and because they nurtured transportable strategies for mobilizing against dictators. (p. 3)

The digital space allowed for sharing and strategizing by peoples who might otherwise not have access to each other’s experiences and knowledges. However, while some were using digital tools to enact democratic principles of free speech, assembly and dissent, “autocratic regimes nurtured information management strategies to control and co-opt these social movements” (p. 4). Thus, the digital affordances aligning with democratic practices are always offset by the digital affordances aligning with autocratic control.

Batouli (2004) argues that capabilities of authoritarian regimes are far greater than the capabilities of more individuated internet users. Evoking the story of David and Goliath, Batouli writes:

Many modern advocates of absolute freedom and democracy around the globe believe that the Internet is their slingshot, a weapon they can use to topple the large, daunting authoritarian regimes around the world […] But as it is easily accessible and inanimate, the authoritarian Goliaths that the Internet is aimed at subverting have also gotten their hands on this tool, creating a two-sided Web war. (p. 5)
Using examples from China and Iran, Batouli (2004) demonstrates that digital environments provide ways for dystopian-level systematicity in subverting political dissent. Restricting available information, surveilling online activity, and targeting dissidents are among the methods that governments and other well-resourced groups use to quash uprisings. Contrast that capability with the capability of an individual internet user, who in all likelihood does not wield counterbalancing resources.

In the 2016 presidential election in the USA, for example, consider the asymmetrical power relationship between individual voters and entities wishing to influence them. The widely held view, coming from 17 US intelligence agencies, is that Russia interfered in the 2016 US election, using classic methods of cyber-intrusion coupled with an influence campaign involving, according to the testimony of Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, “classical propaganda, disinformation, fake news” (as cited in Naylor, 2017). For example, while Russian state actors hacked both major parties in the USA, they released information only from the side of the Democrats in an effort to bolster Trump, the Republican candidate. To maximize influence, Russian state actors then used WikiLeaks as a platform for global dissemination (Sanger and Shane, 2016). Conspiracy theories and “fake news” based on hacked information were then widely circulated by Russian Twitter bots (automated accounts posing as real people) as well as actual people working for the Russian Government (O’Connor and Schneider, 2017), oftentimes posing as pro-Trump US citizens (Bertrand, 2016). It should be noted, of course, that the USA has also interfered in other nations’ elections, and to borrow a line from Senator Thom Tillis, “We [the USA] live in a big glass house, and there are a lot of rocks to throw” (as cited by Naylor, 2017).

This dissolution of boundaries has implications for what Kim (2016) calls transcultural digital literacies in English education, a concept which “accounts for the nascent phenomenon of digitally mediated learning practices in the age of globalization and the Internet” (p. 204). These learning practices have implications for how students learn about themselves and their relationship to a multicultural world. The 2016 US election demonstrated, however, that digitally mediated learning spaces are of high interest to governments and other well-resourced groups. As digital environments allow for an individual to enter into and cross-complex cultural spaces, they also allow for forces beyond the individual to systematically shape the meaning making ecosystem.

From a digital literacies perspective, the main takeaway is that the social dynamics stemming from Web 2.0 technologies can potentially be co-opted by state actors in an effort to amass and maintain power. Thus, individuals entering into the social atmosphere of digital environments should be keenly aware that such social situations likely include entities (e.g. bots or actual people) with ulterior motives. I approach implications for English education below, but first, I offer another way in which the 2016 US election of Trump made me reconsider digital literacies: the enactment of populist practices via internet trolling.

**Enacting populist practices via internet trolling.** My goal in this section is to articulate a working definition of populism and describe the dynamic interplay between populism and digital environments. For a working definition of populism, I draw on Laclau’s (2005) piece, “Populism: What’s in a Name?” As an opening premise, Laclau reasons that populism should not be imagined as operating on the same level as political movements or ideologies (such as fascism, liberalism or communism) because it drives toward futile discussions of what movements/ideologies should be considered populist versus not populist. Rather than leading to questions about what is or is not populist, Laclau arrives at a different question: “to what extent is a movement populist?” (p. 45). Populism therefore refers to a set of political
practices that can be taken up equally by, for example, a fascist movement or a liberal movement.

Laclau (2005) describes three interrelated populist practices that are helpful in unpacking the relationship between digital environments and populism. The first practice is the forging of *equivalential chains*. These chains are forged when particular, unfulfilled social demands of disparate groups “reaggregate themselves” with not the particulars of the social demands, but with the general notion that the demands have gone unmet. The second practice, building *popular subjectivity*, involves the constitution of the subject on the basis of “a logic of equivalence” (p. 37), and arises in popular discourse through appeals to “the people”. These appeals consolidate varied subjective experiences into a singular moniker, and thus serve to maintenance equivalential chains. The third practice concerns *dichotomous construction*, which involves the formation of an “internal frontier” (p. 38) in the social space via the “discursive construction of an enemy” (p. 39).

Through social media and other digital interfaces, these three populist practices became inseparable from US presidential politics in 2016. Equivalential chains, popular subjectivity and dichotomous construction emerged as disparate groups melded their grievances together, which included police officers responding to “what many officers see as growing anti-police sentiment” (Kaste, 2016), white evangelicals citing “[Trump’s] promise to appoint Supreme Court justices who would overturn Roe v. Wade” (Baily, 2016), white supremacists who see Donald Trump as a “last stand” for “[controlling] the culture of politics” (Holston, 2016), white working class voters harboring racist fears of “cultural displacement” coupled with “economic hardship” (Cox, Liensch, and Jones, 2017), and anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim groups stimulated by “a growing fear about terrorism and terror attacks” (Éversley, 2017). These groups are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and there are certainly individuals who overlap with some or all of them, but the larger point is that digital environments, particularly social media, mediated these populist practices. Through digital interfaces, disparate groups with unmet social demands are more accessible to each other, and their dissatisfaction can be pooled much more readily.

The predominate technique of the Trump campaign to maintain these populist practices, I argue, was through “trolling”. As described in Phillips’s (2015) ethnographic work on internet trolls, trolling is a way of being online that involves pursuing “lulz”, a term signifying enjoyment derived from provoking an adversary. Trolling was a main feature of the campaign, leading Dave Chappelle, in his *Saturday Night Live* monologue delivered the week of the election, to observe that “America has done it. We’ve actually elected an Internet troll as our president”. I am not suggesting that Donald Trump belongs to the group of self-identified, subcultural trolls that inhabit 4Chan’s /b/ board, YouTube comment sections, or various threads on Reddit. However, the Trump campaign took up many facets of trolling behavior both in method and worldview.

In terms of method, trolls attempt to provoke their targets with the use of shocking, disturbing and offensive posts. Phillips (2015) argues that trolling is a calculated method of inserting chaos to the conversation, thereby creating the context for a new round of provocations. In terms of worldview, trolling behavior is a digital manifestation of androcentrism, wherein sexism, misogyny and racism are naturalized; so-called “male rationality” is favored over so-called “female emotionalism”; and there is an overt emphasis on “winning” by “successfully exerting dominance over a given adversary” (Phillips, 2015, p. 124). The Trump campaign – from fallout of the you-can-do-anything bus tape to the aggression against a Gold Star family to the threatening of news media to the claim that
“We’re going to win so much, you’re going to be so sick and tired of winning” – squarely aligned with this worldview.

Trolling was the central strategy of the Trump campaign for enacting populist practices. Consider the tenacious use of Twitter to broadcast sensationalist lines to provoke feelings of confusion, anger, disbelief, alarm and indignation among Trump adversaries, a dynamic which, because propagated by the then Republican nominee, would itself become a news story and thus occupy an outsized space in the news cycle. Trump used provocative tweets to remind his supporters of a laundry list of enemies: the Republican establishment who are “dishonest” and “could not stop Obama (twice)”; the “mainstream media” that circulate “#FakeNews”; the courts which are “disgraceful”, “horrible” and “dangerous”; Bill and Hillary Clinton who are “the real predators”, and the “job killing”, Trans-Pacific Partnership, among others (see Lee and Quealy, 2017 for a detailed list). While it may be tempting to dismiss such insults as immature rantings, I argue that these digital provocations provide an efficient means for the perpetual construction of the enemy and, relatedly, the perpetual maintenance of equivalential chains and consolidation of popular subjectivity.

In an essay about attending a Trump rally, Eggers (2016) was reminded of a troll-ish American comedian, Andrew Dice Clay, because the audience seemed taken by the “forbidden delight in hearing highly inappropriate things spoken into a microphone” (para. 73). This “forbidden delight” became a way of maintaining a sense of solidarity as supporters assumed a common stance against all things “politically correct”. To be sure, Trump is not the first populist figure to troll his opponents, but what was demonstrated by the Trump campaign is that in the digital age, trolling via social media is a potent technique for enacting populist practices. In the context of teacher education, such language practices could be taken up through ongoing discussions about power, digital tools and the relationship between the two. As these tools allow for the aggregation of voices from across the globe, the idea of whose voice is present and whose voice is absent, whose voice is amplified and whose voice is ignored, and whose voice is championed and whose voice is mocked is of upmost importance in framing critical inquires about why voices are present or absent, why they are amplified or ignored and why they are championed or mocked. Eggers’s (2016) notion of “forbidden delight” grants a clear entry point for discussing the language practice of trolling and how voices interact with each other in the digital age.

Conclusion
Above, I have outlined my thinking about digital literacies before and after the election of Trump. While I still see the disciplinary/digital parallel and the affordances of Web 2.0 technologies as highly relevant, I supplement these ideas with a more overt treatment of political power in digital environments. For example, my previous treatment of Web 2.0 technologies tended to foreground the social practices of individuals within “interest-driven networks” (Ito et al., 2008) rather unpacking why governments and other well-resourced groups would want to shape such networks – and what methods they might use to do so. Informing this new direction in my teaching is software studies (Berry, 2011; Kitchin and Dodge, 2011; Manovich, 2013), critical software studies (Lynch, 2015a, 2015b) and critical digital literacies (Ávila and Pandya, 2013).

First, the field of software studies emphasizes the “softwarization” (Manovich, 2013) of daily life. Virtually all lived experiences in contemporary society are touched in one way or another by software, which can be imagined as a superstructure of daily lived experience that is in a constant state of flux and flow as algorithms, applications and
interfaces emerge, upgrade and evolve. Kitchin and Dodge (2011) coin the term *everyware* to emphasize the pervasive presence of software interactions that aim to “augment aspects of everyday life and activities by adding value through the embedding of sensors and some degree of decision-making capacity in everyday objects and infrastructures rendering them interactive and smart, yet also mundane and routine” (p. 217). From a literacy pedagogy perspective, the field of software studies highlights the need to understand how meaning making within daily lived experience is structured through software.

Second, the field of critical software studies directly addresses the power dynamics that shape softwarization in educational spaces, particularly those related to neoliberal education policies aimed at “disruptive innovation” in K-12 education. These supposed innovations are driven by research funding from the very businesses seeking to “prove” the educative value of their products. Lynch (2015a) argues that such an environment creates an “orthodoxy of optimism” around technology in schools, leaving critical interpretations at the margins of the discussion. Lynch (2015b) writes:

[... ] software is created by human beings with ideologies, epistemologies, and bottom lines [...]
When powering education, software—to some degree—enacts the pedagogical assumptions and ideologies of those who produce and promote it, transforming teaching and learning into something the logic of the market can solve through the ontology of software space.

From a teacher education perspective, the “ontology of the software space” is a focal point for criticality. As preservice teachers consider how their own literacies and their future students’ literacies are shaped by software, they can enter into conversations about what software is and how it is implicated in societal power hierarchies.

Finally, the field of critical digital literacies emphasizes the “skills and practices that lead to the creation of digital texts that interrogate the world [and] also allow and foster interrogation of digital, multimedia texts” (Ávila and Pandya, 2013, p. 3). Similar to Street’s (1984) distinction between autonomous and ideological models of literacy, critical digital literacies attend to the ideologies mediated through the production and consumption of digital texts. Proponents of critical digital literacies emphasize the need to not only include but also go beyond functional skills associated with digital media (Watulak and Kinzer, 2013).

Informed by the scholarship above, my framing became more generative for pursuing criticality about digital environments. I began this reflection by describing an ultimately unsatisfying classroom conversation the night after the 2016 US election in my class on Reading, Writing and Critical Literacies. A year later in the same class, the conversations about digital environments and the current political moment took a more satisfying turn. Although others will undoubtedly have ideas to add (as will I in each iteration of the class), I conclude this reflection by offering ideas for framing a critical conversation about the digital world. I acknowledge this framing is far from perfect, and I do not wish to position this framing as “correct” or exhaustive or definitive, but rather as a point-in-time snapshot of my teaching and an entry point for continued reflection about (critical) digital literacies in English education and beyond:

- **Framing Idea One: Representation.** How does software (re)present the world to its users? What’s missing in the representation? Why?

My intent with these questions was to put large search engines such as Google, as well as social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter, at the center of the discussion. In a group activity, I asked students to search for topics through Google and look at the news sources
available through Facebook and Twitter. Examples from the various groups were often related to the representation of race, gender and class, e.g. one group noticed that typing “cute girl hairstyles” into Google Images yielded primarily, almost exclusively, images of white girls’ hair. Another angle on the question was on how recent news events were represented on dubious news sites that were then made readily available through Twitter and Facebook. Important to this discussion was the idea that algorithms that power these digital platforms are not value neutral but instead come to mirror the ideologies that are fed into them:

- **Framing Idea Two: Access.** How is information made available in the digital age? Who has access to what – and to what degree?

My intent with these questions was to foreground participation structures in digital environments. Several groups brought up the digital divide that precludes many individuals – particularly from underserved communities – from being participants in digital spaces. One observation was that issues such as net neutrality will potentially add new layers to the divide, rendering access as tiered rather than binary. Important to the discussion was the consideration of who is left in and out as readers in the digital age, whose access is complete and whose is qualified:

- **Framing Idea Three: Contestation.** How are meanings contested within digital environments? Why might governments and other well-resourced groups be interested in influencing online debates over meaning? What methods do they use?

My intent with these questions was to highlight the concerted efforts of governments, news organizations and more loosely organized groups such as the alt-right to shape public perceptions to fit their goals. One example that came from this framing was the #Manysides hashtag that emerged after the Charlottesville protest which resulted in the death of Heather Heyer. The hashtag originated when President Trump drew a moral equivalence between the white supremacists who were marching in Charlottesville and the people protesting them, implying “many sides” were responsible for Heyer’s death. Hashtags such as these are deeply infested with automated bots and human propagandists attempting to influence what meanings are ascribed to an event, person, policy or utterance. Important to this discussion is the idea that literacy pedagogy must be responsive to the new and always evolving methods through which governments and other well-resourced groups occupy, and operate within, digital environments.

**References**


**Further reading**


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“I’m not in the truth business”: the politics of climate change with pre-service teachers

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Abstract

Purpose – This study was designed to be an agonistic encounter between two pre-service teachers from different academic disciplines and with opposing climate change beliefs. The purpose of this study was to create an opportunity for this pair of future educators to voice, acknowledge and engage their differences, rather than avoid or skirt them.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a paired interview approach, two pre-service teachers discussed online sources about climate change. The analysis focuses on critical literacy practices of textual critique and reader reflexivity, considering how students from different beliefs and perspectives engage in agonism and negotiated practices.

Findings – While there was evidence of the two students engaged in critical literacy practices of textual critique, most of this engagement with the sources remained more at a surface level with somewhat superficial criteria to evaluate the sources. The two students engaged reflexively during the interview discussion in terms of their academic disciplines and climate change beliefs. This reflexive work produced the most compelling exchanges during the interview discussion and pointed to two rich sites for agonistic engagement: their differing conceptions of reliability and their competing perspectives about the intersection of science and politics.

Originality/value – Agonism offers a lens that helps ensure we understand that all pursuits toward facts and truth are necessarily contested as we engage with respected adversaries, not enemies we need to vanquish. There is an urgent need for dialogue across difference, especially for people in the increasingly polarized USA with complex topics and challenges such as climate change.

Keywords Media, Critical literacy

Despite the overwhelming consensus in the scientific community that climate change is occurring (Cook et al., 2013; Mooney et al., 2013), there is no such consensus among US citizens. People in the USA have varied perspectives about climate change (Leiserowitz et al., 2011, 2016), which can be traced to different political perspectives, values or “cultural worldviews” (Kahan et al., 2012; Lombardi and Sinatra, 2012; McCright and Dunlap, 2011; Leiserowitz et al., 2011, 2016; Weber and Stern, 2011). This is in part because climate change is often cast as a debate in popular media, framed in terms of whether it is happening and, if it is, whether humans play any part (Klein, 2015; Oreskes and Conway, 2011). Diana Hess (2009) has called this the “rhetoric of balance, fair play, and multiple perspectives” (p. 123). There is also a history of this “manufacturing” of uncertainty and doubt with other socio-scientific issues, such as adverse effects of smoking, Dichloro diphenyl trichloroethane (DDT)
and ozone layer depletion (Oreskes and Conway, 2011). What is clear, then, is climate change is not just about science; it is a socio-scientific issue, encompassing political, civic, geographic, economic, social, cultural, psychological and historical dimensions (Klein, 2015).

For several years, we have been exploring the ways pre-service teacher education students in content area literacy courses evaluate the reliability of online sources about climate change (Author, 2016; in press). We have extended this inquiry through follow-up interviews with pairs of these pre-service teachers from different academic disciplines and with opposing belief orientations to climate change. In this article, we draw from the field of critical literacy and the political philosophy of agonism (Mouffe, 2013) to consider the ways one pair of these students jointly evaluated the reliability of two online sources about climate change. A critical literacy lens considers all texts and the ways we read texts to be political, never neutral; an agonistic perspective offers a “theory of the political” to help frame the discussions people (in this case a pair of university students) have about topics and issues, which are typically mediated by texts. Findings from this study highlight the ways these two students operated from very different conceptions of reliability and held competing views of science. This illuminates core challenges related to reading and living in a “partisan age” (Kahne and Bowyer, 2017) and raises questions about ways that literacy educators might respond to future teachers who think they are not, as one of our participants put it, “in the truth business”.

Overview of related literature
In a comprehensive study of how middle school, high school and college students evaluate online information, researchers found that students in general had difficulty identifying who is behind information presented, evaluating evidence and investigating other sources (McGrew et al., 2017; Wineburg et al., 2016). Also, in divisive political contexts, knowledge and/or analysis skills have been shown to have limited value (Lavine et al., 2012; Taber and Lodge, 2006). While discussions about controversial issues can benefit students in the analysis and crafting of arguments (Campbell, 2008; Hess and McAvoy, 2014; Parker, 2006; Torney-Purta, 2002) and media literacy education can help students make clearer distinctions between evidence-based information and misinformation online (Kahne and Bowyer, 2017), online readers are likely to consume perspectives that align with their own (Jamieson, 2008; Prior, 2013; Kahne and Bowyer, 2017). In fact, we know that political affiliations lead to different beliefs about fundamental facts around divisive topics, such as the Iraq War (Kull et al., 2003), income inequality (Bartels, 2009) and, indeed, climate change (McCright and Dunlap, 2011). When it comes to climate change, people’s beliefs shape their evaluations of texts about climate and can even produce a “boomerang” effect, where individuals read with their beliefs and draw conclusions about sources that support those beliefs (Hart and Nisbet, 2012). Additionally, 40 per cent of Americans perceive climate change as a political issue and 44 per cent understand it as an economic issue (Leiserowitz et al., 2016). While an understanding and acceptance of the scientific consensus around climate change leads to greater public action (van der Linden et al., 2015), the large percentage of Americans who understand climate change as a political and economic issue points to the necessity of ongoing opportunities to engage in conversation and discussion, in particular across different beliefs about climate change.

Theoretical perspectives
To understand the ways that two future teachers across different content areas and climate change beliefs evaluated the credibility of Web sources about climate change, this study integrates critical literacy perspectives with agonistic philosophy.
Critical literacy as critique and reflexivity

While earlier work in critical literacy tended to focus more on “theory-for-practice” (analyses of society, the state and institutions of schooling) than “theory-in-practice”, the often “muddied interactions among critical literacy teachers and students in schools” (Morgan, 2002, p. 8), we now know a great deal about critical literacy enactments in a range of educational settings (Author, 2015; Comber and Simpson, 2001; Kuby, 2013; Morrell, 2004). While these enactments vary, there is a shared understanding of literacy as social and political (Willis and Harris, 2000). In our own work with teachers and students, we have found it useful to conceptualize the social and political practices of literacy in terms of two interdependent dimensions: textual critique and reader reflexivity.

Textual critique involves careful scrutiny of “how texts work” (Freebody and Luke, 1990). Texts are never neutral because they embody values and agendas; readers need to adopt a healthy skepticism toward all texts, pose questions about the ways texts promote different views of the world and consider whether they should accept these views (Author, 2001; McLaren, 1999). In this sense, readers are encouraged to analyze how texts “imply” readers (Iser, 1974) and invite them to respond in particular ways (e.g. to adopt political perspectives and purchase products) because texts create and transport representations of the world which have implications for how gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, nationality and individuality (among others) are viewed and constructed (Author, 2001). A desired result of engaging in these textual practices is “the development of alternative reading positions and practices for questioning and critiquing texts and their affiliated social formations and cultural assumptions” (Freebody and Luke, 1990, p. 218).

Reflexivity practices focus on turning critical lenses inward to consider questions about how reading is shaped by what we as readers and viewers bring to texts, including our beliefs, values, emotions and perspectives. These responses, in turn, are shaped by our varied social identities or locations (race, class, gender, religion, dis/ability, sexuality, etc.). Reflexivity involves a process of vigilant self-reflection and posing questions such as what knowledge, beliefs, values, perspectives and emotions am I bringing to my sense-making with this text? How do these shape my meaning-making? How might different others engage with this text? What might this mean for my own actions in the world (Author, 2015)? Of particular importance in this study are the ways readers draw from academic disciplines and climate change belief orientations in their meaning-making.

