Premier's English Scholarship

Teaching Multi-Media Texts

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Purpose of the study tour

Whilst traditional literacy skills continue to be the basis of our English curriculum in NSW, the broadening of what is studied in English classrooms to include new technologies has lead to the inclusion of multimedia texts for study as well as an increased focus on developing a range of 'literacies'. In the twenty-first century students are already required to understand a variety of new, more interactive non-linear textual structures, as well as engage in new forms of technologically based representation. To succeed in their everyday lives as well as in the world of work, students must be equipped with the ability to understand meaning that is represented in a variety of modes, and to compose their own texts in a range of mediums.

The explicit study of multimedia texts is now included in all high school English syllabuses, however, since multimedia texts were included for study in the 1999 NSW HSC English syllabus few schools have elected to study them, and Stage 6 English teachers surveyed by the English Teachers' Association in 2004 expressed a need for greater support in teaching multimedia texts. Perhaps in response to English teachers reluctance to select multimedia texts for study at the Higher School Certificate (HSC) level, in 2007 the HSC Prescribed Text List for 2009-2012 released by the Board of Studies contained a reduced amount of multimedia texts available for study, and removed hypertext fiction texts entirely.

Text Category	2001-2003	2004-2008	2009-2012
Drama (including Shakespeare)	17	17	16
Poetry	13	14	18
Prose Fiction	14	16	25
Film	12	12	11
Media	4	4	1
Multimedia	5	5	2
Nonfiction	13	11	9

Despite including multimedia as a category of text available for study in the HSC and mandatory for study in Years 7-10, the lack of multimedia texts listed for study on the HSC Prescribed Text List makes it less likely that teachers will elect to study multimedia text, both because of the limited range of texts to choose from, and the corresponding lack of professional development and resources to support teachers that are interested in pursuing these texts for study. The lack of multimedia texts listed for study also makes it easy for teachers to avoid selecting these texts, especially as multimedia (along with media) texts have *never* been listed as options in the HSC English Area Of Study that is mandatory for students in both the Standard and Advanced courses. As well as these practical constraints, by limiting so severely the number of media and multimedia texts approved for study at the HSC level, the Board of Studies sends a clear message to both schools and the community about the place of these texts in the hierarchy of knowledge in English.

With all of this in mind, this study tour was designed to collect information about various pedagogical approaches that were being used internationally to support the teaching and learning of multimedia texts. A particular focus was the teaching of multimedia texts in the senior classroom where time constraints and the pressure of high stakes testing often discourages teachers from venturing into the teaching of texts that use unfamiliar mediums of production. The study tour comprised of -

- interviews with key researchers in the areas of media and 'new media' education.

- interviews with industry contacts at the hypermedia publishing company Eastgate Systems Inc.;
- attendance at the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) Annual Conference, "Mapping Diverse Literacies for the Twenty-First Century: Opportunities, Challenges, Promising New Directions"; and
- visits to secondary schools in Cambridge and New York where exemplary practice in teaching media and multimedia texts is being conducted;

Conceptualising Media and Multimedia Texts

In both the English Years 7-10 Syllabus (Board of Studies NSW, 2003) and the English Stage 6 Syllabus (Board of Studies NSW, 1999), 'media' and 'multimedia' texts are bundled together under a common category. Students in Years 7-10 are required to study examples of spoken, print and visual texts, as well as "media and multimedia which should, over Stages 4 and 5, include texts drawn from radio, television, newspapers, the internet and CD-ROMs." (p. 19). Students in Years 11-12 (Stage 6) are required to study texts drawn from a range of categories. In the Standard English course students must study one text from the categories of 'prose fiction', 'drama', 'poetry', and from a fourth category of 'Nonfiction OR Film OR Media OR Multimedia texts'. Similarly, in the Advanced English course students must study one text from the categories of 'prose fiction', 'drama OR film', 'poetry', 'Shakespearean drama' and from a fifth category of 'Nonfiction OR Media OR Multimedia texts'.

It is clear to see the rationale behind these divisions. As 'media' in the English classroom has in the past been understood to be 'mass media' or 'broadcast media', texts that are works of non-fiction or which communicate news and current affairs continue to shape our understanding of this category of texts. As information and communication technologies (ICT) have developed, there has been a corresponding growth in the attention given to 'multimedia' texts, which combine a variety of presentation techniques, such as pictures, sound, written text and video, in an integrated way.

