Voices from the Field:

Integrating Secondary Reading Standards and Media Literacy Education: Introducing the Lie-Search Presentation

William Sewell

Teachers of secondary English have a difficult challenge. They must prepare students to pass state reading assessments in order to meet Adequate Yearly Progress levels and at the same time create lessons which stimulate and inspire students to read and write. In my own classroom, I find myself negotiating assessments which fit in the middle of second semester. The testing cycle effectively consumes much of the semester and tremendously curtails my options for innovative lessons—especially lessons which move beyond the course textbook. Even getting access to computers for projects can be difficult as they are constantly reserved for student testing in a variety of curricular areas from reading, math, science, and social studies.

That being said, I recognize the increasing need for Media Literacy Education (MLE) in the classroom. "Meaning making," as Love (2005, 300) observed, "is becoming more multimodal because language is continually being reshaped by new forms of communication media." In the past two decades, literacy itself has taken a new meaning. No longer entirely print based, literacy is understood to be comprised of a variety of shifting textual modes which may include images, sounds, and animated movements (Jewitt, 2005, 316). In addition, these multiliteracies necessitate different skills unique to each literacy mode (Ajayi, 2009, 585). Unfortunately in some states, standards have not recognized the shift in literacy; while students are tested on computers, they are not yet required to utilize the computer (or other non-print modes) as a means of communication even though they will be required to do so by their employers once they graduate from high school. Benson (2008, 637) noted that "global economies rely heavily on critical thinking work: reading contexts, designing products to better fit individual needs and

desire, and adapting quickly to new meaning-making situations." A curriculum based entirely on print media "short changes students of future opportunities" (ibid., 637).

Hence, the creation of a project which bridges the gulf between testing demands and the demands of a multimodal society. The project is dubbed the "Lie-Search Presentation" and is a pun on Macrorie's "I-Search Paper" (1988). It was created in order to address reading standard, Kansas 1.4.15: the student "distinguishes between fact and opinion, and recognizes *propaganda* (e.g., advertising, media, politics, warfare), *bias*, and *stereotypes* in various types of appropriate-level texts." To spark ideas for fellow educators, this article outlines the Lie-Search unit and demonstrates how presentations meet state standards while teaching students media literacy. The standards discussed here are from the 2005 Kansas Reading Standards, but are applicable to many other state or national standards.

The Lie-Search Presentation

The primary student task of the Lie-Search unit is to create a PowerPoint or Movie Maker video which tells a very credible lie about an important state, national, or world issue. In sum, I ask students to create or re-tell a very elaborate and very believable hoax. The message is told through a variety of texts including movies, pictures, and sounds in order to generate authenticity of the lie. Thus, the form of the message bears significant weight in the efficacy of the lie. In addition to image, sounds play a critical role in persuasion. Students are asked to create a soundtrack which can invite and maintain the audience's attention. We

then explore how effective music scores can invoke appropriate emotional responses. To illustrate this for the students, I play sample projects with and without the soundtracks.

Lessons are taught multimodally. I deliver content through PowerPoint and Movie Maker; students take notes and are given handouts to support their learning. For those students with e-mail addresses, I send them all my lecture materials and handouts. Lectures are interactive in that students are expected to discuss the content. I also use good and bad student projects from previous classes as tangible examples of how the project should look. For instance, after a quick mini-unit on propaganda techniques, students are asked to incorporate at least two types of propaganda in the lie. So that they better understand the techniques, each member of the class creates and share examples of propaganda. Later in the unit, the class will identify and discuss the efficacy of the author's techniques.

In the three years of teaching the project, I have witnessed numerous tall tales. For instance, a banjo-playing Hitler invaded the Soviet Union because of a failed romance with Stalin. The small town of Stull, Kansas, was originally named "Skull." Because dark, supernatural forces swirl in the town, pilots have to divert around the town: presidents and popes refuse to fly over it. Other presentations have stated that Jesus is a zombie. One student took the idea of how the presentations were to be disseminated to a new creative level. The presentation was set up as special news report describing how doctors can cure cancer with specially fermented cheese; it had the look and feel of an episode of "Dateline" and this provided an extra layer of credibility.

Oddly enough, getting the students to actually fabricate the lies was one of the most difficult aspects of the assignment. For example, when students could not find the information needed to generate evidence, they were shocked when I told them to "make it up." We then discuss how evidence is fabricated through the use of fictional authorities or misleading statistics. We also talk about how authors will mislead through omission. This is a good time to talk about proper source documentation and how this practice builds reader confidence. Students are asked to have a works cited at the end of their presentation so they can generate another degree of credibility.

As I show students how to "lie," we examine the consequences of unethical research practices. For my juniors, this discussion serves as a bridge to a unit on Holocaust fiction which examines *Maus*, *Schindler's List*, and *Night*. A key theme of this unit is how Nazi propaganda is used to dehumanize a group of people in order to rob and murder them. For my seniors, the lie-search project serves as a transition to a study of Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *1984*. In particular, we look at how language is perpetuates the status quo and demonize dissidents.

Some students have difficulty picking a topic for the lie-search project. To help them generate ideas, we will explore various urban myths as well as popular hoaxes like ghosts and UFOs; these hoaxes are rampant on the internet. This is the main reason why I had students use non-local topics (although I have made some exceptions to this rule). By having students draw from larger source areas, they can find a variety of pictures, sounds, and movies to support their ideas. One such hoax is the YouTube clip which demonstrates how four cell phones can cause popcorn kernels to explode.