Agonism and negotiated practices

Critical literacy entails learning to challenge assumptions, biases and limits to knowledge and “to doubt the goodness of one’s own way and to enter into the give-and-take of critical argument about ethical and political choices” (Nussbaum, 1998, p. 62). This give-and-take involves the deliberation, contestation, negotiation and compromise central to living in a democracy and addressing issues of public concern. For example, practices of critique and reflexivity include people posing and pursuing important questions about the diverse, complex array of information sources about climate change that they are likely to encounter. Tully (2008, 2014) refers to the repertoire of ways citizens interact and mediate specific issues in local contexts as “negotiated practices”. Meaning-making as negotiated practices means that citizens come together to evaluate texts, offer different interpretations and engage with varied perspectives to take judicious action. Citizens also interrogate their own complicity in issues, such as climate change, in terms of their own positions, lifestyles and privileges. Disrupting the “internal narratives” that often justify particular positions and privilege is key to disrupting unjust social relations that perpetuate social problems (Teo, 2017).
In her book *Agnostics: Thinking the World Politically*, Chantal Mouffe (2013) offers a way to frame these negotiated practices. She argues that society is permeated and governed by contingency and hegemonic power relations, and that conflicts are permanent, unavoidable and ineradicable. The result is that in matters of politics, “the search for a consensus without exclusion and the hope for a perfectly reconciled and harmonious society have to be abandoned” (p. xi). This perspective contrasts with more liberal political theories, which champion individualism and the privileging of individual over collective identities and “passions”, as well as rationalism, with its beliefs in reason to reach consensus and reconciliation.

Put another way, while some political theorists conceive of the political as a space for individual liberty and collective action with the public sphere as “fertile ground for consensus”, the agonistic starting point for Mouffe is to view the political as spaces of conflict and antagonism, a “battlefield on which hegemonic projects confront one another, with no possibility whatsoever of a final reconciliation” (Mouffe, 2018). Agonistic framing of the political means that people with different or opposing political beliefs and ideas are not understood to be enemies to be vanquished but rather adversaries whose existence is legitimate. With specific attention to climate change, Machin (2013, p. 2) problematizes the assumption that there needs to be a common understanding and rational agreement to act on climate change. Machin, in fact, contends that the opposite is necessary, claiming that disagreement is necessary for “any hope of acting against climate change”.

Another key term within agonism, hegemonic practices, also merits explication. Mouffe (2018) posits that because “every society is the product of practices that seek to institute an order in a context of contingency”, it holds that “Every social order is therefore hegemonic in nature, and its origin political”. She argues:

The social is thus constituted by sedimented hegemonic practices, that is, practices that conceal the originary acts of their contingent political institution and that appear to proceed from a natural order. This perspective reveals that every order results from the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices. Things could always have been different and every order is established through the exclusion of other possibilities. It is always the expression of a particular structure of power relations, and it is from here that its political character stems (n/p).

In this sense, scientific inquiry and the pursuit of scientific facts and truths represent a set of hegemonic practices that can be understood as science and technology as hegemony (Aronowitz, 1988). As a result, we can understand the methods and results of scientific inquiry and the practices that resist, deny or dismiss these methods and results as being two distinct sets of hegemonic practices.

This study was designed to be an agonistic encounter between two pre-service teachers from different academic disciplines (science and social studies) and with opposing climate change beliefs (alarmed and dismissive). The goal was to create an opportunity for this pair of future educators to voice, acknowledge and engage their differences, rather than avoid or skirt them.

**Methods**

Our primary research question was *what critical literacy practices (textual critique and reader reflexivity) do the participants engage in when evaluating Web sources about climate change?* To better understand the ways pre-service teachers might dialogue across different climate change beliefs and academic disciplines, we conducted interviews with three pairs of pre-service teacher education students (Arksey and Knight, 1999) (Figure 1). We used a qualitative interview structure (Yin, 2015) with all participants. These six students
responded to an invitation to extend our larger study through these joint, or paired, interviews. The larger study examined what happened when 65 pre-service teachers evaluated the reliability of four different online sources about climate change. Using an instructional model that required extended individual reading time and whole group deliberation, we found that participants modified their reliability evaluations toward scientific consensus (Author, 2016). At the beginning of the larger study, participants completed the KQED Survey (http://uw.kqed.org/climatesurvey/index-kqed.php), a survey developed by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication (http://climatecommunication.yale.edu/), which yields six different categories of climate change belief profiles. At one end of the continuum is alarmed (believes climate change is happening, is human-caused and actively engages in conversations and actions to address it) and at the other end is dismissive (climate change is not happening or, if it is happening, is not human-caused).

As Figure 1 highlights, these six students were chosen because they represented different academic disciplines and held distinct climate change profiles based on the KQED survey. Each qualitative interview began with the same guiding task: evaluate these two sources to determine what, if anything, should be done about climate change. All interviews took place in a small meeting room at a university. The discussion of the two sources took approximately 30 min for each pair. Pairs sat down and were introduced to one another, and the authors shared the task. The participants then played the first video and discussed it in terms of the task, then did the same for the second video. A few times during each interview, the researchers asked a follow-up question to clarify the participants’ thinking.

Interviews were video and audio recorded and then transcribed. Guided by Erickson’s (2004) movement from holistic to micro organization in data analysis, the two authors, David and Elena (pseudonyms):

- conducted repeated readings of interview transcripts in their entirety, noting key features of each interview;
- independently memoed and annotated transcripts noting critical reading practices by each participant and confirmed identified critical reading practices by using Google docs; and
- memoed and annotated transcripts together for moments of intensity, confusion, agreement and disagreement.
Early rounds of coding completed by David and Elena led to seven initial categories of critical literacy practices, which were further refined into three primary categories of textual critique (determine purposes; evaluate claims and evidence; and evaluate author techniques) and one separate category for reflexivity to account for when the participants indexed their own backgrounds or beliefs in their interviews.

Summary of initial findings
Looking across the six pre-service teachers, we found that they all engaged in some aspects of textual critique and reflexivity during their paired discussions. They collaboratively endeavored to understand the authorship and purposes of the two sources, and they identified particular authorial techniques, such as the use of emotional appeals, to influence readers. At times, they also identified their own limited knowledge about the content of the sources and noted the need for more information, data or evidence to help them better evaluate the sources. They drew on their disciplinary backgrounds to evaluate the sources, including the art education student, who discussed esthetic criteria to evaluate the visual elements of the sources, and the two mathematics education students, who expressed the need for a greater quantity of scientific studies to help them think about what should be done to address climate change. Yet, we also found across the three paired interviews with the six students that the discussions seemed to be more superficial than deep, with politeness norms governing much of their interactions.

Focus on one pair: John and Todd
The paired interview with John and Todd was selected for closer analysis for several reasons. Most importantly, their climate change profiles fell on opposite ends of the spectrum with John’s profile as “alarmed” and Todd’s as “dismissive”.[1] They also represented different disciplinary backgrounds with varied knowledge about climate change. John was a science education major who claimed he had a lot of background knowledge about climate change because of his experiences in debate club in high school and his science focus in college. Todd was a social studies education major with plans to teach history in high school. He indicated that he was not interested in information about climate change because it was “not a pressing issue”. There was also clear evidence of greater reflexivity in this interview, with each of them indexing their own backgrounds and beliefs with movement toward agonistic encounters. The interview was also evenly distributed between the two participants: each spoke approximately 50 times for 25 min. After the decision to focus on the interview with John and Todd, a third researcher was asked to join the study and analyze the data. The three authors further memoed, annotated and posed questions to the transcript based on the overarching research question: what critical literacy practices (textual critique and reader reflexivity) do the participants engage in when evaluating Web sources about climate change?

Video sources
In the paired interview, the pre-service teachers were prompted to evaluate the reliability of two online sources that make particular arguments about climate change: a “dismissive” video clip by a libertarian think tank and an “alarmed” video clip by a liberal news organization. We chose to share the shorter of the two videos first.

Video 1: Global Warming: Glaciers, YouTube, produced by Competitive Enterprise Institute, available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wq_Bj-av3g0
This 1-min YouTube video makes a deceptive assertion that an increase in carbon dioxide (CO$_2$) is beneficial to humanity. The video, created and produced by the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI), is called “Global Warming: Glaciers”. CEI identifies itself as a non-profit public policy organization aimed at “advancing the principles of limited government, free enterprise, and individual liberty”. The organization markets itself as an all-in-one shop for advancement of libertarian principles. Explicit in their organization mission is the intentional crafting of messages related to libertarian goals. This YouTube video is one example of such a crafted message. In terms of the Six Americas profiles, this text fits snugly in the dismissive orientation to climate change. It challenges accumulated scientific knowledge and actively seeks to upend the scientific consensus. At the time of writing, the CEI’s YouTube channel had 2.8 million likes, and this YouTube video had amassed 229,558 views (354 likes and 970 dislikes) and only four comments.


The Guardian is an award-winning news organization based in the UK with outlets around the world and includes an internet presence that can be tailored to US viewers (theguardian.com/us-news). The news organization, in March of 2015, launched an initiative called “Keep it in the Ground”, aimed at the issue of divestment, specifically focused on convincing two leading charities to divest from fossil fuels:

[…] the intention was to highlight the uncomfortable fact that a large proportion of the oil, coal and gas reserves that states and companies already hold have to stay untapped in order to avoid dangerous climate change.

Implicit, then, in The Guardian’s stance is an acknowledgement of the science behind anthropogenic (human-caused) climate change and an explicit emphasis on acting in response to the issue, a key feature of an alarmist belief profile.

The video is located on The Guardian’s web page under “Keep it in the Ground” and with topics “tags” for climate change (science), climate change (environment), greenhouse gas emissions and fossil fuel divestment. Also underneath the video are links to related podcasts and a call to “join us and more than 137,000 others in urging the world’s two biggest charitable funds to move their money out of fossil fuels”, with an internal link to a petition asking these large and influential charitable organizations to divest from fossil fuels.

In the next section, we present findings of the critical literacy practices (critique and reflexivity) these two pre-service teachers demonstrated when evaluating each of the two sources. We emphasize how John, a pre-service teacher in science, evaluated the sources on scientific grounds, while Todd, the social studies pre-service teacher, emphasized the importance of understanding different perspectives about climate change. We also highlight how their reflexive work pointed to two potentially rich sites for agonistic engagement: their differing conceptions of reliability and their competing perspectives about the intersection of science and politics.
Findings

Textual critique

Determining the purpose of each source was one of three ways John and Todd engaged in textual critique. This included concerns about authorship, sponsorship and potential bias of each source. With the first source, Todd stated, “there’s definitely bias in it’s telling [...] that global warming is not an issue” and added that it is one “well-made perspective from that side of the aisle”. Here he situated his response in political terms (“side of the aisle”). Todd followed up about the particular audiences for this source, noting that it “is catered towards people who already believe one thing or another”. Todd also asked a direct question about the “impressive sounding” sponsor of the source (“What is it? Competitive Enterprise Institute?”), and a few conversational turns later, John echoed this emphasis, stating, “I’d like to know about who made the video. I don’t think they ever said in the video like who is making this or what organization is sponsoring this”. Soon thereafter, John added, “But they don’t really tell me what they’re about, what they do, so I would like to know more about the organization as a whole”. Todd followed, stating “I wanna know the author so I can see their reasoning so I can kind of get at their mindset. Because if I can understand them as a group or as an organization, I can understand the bias they’re coming in with”. The two chose not to click on the “Competitive Enterprise” link to ascertain answers to these questions. With the second source, Todd similarly expressed a need to know “who these people are” and “their interest in this”. He added that “most people don’t have luxury of caring about the climate over their money”, stating that people who are “well off” are the ones concerned about the environment. John agreed that people with financial means need to be willing to sacrifice their shares in fossil fuel companies, which would send a “signal” to big companies and result in a “shock wave”. Todd agreed with John in general but wanted to know more about “who these people are” and why they were saying what they were saying.

A second type of textual critique John and Todd engaged in was evaluating claims and evidence. With the first source, John and Todd agreed that there was a need for more data and evidence (John mentioned statistics) along with a preference “to see more studies” that substantiate the main claim of the source, which is that anthropogenic climate change is not occurring. John, for example, stated: “I wish they would have told me something about those studies or like what was wrong with the studies that say it is melting”. With the second source, Todd highlighted the lack of substantive data used to support the blaming of fossil fuel companies. He also questioned whether the source was suggesting that people who are “dismissive” about climate change have problems with alternative energy solutions. He stated: “It’s not like every climate change dismissive is a big oil fat cat, you know, who drives their Hummer down the road”. Both John and Todd agreed that the association between the climate change movement and the anti-apartheid movement in Africa was “a stretch”, yet the two did not demonstrate a clear conceptual understanding of divestment as an economic and political strategy. This was especially the case for John, who spoke more directly about divestment during the discussion. His first response was to call it “a ridiculous proposal”, because it challenged the purpose of fossil fuel companies. With more of an emphasis on the purpose of the source, John added:

It seems like the people they would be showing this [video] to are either ones who already think climate change is real and wouldn’t have any stocks in that stuff, or people who don’t think it’s real and probably have more of a stake in making money out of these companies than anything.

A core component of divestment, as suggested by this video, is for institutions to divest from fossil fuel companies (large companies, universities with sizable endowments invested
in the stock market, etc.). John seemed to operate solely from a more individualistic orientation – i.e. individual people choosing not to invest in fossil fuel companies.

The third category of textual critique we discerned from the interview with John and Todd was *evaluating author techniques*. Given that both sources were video clips intended to persuade viewers, it was not surprising that John and Todd considered ways the sources aimed to influence viewers’ emotional responses. After viewing the first video together, John identified the emotional appeals of the source, pointing to the use of trees, which made it seem natural and “healthy” with nature not threatened, as well as the use of “big words” and scare tactics, especially about children. Todd agreed about the use of emotional appeals as a technique used in the video and pointed out that “everyone uses emotional appeals”. With the second source, Todd highlighted that the use of emotional appeals through comparisons to Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu and Martin Luther King Jr., which made this source as “propaganda-ish” as the first one. John shared a cultural assumption that he found British accents “kinda smarter” and also identified the use of “negative” images, such as oil spills with the second source and “positive” images (e.g. trees) with the first source. For John, this was evidence of what he called the “frame game”.

In sum, there was evidence that John and Todd engaged in critical literacy practices of textual critique; they discussed purposes of the sources, considered claims and evidence (primarily in terms of expressing a need for more data and evidence) and identified authorial techniques (e.g. use of emotional appeals, positive and negative images). However, much of this engagement with the sources remained more at a surface level with somewhat superficial criteria to evaluate the sources (e.g. name of company, image of trees and use of emotional appeals). We did not see evidence of deeper, more focused critical analysis of the purpose and content of the sources which might have led to more significant insights. For example, John and Todd chose not click on links to the CEI to answer their own questions about this sponsor nor did they specify what kinds of data/evidence would be more useful. Their apparent limited understanding of divestment as an economic and political strategy also seemed to shape their evaluations of the second source.

*Reader reflexivity*

During the discussion, John and Todd indexed their own beliefs and backgrounds, and this reflexivity took different forms. At two points in the discussion, John mentioned how his personal experiences as a learner had shaped his thinking. He stated, “I’ve kind of taught myself to believe less of the emotional appeal” and also pointed out that he had been on the debate team for six years and global warming was his “favorite thing to research”. John also located himself in terms of his climate change beliefs (alarmed), stating at one point, “I do think climate change is a big deal and does bad things and I also think it’s kind of the fossil fuel corporations’ fault too”. Todd also indexed his climate change beliefs (dismissive), noting with the first source, “If I have the beliefs that you guys know I do, that it’s not a human-caused issue, this [source] would be something I could point to”. These moments of reflexivity also point to a surface-level engagement with the issue of climate change (“does bad things”) and potential tensions within belief orientations (“If I have the beliefs that you guys know I do”).

To a greater extent, however, Todd’s reflexivity centered on his academic background in history and his future work as a social studies teacher. John also appealed to his academic discipline of science in the discussion. The ways they did this produced the most compelling exchanges during the interview discussion and pointed to two rich sites for agonistic engagement; their differing conceptions of reliability and their competing perspectives about the science of climate change. We explore what we discerned to be two “agonistic
moments” in the data that reflect emergent agonism, the two beginning to engage their differences. What also becomes apparent within these moments of emergent agonism is that textual critique, such as assessing purpose or examining bias, becomes entangled with reflexive orientations to the online sources, to one another, and to larger (and competing) conceptions of truth and reliability.

**Agonistic moment #1: conceptions of reliability.** In terms of their academic disciplines, Todd located himself within social studies in the academic discipline of history. In response to the first source, he stated, “As a historian […] I don’t want to see if the source is true. I want to see who, [and] what is it trying to tell us”. He also pointed to this disciplinary identity in terms of the work that he perceives historians do. He stated:

> If I was trying to convince somebody of my argument, this would be a very good kind of hook to draw them in, very simply, succinctly summarize the sort of dismissive belief.

He then made a connection between the work of historians and his pedagogical priorities as a social studies teacher:

> As a social studies teacher, my job isn’t it to point my students to what is true. It’s to point them to […] this is reliable, this is not complete garbage […] believe one side but some people believe, this is what other people believe, [these are] accurate representations of [each side]. Make your own decisions.

There is also evidence of Todd defining reliability in terms of a source’s utility, as he described how he could use each source (based on that source’s purpose) to convince others. With the first source, for example, he noted that it would be an effective “hook” to draw people in before providing more data and evidence. John also considered his own disciplinary background in science and chemistry and how that shaped his sense-making. He noted:

> I think that’s kind of why I wanted more data on the first one. […] if I can see maybe like, I don’t know, that some concentrations of CO\(_2\) in the atmosphere and how this will change or what those changes [might be] […] that would be a little more believable for me.

John held a view of reliability in which evidence-based scientific inquiry can yield verifiable facts, if not scientific truths. Todd defined reliability differently and maintained that reliability meant accurate representations of a perspective, in this case about climate change – i.e. the first source was a “reliable representation” of a dismissive view and the second source was a “reliable representation” of an alarmed perspective. In other words, Todd was contending that a source can be reliable if it accurately represented someone’s view rather than factual accuracy or whether the source (person or group) has expertise on the topic. At one point, Todd stated that reliability was related to whether something is true, but he “does not consider if something is true” because he does not “work in the truth business”.

**Agonistic moment #2: science of climate change.** The two pre-service teachers discussed the legitimacy of climate change science: about the overwhelming consensus among climate change research scientists that human-caused global warming has been occurring and whether additional CO\(_2\) in the atmosphere was beneficial or harmful. Most of their exchange centered on atmospheric CO\(_2\).

John’s evidence-based reasoning led him to what Craven (2009) has called a “rational response to climate change”, which is a pragmatic risk-management approach in deciding what level of action to take now. John added:

> I just think even if the side that says CO\(_2\) is going to increase plant life and that’s going to increase the amount of oxygen in the atmosphere, I’m not willing to take the risk and say, I’m going to
hang my hat on CO₂ will even out. I mean it will be fine. I'm not willing to hang my hat on that because if I'm wrong, I'm screwed. Everyone [is].

Todd challenged this conclusion, as he pointed to the argument, proffered by the first source from the CEI, that having more CO₂ in the atmosphere will increase plant life, thus increasing oxygen in the atmosphere. John did acknowledge that there were different perspectives about the future impact of increased atmospheric CO₂, even stating there was "good data on both sides". Todd seemed to seize this opportunity, using John’s acknowledgement of different views to demonstrate that “doubt exists”, because “he [John] obviously just said both are plausible”. John, however, maintained that it was important to value facts stemming from the results of scientific study and research, and he focused on data and specific evidence about global warming:

But it is an almost indisputable fact that there is more CO₂ in the atmosphere now than there was a long time ago. And there’s really no credible explanation except for fossil fuels. So that would be my thing, is you can give both sides credit but you should follow the data, if 99 per cent of the studies point to this side we should give them 99 per cent of the credit.

While Todd suggested that a scientific process could determine “who’s right” and “which side of the data is right”, he was not willing to agree the science that human-caused climate change is beyond a reasonable doubt, especially when it came to atmospheric CO₂. Todd claimed that although there is agreement in the scientific community that there is more CO₂ in the atmosphere, there is still doubt about whether this is a “good thing” or a “bad thing”. As the interview drew to a close, one of the researchers asked John to clarify whether he thought there was doubt between these two perspectives about the impact of atmospheric CO₂. John responded, “I think there’s a little bit of doubt. Again the 99 to 1. And that’s not a risk I’m willing to take”.

What we find, then, in these two agonistic moments is an emergent agonism, or initial steps toward a deeper engagement of differences with two texts providing a fulcrum. Different perspectives were shared, acknowledged and, to some extent, addressed. There was less evidence of more direct challenges of each other’s ideas and the sense of the two participating on a “battlefield on which hegemonic projects confront one another” (Mouffe, 2018). One explanation for this is that it seemed at different times during the interview discussion that the two were operating from different premises about their purposes. For example, John indicated that he did not trust the first source but trusted the second source, though he did not agree with divestment as a strategy to combat climate change. John valued scientific inquiry and respected the results of scientific research and the consensus about human-caused climate change. In other words, debating the science of climate change did not seem necessary or useful to him. What was needed was more discussion about what should be done about climate change, which requires deliberation of ideas, possibilities and proposals for best courses of action. He, for example, mentioned that solar panels could reach market parity with fossil fuels, an alternative he thought would be a more effective strategy to shift people away from fossil fuels. In contrast, Todd did not deem either source to be trustworthy, holding fast to the view that the reliability of a source was determined by its fidelity to a particular perspective, and he held the view that the science of climate change remained unsettled.

