

ILT 8793: Dissertation – Chaired by Dr. Sailors

Overview

As a doctoral student, I earned nine credits for my dissertation, through which I learned a great deal about English and Literacy. Below, I share excerpts from four sections of my dissertation: (1) Introduction, (2) Literature Review, (3) Method, and (4) Results. Then, I provide a [list of the Literacy and English texts](#) I read and then cited in my dissertation.

NOTE: To reduce the length of this document, I chose to truncate the featured excerpts. This hurt the flow of the writing but did not affect the content in any way.



1. Introduction

Rap and Literacy. Due to the prospective benefits of the use of rap, numerous secondary teachers have utilized it as a text to support the development of academic and critical literacies (e.g., Hill, 2006; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2004). In this body of literature, *rap text* refers to rap lyrics (provided orally, textually, or visually) with the intention of accomplishing literacy-related goals. This understanding of literacy comprises *academic literacy*, “engaging (reading), producing (writing), and talking about texts across the content and levels of education” (Morrell, 2005, p. 314) and *critical literacy*, “the consumption, production, and distribution of . . . texts by, with and on behalf of marginalized populations in the interest of naming, exposing, and destabilizing power relations and promoting individual freedom and expression” (Morrell, 2005, p. 314).

2. Literature Review

Approaches to English. Locke (2010) identifies four approaches to English Language Arts (ELA): cultural heritage, textual competency, personal growth, and critical practice. The cultural heritage approach aims to promote familiarity with canonized works and the literary elements found therein (Locke, 2010). In a study of 29 school districts, Hoffman (2007) found that the *canon*, a set of texts written primarily by “dead white males” (p. 149), remains prevalent in secondary ELA. Of the 20 most widely read texts, only three were written by women and people of color. Hoffman concluded that, as efforts to diversify the canon had not been realized, ELA continues to marginalize students from diverse backgrounds.

Rap and the Canon. To promote academic, critical, and media literacies, many ELA scholars and practitioners advocate for the use of rap as a text in instructional settings. Arguments supporting the use of rap often rely on similarities between rap and traditional texts. For example, like traditional poetry, rap contains language, imagery, and texture, and employs a number of poetic devices, including metaphor, alliteration, and assonance (Pate, 2009). To illustrate these connections, Sitomer and Cirelli (2004) present pairs consisting of one poem and one rap song, which were matched on the basis of theme and literary device. One such pair includes Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a woman?" and Talib Kweli's "For Women," both of which use allusion and explore themes pertinent to racial and sexual equality.

Alexander-Smith (2004). To appeal to students' interests, Alexander-Smith (2004) integrated rap and other types of music into a unit on tone. She began by playing a rap song and asking students to choose tone words. After providing a typed version of the lyrics, she asked students to defend their choices with lines from the text. Once they had gained an understanding of tone, she directed their attention to the theme and social issues addressed in the lyrics. Then, she engaged students in similar lessons using jazz, spoken word poetry, and anthologized poems. As a final activity, students assembled an eight-line found poem using phrases taken from the texts they had read.

Lynch (2007). Lynch (2007) paired rap with a canonized text to bridge the divide between the classroom and students' urban surroundings. To avoid what he called *hook-resentment*, "hook[ing] students into a unit with lessons about pop culture, only to abandon the popular for the canonical shortly thereafter" (p. 44), he used *The Canterbury Tales* to prepare students to engage with rap. Students examined literary devices (e.g., rhyme, assonance) and reflected on social issues within *The Canterbury Tales* and wrote poems that mirrored Chaucer's style. This assignment led to a lesson on rap, in which students read and analyzed lyrics by artists such as Kanye West. As a culminating assignment, students used lines from their previous poems to write new, socially conscious rap songs, which they performed and recorded.

3. Method

Positionality. It was not until my Master's program that I realized the extent to which racism is woven into many aspects of education. As a student in a course on Young Adult Literature (YAL), I examined reading lists for middle and high school English. I began to wonder why most of the texts were written by dead, white males, and why YAL and other texts were typically excluded. I realized that racism and other forms of prejudice were reflected in and perpetuated by school curricula and practices. This experience not only helped me to understand the ways in which racism and other forms of discrimination are woven into English, but also laid the groundwork for my dissertation.

4. Results

Reflections: Academic Literacy. In addition to increasing students' content knowledge, 5 preservice teachers (PSTs) indicated that rap could be used to promote academic literacy. Of these PSTs, 3 identified a connection between rap and writing development. Kevin explained that he could use rap to provide students with "an example of how to write and express themselves" and Kylie indicated that she "would have students write a rap... without realizing they were writing poetry." Apart from writing, 3 PSTs noted that they would use rap to promote other types of academic literacy. For example, Carolina noted that she would use rap to help students "learn poetry and language," while Kevin explained that he would use it "a primary source to analyze."