International practitioners and researchers had many questions to ask of these divisions, such as -
- Why is radio considered a 'media' text, and not a 'spoken' text?
- Why is television considered a 'media' text, and not a 'visual' text? Or a 'multimedia' (spoken + visual) text?
- Is a television drama, comedy or similar considered 'media' or 'fiction'?
- Would a picture book be considered a piece of 'fiction' or a piece of 'multimedia' (print + visual) text?
- Is poetry published on the internet considered 'poetry' or 'multimedia'?
- Is an autobiographical poem considered 'poetry' or 'non-fiction'?
- Is using the category of 'the internet' akin to using a category like 'the book'?

While acknowledging that the traditions that exist within English are difficult to ignore or dismantle, both in NSW and more broadly, the experts that were met on this study tour argued the need for a clearer distinction between the content and form of a text, and its medium of production. For example, Andrew Burn (Institute of Education, University of London) explained that the formulaic narratives in video games are in fact similar to traditional oral narratives. Similarly, the role play activities that have for a long time been used in process drama are very similar to the learning interactions of personas or avatars in online or virtual worlds. In both examples, the content and the form of the text is not at all new; it is only the new medium of production that we must become familiar with.

Reading Hypertext
Until recently, a work of hypertext fiction was available as an option for study in the HSC. The hypertext fiction *Samplers: Nine Vicious Little Hypertexts* by Deena Larsen was listed for study from 2001-2008 as a 'multimedia' text in Module B (critical study of texts) of the HSC Advanced English course.

Mark Bernstein, the Chief Scientist of the hypertext publishing company Eastgate Systems Inc, was disappointed to hear that the text had not been taken up by teachers in NSW, and had as a result been removed from the 2009-2012 text prescriptions list. He explained the significance of hypertexts, as they are structured in a way that echoes the non-chronological systems in which most people recall and retell their stories. Bernstein suggested that a way into critically studying a hypertext would be to consider both the effect of the language, and our reaction to the language – as there are multiple points of entry into a hypertext story, and multiple paths of reading the story, hypertexts invite re-reading and a high level of reflection on the ways in which textual conventions shape meaning. These are indeed fruitful concepts to draw on in Module B of the Advanced English course.

To return to the way in which this text is categorised, it is interesting to note that hypertexts, like many websites, are not only 'multimedia' in nature, but also 'multimodal'. Multimodal texts involve the responder by requiring them to use different modalities to interact with the text. Like video games, hypertexts demand that the audience interacts with the text, using voice or movement to direct the activity, or the flow of information. Bernstein argued that this multimodality – the process of having to stop and think, to consider what we want from the text, to choose a link, and then to reflect on our choice – added an important element to the text, the net result being that pauses for introspection are built into the narrative. Understanding the distinction between the concepts of multimedia and multimodality would do a great deal to enhance teachers' conceptual understanding of how multimedia texts 'work', and enable teachers to teach more explicitly elucidate the effect of language forms and feature for a broader range of texts.

Making Documentaries
The workshop run by Educational Video Centre (EVC) at the NCTE annual conference "Mapping Diverse Literacies for the Twenty-First Century" provided a real insight into the importance of empowering students to create meaningful documentary videos through their 'Youth-Powered Video' curriculum (2006). The EVC curriculum emphasises the value of drawing material from students' own lives to maximise student engagement. Students are given clear project boundaries and learning is heavily scaffolded to ensure students develop the necessary skills in video filming and production to experience success in the course.

While this workshop focused on a very traditional media form – the making of a documentary – it is the pedagogy of this curriculum that was most relevant to this study of multimedia texts. Students in Stage 6 English are often required to dedicate a majority of their time to analysing and responding to the works of others, while their own creative compositions are sidelined and neglected. The HSC exam reflects this privileging of analysis, with only one section out of six dedicated to creative writing. The EVC curriculum for 'Youth-Powered Video' reminds us of the importance of connecting learning to students' own lives. Perhaps more importantly though, the products of this curriculum show that students who are involved in project-based group work experienced high levels of motivation and developed deep knowledge and understanding of documentary making.

Anecdotally, it is generally accepted that teachers in senior English especially will shy away from project-based assessment because it is believed to take up too much class time. The documentaries produced through the EVC's 'Youth-Powered Video' workshops suggest that this is time that we must invest if we are to engage learners and ensure they develop their knowledge and skills. The focus on individual success and competition between students during the HSC year also may discourage teachers from using group work in HSC assessment; again, strongly scaffolded activities and clearly defined group work objectives can ensure that students experience success in project-based learning.