Here, we see Todd enacting a common approach of people with a “dismissive” climate change profile, which is to impugn the scientific consensus about climate change, contending that the science is still “not settled” and requires additional study. There is a long history of this practice in the USA pertaining, for example, to adverse effects of tobacco smoke, DDT and ozone layer depletion (Oreskes and Conway, 2011). Because science
champions’ healthy skepticism, this impugnment also can be understood as science being used “against itself” where it is “vulnerable to misrepresentation, because it is easy to take uncertainties out of context and create the impression that everything is unresolved” (Oreskes and Conway, 2011, p. 34, emphasis added). To a certain extent, John’s willingness to substantiate that there “is good data on both sides” about the potential impact of increased atmospheric CO₂ provided an opportunity for Todd to do this.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study. While this study was designed to be an agonistic encounter between two pre-service teachers from different academic disciplines and with contrasting climate change beliefs, the research design could have been more intentional about this goal. For example, their shared task was to “determine whether each of these sources was reliable to help you determine what, if anything, should be done about climate change”. A more direct agonistic prompt might have been:

The two of you hold opposing views about climate change, which often can lead to very different ideas when it comes to determining what, if anything, should be done about climate change. So, as you determine the reliability of these two online sources, your goal is to convince the other person that your views about what should be done are better.

A related limitation of the study might have been the restricted length of time to complete the multiple steps of the task, which included viewing and discussing each source separately. Another limitation was not having more robust data about the background knowledge John and Todd brought to the activity, including their views of and commitments to civic or political engagement, as well as their knowledge about climate change and media and knowledge in their respective disciplines.

Implications

Living and teaching in our highly partisan age (Kahne and Bowyer, 2017) means being more aware of the many efforts, strategies and techniques used to shape citizens’ beliefs and behaviors, especially those designed to mislead and misinform us about significant issues, such as climate change. Our findings point to the need to help pre-service teachers engage in deeper, more focused critical literacy practices to engage doggedly in textual critique: evaluating authorial background, interests and positions and analyzing how texts “work” and “imply” readers to promote particular agendas. Developing these practices requires explicit attention to the ways businesses, politicians, organizations and media have used the “rhetoric of balance, fair play, and multiple perspectives” (Hess, 2009, p. 123), as well as “manufactured” uncertainty and doubt (Oreskes and Conway, 2011), to promote particular views and agendas. For example, when it comes to the science of climate change, it is important for pre-service teachers (like Todd) to understand that giving “both sides” of the debate “equal and valid say” is not warranted on scientific grounds.

Being able to assess the validity, legitimacy and nuances of different kinds of perspectives and arguments also requires reflexivity as a core critical literacy practice. This begins with acknowledging one’s need for sufficient background knowledge about unfamiliar content in a text, such as the role of divestment in addressing climate change. Such reflexivity also entails being able to not only examine others’ ideological or political affiliations, core assumptions, key beliefs and identities but also a willingness to examine one’s own. This can be difficult because it requires accepting that one’s own views are necessarily limited and understanding that others may have more informed and developed ideas. Accepting a position of reflexive humility and fallibility is key because it presupposes
that we benefit from interacting with diverse others who can help us better understand complex topics (Appiah, 2008; Author, 2011).

The implications of this study for teacher education also point to the need for more explicit attention to critical literacy practices across the content areas. Teacher education courses in specific subject areas can help pre-service teachers learn how to mobilize disciplinary literacy practices and content area knowledge to help them carefully investigate complex information sources, such as those used in this study. For example, when the CEI video mentions CO₂ “isn’t smog or smoke, it’s what we breathe out and plants breathe in”, viewers need to have some scientific understanding of CO₂ as both a gas produced by respiration and a greenhouse gas emitted by human activities, such as burning fossil fuels, that contributes to climate change (NASA, 2018). To assess the claims about divestment made in the second video, social science literacy practices enable examination of divestment case studies (e.g. targeting apartheid in South Africa) to evaluate the efficacy of divestment for social change or investigation into university-based campaigns (Apfel, 2015), such as the Responsible Endowments Coalition (2018), to learn more about fossil fuel divestment as a movement being taken up by university students. Disciplinary knowledge and literacy practices in this case would help readers contextualize and corroborate information to evaluate the reliability of the two sources and the claims they make.

This work can help pre-service teachers understand that knowledge from the disciplines is often used (and misused) in information sources to make arguments, influence the ways people think about issues such as climate change and connect with particular ideological positions, beliefs and identities. This focus in the subject areas can help teachers think about the nature of expertise in the disciplines to question authorship and purpose, understand how knowledge is constructed and legitimated in particular disciplines, evaluate how disciplinary knowledge is used to make claims and be able to distinguish when claims are unwarranted based on specious evidence or logic. It is especially important for pre-service teachers to understand that disciplinary knowledge can also be used to make emotional appeals or be presented in ways intended to appeal to values and beliefs. For example, the “alarmed” and “dismissive” video clips in this study used particular techniques and knowledge to appeal to and reinforce certain climate change beliefs. Helping the two students in this study understand these aspects of the video clips is central to a more thorough textual critique and the reflexive awareness of how the clips “connect” (or do not connect) to pre-existing beliefs and identities.

Findings from this study also point to the potential of an agonistic framing of the political and the possibility of give-and-take deliberation among pre-service teachers. The sort of initial agonistic encounter between John and Todd from different disciplinary backgrounds and climate change beliefs in this study is an initial step. We need to know more about the ways agonistic encounters support or thwart pre-service teachers’ abilities to evaluate the reliability of sources about complex topics. This includes pre-service teachers within an academic discipline or subject area (history or social studies education), as well as across disciplines, as with John and Todd (science and history, respectively). We also think there is more to learn about reflexivity as a critical literacy practice, especially through an agonistic perspective. Finally, if a goal is for pre-service teachers to become more comfortable with debate, contestation, controversy and confrontation, as well as critical self-reflection, teacher educators need to lead the way through modeling and providing examples.
Conclusions

Agonistic encounters serve an educative function. They require antagonists to articulate their views, engage views other than their own and participate in the give-and-take that is central to civic life and learning. Rather than view climate science as outside of or beyond politics, we can understand it as positioned on the “battlefield” confronting the hegemonic practices of climate change denialists, fossil fuel industries and government representatives representing such views. Such was the response of many scientists who joined citizens in protest on Earth Day, April 22, in 2017, with “marches for science” (Twitter hashtag: #marchforscience) in 600 US cities as part of a comprehensive movement to: strengthen the role of science in policy-making, improve science outreach and communication, advance science education and foster an inclusive, diverse community (https://satellites.marchforscience.com/). At the heart of this movement is the notion that science and education serve the public good and are essential for democratic life. The March for Science mission statement notes that “science serves the interests of all humans, not just those in power”, and that it is “critical to ensure that science reaches its potential to serve all communities” (www.marchforscience.com/mission-and-vision/).

As literacy educators, we tend not to see ourselves in “the truth business” and likely for good reason. There is a long history of pedagogical attempts to march students to pre-ordained truths. However, we think the results of this study remind us that critical literacy work, as textual critique and reader reflexivity, are essential for exploring and examining the truths we individually and, in some cases, collectively, hold dear. Agonism offers a lens that helps ensure that we understand that all pursuits toward facts and truth are necessarily contested as we engage with respected adversaries, not enemies we need to vanquish (or whom we deem to be less ethical or moral than ourselves). There is an urgent need for dialogue across difference, especially for people in the increasingly polarized USA. We argue that if educators are to play a role in addressing complex topics and challenges such as climate change, we need to create conditions for pre-service teachers to have agonistic moments. These agonistic moments are fundamentally educative because they require us to encounter and engage with different viewpoints and positions, question our own views and hopefully develop better, more informed and more just positions on issues. The humility necessary to consider what we do not know and may not yet believe is an opening for potential action that might be the most productive space of all.

Note

1. Todd expressed concern about the survey profiles, stating that it was “completely biased because it treated white, conservative, male, Republican, and “born again” Christian like taboo words.”

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Navigating discourses in academia: challenging the status quo

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to discuss the seepage of current national discourses into the fabric of university classrooms. The authors describe their experiences navigating politics and accompanying discourses in their undergraduate and graduate courses at a rural Midwestern university in the USA. Their narrative provides a socio-historical context in response to events related to the 2016 presidential election.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors situate their cultural and linguistic identities within a critical race theory framework and unpack discourses of privilege that "other" students and families from nondominant communities. They highlight promising practices that challenge the status quo, creating opportunities for critical teaching and reflection.

Findings – Teacher educators are called on to engage pre- and in-service teachers in practice-based pedagogies and inquiries around authentic issues that present possibilities for transformative social change.

Originality/value – This narrative addresses teaching in contentious times and reflects on transformative practice to engender critical hope.

Keywords Discourses, Culturally responsive pedagogy, Critical race theory, CRT, White privilege

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

The 2016 US presidential election ushered in a new era of white identity politics (Maskovsky, 2017). The intensity of the campaign made visible a racially divided nation, giving "strength and momentum" to white supremacy and its concomitant racialized discourses (Monzó and McLaren, 2017, p. 14). This is not, however, endemic to the USA, as a surge of nationalism has created a "global phenomenon" (Wodak, 2015, p. 70). While once tied to notions of citizenship, nationalism is increasingly defined by exclusionary ethnic, racist categories, marking some as outsiders. In addressing the current state of US affairs, Maskovsky coined the term "white nationalist postracialism" to refer to politics that advance merit-based, colorblind ideologies and anti-immigrant, anti-global and anti-multicultural agendas. White nationalist postracialism calls for people to be judged on merit and not on race. Maskovsky further notes that Trump’s anti-immigrant, merit-based ideologies encourage expressions of racially charged views, not only in the political arena but also in teacher preparation classrooms.

In this practitioner narrative, the authors describe recent experiences teaching pre- and in-service teacher education courses in language, literacies and culture at a rural Midwestern university in the USA. Their purpose is to draw attention to how recent political events are shaping classroom discourse and to amplify the need for socially just and culturally responsive pedagogies. The authors draw on critical race theory (CRT) to frame their reflections. They situate their cultural and linguistic identities and unpack discourses of
privilege that “other” students and families from nondominant communities. The authors then describe promising practices that challenge the status quo to create opportunities for critical reflection and teaching.

In the USA, findings from a University of California Los Angeles survey reported by National Public Radio News (Kementz, 2017, p. 4) indicated that teachers are noticing an increase in bullying related to political talk since President Trump’s inauguration. According to the teachers, students “seem more “emboldened” to express racist and derogatory views”. This news is hardly surprising, as students learn what it means to be raced and how to racialize others (Trainor, 2017). Wodak (2015), writing on ethno-nationalist populism in the European Union, points to the fallacy of sameness. She explains how sameness presupposes one’s own nation as culturally homogenous and superior while stressing the dangers ethnic minorities pose to national security and well-being. Similarly, in a critical literacy course in South Africa, Janks and Adegoke (2011) found that students practiced exclusion during group work, preferring to work with those of their own race and nationality. These examples illustrate how race and nationhood are often used to conceptualize the configuration of communities, fueling the global rise of nationalism (Brubaker, 2009).

Racialized discourses “socialize people into seeing, thinking, and performing whiteness and non-whiteness” (Kennedy et al., 2017, p. 5). They are a means of enacting one’s positions and representations in the world. Despite teaching in an era of polarized political discourse and in a bid to be color blind (Bonilla-Silva, 2002), some educators disregard sociopolitical factors that impact pedagogy (Sleeter, 2011; Castagno, 2013, p. 113). Castagno argues that educators who focus on colorblind ideologies to promote unity engage in “powerblind sameness”, preserving the status quo and ignoring inequalities.

Navigating the politics of teacher discourses in P-20 teacher education courses is challenging when participants grapple with the interplay of sociocultural influences in the teaching/learning process. Thus, it is imperative that educators integrate culturally responsive teaching into their practice, which Gay (2010, p. 31) defines as the “behavioral expressions of knowledge, beliefs, and values that recognize the importance of racial and cultural diversity in learning”. Cochran-Smith (2004, p. xii) further elaborates on the need for educators to become linguistically and culturally aware, stating:

[...] we cannot shy away from unpleasant and uncertain conversations because the failure and unwillingness to look, listen, and learn about diversity and oppression significantly interfere with the ability to critique and problematize schooling and or teach against the grain.

The authors contend that when educators downplay the significance of politics on classroom discourse and dispositions, students of color are adversely affected.

Teacher knowledge and preparation are world-wide policy concerns (Brass, 2014). In her goal to improve teacher preparation and professional development, Darling-Hammond (2017) contrasts the US education system with those of Finland, Singapore, Canada and Australia. She maintains that educational systems in these countries have strong professional ideals and demonstrate a firm commitment to developing educators. She draws attention to the devaluing of teacher education programs, teachers and the field of teaching by recent US administrations and suggests that these practices have negatively impacted underserved communities.

Addressing educational inequity and improving teacher knowledge in the USA led to the development of core professional teaching standards by the Council of Chief State School Officers (2013, p. 17). The Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) Standard #2: Learning Differences states: “The teacher uses understanding of
individual differences and diverse cultures and communities to ensure inclusive learning environments that enable each learner to meet high standards". This standard requires educators to integrate practices related to English learners (ELs), culturally responsive pedagogies (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2014) and funds of knowledge, a resource pedagogy that refers to household’s and individual’s historically and culturally developed bodies of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) into the curriculum. Teacher preparation programs align course readings and experiences to these standards, but teachers’ beliefs, dispositions and discourses about teaching culturally and linguistically diverse learners cannot be mandated. Therefore, teacher education students in the USA who are uncomfortable with practices associated with cultural responsiveness and funds of knowledge often express their opinions in political terms, which reflect white nationalist postracialized discourses. The challenge then exists in deconstructing differences of race and nationality (Brubaker, 2009).

**Theoretical perspectives**

CRT offers a framework to deconstruct race, power and privilege within the USA (Delgado and Stefancic, 2013). Scholars who subscribe to CRT challenge the privilege endowed to whites at the expense of people of color. CRT addresses the intersection of race, power and privilege and the impact of these on people of color in a predominantly white society with deep-seated racism. Drawing on the notion that racism is ingrained in American society, CRT operates on the following premises: it challenges status quo/mainstream viewpoints, offers a platform for counter-narratives from non-dominant groups, subscribes to a social justice framework and draws on an integrative (interdisciplinary) approach to investigate a plethora of worldviews (Howard and Navarro, 2016).

The ideology of whiteness is reified and reproduced in dominant discourse. Jaworski and Coupland (2006, p. 46) define an ideology as “common assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs about social life, which are often treated as stable and immutable, and which shape, maintain and reinforce group relations including patterns of power”. Ideologies are sustained and communicated through “everyday conversations and institutional talk and text” (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 506). Van Dijk contends that discourses pertaining to immigrants, refugees, people of color and the LGBTQ community function broadly, affecting the social, political and cultural fabric of society.

Gee (2008) agrees viewing discourses as identity toolkits that signal membership in groups associated with that identity. Van Dijk (2006, p. 506) maintains that discourses often convey “positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation”. Correspondingly, Howard (2006, p. 32) asserts that individuals selectively distinguish between themselves as individuals and as members of a group, after which, they then “ascribe values of superiority and inferiority to the various in-groups and out-groups”. Furthermore, conversations that support and reify such distinctions are deeply related to the distribution of social goods, which Gee (2014) refers to as politics, i.e. who wins or loses, and who gains wealth, status and acceptance. Thus, discourses establish identities, enact social positions and advance the interests of the dominant.

For these reasons, the construct of whiteness as property warrants further discussion. Delgado and Stefancic (1997, pp. 98-100) theorized that during certain periods in history, an individual is guilty of imposition merely “by virtue of whom he or she is – that is, simply by being a Jew, woman, Chinese, or black engaged in some ordinary activity in life”. They refer to the English-only movement as an exemplar of the ways in which the language of imposition positions immigrants and linguistically diverse communities as unpatriotic and unwilling to assimilate. The adjective “normal” becomes an identifier for groups who acculturate and adopt “American culture and values”. Accordingly, Delgado and Stefancic
claim that the “narrative of imposition appears at predictable periods in history, namely, when reform has gained momentum and appears poised to produce changes that make us uneasy”. Given the recent proliferation of political talk, it is little wonder that such discourses actively weave their way into classroom talk, underscoring the calculus of teaching as a political act. However, as discourses are socially constructed, they can also change (Goodman and Cocca, 2014). Resisting the current sociopolitical climate and forces of oppression entails taking up the role of an activist to enact socially just pedagogies both in spirit and in practice (Andrews et al., 2017).

Being an activist is challenging. Howard and Navarro (2016) allude to the tensions associated with implementing pedagogical approaches grounded in CRT. They explain that although CRT has been explored in the literature for more than two decades, it has not, in practice, demonstrably increased opportunities for students of color. As discussed by a number of scholars, disciplinary measures, graduation rates and career opportunities are still skewed against students and people of color (Artiles et al., 2010).

Situating the cross-cultural context of our narrative
In this section, the authors situate the cross-cultural context of their narrative. They describe the regional context in which they teach and establish their identities as cultural border crossers.

The authors live and work in a region of the country known as America’s Heartland, a distinct area that encompasses the middle or “heart” of the country. The region is home to a number of sundown towns (Loewen, 2005, p. 4), which Loewen defines as “any organized jurisdiction that for decades kept African Americans or other groups from living in it and was thus ‘all-white’ on purpose”. He describes how sundown towns sprang up after the Civil War during Reconstruction and estimates that approximately 120 remain in the region, illustrating the region’s history of racial discrimination.

The Heartland was settled by Western European immigrants. Farms and land have been passed down through families for generations. Church spires, modern and historic, evidence a strong Christian heritage (Russell, 2012). Tradition and hard work are valued, connecting family, community and country. While the land remains fertile and bountiful, the region falls under a special US Government poverty designation (see the Delta Regional Authority link: http://dra.gov/about-dra/mission-and-vision). Once known for its coal production, Russell makes plain that as coal became less marketable, a number of mines either reduced production or closed. The region suffered economically from the loss of coal and manufacturing jobs; therefore, Trump’s message to curtail illegal immigration, negotiate new trade deals and bring back the coal industry reverberated throughout the Heartland, bringing hope to the region.

Crossing borders: Lavern
As a Black female growing up in Jamaica, I spoke both Standard Jamaican English and Jamaican Patois. I cannot specifically say at what point I learned either. However, my maternal grandmother, who was a stickler for “speaking properly”, would constantly correct me, and I knew English was the language to be used in school, at church and in official settings. In Jamaica, classroom instruction is in English due to the country’s historical ties with the British, but most Jamaicans are of West African descent and speak a native language with West African roots. For the most part, educators have not affirmed the native language.

Recently, due to a shift in language ideologies, Jamaican scholars and linguists have called for a revision of the education system, as it pertains to the use of the native tongue.
Devonish (2001, p. 1) in his proposal to reconstruct the Jamaican Constitution, argues that “the Constitution should guarantee freedom from discrimination” on the basis of language. A professor in the Department of Language, Linguistics and Philosophy at the University of the West Indies in Kingston, Jamaica, Devonish was instrumental in encouraging wide-scale efforts to promote the affirmation of the native language, which was once viewed (and still is by many) as broken English.

To this end, I have experienced first-hand the complexities associated with the divide between those who are considered fluent English speakers by Jamaican standards and those who are labeled as speakers of “broken” English. My “overlapping identities” (Dyson and Genishi, 2005, p. 57) as a former elementary teacher in Jamaica and now as a teacher educator have deepened my understanding of complications related to family, societal and school expectations about the teaching and learning of language, and I daily straddle in between worlds.

Transitioning into a faculty position in the USA was not without hurdles, but having obtained both my masters and PhD from a US institution helped. Relocating to the USA 12 years ago to pursue a master’s degree and ultimately my doctoral degree was a major culture shock. It was the first time in my adult life that I was living permanently in a foreign country, despite having traveled for years to the USA for vacations, and I had the sudden realization that as a Black woman, with a thick Jamaican accent, I may be perceived as unlikely to succeed.

Although I was awarded a prestigious scholarship that fully funded my master’s program, it was the first time I realized what it meant to be Black in America. In my formative years, I was educated in a majority Black country and excelled in academia. No one questioned the legitimacy of my achievements, but here in the USA, I have had numerous conversations with students who point out “Blacks are hired because of race to fill quotas”, a statement that diminishes my success.

**Straddling different worlds: Heidi**

As a wife and mother of a racially blended family, I too straddle different worlds. In my personal life, I dwell in a borderland where I feel and experience pain and injustice directed to my family and me while benefitting professionally from my privileged status as a white academic. Mahoney (1997, p. 642) writes that “White interactions go on whether or not we intend to subordinate another person or to interact with consciousness of race”. As a professor and cross-cultural researcher, I routinely reflect on my privilege and interrogate my subjectivities, discourses and positioning of self and others (Bacon, 2014).

My family roots are working class. I was born to German immigrants who spelled phonetically and spoke English with an accent. I grew up in a post-Second World War white suburban neighborhood. My parents saw America as a land of opportunity and subscribed to the myth of the meritocracy where one need only work hard to prosper. They judged those who were different as less than or other.

By age 16, my life took a series of turns that separated me from my parents. I began navigating on my own and negotiating life in the margins. Contrary to my parents’ beliefs, regardless of how hard I worked at a progression of service jobs, I knew I needed to complete high school and obtain a college degree. Thus, I returned to school as a working wife and mother to earn a general education development (GED), a high school equivalency exam, and a bachelor’s, master’s and a doctoral degree.

After working in a series of banking and sales positions, I left the business world for a teaching career. At the time, I was living with my family in a Southwestern city close to the US/Mexico border. I had been volunteering at an adult education center in a predominantly Latinx neighborhood, which spurred my decision to teach, as I loved working with adult
learners. In a related move, my first teaching job was at an adult probation office teaching adult basic education and GED. Two years later, I accepted a position at an urban charter school where I worked with underserved youth from nondominant communities. It was during my tenure at the charter school that I witnessed the “othering” (Borrero et al., 2012) of students by teachers and staff. Students were often described in deficit terms, and some were written off as uneducable. These experiences left an indelible mark and influenced my desire to become a teacher educator.