When time permits, I like to show portions of the 911 conspiracy film, *Loose Change*. The film utilizes a variety of techniques to propagate its message that the United States government was actually behind the attacks. Techniques such as voice-overs, use of video segments from news reports, and omitting contradictory evidence bolster the films claim; these techniques are often useful for students' own presentations.

The lie-search presentation is an interactive project as the class is also tasked with evaluating the presentation and content of the message. To prepare students for this portion of the unit, they are given mini-lessons on imagery analysis. One important technique is "reverse photoshopping." Items such as pimples, sores, blackened teeth or eyes have been added to images of people so they look ludicrous. When students see a cross-eyed Brittany Spears, they are quite surprised until they discover that the picture is a fake. We also inspect other interesting "photoshopped" pictures found on the internet. One popular picture is of both Bush presidents fishing in a flooded New Orleans street. In the background of the picture, citizens loot buildings. Another popular picture is of a bikini-clad Sarah Palin who sports a rifle. The picture is contrasted with the actual picture of a much-younger looking woman. Finally, students are definitely "grossed out" by the series of photos which tells the story of a speck of dust in a person's eye which, as the last photo demonstrates, turns out to be large worm that has to be surgically removed.

This mini-lesson spawns a discussion of the ethics of "photoshopping" images. For example, we examine whether or not the picture of the "9/11 Tourist Guy" is appropriate. This is a photo of a man who has his picture taken just moments before the plane strikes one of the towers. At first glance, the picture appears to be distasteful; however, there are numerous other photos of the traveler in other disaster scenes (i.e., The Hindenburg) which can complicate the discussion. Having established a theme on the ethics of imagery, the class also explores the ethics of staged photos such as Robert Kenneth Wilson's photo of the Loch Ness Monster and the iconic photo of the raising of the American flag on Iwo Jima.

Numerous topics emerge from these discussions. One such topic is the ethics of airbrushing (i.e., distorting) elements from a model's picture and how the practice impacts our understanding of appropriate body image. We further explore how airbrushing can contribute to eating disorders and other unhealthy acts. Though most of my students do not have the capability of photoshopping images, they usually do not have trouble finding images on the internet that support their message.

In order to better understand how the students create their lies, students are asked to analyze and discuss each presentation. A handout of five key questions guides the students; the questions are derived from the article, "Key Facts: Media Literacy" (2003).

1. What techniques are used to attract and hold attention?
2. What life styles, values, and points of view are represented in this message?
3. What is omitted from this message? Why was it left out?
4. What specific forms of propaganda are used? Are the used effectively?
5. What evidence is used to persuade the audience? What was most and least effective?

Meeting the Reading Standards through MLE

Passing the state reading assessment is a growing preoccupation in my school district; without continuous improvement, we will lose accreditation. Consequently, my district conducted an analysis of the three key reading standards students scored the lowest in the previous year. Teachers are expected to emphasize these standards throughout the school year.

The most missed standard was knowledge of Greek, Latin, and Anglo-Saxon roots, prefixes, and suffices (1.3.3). While the Lie-Search unit did not address this standard, it had great impact on the other two standards: analyzing text structure (1.4.6) and author's style and use of literary devices to achieve writing purpose (1.1.11). After the Lie-Search unit, students demonstrated a better understanding of how text types and text structure (including heading and subheadings) communicate the author's message. Not only were they able to identify various literary devices such as mood, tone, allusion, irony, symbolism, overstatement, they were able to apply them to their own writing. Hence, they were able to demonstrate a greater mastery of the reading standards. Because they shared their presentations with their peers, students were able to get feedback on how well they mastered the assignment; they were also able to see a variety of ways in which to complete the task.

This project has taught me that Media Literacy Education and state standards do not have to be mutually exclusive. In fact, the project addressed many reading and writing standards I have to teach throughout the school year. The key to successful projects is the recognition that assignments can be disseminated and completed in a variety of ways beyond the printed or spoken text (Bearne, 288). For me (and I hope for other secondary English teachers), MLE opens up new possibilities which can invigorate a test-driven curriculum.

References

Ajayi, Lasisi. 2009. English as a second language learners' exploration of multimodal texts in a junior high school. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 52(7): 585-595.

Bearne, Eve. 2005. Interview with Gunther Kress. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 26(3): 287-299.

Benson, Sheila. 2008. A restart of what language arts is: Bringing multimodal assignments into secondary language arts. *Journal of Advanced Academics* 19(4): 634-674.

Jewitt, Carey. 2003. Re-thinking assessment: Multimodality, literacy and computer-mediated learning. *Assessment in Education* 10(1): 83-102.

---. 2005. Multimodality, "reading", and "writing for the 21st Century. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 26(3): 315-331.

Key facts: Media literacy. 2003, 1-4. http://www.kff.
    org/entmedia/upload/Key-Facts-Media-Literacy.
    pdf (accessed January 12, 2010).

Love, Susan Mary. 2005. Multimodality of learning
    through anchored instruction. *Journal of Adoles-
    cent and Adult Literacy* 48(4): 300-310.

Macrorie, Ken. 1988. *The I-Search Paper*. Portsmouth,
    New Hampshire: Boynton/Cook.