Using Blogs
At Long Road Sixth Form College, teachers use online web-logs ('blogs') for class work in both their Media Studies and Film Studies courses. As reported in Shelley McNamara's Premier's Teacher Scholarship Report, "collaboratively working on blogs helps students become better writers", however the monitoring of student work and the provision of timely online feedback can be "overwhelming for the moderator" (2005, pp. 115-116). Anecdotally, many teachers in NSW have expressed a similar concern – that the use of online learning tools may result in an increase in workload, and that the extension of the class space into cyber space may give the impression that students have 24-hour access to their teacher.

Teachers at Long Road were keen to emphasise the importance of using an RSS aggregator or 'reader' (such as Google Reader) to receive alerts when any comments or other materials are added to student blogs. This practice significantly reduced teacher workload, as each class blog did not have to be manually checked for updates. Students at the college also received explicit instruction and orientation to the course blog protocols – students were aware that teachers would only check the blog a certain number of times per week, and did not treat the blog as a space to make demands, but as a place to share ideas and build a bank of knowledge over time.

Use of class blogs also made students accountable for their ideas, unlike when work is completed in an exercise book that is not often enough read by teachers and peers. Students were also made accountable for their writing – as a blog is a place for the class to share resources as a learning community, students showed greater respect for the process of writing out their ideas in full as they had a clear audience and purpose that they were writing for. This also had the effect in some courses of students with more expertise taking on the role of teacher and providing information and advice to their classmates. This kind of community dialogue worked well both with teachers who were highly knowledgeable about the teaching of media texts (as they could draw on a range of resources to construct posts and comments on the blog), and with less knowledgeable teachers (as they could link in with other teachers' blogs to share teaching resources, and rely on more advanced students to contribute their expertise through the comments system).

Promoting the teaching of multimedia texts
This study tour enabled discussion with a variety of experts in the field, including industry leaders, researchers and practitioners about the strategies that can be employed to strengthen teachers' capacity to analyse multimedia texts in the classroom. At the heart of this objective is a need to reconceptualise the boundaries that we draw around different textual forms, and the way in which we categorise various language codes and conventions, to enable teachers to draw on their existing knowledge.

It may be the case that English syllabuses will continue to use categories like 'prose fiction' and 'poetry' – even though these could both be more simply classified as texts that use 'written' language – to give weight to textual forms that are perceived as culturally important or valuable. However, it is essential that teachers are given the conceptual framework to make links between

their existing (and extensive) knowledge of written, spoken and visual language, and the relatively new knowledge that they must develop in order to develop students' understanding of how meaning is created through multimedia texts. In this way, multimodal and hypermedia techniques, (as with dramatic conventions, which currently are easily integrated into studies of drama and film texts), might simply be understood as additional 'layers' of meaning that enhance written, spoken and visual language codes and conventions.

Another implication of this study is that the use of multimedia texts in the classroom can provide a rich opportunity for students to engage in the often neglected activity of creatively composing texts of their own in the senior years. As shown in the EVC's 'Youth-Powered Video' project, students who were engaged in making a documentary were better able to understand the codes and conventions of that particular media. Teachers who construct a program of learning that involves students in the *creation* of a multimedia text should find that this experiential learning allows students to analyse multimedia texts created by others more quickly and easily, thus negating common concerns about the 'wasting' of class time on composition activities.

Finally, the use of online teaching tools such as a class or course blog was seen to foster a highly appropriate pedagogy for the teaching of media and multimedia texts. Teachers who have been reluctant to venture into the study of multimedia texts (or indeed, any other texts) due to fears about their own lack of knowledge might consider the use of an online teaching space (through a site such as *edublogs.org*) to enable links to be provided to external 'expert' information, and to promote a sense of a learning community in the classroom where students are encouraged to ask questions of each other and to share their expertise. If English as a school subject is to continue in its role of developing students' capacity to understand the world using a range of 'literacies', teachers cannot afford to ignore the increasingly powerful role that multimedia texts play in society. Empowering students to express their ideas and to create their own meanings through technologically based representation will ensure that they develop their capacity to participate as powerfully literate citizens in a 21st century context.

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