Creating cross-cultural understandings
The authors’ life experiences and academic preparation shaped their commitment to increasing educational equity. Mahoney (1997, p. 642), however, reminds us that “transformative work is part of conscious-raising and [...] entails listening respectfully to those who can see what we cannot”. This type of listening encompasses what Cammarota and Romero (2009) refer to as deep respect that arises out of true caring. Thus, raising consciousness requires a process of decolonization and activism, exposing the hidden to make it visible and “questioning unjust structures and values” (Nieto, 2008, p. 140). One way that CRT theorizes transformative visibility is through the sharing of counter-stories of those who are marginalized/pressed.

**Majoritarian versus counter stories in teacher discourse**
Yosso (2006, p. 4) describes two types of stories that explain unequal educational outcomes: majoritarian and counter stories. According to Yosso, majoritarian stories begin with assumptions that all individuals have access to the same kinds of “opportunities and conditions”. Gee (2014) refers to these stories as “typical stories”, oversimplified models of the world that vary based on one’s assumptions, values and beliefs. Conversely, counter stories or narratives tell about the lives and experiences of those who live in the margins. Counter storytelling is a tool to analyze and contest public narratives put forth by those in power (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). Counter stories, therefore, offer “alternatives to hegemonic discourses of race, class, gender, and sexuality” (Elenes, 2006, p. 245). They give voice to those whose voices have often been silenced.

**Majoritarian stories in teacher discourses**
A commonly held majoritarian story in teacher discourse is exemplified by Payne’s (2005) culture of poverty. Payne takes up a set of class-based rules that essentialize families and fail to account for prevailing social, political and institutional contexts that are marginalizing (Dudley-Marling, 2007). Her influence is far-reaching, as schools and districts across the USA have implemented her professional development programs on understanding students who live in poverty and have come to view nondominant families through this lens.

Dyson (2015, p. 199) asserts that eventually “the intersection of socially and politically influenced attitudes” alter and become “naturalized”. For example, in one of Heidi’s classes, a group of pre-service teachers read about Moll et al.’s (1992) funds of knowledge. The discussion topic for class that day centered on the importance of home visits and a related assignment requiring students to conduct a home visit. When class convened, Heidi noticed that students were largely silent. After several attempts to draw them out, a student blurted out that she did not want to go to the home of any of those families. She hypothesized the home would be unclean, and she worried about her personal safety. Although the student spoke hypothetically, it was clear she subscribed to a majoritarian narrative of those families and the likely condition of their homes. The student’s classmates did not speak up; they nodded their heads in agreement and allowed her to speak for the group.
In a second incident that involved nationalist postracial discourses, students in one of Heidi’s graduate classes read a variety of texts on language, literacy and culture to explore the teaching of ELs and students who speak a variation of English. Several students wrote in their discussion posts that providing initial native language support was a good thing, but too much native language instruction would obstruct the ability of ELs to learn English, as ELs need to be given every opportunity to speak English to be successful in the labor market. Other students expressed similar sentiments. One student wrote that America might lose its identity; people should come here to assimilate and become one group of people, which is what makes this country great. Another student noted that current Americans are not connected to the homelands of their ancestors. True Americans want to promote and preserve the current USA, as America is home to born and raised Americans who are in the business of continuing the idea of America as the greatest country in the world. The students’ language reveals what Bonilla-Silva (2002, p. 41) refers to as the “standard linguistic fare of whites’ contemporary racetalk”. It speaks to majoritarian narratives that become normalized over time and explicates how racism and color-blind sameness are ingrained in American society. The co-opting of language and country aligns with Wodak’s (2015) fallacy of sameness and paints a dichotomous picture of those who belong by virtue of blood and land and outsiders who are excluded by race, ethnicity, language, religion or sexual orientation.

A third related incident occurred in a methods course for pre-service teachers. An undergraduate female student asked about the difference between using the term English learner versus English Language Learner, a term critiqued by Duff (2012, p. 410) for its “incomplete processes and outcomes of learning and acculturation”. A middle-aged white male interrupted to ask whether we could just drop the politically correct nonsense and move on to the rest of the lecture. His comments eschew discussions of difference and dismiss them as more politically correct jargon. They evidence a post-racial ideology where race does not matter (Cho, 2009).

Likewise, in a graduate course that prepares educators to teach diverse students, Lavern was reprimanded by an older white female who maintained the content of the course was too liberal. For example, students participated in a privilege walk and discussed ways they felt race impacted their daily experiences. While Lavern sought to entertain different perspectives, the student took exception to the activity. During discussion of a course reading, this student expressed ire over the use of the term “undocumented” rather than “illegal alien”, which she claimed was the correct term. Intensifying the debate over political correctness, the student argued that undocumented is a “politically correct” term used by liberals to sugarcoat how those who reside in the USA without proper documentation are breaking the law. She took Lavern to task for promoting “this liberal agenda” in a class where hardworking Americans were seeking an education.

These incidents bring tensions associated with broaching issues of race to the fore. Rodgers (2017, p. 222) claims that in the USA, although “issues of race are national – even international–in scope, they are also personal and local [. . .] race is individually embodied and socially experienced”. Confronting the reality of teaching as a political act can lead to acrimonious debates, as the current sociopolitical context makes it acceptable to other groups of people based largely on fear (Buchanan, 2017). As consciousness and awareness are “dialectically related” to practice and struggle (Fairclough, 2015, p. 230), the authors’ experiences showcase the terrains that faculty must navigate, as they seek to sensitize students to the political, ideological nature of teaching and learning.

Counter stories of hope
In his seminal article on hope, Duncan-Andrade (2009, p. 182) identified three kinds of false hope: hokey hope, mythological hope and hope deferred. He names these as “enemies of hope”,
as each reinforces majoritarian stories and sustains post-racial ideologies. Duncan-Andrade calls instead for critical hope to advance the struggle against racism, xenophobia and oppression of marginalized people. Hope is critical; it allows us to reimagine our world. Counter storytelling creates new narratives that foster and build critical hope. With this in mind, the authors present the following counter-stories to disrupt and complicate the status quo.

Reconceptualizing beliefs and perceptions
In the summer of 2016, Heidi taught and supervised a clinical graduate reading assessment course for in-service teachers (Bacon, 2016). The course was held at the Small Town Education Center (STEC), a migrant/farmworker community-based organization. The course required teachers to assess students and develop tutoring plans to address students’ instructional needs. Teachers then produced a case report for each child. STEC staff were excited to host the class. They contacted parents, recruited children and ensured the Center was open and staffed. Participating teachers agreed to make the 90-min roundtrip drive three days a week at their own expense.

At first, the teachers panicked. They had little to no experience working with Spanish dominant bilinguals. The teachers grouped the children by age, creating small groups of two and three. They began and ended each day’s session with a community activity that fostered a sense of togetherness. Most importantly, the teachers took time to get to know the children. They drew on the children’s funds of knowledge and love of family to plan their reading and writing lessons and came to value the importance of teaching challenging content through the “cultural processes and knowledge that students bring to school with them” (Sleeter, 2011, p. 13).

Teaching at the STEC took the teachers away from the comfort of the university and their classrooms. They taught in a storefront where they were the language minority. Their experiences at the STEC complicated typical stories of immigrant families and migrant children, which led the teachers to confront and question previously held assumptions. Parents and children communicated caring and thanks, which shattered deficit perceptions and produced a noticeable shift in the teachers’ discourses. The teachers found the children to be respectful and eager to learn. One of the teachers, an early childhood educator, stated that she “had never felt so appreciated before” (Bacon, 2016).

In four short weeks, the teachers grew close to the children, taking on the role of advocates. This was especially apparent in their case reports, as the teachers focused on students’ strengths and provided asset-based strategies and recommendations for future instruction (Bacon, 2016). The teachers described their experience at the STEC as one of the best in their program. They came away with renewed hope, enthusiasm and confidence. Each reported feeling changed by the experience.

Community-based advocacy
Another example of a university, school and community partnership that disrupted the status quo occurred when Lavern worked with a bilingual parent group to amplify the voices of families whose native language is not English. Lavern was invited to meet with parents and district personnel by a male colleague and a bilingual parent whose children attend school in the district. Lavern’s colleague had expressed concerns about teachers not appreciating or listening to parents’ voices and sensed a need to have strong show of support as parents negotiated with the district, a feeling seconded by the bilingual parent. He felt Lavern’s expertise in bilingual education would help ensure that the voices of immigrant parents were heard. Relatedly, DeCuir and Dixson (2004) state that social change is implicit in a CRT framework and counsel scholars to liberate the voices of the silenced. In
her role as mediator and community liaison, Lavern used her knowledge of bilingual programs to provide parents with evidence-based arguments to present in advocating for their children, planting seeds for social change and challenging the discourses of those in power.

**Impacting practice through community engagement**

Finally, a small group of teachers in a rural district took action by conducting outreach with immigrant families who speak K’iché, a Mayan language of Guatemala, as their first language and Spanish as their second language. The teachers invited Heidi to partner with them. Funding for materials and snacks came from a local food processing plant where several of the parents worked. Over the course of six weeks, Heidi and seven elementary teachers conducted two sessions of conversational English per week at a Spanish speaking church. Recently, Heidi and Annette (a pseudonym) reminisced about the experience. As they spoke (personal communication, November 2, 2017), Annette confided how this work changed her life:

Working with the adult English learners became a very personal experience for me. My thinking changed. I began to think through what it would feel like to be a parent who was learning English. How can I, as a teacher, send homework home and expect parents to help when it is all in English? Going to the church where I didn’t know people and didn’t have a “friend” was uncomfortable. I want people to know that it changed me as a person and as a teacher. It made me more aware of what minorities go through in our communities. I am more accepting of diverse people now, and I’m more culturally sensitive in how I engage with students in my classroom.

Annette and the other teachers examined school practices with a critical eye, which resulted in culturally responsive changes at their school. For example, they purchased more dual language Spanish/English books for their classroom libraries. The teachers also worked with the principal to revamp the school’s automated call routing system. In addition, the school revised its forms to make them more accessible to parents who speak a language other than English. As a result, the school created a more welcoming environment. A number of families are coming to school and attending school functions. Heidi watched the teachers reach out to families and build relationships of trust. This experience cultivated shifts in thinking and actions; teachers volunteered their time and came away enriched.

**Discussion and implications for practice**

The stories presented in this narrative demonstrate the need for teacher educators to rethink the practice of culturally responsive teaching in teacher education. Quoting James Baldwin, Duncan-Andrade (2011, p. 309) encourages us to “confront the principal facts of our shortcomings and [find] the creativity to correct them”. He calls on teacher educators to rethink teacher education and move away from “reinforcing the status quo to redesigning it”. Redesigning teacher education cannot happen without the support of administrators. Faculty who challenge the status quo often experience backlash when they adopt critical, anti-racist pedagogies (Evans-Winters and Hoff, 2011). Moreover, failure to confront racist ideologies perpetuates the status quo and contributes to Castagno’s (2013) notion of “powerblind sameness”. Thus, classroom experiences must be tied to pedagogies that engage pre-and in-service teachers in reflection, dialogue and action (Freire, 2000).

This practitioner narrative has universal implications for teacher educators, as pedagogical practices are applicable in contexts where students and families from nondominant communities interact. Therefore, we include three recommendations for consideration. First, we recommend that care be taken when discussing families and students to ensure that monolithic notions of culture are challenged and “assumed deficits”
are not assigned to whole groups of children and families from nondominant communities (Dyson, 2015, p. 199).

Second, it is imperative to establish connections and form partnerships with schools and community-based organizations. It takes concerted effort and investment; however, these relationships enable teacher educators and their students to engage “living knowledge in practice” (Moll, 2014, p. 117). Partnerships that foster critical engagements with children and families are key to transforming practice and challenging the status quo in teacher education.

Third, we have found the practice of study groups to be worthwhile ventures that can produce shifts in thinking, perceptions and discourse. Study groups can help address and advance issues of race and equity. Moll’s (2014, p. 147) notion of study groups specifically focuses participants on the study and application of funds of knowledge and culturally responsive pedagogies. He conceives study groups as the intersection of “people, artifacts, institutions, nation-states, and linguistic and political ideologies”. In these study groups, peers, analysis of literature, mentors, university courses and community work in tandem to create a deeper context for study and dialogue (Moll). The authors came to realize that when study groups are student-led and incorporate choice, they become less about the instructor’s positionality and more about students’ understanding and engagement of critical concepts.

Conclusion
In this practitioner narrative, the authors provided a theoretical frame for understanding majoritarian stories and illustrated counter stories of hope, demonstrating concrete ways to disrupt the status quo. The first counter story described teachers working with children in a migrant/farmworker center. This setting provided teachers with new insights about the language and culture of a community, which affected their practice. This experience was transformative and contributed to teachers reconceptualizing their beliefs and perceptions.

The second counter story described another out-of-school setting, a community study group designed to help parents advocate for their children and express their views to those in authority. Through this study group, participants gained access to language that enabled them to negotiate with those in power. Finally, the third counter story described the possibilities that can influence instruction when teachers have an opportunity to become intimately acquainted with the language and culture of students and families.

These stories demonstrate that critical hope is possible when educators extend themselves to incorporate’ funds of knowledge and culturally responsive pedagogies that disrupt socially unjust teaching and learning contexts. At the heart of culturally responsive pedagogies is the belief that the voices of the silenced should be privileged and connected to instruction (Ladson-Billings, 2014). This work is a small step toward redesigning teacher education. Given the heightened awareness of teaching as a political act, educators have a responsibility to become agents of change and challenge the status quo in academia and beyond.

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Our students are watching: navigating heightened polarization during class discussion

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide teachers with research and methodological findings for planning, facilitating and assessing classroom discussions around difficult, political issues.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper focuses on navigating political polarization in classroom discussions. The research supported three teaching interns in developing classroom cultures where such discussions could and did happen.

Findings – Findings include the importance of having difficult discussions, the methods for doing so successfully and the introduction of a new activity, Daily Independent Listening.

Originality/value – In a climate of heightened partisanship, this research and these teaching examples provide models for all teachers engaging in such important work.

Keywords Politics, English language arts, English teaching, Secondary education, Whole class discussion

Paper type Conceptual paper

The raucous climate of extreme political polarization (McAvoy and Hess, 2013; Taub and Nyhan, 2017) is affecting schools around the world. In short, teachers want students to behave better than politicians seen on Twitter feeds, Facebook posts and 24-h news channels (McAvoy and Hess, 2013). As these examples filter down to the classroom, teachers find political polarization an increasingly difficult divide (Godley and Thein, 2017). Too often, students use labels like Republican or Democrat, Leave or Stay, Al Quds or Jerusalem, and succinctly put an end to discussion. Rallying cries of “Brexit Means Brexit” or “Make America Great Again” are enough to send a class off the rails and drown out civil discourse.

It is not just that students do not listen to each other. They are playing out a societal pantomime in which even facts and evidence are at risk:

Partisan polarization is now so extreme in the United States that it affects the way people consume and understand information – the facts they believe and what events they think are important. (Taub and Nyhan, 2017, p. A18)

The lines between opinion and fact become so blurred that teachers across many nations cannot think about content instruction until they wrestle with a trend of anti-rationalism in public discourse that blurs the line between opinion and fact (Nichols, 2017) and corrupts social attachments (Janks, 2017).
Many sources of information once trusted by teachers have been undermined as unsubstantiated opinions, or outright falsehoods, replace facts. Russia and the USA have each condemned the others’ news outlets as state-run propaganda outlets (Nechepurenko, 2017). President Trump has angered, and potentially been uninvited by, the UK for posting anti-Muslim videos (Castle, 2017). The uprising against sexual harassment is only acknowledged by some along partisan lines (Alcindor and Fandos, 2017). Human beings seeking to escape poverty have had their homes destroyed by a government citing safety regulations (Buckley, 2017). Countries happy to reduce the number of migrants now see them sold as slaves (Kirkpatrick, 2017). Even the Pope cannot mention an ongoing ethnic cleansing the government claims is not happening (Horowitz, 2017). In this combat of facts and fake news, teachers must still get students to engage the content and each other, particularly in a field like literacy instruction and the English Language Arts (ELA) that is inherently political (Godley and Thein, 2017).

During the 2016-2017 academic year, the campaign, election and presidency of Donald Trump brought this to the fore of transnational discourses as never before. As a teacher educator at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK), Judson (first author) experienced several teacher candidates asking how to navigate such heightened polarization in the classroom, particularly during whole class discussion. While we were wrestling with these questions in the context of the southeastern USA, the ripple effects of the Trump era’s post-truthiness and political chaos were being felt around the world (Janks, 2017). Our own questions about how to navigate political polarization and facilitate effective student discussions of political issues led us to research and write this essay, which we feel will benefit teachers across national boundaries. This essay helped us to locate and develop more effective teaching methods, methods that Alexis, Molly and Hannah (authors), who graduated from UTK’s teacher preparation program in May 2017, used in their student teaching experiences and are now using in their own classrooms.

In this essay, we describe our journey to address the importance and benefits of class discussion in a time of polarization. We open with a rationale for the importance and benefits of classroom discussion when navigating polarization. We then describe promising practices for effective pre-discussion, during-discussion and post-discussion strategies and methods. We conclude our research synthesis with the importance of listening instruction. From this research, we make specific connections to Alexis’s preparation of her students for discussions, Molly’s strategies for avoiding personal offense and Hannah’s implementation of Daily Independent Listening (DIL), a new method helpful for encouraging students to become better listeners by practicing listening.

Politics not polarization
Throughout this essay, we refer to the heightened polarization present in our current political climate. Oftentimes, discussions of these issues use the term politics, as in “let’s not discuss politics”, which we find to be a misnomer: “We are being political when we are collectively making decisions about how we ought to live together” (McAvoy and Hess, 2013, p. 16). Classrooms should be a place where students learn how to discuss politics in productive ways (Hess and Gatti, 2010) and, as mentioned above, the ELA classroom is inherently political (Godley and Thein, 2017). Our focus in this essay is more directly on how political polarization has made such discussions more difficult:

Political polarization refers to moments in time when political discourse and action bifurcates toward ideological extremes. This causes a crowding out of voices in the middle, leaving little room for political compromise. (McAvoy and Hess, 2013, p. 26)
The world is experiencing such a moment and indications are that things will not be getting better any time soon. Thus, effective political discussion in the classroom is under threat in an age when we need it most to counter the effects of polarization (Smagorinsky et al., 2017). While there is much to adapt from well-known and regularly practiced discussion strategies of the ELA classroom, overcoming polarization requires something more.

Navigating polarization in the secondary English Language Arts classroom

The ELA classroom has long been a locus of difficult discussions. We read complex texts addressing complex situations. We write persuasive essays arguing controversial stances. We discuss authentic problems in (hopefully) safe contexts. However, political polarization is making this more difficult as it pushes people to see their rivals both as being irrational and having evil intentions (Hess and McAvoy, 2014). The ELA classroom has been shown to be an effective context for fraught conversations about difficult issues, issues like race and racism (Thomas, 2015). We even question how our discourses around class discussions might reinforce canonical ideologies, for example gender reification of heterosexual masculinity (Macaluso, 2016) and the social justice aims of critical literacy (Janks, 2017).

However, in searching for help with addressing political polarization, we came to an interesting conclusion. For a long time, ELA teachers have had adequate methods but maybe not adequate content. The people talking about class discussions in the specific context of political polarization are the social studies and history teachers. Thus, in many ways, this essay represents a synthesis of our own knowledge of promising practices with curriculum and content from the social sciences (i.e. the middle and secondary content areas of social studies, history, economics, political science, geography and government). As such, much of what we synthesize here as rationale and methods should seem familiar to ELA teachers and teacher educators. However, we are learning from social sciences why and how effective class discussion is important as a tool for fighting political polarization and so focus our essay in that context.

Classroom discussion as antidote to polarization

Across international contexts, political polarization has grown worse since the 1980s for several reasons. Clearer demarcations between parties, the rise of culture wars, the use of oppositional parliamentary procedures, increasingly homogeneous communities, official encouragement of violence against the Other and the advent of 24-h news and the internet all serve to draw people into opposing camps (Janks, 2017; McAvoy and Hess, 2013). This polarization is unlikely to get better any time soon as polarization seems to increase alongside income inequality and negative views toward immigration (McCarty et al., 2006), both of which are being stoked internationally.

Yet, schools might be a good site to push back, a place to teach students how to deliberate effectively across and beyond differences of opinion (Smagorinsky et al., 2017). Schools are useful because of curricular opportunities to address difficult issues, the presence of teachers acting as experts in deliberation and the ideological diversity among students: “Classrooms are one of the most promising sites for teaching the skills and values necessary for deliberative democratic life” (McAvoy and Hess, 2013, p. 19) because “Political tolerance is best built through engaging in discussion with people who hold different opinions from your own” (Hess and Gatti, 2010, p. 22). However, doing this well requires planning and forethought.

Much of the research on class discussions in the ELA classroom focuses on connections to literacy performance (Applebee et al., 2003) or reading comprehension (Nystrand, 2006). Fewer qualitative studies have been conducted to examine the ways in which ELA teachers
go about teaching political views and issues. In fact, a common theme throughout the research was a pattern of teachers avoiding political discussion or stifling student opinions about political or controversial topics (Fournier-Sylvester, 2013; Journell, 2011a, 2011b; Niemi and Niemi, 2007).

In the past year, this perspective was reflected in teachers’ opinions on teaching the 2016 US presidential election. In a survey of approximately 2,000 K-12 teachers conducted by Teaching Tolerance (Costello, 2016), 43 per cent of participants indicated they were hesitant to teach about this particular election due to its hostile nature. One teacher from Virginia wanted to keep students calm and safe by “being careful – rather than stoking fires”, while another from New England stated, “I need my job so I must walk this fine line [of political neutrality]” (p. 13). The 2016 election was one teachers in the USA felt a need to avoid.

Despite this avoidance of political discussion in the classroom, research showed this type of discourse was vital to the development of students as active civic participants (Baker et al., 2016; Smagorinsky et al., 2017), particularly as the classroom is often a student’s first introduction to diverging political opinions (Costello, 2016). Costello described the necessity for the inclusion of politics in the secondary classroom as preparing students for their most important job: allowing their voices to be heard as citizens. Similarly, Fournier-Sylvester (2013) advocated for controversial discussions because they enhance critical thinking skills, claiming students should be given the opportunity to talk through important societal issues so that they may gain an understanding of current events and, more importantly, an ability to partake in critical conversations surrounding these events with their peers, thereby forming deeper community (Janks, 2017; Sandy and Schutz, 2015).