Lesson Plans: Sources of Information. While 8 PSTs integrated digital texts, only 5 integrated paper texts into their lesson plans. Of these PSTs, 4 incorporated primary source documents. Bruce contended that he would have students "read selected passages from the *Texas Cowboys' Journal*" and Kylie explained that she would provide copies of "the U.S. and Texas Constitutions." In addition to primary sources, 2 PSTs indicated that they would incorporate student-generated texts into their lessons. As such, Vivian noted that she would have students "use their homework questions" to compose a letter about environmental conservation, while Kylie explained that she would offer students a handout with "student-friendly definitions of key terms." These remarks reveal that nearly half of the PSTs would use paper texts in their lessons.

Literacy and English Resources

The following are the literacy and English works I (re)read while working on my dissertation. All of the works on this list are included in the Reference section of my dissertation.

- Alexander-Smith, A. C. (2004). Feeling the rhythm of the critically conscious mind. *English Journal*, 93(3), 58-63.
- Alvermann, D. E. & Hagood, M. C. (2000). Critical media literacy: Research, theory, and practice in "new times." *Journal of Educational Research*, 93(3), 193-205.
- Au, K., & Jordan, C. (1981). Teaching reading to Hawaiian children: Finding a culturally appropriate solution. In H. Trueba, G. P. Guthrie, & K. Au (Eds.), *Culture in the bilingual classroom* (pp. 139-152). Rowley, MA: Newbury.
- Duffy, G. G. (2009). *Explaining reading: A resource for teaching concepts, skills, and strategies* (2nd ed.). New York: Guilford Press.
- Frey, N., Fisher, D., & Berkin, A. (2009). *Good habits, great readers: Building the literacy community*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Hallman, H. L. (2009). Dear Tupac, you speak to me: Recruiting hip hop as curriculum at a school for pregnant and parenting teens. *Equity and Excellence in Education*, 42(1), 37-51.
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- Hill, M. L. (2006). Using Jay-Z to reflect on post-9/11 race relations. *English Journal*, 96(2), 23-27.
- Hoffman, J. (2007). The western canon in today's high schools. *Minnesota English Journal*, 43(1), 140-151.
- Kirkland, D. E. (2008). The rose that grew from concrete: Postmodern blackness and new English education. *English Journal*, 97(5), 69-75.
- Knight, S. D. (2011). Using narrative to examine positionality: Powerful pedagogy in English education. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 10(2), 49-64.
- Locke, T. (2010). Critical multiculturalism and subject English. In S. May & C. E. Sleeter (Eds.), *Critical multiculturalism: Theory and praxis* (pp. 87-98). New York: Routledge.
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- Luke, A. & Woods, A. (2009). Critical literacies in schools: A primer. *Voices from the Middle*, 17(2), 9-18.
- Lynch, T. L. (2007). Illuminating Chaucer through poetry, manuscript illustrations, and a critical rap album. *English Journal*, 96(6), 43-49.

- Mahiri, J. (1998). Streets to schools: African American youth culture in the classroom. *The Clearinghouse*, 71(6), 335-338.
- McLaughlin, M. & DeVogd, G. (2004). *Critical literacy: Enhancing students' comprehension of text*. New York: Scholastic.
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- Morrell, E. (2011). Critical approaches to media in urban English language arts teacher development. *Action in Teacher Education*, 33, 157-171.
- Morrell, E. & Duncan-Andrade, J. M. R. (2002). Promoting academic literacy with urban youth through engaging hip-hop culture. *English Journal*, 91(6), 88-92.
- Pate, A. D. (2010). *In the heart of the beat: The poetry of rap*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- Paul, D. G. (2000). Rap and orality: Critical media literacy, pedagogy, and cultural synchronization. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 44(3), 246-252.
- Semali, L. (2003). Ways with visual languages: Making the case for critical media literacy. *The Clearinghouse*, 76(6), 271-277.
- Sheridan, D. (2000). *Teaching secondary English: readings and applications* [NetLibrary]. Retrieved from <http://www.utsa.ebib.com>.
- Sitomer, A. & Cirelli, M. (2004). *Hip hop poetry and the classics*. Beverly Hills, CA: Milk Mug Publishing.
- Stairs, A. J. (2007). Culturally responsive teaching: The Harlem Renaissance in an urban English class. *English Journal*, 96(6), 37-42.
- Weinstein, S. (2006). A love for the thing: The pleasures of rap as a literate practice. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 50(4), 270-281.
- Zadrozny, A. (2010, February). Shakespeare's got game. *Weekly Reader*. Retrieved from <http://www.weeklyreader.com>.