When students engage in these sorts of discussions, their view of democratic commitments is positively affected and measurable increases are seen in tolerance, confidence, social interaction and political interest and involvement (Fournier-Sylvester, 2013). This body of research also provided several promising practices for effective political discussions.

Discussion strategies in an age of polarization
With a strong rationale for holding class discussions about politics despite political polarization, there still remains the issue of how to do it effectively. In this methodological pursuit, we found several useful ideas from research on social sciences education. First and foremost, specific thought must be given to the topic for discussion. McAvoy and Hess (2013) described how effective questions must have multiple and competing answers, delineating the difference between open, closed and tipping issues. Likewise, they described differences between discussion (shared inquiry) and deliberation (deciding on a plan of action that resolves a shared problem); while discussion and deliberation are both necessary, we continue to use class discussion to refer to both possibilities, trusting the individual teacher to design a curriculum where both are engaged appropriately and effectively.

Hess and Gatti (2010) laid out three tenets for the design of a classroom context for effective class discussion:

1. let students know they are expected to participate;
2. use a mix of small-group work and large group formats; and
3. think deeply about the disclosure of a teacher’s personal perspectives.

This last tenet directly helps obviate the primary reason why teachers avoid these discussions. In looking at high school seniors, McAvoy and Hess (2010) found most students were open to hearing a teacher’s personal views, but they became wary of teachers pushing
their views and quite critical of classrooms where competing views could not be shared. Thus, this is a primary tightrope each teacher must reflectively walk (Flynn, 2012), but should not be justification for avoidance.

The first and second tenets concern effective engagement, which can be addressed in a number of ways. Harwood and Hahn (1990) prioritized the selection of issues, suggesting:

Teachers should consider their students’ interest, experience, and expertise regarding the issue; the relevance of issues to their students’ lives; their students’ maturity level; and the significance of the issue to society (p. 4).

Kahn (2007) likewise believed that igniting student engagement was the central tenet of a successful discussion. One effective way of doing this is introducing a conflict or a controversy. Kahn (2007) claimed, “The difficulty is finding and developing a workable conflict or controversy. The teacher has to know his or her students as well as the literature” (p. 17). This knowledge of both issues and students is essential to successful preparation.

Frontloading is a strategy commonly used before reading, but it can also be used to prepare students for discussion. When considering discussions, teachers need to frontload pertinent information that is necessary for success in discussion of any given topic. This can appear as selecting a text around which students will base their discussion or providing essential questions that will guide the discussion, or even laying out a teacher’s explicit goals for the class (Smagorinsky et al., 2017). Glazier and Seo (2005) encouraged Grade 9 teachers to choose multicultural literature, as it lends itself to modeling voices who are often silenced through canonical curriculum and pedagogy.

To further ensure students are prepared, teachers can vary structures for the discussion, including small-group work (Cruz, 2015; Diaz-Gemmati, 1995). Avery et al. (2013) introduced the Deliberating in a Democracy (DID) Project, which featured Structured Academic Controversy (SAC) to frame discussions. SAC resembles debates in that groups of four have a topic, but one pair within the four argues the pro side, while the other argues the con side. In the final phase, all students discuss their opinions and experiences together.

Another method, explained by Flynn (2012), suggested the use of circles in the classroom. This strategy has students sit in circles and begins with lighter discussions to ease students into the habit before moving on to more complex issues. Similarly, Cruz (2015) proposed using shorter, more informal activities to begin to activate students’ thinking about various topics before moving on to whole class discussion. These types of small group activities can lead to whole class activities being more effective. These whole class activities can be teacher led – like Four Corners, Take a Stand and Teacher Tokens – or student led – like Fishbowl, Gallery Walk and Socratic Seminar – many of which are already familiar to ELA teachers (Hale and City, 2006; Juzwik et al., 2013) but can focus on politics rather than ELA texts.

Finally, the research suggested the use of modeling. Students may come to class without the speaking and listening skills necessary for discussion: “Effective teachers take care to teach students how to interact respectfully” (Hess, 2011, p. 72-73). This includes defining discussion, differentiating from other activities and giving students models of good and bad discussion using videos or live models. It is also essential to provide students with the tools for respectful discussion. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) insisted students use their peers’ names during discussion. Furthermore, students benefited when teachers provide discussion starters to help them keep the discussion moving forward.

After a class discussion, effective methods hinge on reflection from both students and teachers (Juzwik et al., 2013), either through whole-class debriefings (Hess, 2011) or individual journals (Flynn, 2012). McAvoy and Hess (2014) also described the importance of
feedback, both from the teacher and other students, that students can use to improve later discussions. Feedback can also be provided between peers throughout the discussion process. Teachers must also reflect on discussions. Glazier and Seo (2005) suggested a detailed analysis of students’ discussions that can illuminate patterns of silence, excessive contribution and instances in which students veered off-topic.

In summary, the research encourages teachers to think deeply about an appropriate but controversial topic, develop a safe classroom environment where competing ideas can be shared respectfully and then structure lessons moving from small-group work to whole-class discussion and from discussion to deliberation. Yet, even when teachers accomplish this, the effects of polarization can remain. In seeking to connect this research to practice, we hit upon another realization: people have stopped listening. And who can blame them? If the constant media barrage is in large part unsubstantiated claims filtered through previously held beliefs, we cannot expect students to necessarily be good listeners.

Learning to listen

Most research on listening skills focuses primarily on active listening or listening to direct instruction (King and Womack, 1983) and that most often in elementary or world language classrooms. While listening is a skill important for things like note taking or a lecture, the practice of listening as a skill important in itself appears less often despite almost five decades of research attesting to the importance of listening (Lundsteen, 1971).

Listening is a skill everyone needs and students have shown that, on average, they can “listen and comprehend 2 grade levels above their reading level” (Lundsteen, 1971, p. 23). It is important not just to teach how to hear instructions, questions or comments, but to really listen. While students should listen to the teacher, it is just as important (if not more so) for students to listen to each other. Unfortunately, political polarization may be leading students away from this necessity. Too often, students are encouraged to treat the teacher’s voice as the most valuable in the room. The teacher is treated as the resident expert on all things in that subject matter; however, and especially in the ELA classroom, students’ viewpoints are what can be most valuable. Their perspectives are often more original, new and relevant.

Heightening students’ academic skills is an important part of listening instruction, as even reflected in the USA Common Core Standards for speaking and listening. Academic speaking and listening skills support effective participation in various forms of discussion with diverse partners and include adequate preparation, working to set collegial rules, posing and responding to questions, and reacting thoughtfully to diverse perspectives. Throughout a discussion, students should also integrate multiple sources of information from various media and be able to evaluate those sources and the points of view of other participants. With practice and development of such skills, student empathy and respectfulness in and out of the classroom may also improve and contribute to better engagement across divergent opinions. Although observations like, “students who are effective listeners during class are better students than those who listen less effectively in the classroom” (Beall et al., 2008, p. 123) ring true, platitudes do not connect to useable methods.

Citing contradictory studies in their review of research on listening education, Beall et al. (2008) noted that, “While listening education may heighten a student’s awareness of what constitutes listening ability, it is still unclear whether that education actually increases actual listening performance” (p. 127). In the research on listening education, some participants, when surveyed, believed their listening skills had improved, while others’ self-perceptions of their listening skills decreased. This conundrum could be due to differences in instruction of listening skills, or perhaps some students are bound to think their skills have
improved by receiving further instruction. Other students may feel that they are not as skilled because a subconscious skill is brought to full consciousness. This type of meta-cognition can actually be detrimental in early stages but could lead to improvement later.

While there was limited research focused on secondary ELA classrooms, the field of nursing provided adaptable evidence. Rebair (2012) emphasized the difference between listening and hearing: “Hearing is the physiological process in which the sound waves hit the tympanic membrane of the ear, while listening is the active participation in communication” (p. 64). This distinction is vital when approaching Rebair’s five steps of listening:

1. **Receiving** – ensure you are in a good position to hear the information. Check for background noise and note the time available for the activity.
2. **Attending** – adopt positive body language, facial expressions and gestures to show the person you are engaged in conversation.
3. **Understanding** – try to gain an understanding of what is going on beyond the words, remembering that sometimes the real meaning is not expressed in words. If in doubt ask, for clarification. It is helpful to summarize at the end, letting the person know you are anxious to hear correctly.
4. **Responding** – if you have made a comment to upset the person while responding to their story, apologize and acknowledge that this was the wrong thing to say. It is helpful to say that such a comment would upset you too.
5. **Remembering** – recall what was said so you have a good starting point when you re-engage. Relay what was summarized and ask the person how he or she has been. This demonstrates that you have listened, highlighting the person’s worth and your concern for them (p. 64).

This breaking down of listening provides a framework for working with students on listening skills. Oftentimes, some or all of these steps take place without students being completely conscious of them. However, bringing these steps into discussion may create a new awareness in students to practice better listening skills in their conversations in and outside the classroom.

Overall, the research provided many examples of what teachers can do to set the stage for effective discussion and also described how students can be prepared to be successful participants in discussion, both despite and as counter to polarization. In synthesizing this research, we found several ways to begin making connections to practice.

**Connecting research to practice**

Teacher candidates during and after the 2016 US Presidential election, Alexis, Molly and Hannah, experienced a steady increase in polarization as students began to emulate personal and public models of discourse in the classroom; much of this rhetoric was offensive and emotionally charged. However, Alexis, Molly and Hannah did not want this to prevent them from facilitating discussions of political issues; ignoring such topics would do students a disservice (Fourrier-Sylvester, 2013; Journell, 2011a, 2011b; Niemi and Niemi, 2007) and would not adequately prepare them as teacher candidates for their own classrooms the next year.

To connect the research to their own developing practice as teacher candidates, Alexis, Molly and Hannah used a combination of participant observation field notes, reflective discussions with their mentor teachers, student surveys and informal checks for learning to explore what worked and what did not. While they each used multiple instructional...
strategies over the course of the year, we focus here on one research to practice connection for each: Alexis’s preparation of her students for discussions, Molly’s strategies for avoiding personal offense and Hannah’s implementation of DIL.

In connecting the research to her Grade 9 genre studies classroom, Alexis discovered students needed extensive preparation in how to engage in discussions of political issues and overcome polarization. Students often came to class without ever being explicitly taught how to respectfully discuss emotionally loaded topics (Costello, 2016). Despite commitments to model performance skills in the classroom, teachers may underestimate students’ need to see respectful and productive discussion. Thus, before modeling this behavior, teachers must create a safe and inviting educational atmosphere (Fournier-Sylvester, 2013; McAvoy and Hess, 2013).

Alexis put structures in place to encourage discussion with peers and formation of relationships, using teacher-developed questions on shared readings from multicultural literature broaching difficult subject matter. Students were seated in small groups to easily promote communication and discussions; adoption of a circle format modeled for students that they were equals (Flynn, 2012; Sandy and Schutz, 2015). Circles also teach students to pay attention to their peers, practice listening attentively and acknowledge others’ opinions. Alexis also made sure students specifically reflected about the discussion process, writing about areas for reinforcement and improvement so as to keep from being overwhelmed. Using circles and small groups can help teachers become more acquainted with students as students become more acquainted with each other. Since graduating, Alexis continues this practice in her own Grade 10 world literature classroom.

Similarly, the students in Molly’s Grade 10 world literature classroom demonstrated a consistent motivation to engage political topics, stating that these types of discussions allowed them to both express themselves and hear the perspectives of others (Hess, 2011). However, students struggled when they felt personally offended when another individual criticized their political beliefs; they saw this criticism as an attack on their morality. In turn, misunderstanding often led to insults, shouting or students talking over one another (Hess and McAvoy, 2014). Due to the overwhelming interest in discussion and research surrounding the benefits of political discourse, Molly developed weekly opportunities for students to make “text to (political) world” connections between the current political climate and ELA curriculum (Avery et al., 2013).

These connections took numerous forms, a notable example being a student-generated connection between Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” and Trump’s decision to remove Sally Yates from the position of US Attorney General due to her belief that his travel ban was an unjust law that she could not enforce. The “text to (political) world” discussion technique created a forum in which students from different political affiliations and backgrounds could express their beliefs in a controlled setting wherein the instructor could act as a mediator to promote an environment of accountable talk. Students began to listen to one another more intently and started to use phrases like, “I see where you’re coming from” or “that’s actually a really good point”, rather than the too familiar battle cry of “I know I’m right and you’re wrong!” Through these discussions, the classroom evolved into a collaborative culture where, while every student did not share the same beliefs, they were able to respect one another as they connected their opinions to ELA content and political issues. Since graduating, Molly continues to encourage these connections in her own Grade 10 world literature classroom.

In Hannah’s Grade 11 American literature classroom, students continued to talk over each other; after all, the classroom was still full of humans. In drawing on the listening instruction research described above, Hannah developed an adaptation of Daily
Independent Reading (DIR) (also known as Silent Sustained Reading) focused on listening. In short, DIR is premised on the idea that to become a good reader one must read often. Hannah figured the same might be true for listening. In short, where DIR asks students to read silently for a period of time every day, DIL asks students to listen to other people for a period every day. Students listened to podcasts from a curated list using their own devices or listening stations in the classroom (see Appendix A for some examples). Students were not listening to music but recordings of people talking.

The connection from research to practice was a parallel drawn between DIR and DIL, notably the idea that when students are better readers, they typically perform better in the classroom (Allington, 1977; Guthrie and Humenick, 2004). Hannah made the same assertion for students who are better listeners, but there have not been studies outlining these benefits or describing their manifestation in the classroom. With direct listening instruction, including regular DIL, students began to develop more empathy through listening in new and more accepting ways. Instead of rolling their eyes, being annoyed by or frustrated with being shushed or being asked to be quiet, students started to empathize and regulate themselves. At the beginning of the semester, Hannah emphasized the importance of listening to one another, discussing as a class what good listening physically and cognitively looks like, in class and in life (Beall et al., 2008; Rebair, 2012). Students then practiced good listening through DIL.

Hannah and her students even conducted a DIL unit focusing solely on podcasts, which they listened to in groups and independently. Students used the information and skills they obtained from this unit to create their own podcasts as a summative assessment indicating how much information they learned through listening. In creating a podcast with multiple participants, there is an orchestration of listening, conversing and teamwork. The students’ podcasts focused on similarities and differences in perspectives around text interpretations, as yet another way students could feel empowered, encouraged and reminded of how important it is to listen to their classmates. Since graduation, Hannah is continuing to use DIL in her own Grade 9 genre studies classes and has developed a promo sheet she shares with all her students (Appendix B).

Conclusion
Across our experiences of teaching through the 2016 US Presidential election and the ensuing international fallout, three important themes developed that may help other teachers looking to facilitate political discussions in an era of polarization. First, as a teacher it is important just to let students speak and to listen to what they say, not acting as the all-knowing person in the room (Smagorinsky et al., 2017). For some classrooms, it may even be possible (if not preferable) to move to a place where no one raises hands. A focus on explicit listening skills will benefit students’ abilities to engage with the class material, but more importantly to engage with one another more cohesively (Fournier-Sylvester, 2013; Sandy and Schutz, 2015). They may not like one another; they may not agree with one another; however, willingness to listen to one another can change over the course of just a few months.

Second, reflection is key (Flynn, 2012; Glazier and Seo, 2005). To leave discussions without feeling overwhelmed, students need the opportunity to talk and write about areas for reinforcement and improvement in the discussion overall and in their personal contributions. Furthermore, student reflections help to assess the effectiveness of the discussion and to brainstorm ways to improve the next discussion. Moving forward, teachers need to continue incorporating relationship-building activities throughout the year to further strengthen and reinforce the classroom community and critical literacy skills.
Increasing discussions led by and centered on students and their interests will also improve the results of discussing polarizing topics in the classroom.

Finally, teachers must remember not to become discouraged. Students are not going to completely agree with one another regarding these topics and they can become very angry during political discussion. A teacher should neither change students’ political beliefs nor definitively convince them that morality and party affiliation are not intertwined (Janks, 2017; Smagorinsky et al., 2017), although Hess and McAvoy (2014) provide reasons for and against teaching partisan identities. Starting a dialogue about these topics and creating a space in which students learn to listen to the perspectives of others and consider them to be valid is possible. By giving students multiple opportunities to practice discussion in a school setting, they strengthen their ability to do so outside of the classroom. Students are far more capable and interested in political discourse than they are given credit for. As we teach a generation of students to enter, read and change the adult world, teachers must take responsibility for providing students the opportunity to use not only their voices within the classroom but their ears as well.

References


**Appendix A: Suggested podcasts for DIL**

“50 of the Best Podcasts for High School Students” (curated by Dennis Lee), available at: www.teachthought.com/education/50-of-the-best-podcasts-for-high-school-students/


“Sleep with me”, available at: www.sleepwithmepodcast.com/


“Serial”, available at: https://serialpodcast.org/season-one

“Up & Vanished” (Payne Lindsey), available at: www.upandvanished.com/episodes

“Stuff you should know” (Chuck Bryant & Josh Clark), available at: www.stuffyoushouldknow.com/podcasts

And pretty much any podcast by NPR, the BBC, or other podcast approved by both parents/guardians and the teacher.
Appendix B: Promo sheet for DIL

Daily Independent Listening - DIL
Listening to Podcasts in English

What is a podcast?
- According to the New Oxford American Dictionary a podcast is a "digital recording of a radio broadcast or similar program, made available on the internet for downloading to a personal audio player."

Choosing a podcast...
- Decide why you want to listen to a podcast.
  - Are you listening to learn more about a topic you are already knowledgeable in?
  - Are you interested in expanding your knowledge to a new topic?
  - Are you looking to be inspired?
- Once you have decided on a topic, start looking around for a good fit in terms of a more specific topic.
  - Podcasts can be extremely specific or fairly broad. If you are trying to be more informed of current events you may want to listen to something general, but if you are focused on something like weather patterns in Antarctica that is going to be much more specific.

What is DIL?
While there is no current definition for what exactly DIL can be defined as, this definition is based off of research done into the subject. DIL is the practice of intentionally listening to some type of audio only media (i.e. a podcast) for new information/pleasure. The subject of the audio media is the listener’s choice.

Occasionally out of class
Listening in class
5-10 minutes
What do I pick?
- TEDblog reveals 45 of their picks here.
- TeachThought.com recommends 50 podcasts for high schoolers.
- You are not limited to this list; these are merely suggestions to get you started.

Our students
are watching

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English education as democratic armor

Responding programmatically to our political work

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the ways in which attention to programmatic vision and coherence – rather than foci on individual courses – might advance the work of justice-oriented, critical English education in important ways. The authors propose that consciously attending to the work of English education on the programmatic level can better enable English educators to cultivate democracy-sustaining dispositions in preservice teachers. Using Grossman et al.’s (2008) definition of “programmatic coherence”, the authors illustrate how one interdepartmental partnership is working to create a shared programmatic vision for English education.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on Cornel West’s call for the development of a three-piece democratic armor – Socratic questioning, prophetic witness and tragicomic hope – the authors describe their programmatic vision for cultivating democracy-sustaining dispositions in preservice teachers. They show how this shared vision constitutes the foundation for the organization, purpose and sequence of the four-semester cohort program. Finally, the authors describe how this vision helps facilitate meaningful and purposeful symbiosis between field experiences and university coursework.

Findings – In an effort to promote replicability regarding programmatic coherence, the authors share structural aspects of their program as well as pose generative questions for colleagues who are interested in approaching the work of critical, democratic English education from the programmatic level.

Originality/value – Addressing the challenges of teacher preparation – especially in this polarized and pitched historical moment – requires shifting the focus from individual courses to a more expansive view that might enable English educators to consider how courses within a program might collectively advance a particular vision of critical and democratic English education.

Keywords Partnership, Teacher education, Democratic English education, Political work of teaching, Preservice English education, Programmatic coherence

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Schools – and all of the teaching and learning that goes on within them – are inherently and unavoidably political spaces, not in the partisan sense where ideological agendas and camps are staked out and argued from, but in the sense that Hess and McAvoy (2015) discuss in their work on the political classroom: “We are being political when we are democratically making decisions about questions that ask, ‘How should we live together?’” (p. 4, original emphasis). The understanding that our work as teachers and teacher educators is political is
not new. What is new, however, is the polarized and increasingly toxic zeitgeist in the USA. Compounding the political, economic and social pressures are the continued evaporation of public funding for universities and schools, steady decrease in colleges of education, and public attacks on “liberal” professors. While these trends were certainly under way before the 2016 election, since the election the quality of civic discourse has declined, especially in schools (Costello, 2016). The Southern Poverty Law Center, a nonprofit dedicated to tracking hate groups and racism, has called this “The Trump Effect” (Costello, 2016; see also www.splcenter.org/hatewatch). For people teaching K-12 and for those educating future teachers, this is an especially precarious and anxiety-ridden historical moment.

In this essay, we argue that addressing the challenges of teacher preparation, especially in this challenging historical moment, requires that we expand our understanding of the work to include not only our own class or classes in English education but rather also consider our work programmatically. More specifically, we propose a deliberate and collective effort to imagine and develop programmatic coherence. Grossman et al. (2008) argue that although coherence is a crucial aspect of good teacher education, it is not typically explored as a salient programmatic feature. Drawing from relevant scholarship on coherence (Tatto, 1996; Hammerness, 2006), they argue that coherence has:

A shared vision regarding teaching and learning, conceptual and logistical organization of coursework around those aims and goals, and courses and clinical experiences designed to support, reinforce, and reflect those shared ideas. (Grossman et al., 2008, p. 282):

Using these core tenets of coherence to structure the essay, we describe the efforts of one English education program to educate[1] English teachers who are critically minded, politically astute and democratically oriented.

To situate our work on programmatic coherence within a larger body of relevant scholarship, we begin with an overview of the literature on democratic and critical English education. Next, we explain how our shared vision for English education draws from and works toward Cornel West’s vision for a three-piece “democratic armor”: Socratic questioning, prophetic witness, and tragicomic hope. And because, as West argues, these three moral pillars must undergird our citizenry if democracy is to flourish against corruption and hate (West, 2004, p. 21), we think of West’s pillars as central to the types of dispositions we cultivate in our English education students, referring to these as “democracy-sustaining dispositions”. Next, we describe how this shared vision informs the conceptual and logistical organization of coursework. In this section, we catalog the sequence of courses (semester-by-semester) of our program and share illustrative vignettes from select courses and experiences throughout the two-year program. We then describe how we aim to create critical symbiosis between our university coursework and our students’ clinical experiences in local schools. Finally, we offer concrete suggestions aimed at helping other program conceptualize, design and enact a more critically coherent English education program.

**Review of the literature**

The fields of secondary English and English education have historically been rich sites for democratically oriented work. In secondary English, some of this work has explored the unique potential for American Literature to develop students’ critical lenses related to voice, power and silence (Petrone and Gibney, 2005) and to engage students in critical debate of “the American Dream” (Hurst, 2013). Other research and scholarship in has focused on the role of writing for advocacy (Barton, 2005), activism related to policymaking (Easton, 2005) and “inside-out” community writing projects aimed at promoting civic participation with 9th grade Latinx and Chicanx students in Arizona (Saidy, 2013). Other researchers have
focused on the democratic potential of teaching Young Adult (YA) literature. For example, Wolk (2013) advocates for the inclusion of more YA literature in English classes as a way to promote democracy and social responsibility. Taking a more critical approach to the selection and inclusion of YA literature, Thein et al. (2013) offer an in-depth analysis of the differences between two versions of the same story: *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates* (for adults) and *Discovering Wes Moore* (written for adolescents). The authors call for a more critical analysis of the difference between *versions* of texts and challenge teachers to be critical consumers when selecting a particular version of a text.

As with the scholarship aimed at secondary English classrooms, the scholarship in English education also attends to issues of power, social position and critical pedagogy. In English education, some of this work has focused on helping preservice teachers bridge the “demographic divide”. For example, Barnes (2016) created a class assignment called a Community Inquiry Project in which English education teacher candidates (TCs) formed groups to explore and interact with different communities. Findings from a sample of three students’ reflections at the end of the semester show that as TCs’ contact with the community increased, they “demonstrated at least a first step in the direction of critical multiculturalism” (2016, p. 169).

Other research in English education has focused more urgently and more explicitly on systemic racism and has called for more pointed and critical work on helping preservice teachers better understand the ways in which the media perpetuates racial stereotypes so that they can be more prepared to confront and analyze those messages. In their recent article, Baker-Bell et al. (2017) describe how the uncritical consumption of mainstream media creates, circulates and reifies stereotypes of “dangerous Black youth”, and argues that these depictions “reinscribe and reinforce white supremacy, which leads to anti-blackness” (p. 132). The authors argue that by advancing a “healing pedagogical framework” (one that is defined by the acknowledgment of racial wounds) and by supporting the development of critical media literacy in English education, we might better equip novice teachers to address racial injustice, despite the discomfort and despite the feelings of vulnerability that accompany these difficult conversations. To facilitate this work in the field of English education, they provide a series of four thoughtful, critical and ready-to-implement lesson plans for teacher educators. They write, “by not addressing racial injustice, we risk reproducing racial inequality in our classrooms and preparing our youth to be passive and silent bystanders in the face of it” (p. 148).

Less typical in the research on English education is attention to the *programmatic* level of teacher preparation. McBee Orzulak et al.’s (2014) study of how the University of Michigan’s English education program deliberately attended to the coherence of their courses contributes important insights how we might not only educate English teachers for the theoretical foundations they need to be effective, but how we – again, as a program, rather than a single course – might also attend more carefully to how we educate teachers for the practical day-to-day of instruction without sacrificing the theoretical and interpersonal aspects of teaching. As a way to programmatically respond to students’ feelings of overwhelm related to learning to teach, McBee Orzulak et al. (2014) devised a “lesson architecture” within their program’s three-semester sequence for English education (used both within teaching methods courses and supervisory spaces). This evolved as the authors implemented, observed and noted areas of growth in the lesson architecture, most notably in the area of what the authors call “interactional awareness” which “invites consideration of how each practice is actualized through classroom talk” (McBee Orzulak et al., 2014, p. 91). They write:
With particular regard to our dilemmas about choosing a beginning point to help students access the complexity of theory-driven ELA practice, we see interactional awareness as a tool for helping the students and future teachers we work with to develop equitable instruction by understanding how their interactions can open and close opportunities for learning. (p. 86)

**Shared vision**

According to Grossman *et al.* (2008), having a shared vision is central to programmatic coherence. Developing a shared vision for our program required that we consider both the pragmatic and aspirational aims of our work, such that we could structure coursework and clinical experiences around these goals. In addition to the professional vision of our program – namely, that our graduates are well-prepared to teach all students effectively – we also agreed that effective teaching requires engagement with the political nature of the field. Because preparing teachers for an educational landscape that is constantly in flux seems a Sisyphean task, we wanted to ensure our students were equipped to weather professional storms with a strong, democratically oriented foundation in place. To this end, Cornel West’s (2004) text, *Democracy Matters*, pushed us to consider the necessity of providing our students with a “democratic armor” comprising three pieces: Socratic questioning, prophetic witness and tragicomic hope.

The first of these, Socratic questioning, “requires a relentless self-examination and critique of institutions of authority, motivated by an endless quest for intellectual integrity and moral consistency” (p. 16). In practice, Socratic questioning takes various forms, including perspective taking, critical self-reflection and parrhesia (fearless speech) (West, 2004, pp. 213-214). Prophetic witness, on the other hand, tempers the “profound yet insufficient rationalism” of Socratic methods through a commitment to “the passionate fervor and quest for justice of the prophetic”. Prophetic witness, in short, is a relentless commitment to justice, one similar to “the social commitment that often gives passion to teaching” described by Graff (1992, p. 148). Finally, the essence of tragicomic hope, for West:

> Is dangerous – and potentially subversive – because it can never be extinguished. Like laughter, dance, and music, it is a form of elemental freedom that cannot be eliminated or snuffed out by any elite power. (p. 217)

Without these pillars in place and nurtured by its citizenry, “no democracy can flourish,” wrote West (p. 21). These pillars are recursive, and are balanced by virtue of their interdependence. “We need a bloodstained Socratic love and tear-soaked prophetic love fueled by a hard-won tragicomic hope”, said West (p. 216).

West’s ideas are ones we have sought to enact in our English education program. As such, Socratic questioning in our program takes the form of encouraging a culture of self-reflection, both among the program faculty and in our classes. It is evident in our work to bridge theory, policy and practice, such that our students feel empowered and entitled to speak truth to power. Our understanding of West’s notion of prophetic witness suggests that it is important for our students to encounter “the other” to dismantle their beliefs (often deficit ones) about youth who come from different racial, cultural and/or linguistic backgrounds. This requires, then, that we orchestrate experiences for our students to work with diverse youth and that we provide adequate space for students to critically reflect on these encounters. Tragicomic hope, a hope that persists despite substantial odds, is the affective and moral lens through which we cast the meaning of our work. Within our program, we see evidence of tragicomic hope in the increasingly agentive stances our students assume as they progress in the program, marked by patience, flexibility and even joy.
Within our program, the pillars of Socratic questioning, prophetic witness and tragicomic hope outlined by West are conceived of as democracy-sustaining dispositions that inform our shared vision for English education. Central to our program mission is helping teachers see that their work is not that of a solitary actor laboring behind a closed door (Britzman, 1986), but rather a part of a collaborative and growth-oriented profession. Through our collective attention to these democracy-sustaining dispositions, our programmatic vision — teaching is a political act — is not only emphasized, but is infused into every aspect of the program.

Operationalizing our shared vision through programmatic coherence
Developing and sustaining programmatic coherence not only requires that the individual courses within a particular program reflect a shared vision for teaching and teacher education, but also requires that courses deliberately and systematically reinforce and expand that vision. In this section, we describe the programmatic infrastructure that shapes and defines our English education program and then offer three illustrative vignettes that show how our courses aim to cultivate democracy-sustaining dispositions in our preservice teachers.

Over the years, a cadre of English education and English faculty, supported by numerous graduate students in both departments, has worked in active partnership to create shared responsibility for the preparation of English education students. This partnership was initiated over 20 years ago by an English professor, Robert (second author) and a former English education professor who sought to collaborate on the work of teacher preparation. It has since been sustained by those in tenure-line positions in both departments.

There are several structural mechanisms that make this partnership possible. First, the program is based on a cohort model. Each February, Robert and Rachael (second authors) from the English Department and Lauren and Sarah (first and second author, respectively) from the Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education (TLTE) interview up to 35 prospective secondary English students for between 22 and 24 spots in the two-year program (See Appendix 1 for interview questions). The interview questions are formulated around the areas that we agree are most important for teaching English, focusing on four distinct areas (in addition to GPA and transcripts): reasons for wanting to teach, reasons for wanting to teach English as a discipline, approach to collaboration and experiences working with — and/or being open to working with — students from diverse backgrounds. In conjunction with the applicant’s transcripts, letters of recommendation and required essays, these interviews allow us to select preservice teachers whose commitments to teaching English and commitment to teaching all students are equally robust. Moreover, the interview process enables us to interact with students who on paper might not appear to be a good fit but in person demonstrate the kind of openness to growth and critical perspectives we value. The process of interviewing also strengthens the partnership we have with one another as a program as we annually revisit our mission and the larger programmatic vision.

Students are admitted in the spring and begin their program in fall of junior year. In the first weeks of class, our cadre of English and Education professors hosts a “Meet and Greet” where we formally welcome the cohort, explain and describe the sequence of courses and clinical experiences in the program, describe our vision for our English education program and field questions. The semester sequence is as follows (*asterisks indicate that there is a concurrent and related clinical requirement):
Finally, to maintain a shared sense of how our students are doing, we meet monthly to discuss our shared cohort of preservice teachers, problem-solve areas of concern and consider different and/or additional ways we might respond to our students’ needs, especially when it comes to teaching linguistically, racially and culturally diverse learners. This is a vital part of our program’s coherence because it engages in what Lowenstein (2009) calls a “parallel practice” wherein we model the kinds of teaching and learning that we want our own students to practice (see Gatti, 2016). Moreover, these monthly meetings allow us to make changes in our own courses or in clinical expectations if that is what we feel our students need.

Taken together, the initial and mid-program interviews, as well as the intentional sequence of courses, enable our program to infuse West’s democratic armor into the very structure of our program. They allow us to signal these values recursively and coherently throughout the program, and ensure that students have both the time and the space needed to cultivate democracy-sustaining dispositions. The initial interviews are spaces in which prophetic witness and tragicomic hope are foregrounded, as students are asked to detail their commitment to social justice as well as their enthusiasm for a notoriously difficult profession. The course sequence is designed to harness and deepen students’ inquiry skills and is structured to ensure that students experience and are able to apply familiar concepts in new contexts and situations. Regular, monthly meetings provide an opportunity for reflection as we consider the relative effectiveness of our approach, and as we plan future collaborations across courses.

In the vignettes that follow, we describe a few critical moments that highlight the ways in which the coherence of our program – organized as it is around West’s ideals – combines with similarly focused pedagogical moves and invitations, and ultimately provides evidence of our students’ development into democratically oriented practitioners.
Vignette one: critical policy writing and reflection in reading theory

The Preliminary Informed Position Statement assignments (PIPS for short) are written and revised for Robert and Rachael’s English department courses – Reading Theory and Practice and Composition Theory and Practice – in the first semester course block. These PIPS are structured to invite preservice teachers into the political work of English Studies. In accordance with West’s call for a “relentless self-examination and critique of institutions of authority, motivated by an endless quest for intellectual integrity and moral consistency” (p. 16) and fearless speech that “unsettles, unnerves, and unhouses people from their uncritical sleepwalking” (p. 16), these major projects ask preservice teachers to speak back to public policy statements and justify their positions with professional support.

Both PIPS assignments start with existing policy documents and invite preservice teachers to reflect critically on those policies to offer their own visions of what those policies ought to be, supported by their own experience and their professional reading. In Robert’s Reading Theory and Practice course, the PIPS project is the creation of a policy statement for an aspect of reading, modeled on the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) position statements. The preservice teachers’ assignment is to draft a policy statement on a currently debated reading issue, justifying their position with appropriate professional support. Preservice teachers also looked at local position statements generated by the Nebraska Writing Project Advisory Board (2012-14), and the newly adopted English Language Arts State Standards for Nebraska (2014).

Both PIPS assignments immersed preservice teachers in the intellectual work of West’s Socratic questioning and prophetic witness. As the projects were developed over the course of the semester, the content of these projects tended to enrich over time, as preservice teachers engaged in “critical self-examination” of their own writing/reading practices. As the assignments involved positioning their own ideas amid a rhetorical field of other positions (some officially sanctioned by the Nebraska Department of Education, others advocated by recognized leaders in the profession), preservice teachers almost naturally engaged in West’s “critique of institutions and authority” (p. 16).

One example of this work is Jennifer’s Reading PIPS, entitled “Reading for Social Justice: The Call and Strategies for a Socially Just Reading Classroom”. This policy statement was explicitly modeled on NCTE’s (2014) “Resolution on the Need for Diverse Children’s and Young Adult Books” and Heather Bruce’s (2013) “Subversive acts of revision: Writing and Justice”. It argues for an approach to literature teaching that emphasizes diversity and critical examination of existing social biases. Jennifer’s central paragraphs read:

While insulating curriculum with works like Romeo and Juliet, The Odyssey, 1984, and Lord of the Flies exposes students to historically valued texts, heavy focus on these stories amplifies the perspectives and works of historically privileged groups […] Not only should students read texts that relate to their lives directly, but they should also read works from multiple diverse perspectives and groups they may not necessarily be included in. Equal representation is a necessary component for social justice education, especially when a group has no representation in a particular classroom […] No matter the context, literature from diverse authors representing diverse perspectives is essential. If students are to think critically about justice and further develop a critical consciousness, they must first be exposed to the positions of others as well as the value and validity of others’ perspectives. This exposure will help students identify power imbalances, learn to empathize with individuals of different social groups, and critically examine their own privileges and disadvantages.
Jennifer’s PIPS developed from her own experience with a school curriculum that had been dominated by “historically valued texts”, so she was in part speaking against the schooling she herself had received. In the first semester block of courses, she was drawn to Christensen’s (2009) *Teaching for Joy and Justice*, especially the idea of selecting texts that “tell [. . .] students that they are alive, that they matter, that teach lessons about human connection, about building a civil society” (p. 165). This project thus immersed Jennifer in a healthy and extended institutional critique along the lines suggested by West. She was able to see her own schooling as a product of a particular ideological position. In response to that experience, she explored a different political agenda for literature teaching. Following the model of the NCTE policy statements, she makes some moves toward public, professional advocacy for positions she holds at this time. While she expects these positions to mature and clarify in the remaining three semesters of the preservice education program, we can see the beginnings of a politically aware self-positioning in the profession.

**Vignette two: tragicomic hope through experiential education in composition theory**

For West, democracy is “more a verb than a noun” (68), and a rich experiential component of the teacher education program at our university allows us to present tragicomic hope as a *doing* for novice teachers. For the first semester of the program, Rachael and Robert engage the cohort in a collaboration with one of the most diverse high schools in Lincoln, a vibrant school enriched by refugee and immigrant students, as well as a diversity of socioeconomic and racial backgrounds. This partnership offered new experiences to interact across difference for many of the preservice teachers, as the vast majority is white and most come from homogenous, rural communities. Many of these preservice teachers were tracked into high-achieving classes and have a love of English rooted in past classroom success, fueled by the ways their home discourses are valued in school. It is therefore important for our preservice teachers to interact with students who have been actively minoritized, and to explore how the education system impacts these students. As West explains, prophetic witness involves taking a direct look at injustice, to “shatter deliberate ignorance” and “stir up in us the courage to care and empower us to change our lives and our historical circumstances” (p. 114). By fostering semester-long, one-to-one relationships with high school students, we sought to encourage personal investment – a key ingredient in the “courage to care” that West calls for. It was important for us, as an English education team, to ground the cohort *from the beginning* in the experiences of those youth who are often most marginalized in the education system, reflecting West’s argument that the starting point for social thought should be the experiences of those most vulnerable in society.

The cohort’s composition theory and reading theory courses are scheduled back-to-back, and on most Thursdays, this block of time was allocated to meeting at the high school. First, the preservice teachers participated in reading groups with a literature class, exploring *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky, 2012)[3] with young readers. During the next period, the preservice teachers hosted workshops with a composition class. These meetings transitioned from activities led by the high school teacher to lessons designed by the preservice cohort, as the groups explored using a different lens to interpret the novel (e.g. race, class, gender) and a different aspect of the writing process (invention, drafting, revising, editing) each week. During the final period, preservice teachers met with the two high school teachers during their planning break for reflection.
The partnership stressed constant shuttling between action, reflection and revised action, as there were multiple weeks at the school site. Pragmatism is rooted in this stance of open-ended experimentation and revision (Dewey, 1916, 1938), and prophetic pragmatism folds in the ethical imperative to pursue pragmatism with a focus on justice. The reflection sessions with the high school teachers were invaluable in contextualizing challenges in light of justice issues and collaboratively brainstorming new strategies. Rachael, the English education cohort, and the collaborating high school teachers used this action-reflection-revision structure to foster tragicomic hope, the ability to look with realism at injustices and entrenched problems in education, but still move forward in hope.

One example of tragicomic hope in development occurred with a preservice teacher, Cassie, who was paired with a high school composition student, Miguel. Miguel was older than the other students because there had been a composition test required for graduation a few years before, and though the test had been abolished, Miguel was grandfathered into the requirement. He had taken composition three times and failed the test each time. Now in a class with those who were younger and had different assignments, Miguel was clearly frustrated and sometimes resistant to Cassie. In the reflection sessions, Rachael and Cassie framed Miguel’s resistance not as individual disrespect but as a reaction to a problematic standardized test that was clearly failing to support Miguel. The impact of this standardized graduation requirement was laid bare. Yet within this structural frame, they also explored approaches to working with Miguel, drawing from class texts to emphasize the importance of building personal relationships, focusing on student strengths and allowing student voice.

Miguel was struggling in particular with a process essay required as part of his exam. He had written about his passion for boxing, but the prose was unclear and he was unwilling to revise. One afternoon, Rachael turned to find Cassie standing next to Miguel, holding a boxing stance. In Cassie’s words:

I stood up and placed my feet where Miguel’s paper told me to place them. I threw my arms up and balled my hands into fists the way he described verbatim. Miguel would watch me and study my actions, like a coach to a novice athlete. I was his model boxer, learning orthodox and southpaw stances, jabs and hooks. In different sections where it wasn’t clear from the writing what I was supposed to do, Miguel would highlight that as a section that needed more clarity. It was engaging for Miguel because he had the opportunity to be the teacher, instead of him being taught.

Cassie used this experience not only to deepen awareness of power and the meaning of standardized tests for marginalized students, but also to practice ways of agile movement within problematic institutions, seeing this problem not just as a cause for despair, but for doubling down on commitment, action, and yes – as West would put it – joy, as Rachael witnessed Cassie shaking with laughter as Miguel tried to teach her a southpaw stance. In that moment, she captured the indomitable spirit of tragicomic hope.

Cornel West argues that Socratic questioning, prophetic witness, and tragicomic hope are “democratic armor” that can be used to fight nihilism resulting from market moralities (p. 217). It stands to follow that if we want students to use this armor, we must give them opportunities to try it on and move around in it, not just read about it. In this sense, the experiential component of teacher education programs has the potential to support students in doing prophetic pragmatism.
Striving for symbiosis in university coursework and fieldwork

Field experiences often constitute the beating heart of teacher education programs. Grossman et al. (2008) explain, “What may matter most are not the number of hours but the extent to which these assignments that link coursework and fieldwork are well-constructed” (p. 283). In each of the four semesters of our English education program, our students are involved in at least one field experience. Some of these take place in English courses (Composition Theory and Reading Theory) and others take place in Education courses (Young Adult Literature, Methods I and Methods II).

In students’ first semester, they engage in an online reading partnership with a rural school in northwestern Nebraska as well as a reading and composition practicum at North Star High School jointly run by Robert and Rachael. In students’ second semester of the program, they complete a 10-week apprenticeship in an English Language Learner[4] (ELL) classroom at Northeast High School. In third semester, students complete a 10-week teaching practicum where, in pairs or solo, they observe one period in a cooperating teacher’s classroom and then teach one class on their own under the supervision of their mentor. Finally, students have a semester-long, full-time student teaching experience in a middle or high school. This experience is accompanied by a student teaching seminar where student teachers critically reflect on their student teaching experiences in online and in-person meetings. Rather than being stand-alone experiences for preservice teachers, each field experience is connected to the content of the course and the vision for the program.

One of the most important features of our field experiences is that Sarah, a Professor of Practice and former public school teacher in LPS, places all of our English education students. The significance of this feature cannot be overstated. Not only does Sarah have relationships with dozens of people in the district, but she also has an ability to think about what individual students in our program need in terms of mentoring and can make placements accordingly. Grossman et al. (2008) refer to this as “programmatic control over field experience” (p. 283) and explain that it is one of the most important features of programmatic coherence. When one or more person from the program is able to thoughtfully consider where and with whom preservice teachers are placed, the shared vision for teaching and teacher education is more likely to cohere the university and school’s messages and values.

These field experiences have evolved in number and nature over the past few years in response to student feedback and the changing demographics of our community. For instance, several years ago, evaluations from the Methods II course (taught by Lauren) revealed that many students felt unprepared to teach English Language Learners (ELLs) effectively. In an effort to respond to students’ needs through enacting Lowenstein’s (2009) “parallel practice”, the following year Sarah collaborated with local teachers and administrators to develop an informal, 10-week ELL practicum to be completed in conjunction with Methods I and Young Adult Literature (taught that year by doctoral student Jessica, first author)[5]. In these field experiences, preservice teachers immerse themselves in ELL classrooms as supportive apprentices alongside their cooperating teachers, periodically composing reflections and dialogue in their university Methods classes in service of sense-making and scholarly applications.

Vignette three: engaging theory and practice in mid-program interviews

Understanding what our students need, where they are growing and what they are struggling with is central to teaching them. One of the ways we do this is via a Mid-Program
Reflection and Interview (see Appendix 2 for mid-program interview questions). John used his mid-program reflection to consider the first half of his ELL practicum experience where he experienced a reflective opening that evoked attentive care. The opening he created involved a classroom moment where he realized a blind spot he was not aware he had in his professional development – and, in this identification, proceeded to open up vs pin down definitively his developing understandings through close observation and reflection. He moved from local to global perspectives as he realized this local Shakespearean moment extends a global understanding for him about the ELL population, an understanding he might not have gleaned if simply read in a book:

I think the most surprising bit of this practicum was watching Alice not pull her punches with the students. She treats them like the young adults they are and doesn’t baby them, which I appreciate immensely […] Alice was reading Shakespeare with her class, something that even fluent English speakers have a hard time with, and her students were getting it. Sure, sometimes they had to define a word or two, or maybe had a difficult time expressing what they wanted to say, but they understood it. I think that just reinforces everything we’ve read up to this point: ELL students aren’t children trapped in the bodies of high schoolers; they’re intelligent young adults who understand the material but maybe don’t yet have all the tools needed to express what they know. I think that seeing the sharp wit and intelligence of these kids makes me more prepared to teach them, as I’ve never before interacted with an ELL classroom. It’s one thing to read all about an ELL population in a book, but it’s another to observe the class itself.

Noting the overlaps between the theory he had encountered in his Methods course and the teaching practice he observed, John was able to recognize deficit-based approaches to teaching English Language Learners – approaches that he perhaps has previously internalized – and depart markedly from them as he rethinks what is possible in an ELL classroom.

Another preservice teacher, Hope, used the mid-program reflection and interview to share some of the biggest changes she had undergone thus far in the program as a thinker, learner and novice teacher:

I’ve learned from working in my practicums [sic] and exploring teaching methods that impactful teaching is student-centered, not subject-centered, and is about developing understanding, enabling identity formation, fostering empathy and critical thinking, dismantling and reconstructing power in the name of justice […] I’ve also become far more committed to working with diverse youth. Though I’ve always valued multicultural, inclusive education, the “diversity” I revered was a highly decontextualized ideal. I wanted to abolish racism and sexism. But I had no idea how to do that—it wasn’t until taking these courses, exploring the power structures of the “-isms” by reading Freire, Christiansen, and Appleman and having class discussions over these texts, that I began to realize just how deeply embedded in our society injustice truly is.

From an early, less complex notion of learning to teach – to transmit her love of the subject to others – Hope described turning her attention toward bearing witness to injustice as she considered her role in supporting students as they “unpack and combat” inequality.

Hope’s growth was not simply the consequence of her university coursework; rather, there were several programmatic opportunities that facilitated Hope’s growth in evolving her early inclinations toward social justice pedagogy into a lived, informed reality. Fieldwork was an integral part of this.

Conclusion: towards coherence in English education
In this essay, we have illustrated how one cadre of English Educators has worked to actualize the kind of programmatic coherence that Grossman et al. (2008) advocate for
teacher education. While West’s “democratic armor”, comprising Socratic questioning, prophetic witness and tragicomic hope, has helped us to articulate the shared vision for our program that Grossman et al. (2008) suggest is central to strengthening teacher preparation, we recognize that this need not be the only vision for English education in the USA and around the world. Our shared commitment to cultivating democracy-sustaining dispositions in our preservice teachers is a reflection of our own values and hopes. In another program, perhaps that shared vision is centered on critical literacy, or social justice, or cultural pluralism (Macaluso et al., 2016). We would argue that the only requirement for this kind of programmatic work is that the shared vision for English education advances the democratic potential of public schools for all students. As Britzman (1986) writes:

While experience is always instructive, the issue is whether the instruction empowers human agency or replicates the status quo. Prospective teachers need to participate in developing critical ways of knowing which can interrogate school culture, the quality of students’ and teachers’ lives, school knowledge, and the particular role biography plays in understanding these dynamics. Without a critical perspective, the relationships between school culture and power become “housed” in prospective teachers’ biographies and significantly impede their creative capacity for understanding and altering their circumstances (p. 454).

In thinking of how English education programs might deliberately pursue the work of programmatic coherence as a political act, we draw on Britzman’s challenge to create opportunities for prospective teachers to develop “critical ways of knowing” via programmatic experiences that resonate with a shared vision regarding the larger purposes of teaching and learning.

In the interest of promoting increased attention to the concept of coherence, we offer a few starting points for what we hope will be an ongoing dialogue at our readers’ respective institutions:

- Assemble a team and reflect on your current program. Who are your colleagues in the English Department? The Education Department? Meet with them to identify which classes are taught, by whom they are taught and at what point in preservice teachers’ program. What trends, overlaps, redundancies or gaps do you see? How are you able to trace students’ development at different points in your program?
- Discuss goals and values with your colleagues. Which skills, knowledge, and dispositions are most valued by your program? Where, in the program sequence, are there structured invitations to develop these? Where are the gaps and how might you address them?
- Be explicit with prospective students about what you value as a program. What is the most important thing you want your English education students to come out of your program knowing, believing and being able to do? In our program, we communicate our values through the interview and through the required essays that students write for admission.
- Get involved in district professional development. How is professional development in English Language Arts handled in your district? What might you be able to do to help create meaningful professional development experiences for English teachers? This kind of work helps build relationships between the university and schools.
- Start small. If you have one teaching methods course and believe that two would be preferable, what might you do to advocate for or create that course?
These questions are vital ones. As university budgets shrink around the globe and as, in the USA especially, teacher preparation programs face increased scrutiny from a variety of neoliberal stakeholders, it is as important as ever to work across disciplinary divides to align our work with a vision that is meaningful and ultimately sustaining for our students and for ourselves. In so doing, we are tragicomically hopeful about the future of English education.

Notes

1. When referring to the work of English education, we have chosen to use the word “educate” rather than “prepare” or “train.” The word “educate” suggests a more holistic and multidimensional approach to the work we do in teacher education. We understand that this risks redundancy, but believe it is an important distinction to make. We thank our anonymous peer reviewer for offering this suggestion and this language.

2. All student names – secondary students and preservice teachers – are pseudonyms. Additionally, each of the preservice teachers whose work we cite in this essay has granted us permission to do so.

3. We are aware that this title has been critiqued due to its centering of white, middle-class experiences. We have explored the substitution of a more inclusive text, such as Angie Thomas’s *The Hate U Give*, but at present text selection for General English 11 courses in our district are controlled by an oversight committee. The text selection will be reconsidered in the next English 11 revision cycle.

4. In the USA, English Language Learners are students whose home language is not English. Nebraska is one of the top ten states in the country for refugee resettlement, something that is reflected in the demographics of the district. According to Lincoln Public Schools statistics, 7.7 per cent of students are English Language Learners. The three most common home languages in the district are Spanish (25.4 per cent), Arabic (21.6 per cent) and Kurdish (17.8 per cent).

5. Initially, this took place in both middle and high schools. As of 2017, however, the practicum has moved entirely to one of the district’s most diverse high schools. This majority white, working class school was undergoing its inaugural ELL program year during the bitterly contentious presidential election.

References


Christensen, L. (2009), *Teaching for Joy and Justice: Re-Imagining the Language Arts Classroom*, Rethinking Schools, Madison, WI.


Further reading


Appendix 1

Admission interview for English education:

- Academic Preparation and Potential for Success within the Program 1 2 3 4.
The candidate displays exemplar academic progress and achievement, as evidenced by having taken a range of liberal arts courses as well as courses in the discipline of English, including literature, writing, rhetoric, linguistics and literacy; attaining a GPA that is commensurate with the expectations of a professional program endorsement in Secondary English; and involvement in non-classroom academic experiences (e.g. study abroad, U-Care work, student organizations):

- Commitment to the Profession of Teaching 1 2 3 4.
The candidate shows an understanding of the profession of teaching beyond personal experience as a student and can offer a well thought-out, reflective explanation and rationale for his/her desire to become a teacher. This explanation should extend beyond naming or listing personal experiences; instead, it should link the work of being a teacher to broader principles and socio-political contexts:

- Personal Attributes in relation to Collaboration and Professionalism 1 2 3 4.
The candidate displays an understanding of the value of collaboration with peers and colleagues, desires to engage with a variety of ideas about approaches to teaching and learning secondary English, and demonstrates professional behavior, including appropriate dress, presentation and writing mechanics:

- Commitment to the Discipline of English and the Language Arts 1 2 3 4.
The candidate displays an understanding of the scope of English Studies, including imaginative literatures and the cultures they represent; rhetorical practices of writing and speaking for public engagement; and the multiplicity of textual genres and language forms in the twenty-first century. The candidate displays thoughtful and reflective awareness as receiver, analyzer and producer of texts. S/he articulates a professional commitment to the use of at least some aspects of English Studies for engagement with cultural issues and agency for social improvement:

- Commitment to working with Diverse Youth 1 2 3 4.
The candidate makes visible an understanding of youth beyond personal experiences and can articulate a thoughtful, reflective set of commitments and reasons for wanting to work with diverse secondary-aged people – ones that extend beyond talking about teaching and the discipline of English.

Appendix 2

Mid-program interview questions:

- Academic Preparation and Potential for Success within the Program.
In what ways have you grown as a scholar in the program? Specific texts/writers that especially resonate?

- Personal Attributes in relation to Collaboration and Professionalism.
You have had multiple opportunities to engage robust collaboration throughout the program. What have you learned about yourself, professionalism and effective collaboration?

- Commitment to the profession of teaching.
In what ways has your “why” for teaching enlarged and deepened?

- Commitment to the Discipline of English and the Language Arts.
What is the important work of teaching English? When considering your future course impacts, what essential competencies do you want your students to take away?

- Commitment to working with Diverse Youth.
The program has afforded nearly one year of immersive field experience working with diverse youth so far. What have you learned about yourself? About effective teaching within these contexts? What growth areas do you identify for yourself?

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Abstract

Purpose – This study was conducted in ninth- and tenth-grade classrooms with the goal of studying effective scaffolding for improving argumentative writing, both conventional and digital/multimodal.

Design/methodology/approach – The author conducted a formative experiment in two high-school classrooms to study ways teachers integrated forms of multimodal composition in their classrooms and provided associated scaffolding.

Findings – Findings regarding scaffolding included the embedding of scaffolding in the writing process to blend conventional and digital forms, the use of collaboration as a needed, though resisted, part of this scaffolding, and the consideration of digital tools that mediate students’ argumentative writing.

Originality/value – This study explored the implementation of a multimodal literacies intervention, providing empirical findings to a field that has remained largely theoretical.

Keywords Media, Literacy, Scaffolding, Argument, New literacies, English language arts, Writing, Teaching writing, Multimodal, Digital tools

Although research on multimodal literacy practices has focused on student engagement (Jocius, 2013) or students’ lives outside of school (Mills, 2010), more research is needed that “emphasizes scaffolding the multimodal practice of youth by experts in school settings” (Mills, 2010, p. 39). Multimodality is defined by the combination of two or more modes – including visual, linguistic, audio, spatial and gestural – and the affordances and interaction of these modes to fully express meaning (Dalton, 2012; Mills, 2010). Students may be adept at using multimodal literacies for purposes outside the classroom, but need guidance to use these literacies for other academic and social purposes (Mills, 2010). This discussion contributes to this gap by examining how multimodality might be scaffolded (Dalton, 2012; Mills, 2010) in the classroom.

The following research question was examined from a formative experiment in two high-school classrooms: What forms of scaffolding were implemented in high-school English instruction when teachers implemented multimodal composition? This study was conducted in a ninth- and tenth-grade classroom with the goal of improving argumentative writing, both conventional and digital/multimodal. This multimodal argumentation intervention consisted of three essential elements:

(1) construction of arguments composed of claims, evidence and elaboration of that evidence;
(2) digital tools suitable for producing multimodal arguments; and
(3) a process approach to writing.
Specifically, scaffolding is discussed as it pertained to:

- scaffolding embedded in the writing process to blend conventional and digital forms;
- collaboration as a needed, though resisted, part of this scaffolding; and
- consideration of digital tools that mediate students’ argumentative writing.

**Relevant perspectives**

The New London Group (1996) called for an expanded concept of literacy that accounted for the design and comprehension of multimodal texts, which they coined *multiliteracies*. They suggested students’ understanding of multimodal design was imperative especially as digital technologies made these forms more accessible, and globalization made communication less dependent upon a standard, national form. Kress (2003, 2010) continued this discussion in social semiotics. Jenkins and colleagues (Jenkins *et al.*, 2006; Jenkins *et al.*, 2016), in their discussion of new media literacies, emphasized the need to make communication more participatory, with low barriers to creating, expressing and sharing ideas in an increasingly technological and networked society. Although students spend an increasing amount of time with technology, their ability to discern and create multimodal texts online is not necessarily keeping pace (Hutchison *et al.*, 2016) and may require more explicit instruction (Simpson and Walsh, 2015). Research suggests that although multimodal instruction may be useful for students to learn content knowledge, such as argumentative writing (Demirbag and Gunel, 2014), and that new models of writing including such multimodality are warranted (Whithaus, 2012), guidance for integrating multimodality into K-12 classrooms is lacking, especially for academic learning rather than merely engagement (Jocius, 2013).

Specifically, research on how to scaffold such learning in the classroom is needed (Mills, 2010). Schunk (2012, p. 245) defined instructional scaffolding as:

> The process of controlling task elements that are beyond the learners’ capabilities so that they can focus on and master those features of the task that they can grasp quickly.

Boche and Henning (2015, p. 580) expand this definition of scaffolding as providing “entry points” into learning. In their seminal article on scaffolding, Wood *et al.* (1976), provided nuance by discussing six functions of scaffolding:

1. *recruitment*, making the learning task appealing;
2. *reduction in degrees of freedom*, simplifying the task;
3. *direction of maintenance*, keeping the learner on track for learning the objective;
4. *marking critical features*, highlighting important features of the learning task;
5. *frustration control*, using scaffolds to control the learners’ frustration; and
6. *demonstration*, modeling the process.

Benko (2013) discussed that scaffolding has historically been part of writing instruction, including both potential and pitfall. For example, she discussed that scaffolding is useful when it is used to help students consider the process of writing; however, as with the five paragraph essay, sometimes the scaffold is lost, instead becoming another product pursued without purpose. Langer and Applebee (1987) highlighted scaffolding as a way to transition from writing instruction focused upon product to teaching that facilitates the process of writing instead. In their study of 23 secondary teachers’ implementation of writing
instruction, they called for instructional scaffolding, composed of five elements: ownership, student’s investment in the task; appropriateness, building on student skills; support, guidance through the task; collaboration, the teacher working with students to achieve a goal rather than simply assessing progress; and internalization, where the process becomes part of the student’s path of knowing. Others acknowledged instructional scaffolding as important, yet suggest that term is limiting when it implies that the teacher is the only expert; instead, a metaphor of weaving may be more apt to show that both the teacher and student influence one another through scaffolding (Smagorinsky et al., 2015).

Dalton (2012, p. 336) defined scaffolding multimodal composing as a need to “constrain the larger composing task so that students are able to focus attention on the new thing to play with and learn”. Although studies such as Simpson and Walsh’s (2015), which examined fifth-graders’ responses to multimodal texts, have begun to address the need of scaffolding with multimodal texts, the authors also specifically called for further study in divergent contexts, such as the study presented here, executed in high-school English classrooms. This study focuses on the scaffolding teachers used during an intervention implementing digital, multimodal composing to improve students’ arguments. Multimodality has been described both as a learning process requiring scaffolding (Mills, 2010) and a scaffold itself for literacy learning (Boche and Henning, 2015). In the study reported here, scaffolding was needed to help students create multimodal texts through their writing process and collaboration. In addition, students’ creation of multimodal arguments with digital tools helped scaffold their expanding concept of argument.

**Method**

A formative experiment was ideal for this study because of its focus upon exploring how an intervention can be implemented in classroom instruction to achieve a pedagogical goal (Reinking and Bradley, 2008). Although each classroom’s implementation of this intervention differed according to the teacher’s curriculum, the essential elements of the intervention were consistent for each case:

- construction of arguments composed of claims, evidence, and elaboration of that evidence;
- using digital tools suitable for producing digital, multimodal arguments; and
- a process approach to writing.

These elements can be implemented in multiple ways, but removing any element negates the intervention as a definable instructional entity (Howell et al., 2017). During the intervention, I worked collaboratively with the teachers as is typical of formative experiments (Reinking and Bradley, 2008). This collaboration ranged from helping them design instructional materials to at times co-teaching, but I deferred to their instructional decisions as these decisions are important data in formative experiments.

In each case, the intervention was enacted in stages. The first stage consisted of the students completing a smaller project, an argument of a social issue presented via an infographic (Howell, 2016) using Glogster EDU (edu.glogster.com). The second stage consisted of a larger project, a Google Sites website (www.google.com/sites/overview.html) in which the students argued for a social issue in the form of a public service announcement (PSA).

Table I describes the weekly goals for learning in ninth grade and the corresponding weekly instructional activities implemented to meet these goals during the intervention. The
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Students learn language of argument</td>
<td>Activity in which students solve a mystery using parts of argument (Smith et al., 2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Students learn language of argument</td>
<td>Students created, using Glogster EDU, an advertisement implementing parts of argument (Smith et al., 2012)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Students reading Tuesdays with Morrie</td>
<td>Reading</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Students reading Tuesdays with Morrie and euthanasia text set and analyzing for elements of argument</td>
<td>Reading; Analyzing text set for argument and multimodality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Students discuss infographics and introduce infographics assignment</td>
<td>Analyzing infographics online and introducing infographics assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Student construction of infographic</td>
<td>Students crafting infographics on Glogster EDU</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Students revising and publishing infographic</td>
<td>Students revising and publishing infographics using Glogster EDU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Review of parts of argument</td>
<td>Students review a text set including editorials on whether students should have homework (Gallagher, 2006). They annotate the articles for claim and evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Introduction of Public Service Announcements (PSA)</td>
<td>Students are introduced to what PSAs are and the PSA assignment. They then explore PSAs (Selfe and Selfe, 2008) for both elements of argument and multimodal design using Google Docs</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Reading Mice and Men; Exploration of potential topics for PSAs</td>
<td>Students use library websites to explore social issues and multimodal resources pertaining to Of Mice and Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Students finishing Mice and Men</td>
<td>Students finish reading novel</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Learning about evidence</td>
<td>Students evaluate various pieces of evidence (Smith et al., 2012) and find evidence to support their topic from novel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research of evidence and citing evidence</td>
<td>Students use Google Docs to research topics in groups, focusing on written research as well as other modes of research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Students continue to research topics</td>
<td>Students use double entry journal note taking to record evidence and source information on the left side and to elaborate on that evidence in the right column</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Students drafting arguments</td>
<td>Students use a prompted writing assignment (Bernabei and Hall, 2012) to draft arguments about their PSA issue</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
learning activities and goals were similar in tenth grade, although they created an infographic on social issues pertaining to *To Kill a Mockingbird* and a website related to stances taken on current social issues chosen by students. Implementing the intervention in these stages allowed for modifications to be made to the intervention between the first and second stage as well as during each stage, which is consistent with and a necessary condition of formative experiments, which are iterative at micro- and macro-levels (Reinking and Bradley, 2008).

Both teachers decided to implement the intervention using the same digital tools: Glogster EDU, Google Sites and Google Docs (www.google.com/docs/about/). Google Sites is a digital tool for making websites, and Google Docs is used for sharing collaborative documents. Glogster EDU is an online site enabling digital, multimodal posters.

**Cases**

This study was conducted as a formative experiment using multiple-case study methods for data collection and analysis (Yin, 2014). Each case was a common case (Yin, 2014) as the two participating teachers and their students were neither clearly predisposed toward the intervention’s success nor failure as suggested in formative experiments (Reinking and Bradley, 2008). Barrister was the ninth-grade teacher, and her English I class participating in the study had 24 students: 12 White females, 10 White males and two Hispanic males. Tucker was the tenth-grade teacher, and her English II class participating in the study had 23 students: one Black female, 11 White females, one Black male, one Hispanic male and nine White males. Both teachers were White females teaching in a rural, high-poverty, predominately White high school. Tucker was in her first year of teaching, whereas Barrister was a veteran teacher with 23 years of experience. Each case was bound by the time devoted to implementing the intervention, a total of 15 weeks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Students are shown models of Glogsters and create Glogster EDU posters of their evidence from the novel <em>Of Mice and Men</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Students look at examples of PSAs in the form of websites and draw their visions for their sites using paper and crayons. Then, students use computers to start their Google Sites. Students given handouts on features of Google Sites and how to embed Glogster EDU poster into website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Drafting websites</td>
<td>Students return to drawing and planning sites and then continue with making sites using Google Sites. Students given handouts on how to include images in websites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Revising of websites; Publishing websites</td>
<td>Students work to finish websites. They work with a partner to revise site and use a reflection sheet to revise and edit their own work. At the end of the week, students publish their websites before their class lesson.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data collection and analysis

Qualitative data were collected throughout the study for three purposes:

- before the intervention to observe the context of the intervention and gather baseline data to understand where participants were regarding the goal of the study;
- during the intervention to observe enhancing and inhibiting factors of the intervention, modifications needed to the intervention and unanticipated outcomes of the intervention; and
- after the intervention to determine whether the instructional environment changed as a result of the intervention (Reinking and Bradley, 2008).

Table II shows the data collected, when the data were analyzed, and the type of data analysis used.

The qualitative data, which included interviews, observations and field notes, were coded using a grounded-theory method of coding and a constant-comparison analysis in which I formed initial codes, reviewed emerging codes, gained more data when necessary and formed more focused codes and theoretical assertions during the retrospective analysis of data (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 1965; Gravemeijer and Cobb, 2006).

Qualitative analysis of the student questionnaire, student multimodal-argument reflection and student multimodal artifacts were coded in the retrospective analysis using *a priori* coding that probed for any changes in the students’ ability to convey elements of the goal and intervention, specifically how they used digital, multimodal tools and their ability to convey argument, including claims, evidence and elaboration of that evidence. A retrospective analysis of data is called for in the final phase of formative experiments (Reinking and Bradley, 2008). This analysis examines all of the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data collected</th>
<th>Description of data</th>
<th>Phase of data analysis</th>
<th>Type of data analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Interviews of the teachers, students, administrator, and the school media specialists using semi-structured interview questions</td>
<td>During intervention; Retrospective analysis</td>
<td>Emergent coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(32 Total)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations and Field Notes</td>
<td>Direct- and participant-observations were made over a five-month period (Yin, 2014)</td>
<td>During intervention; Retrospective analysis</td>
<td>Emergent coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(45 Total)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student artifacts</td>
<td>The students produced artifacts from the assignments they were given in the intervention</td>
<td>During intervention; Retrospective analysis</td>
<td><em>A priori</em> coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Questionnaire (Pre- and Post-)</td>
<td>The students were asked before and after the intervention about their beliefs and practices regarding arguments</td>
<td>Retrospective analysis</td>
<td><em>A priori</em> coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Multimodal-Argument Reflection (Pre- and Post-)</td>
<td>The students were asked before and after the intervention how they would construct an argument using technology</td>
<td>Retrospective analysis</td>
<td><em>A priori</em> coding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II. Qualitative data collection and analysis
data collected and analyzed during the intervention with the purpose of generating recommendations for practice (Gravemeijer and Cobb, 2006; Reinking and Bradley, 2008). As a multiple-case study, cross-case analysis was performed (Yin, 2014) during the retrospective analysis in which I compared the focused codes of the emergent coding and the a priori coding of each case, discussed in the subsequent findings, prior to forming the theoretical codes discussed in the implications for practice. Table III lists the initial, focused and theoretical codes that reflect scaffolding and the factors associated with that scaffolding.

Findings
The following findings regarding scaffolding emerged from analyses of the data:

- scaffolding was embedded in the writing process to blend conventional and digital forms;
- collaboration was a needed, though resisted, part of this scaffolding; and
- consideration of digital tools should include their mediation of students’ argumentative writing.

Scaffolding the writing process
The students at different points in the intervention felt overwhelmed by the scale of the infographic and PSA website projects assigned. Barrister’s concern was evident in an interview reflecting upon the infographic assignment and changes necessary going forward:

I think there are times, there’s a little too much for them, and it is [steps of the infographic project] not broken down enough step by step. I think they get overwhelmed, and then they do not know where to start or where to begin.

Thus, between the stage one infographic and the stage two PSA website project, we made modifications to include more scaffolding for students based upon Barrister’s discussion of the inhibiting factor of students being overwhelmed by the multimodal arguments and more scaffolding being needed.

Barrister and I talked about providing the students with more scaffolding, for their writing as well as their use of digital tools. We discussed breaking down the tasks involved in composing a digital, multimodal project into manageable chunks. For example, for the infographic, the students composed the draft online. However, in the second stage with the PSA website, we decided to provide more models of argument writing, in the form of print-based editorials as well as digital, multimodal models of PSAs, provide more steps of drafting and revisions and start with writing at an earlier point in the writing process. In addition, we provided possible templates the students could follow in designing their PSA website. Wood et al. (1976, p. 98) recommended modeling as a form of demonstration so that learners can imitate an “idealized form of an attempted solution”. The ninth-grade students needed this modification to ease their tendency to become overwhelmed when working with multimodality and digital tools, concepts they had not attempted previously. However, in future iterations, it would be important to gradually decrease this scaffolding and encourage more freedom in their own designs, thinking about the larger aim of multimodal arguments and the design needed to reach that goal. Benko (2013, p. 299) encouraged teachers to think of scaffolding as an “ongoing process to support students”, that ultimately ends with student internalization of that process.

To provide a scaffold for using digital tools, modifications included providing more instruction in the classroom before students worked in the computer labs with these tools.
The need for this modification is exemplified in Barrister’s reflection about the infographic project, where students planned and composed the infographics digitally without planning first in the classroom without the digital tool. She said, “I would spend more time and get everything together […] before we went to the computer lab, and I’d make sure all their [the students’] ducks were in a row”. For instance, in the infographic project, the students were given direction, via whole-group instruction and conferencing, while they were in the computer labs completing their work. In the website PSA project, we explained the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial codes</th>
<th>Focused codes</th>
<th>Theoretical codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessing time spent on project</td>
<td>Providing scaffolding versus allowing freedom</td>
<td>Appropriate scaffolding is needed for multimodal composing, which is complex and multifaceted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging in writing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing frustration with digital tools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling uncomfortable or unfamiliar with technology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making modifications</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Modeling argument</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Needing classroom management or structure</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing scaffolding</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing using process approach</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designing in school</td>
<td>Writing and production versus creation and design</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Designing with digital tools</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Enhancing digital skills</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Enjoying digital tools</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggling to create</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Struggling with writing arguments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Using mobile devices</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing multimodally</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing relying on text</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessing group work versus individual responsibility</td>
<td>Collaborating</td>
<td>Opportunities for collaboration when creating arguments may be needed for students, though resisted by teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessing time spent on project</td>
<td>Providing scaffolding versus allowing freedom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making modifications</td>
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<td>Providing scaffolding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing using process approach</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrating creativity</td>
<td>Using multimodal, digital tools as a scaffold for learning argument</td>
<td>Digital tools that provide appropriate scaffolding may help students mediate their understanding of complex content material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focusing through digital tools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designing with digital tools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obtaining research</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Transferring skills</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding concept of argument</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing multimodally</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing written arguments</td>
<td>Expanding concept of argument</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Transferring skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding concept of argument</td>
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The need for this modification is exemplified in Barrister’s reflection about the infographic project, where students planned and composed the infographics digitally without planning first in the classroom without the digital tool. She said, “I would spend more time and get everything together […] before we went to the computer lab, and I’d make sure all their [the students’] ducks were in a row”. For instance, in the infographic project, the students were given direction, via whole-group instruction and conferencing, while they were in the computer labs completing their work. In the website PSA project, we explained the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scaffolding multimodality</th>
<th>Table III.</th>
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</table>
directions in the classroom, allowed students to plan and draft what they thought the digital aspect should look like, gave them handouts outlining the steps needed with the respective digital tool and then proceeded to the computer lab. Although Barrister commented in my observations that she thought this added scaffolding eased potential student frustration with digital tools (Wood et al., 1976), it also added instructional time to the intervention. Interview data suggested that students wanted to decrease the days spent on the project because the length of the project inhibited its appeal.

We also started with writing conventional drafts of the arguments on their social issue at an earlier point with the website PSA than was done with the infographic that was created online through the writing process. With the PSAs, the students devoted a class period in their classrooms drafting the content of their arguments through a writing assignment in which they were guided to include the elements of argument. This more structured teaching of writing and focus on individual concepts seemed to allow the students to learn and acquire individual skills instead of trying to gain them holistically without differentiation. In this way, we were reflecting Wood et al. (1976, p. 98) and their notion of reduction in degrees of freedom or allowing the learner to “perfect the component sub-routines”. In an observation, I noted the students wrote one to two pages for their drafts on their social issue argument for their PSA websites, which was a significant amount of writing for these students. Barrister viewed that approach as much more effective. She stated, “I think the writing, the prompted [guided] writing was 100 per cent effective.”

Similar modifications were made in the tenth grade as in the ninth grade to provide more scaffolding for the students’ use of digital tools. I noted in multiple observations that including more time to familiarize students with how to use digital tools meant, specifically, adding more class periods for students in the computer lab, providing handouts to guide students through using digital tools and using more models of writing and explicit directions for students. The models included students exploring PSAs currently used in multimedia including online posters, websites and videos from outlets such as the American Heart Association (www.heart.org) and The More You Know website (www.themoreyouknow.com/). Modeling is an important function of scaffolding (Benko, 2013; Wood et al., 1976), and these real-world examples were digital mentor texts for students (Benko, 2013). The handouts included a scaffold for a double-entry style of taking notes on their online research, with the left column recording evidence and the right column discussing how that evidence related to their argument, as well as handouts for how to create a Google Site. Although time and directions may not typically be defined as scaffolding, these were intentional steps to design more structured support which is part of the definition of scaffolding (Benko, 2013). In this case, this scaffolding was needed to simplify the task and focus the students’ attention on stages he or she could complete before moving on to the PSA as a whole or what Benko (2013) referred to as reducing the degrees of freedom.

Taking steps to scaffold students’ digital, multimodal arguments, including more conventional print scaffolds such as those previously mentioned, was done based upon observations that students struggled to contend with the technical functions of the digital tools, such as creating a Google website, as well as using multimodality (especially, using modes other than alphabetic text) to design their arguments. For instance, I observed in my field notes that students were overwhelmed with learning how to operate Google Docs, a technology that was not familiar to them, as well as analyzing texts for evidence to use in their arguments. In the tenth grade, the modifications for scaffolding were needed due to the inhibiting factor of students’ frustration and unfamiliarity with digital tools used for academic purposes. Benko (2013) noted that thinking through students’ current ability level
and moving them beyond what they are currently able to do is part of the role of scaffolding. The conventional, paper-based scaffolds, which aligned with the students’ current intellectual work, were needed to aid students to move toward digital composition, something that was not within their comfort zone. Particularly in the tenth grade, these scaffolds were necessary to support frustration control (Benko, 2013; Wood et al., 1976), which is an acknowledged need to help students feel supported through scaffolding to tackle potential learning obstacles.

Collaborating

Although learning through collaborating is often perceived through a tutor and student lens based upon Vygotsky’s notion of zone of proximal development, in which learning occurs through a more knowledgeable other, the data presented here supports a bidirectional notion of learning that can occur through the interaction with and dissonance considered in peer thought processes (Frankel, 2012). However, the teachers and students did not always value this collaboration equally as demonstrated through the modification to adjust the extent of student collaboration to allow for additional individual student accountability.

In the infographic project, the students worked collaboratively in small groups on the infographic, with each group presenting one infographic as a culminating presentation. However, upon talking with Barrister and Tucker about modifications needed for the second stage, when students would be engaged in creating their PSA websites, the teachers were concerned with balancing student collaboration with the desire for individual student accountability.

Thus, modifications were made in stage one in the ninth grade, such as moving students to different groups, to address the inhibiting factor that Barrister identified as a lack of student accountability for individual contribution in the collaborative group work. Students were at times put into different groups to see if the group dynamic would help some contribute that had not previously. In addition, in both cases, during the second stage of the project, with the PSA website, the students worked in groups to research a topic, but created their own, individual website. They worked with the group members to create and revise ideas, but they were solely responsible for presenting their website.

Even though initial modifications during the intervention were made to modify collaboration to increase accountability during times of student collaboration, a retrospective analysis of the data showed that Barrister and the students had conflicting ideas regarding student collaboration. The students naturally sought collaboration, whereas Barrister often organized her class to avoid it as a means of classroom management. At times Barrister seemed to value maintaining order and discipline for her students rather than supporting collaboration. For instance, she assigned seats in the computer lab, physically separating group members.

However, the retrospective analysis revealed students overall seemed to embrace opportunities to collaborate with one another. When asked if they preferred to work in groups or would have rather worked independently during the intervention, seven out of the eight students discussing collaboration responded that they liked working in groups. Specifically, they seemed to see their collaboration as compensating for their individually perceived weaknesses. Cora, a student who Barrister described as being average in her writing ability, stated, “[. . .] It was easier to get more information, and some of the things you can’t get it by yourself”. In interviews, students described collaborating in groups as providing them an opportunity to share information, stay engaged, ask questions, support weaknesses, compare opinions, gain multiple perspectives and collaborate on positions.
I noted Barrister’s concern as students talked more, and it often took longer to initially gain students’ attention; however, the students seemed to naturally seek one another’s guidance. Thus, the students and the teacher had a contrasting perspective of the value of collaboration. Retrospectively, initial modifications that were made to address the inhibiting factor Barrister identified as a lack of student accountability did not match the students’ descriptions of this collaboration as beneficial and collaborating equally. Thus, an inhibiting factor was Barrister’s reticence toward student collaboration, and future modifications may need to address whether or not teachers are willing to allow for such collaboration.

The tenth-grade students appeared to enjoy working in groups more when they all worked on one assignment (in the infographic stage) as opposed to when each student completed his or her own website, and group collaboration was limited to research of the assignment (when developing their PSA website). In the interviews after the infographic stage, in which students worked in a group on one assignment, four out of six students expressed a preference for working in groups as opposed to working individually. However, in the interviews following the PSA website, where their group efforts were less central to the assignment, five out of six students asked preferred working independently.

The ninth-grade students viewed the opportunity to collaborate with one another in a manner consistent with the New London Group’s (1996) perspective that knowledgeable peers and teachers contributed to their learning. Students stated that they would rather work in groups than individually. They discussed the benefits of relying on their more knowledgeable peers as sources of helpful information and technological assistance as they worked on their multimodal arguments. This collaboration was a needed scaffold for students’ multimodal composing.

Similarly, in the tenth-grade case, Tucker seemed to value personally holding students accountable for their work more than allowing them to create their multimodal arguments collaboratively. Her students, however, seemed to experience detrimental consequences as a result of limiting their collaboration. For example, more limited collaborative work seemed to be less appealing to the students. Tucker supported this interpretation when asked about the modification of group collaboration, stating changing the group collaborations to be more limited in the second stage, with the PSA website, helped individual student accountability for work, but may have confused students about whether they were truly working collaboratively.

**Digital tools and mediating thinking**

Students in both cases discussed the digital, multimodal tools of the intervention providing necessary mediation for their thinking. Technology can be thought of as a scaffold or tool that mediates student learning: “All learning is mediated by tools such as language, symbols, and signs.” (Schunk, 2012, p. 252). The digital, multimodal tools used in the infographic and PSA website project mediated students’ learning of the concept of argument. When asked about how the digital tools helped them mediate or scaffold their argumentative writing, students described the digital, multimodal arguments helped them to both visualize their arguments and understand the organization of argument. When asked why the digital, multimodal construction would help their arguments, one ninth-grader, representative of this finding stated, “I am a visual person, so I like seeing things”. In addition to the students’ description of this scaffolding, Barrister also described that their digital, multimodal arguments helped the students see a “structure and design” for their arguments. Thus, the students seemed to begin to internalize the visual semiotic system to aid their understanding of the elements of argument, and this area warrants further research.
Scaffolding is typically perceived as a tool or the instructional design of the teacher for the student (Benko, 2013). However, as society becomes increasingly digital, which affords multimodality, this study suggested that digital tools used in a multimodal composing process can be scaffolds for students learning argument. The students’ comments that tools such as Glogster EDU and Google Sites helped them to better visualize argument suggest these tools functioning as *marking critical features* (Wood *et al.*, 1976). The tools allowed students to see the elements of argument and how they worked together, with and beyond text, thus aiding their understanding of argument.

**Discussion: implications for scaffolding digital and multimodal literacies**

The findings of this study suggest new ways of thinking about scaffolding within instruction and curriculum surrounding multimodal and digital composition, particularly as related to arguments. The following discussion emerged from theoretical codes that pertained to both the scaffolding needed for digital, multimodal argument construction and how that construction, may, in turn, scaffold student learning.

Appropriate scaffolding is needed for multimodal composing, which is complex and multifaceted

According to the New London Group (1996, p. 80), multimodal composing is an intricate system in which multiple modes form “quite remarkably dynamic relationships”. Because of the typical complexity of multimodal composing, we found it necessary to scaffold technological and writing tasks for high-school students. Students in these cases were, prior to the intervention, accustomed to tasks using digital tools for more prescriptive assignments, such as finding specific information online or typing information they had already written, where they were not expected to synthesize information to create their own texts. Thus, they were unfamiliar with using digital tools for multimodal composing, especially for academic tasks such as designing multimodal arguments. Scaffolding – through drafting in class before designing online in the computer lab, explaining instructions explicitly for digital tools and including handouts, and modeling examples of texts created with these digital tools before having students create their own digital, multimodal texts – helped to ease students’ frustration with the digital tools and their tendency to become overwhelmed by the multifaceted and complex skills necessary to design multimodal arguments.

Although the New London Group (1996) argued that educators should use appropriate scaffolding in a pedagogy of multiliteracies, they did not describe that scaffolding or how educators might implement it to promote creativity and design. This study adds nuance to this perspective by suggesting that providing scaffolding, even with more prescriptive instructional designs such as templates, provided students with inspiration for how they might design their websites and prevented students from becoming cognitively overwhelmed in what was otherwise an enjoyable but multifaceted and therefore challenging learning process. However, care must be taken that such scaffolding does not exceed what Wood *et al.* (1976) described as the *recruitment* or student interest in the task. For example, in the ninth-grade case, scaffolding eased potential frustration with digital tools, but students expressed negative views about the extra instructional time this required.

This study also extends the New London Group’s (1996) discussion by examining the scaffolding needed for students to integrate both conventional and digital, multimodal composing. Such scaffolding may entail elements of prewriting before students attempt digital, multimodal composing. This prewriting included having
students draw on paper the different elements to include in the webpages of their website. This prewriting may, however, need to be integrated into the multimodal composing process rather than becoming an isolated component, which was a finding in a previous, smaller-scale study. For example, in that study (Howell et al., 2017) rather than integrate the elements of conventional writing with the digital, multimodal assignment, the teacher required students to write a conventional essay and a digital, multimodal website. This isolation of these components was an inhibiting factor that led to the recommendation in that study for a future modification of blending the conventional and digital process approach to writing.

The tenth-grade students needed less scaffolding of their multimodal design, but the tenth-grade teacher became at times overwhelmed with teaching both the elements of writing and the digital tools necessary to provide such scaffolding, forgetting to include necessary steps, such as clearly explaining expectations for student writing prior to having students create with digital tools. Care is needed to provide multiple lessons necessary to explicitly instruct students on their available resources, to show how these resources might be used with representative models, to explain how they might apply these models to their own multimodal composing, and likewise to explain how multimodal composing will eventually be assessed. This multilayered scaffolding is a dynamic process that may require integration of multiliteracies and conventional literacies, an integration with which teachers may be unaccustomed (Hutchison and Reinking, 2011). For instance, in both cases, each teacher’s instruction prior to the intervention was more teacher-centered, required less student creation, and had fewer inter-related components.

Opportunities for collaboration when creating arguments may be needed for students, though resisted by teachers

This recommendation that teachers should encourage students to collaborate while creating arguments fits within the multiliteracies perspective, as the New London Group (1996, p. 82) believed knowledge was developed during “collaborative interactions with others”. However, the modifications made as a result of perceived inhibiting factors during the intervention suggest a tension between the students’ and the teachers’ valuation of this collaboration and thus willingness to enact a more participatory culture called for by scholars such as Jenkins et al. (2006).

Students seemed to gravitate toward constructing their arguments during collaboration with others, even when they were not instructed to do so. Difficulties the teachers associated with classroom management, student accountability and assessment of student work inhibited this student collaboration. This study found in both cases that opportunities for collaboration were valued more by students than by teachers. Furthermore, restricting such collaboration led students to appreciate this collaboration less, potentially because it became less authentic once teachers placed strictures on its use.

The New London Group (1996, p. 76) argued that design is a “co-engagement” not consisting of “independent processes”, and the findings of this study affirm that perspective. Students valued the co-creation of their digital, multimodal writing and limiting this collaboration, even if to improve student accountability or classroom management, diminished students’ engagement. When facing the scaffolding needed for unfamiliar and multifaceted tasks of creating multimodal arguments, collaboration was particularly important to students as they discussed valuing their peers as resources for information and assistance. Thus, the findings of this study suggest that instruction of multimodal arguments would be more effective if it included collaborative practice that could also serve
as scaffolding for multimodal composing. This collaboration was challenging for the teachers of this study, which validates empirically what current theoretical literature suggests that the social, networked nature of creating a participatory culture has proved difficult though necessary (Jenkins et al., 2016).

**Digital tools that provide appropriate scaffolding may help students mediate their understanding of complex content material**

In both classrooms, students noted that the digital, multimodal design of arguments helped their development of the concept of argument, which they believed would transfer even when writing more conventional arguments. Argumentative writing is difficult for teachers to teach (Newell et al., 2011), and students are often not given extended writing assignments (Applebee and Langer, 2013). Students' engagement with digital tools as an entry point to learning disciplinary concepts such as argument may make complex content material more engaging and accessible during literacy instruction.

**Conclusion**

This study of the use of new, digital tools to mediate learning and the scaffolding required of such tools aligns with recent calls to “reconceptualize the project of educational innovation” (Beck, 2017, p. 30) from historical concepts. In other words, even when exploring innovative digital tools, such as those often connected with multimodal literacies, teachers might anchor this innovation in historical pedagogical practices such as scaffolding. For example, this discussion highlights the use of digital tools through Vygotsky’s lens of how those tools mediate learning (Schunk, 2012). Furthermore, the functions of scaffolding Wood et al. (1976) described were needed in digital, multimodal composing, as they are in traditional, print-based composing. Finally, this study continues to build upon the multiliteracies perspective (New London Group, 1996). Benko (2013, p. 298) described scaffolding as “an active process – as a verb – not simply a tool or ‘thing’ to be used”. This study confirms the need for such an active process when pursuing a conventional learning goal, such as argumentation, through digital means, the digital, multimodal construction of that goal. Scaffolding was in action in this study through designing instruction for multimodal composing, understanding collaboration as a form of scaffolding and examining multimodal composing and its potential for scaffolding argument learning.

**References**


**About the author**

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