Media literacy's gifts to literature study

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ABSTRACT: *Media studies can have a healthy symbiotic relationship with literature studies, where each supports and enriches the other. This paper describes eleven teaching strategies that the author has developed and used in his English teaching. The strategies help students engage with and understand literary works, while simultaneously providing opportunities to understand and appreciate media literacy. The strategies include biography as representation, fanfiction as audience participation, movie posters and trailers as summations and highlights, creating and analyzing adaptations, translation from video to print, representation through T-shirt design and Facebook pages, and supporting poetic meanings through audio and visual designs.*

KEY WORDS: *Adaptation, translation, analysis, media literacy, literature studies, audience, strategies, engagement, creation, English*

MEDIA STUDIES' GIFTS TO LITERATURE STUDY

I have taught English for as long as I have taught media, and as my media teaching has evolved, it has profoundly influenced my English teaching. Ergo, the title for this narrative. I use the word "gifts" quite purposefully because I think my media literacy insights have helped me be a more effective and successful English teacher, especially for students who do not consider English a favourite subject.

I began my English teaching with a great enthusiasm for literature and literature study. I had spent years learning how to appreciate great literature, and I was eager to help my students do the same. I had written poetry for the university's poetry anthology and enjoyed a creative writing course.

I also took many film courses, taught by my self-taught English professors. (Here, self-taught means that these professors had not taken film courses themselves, but had studied and viewed widely, then created their own syllabi. This may sound academically suspect, but occurred the late 60s, when university film studies courses were non-existent in Canada, so these professors were breaking new ground.) In these courses, films were discussed in ways similar to the discussions of novels, as examples of artistic movements and aesthetic styles. I didn't know how I was going to use that knowledge, but at the same time, I found those courses more interesting than the English courses.

When I first taught literature in English classrooms (early 1970s), I stressed the aesthetic qualities of the works, helping my students understand and appreciate the symbols, metaphors, themes and broader elements of figurative language and narrative construction. I assigned tasks that asked for demonstrations of similar appreciations. I rarely made connections between units, examining poetry, drama and novels as discrete genres. There were no media studies within the English curriculum,

and barely any cultural studies. Media use was limited to movie adaptations of stories or poems sung on record, but were only used to enhance the literature study. I also taught a film course, showing my students historically and artistically significant movies, then asked them to produce appreciative analyses. While the film course was taught within the English department, there were no curricular connections between what was studied in Grade 11 English and Grade 11 film. The two courses existed as two solitudes, mutually unaware of one another.

A wonderful part of my continuing education serendipitously arose in 1978 when I joined the Association for Media Literacy, a small group of high-school and university educators that advocated for and supported media education. Through a long series of workshops, personal reflections and dinner conversations, my media teaching improved and my English teaching evolved.

I came to understand that neither media texts nor English texts, including my "old chestnut" short stories, novels and plays, were apolitical. My media teaching helped me understand that there are three biases: creator's, audience's and medium's, and that each of these biases contribute to meaning. It also helped me realize that, just as my media students needed to consider an ad's values messages relating to the power dynamics of gender, race and class, so too did my English students need to explore these values in novels and plays.

I also realized that, like the media texts we studied, literary texts are not created in a vacuum, but arise from cultural contexts that have influenced their creation, distribution and reaction. It was important for students to know the personal and cultural conditions that influenced the creation of the literature we read. It was also useful for them to know how the works had been originally received by audiences, because they were originally written not for students, but for public consumption.

As I developed these insights, I realized – and taught – that there were similarities that connected writers of the past with creators of the present: that they usually have to please audiences as well as themselves; that they have to compromise and negotiate with bosses to get their work to its audiences; that audience responses influence their wealth, well-being and future work. In short, I came to see literary works as media works, with similar artistic compromises, cultural influences and commercial challenges.

Such changes in my English course's point of view led us to learn that Shakespeare had a patron: not Warner Brothers or NBC, but the British monarchy; and that his relationship to his patron influenced his work in ways not unlike entertainment writers working today. We learned that Shakespearean plays had been re-written in previous centuries, so that concerns for the public good caused King Lear's good daughter to be saved from hanging by, and to subsequently marry, Gloucester's good son. We considered how the modified ending changed the values message of the play. We also speculated upon what social forces might have caused, and made people feel justified to cause, such changes. Finally, we considered what social changes occurred in the 20th century that caused the original ending to be resurrected. Did the grisly battlegrounds of the First World War unmask humanity's capacity for horror so completely that Edmund's acts seemed less awful?

As my teaching career proceeded, there became less and less difference between the way I taught media and the way I taught English. I grew away from my colleagues, some of whom did not see me as an English teacher at all, but as someone who was polluting literary study with pop culture. This concerned me and caused me to develop and share teaching strategies that would encourage them to see literature and media as more similar than different. I realized that there were strategies still needed to honour literature study so as not to alienate the hardcore English teachers, so I devised strategies that might use media study to enhance literature study. Here are some of those strategies.

BIOGRAPHY AS REPRESENTATION MORE THAN REVELATION

Examined through the media studies lens, biographies can be seen as representation. Representation and identity are major concepts in media studies, and both are implicated in the study of biography. Because of the biases of biographer, audience and medium, no biography can "tell the truth." The representation – or re-presentation – that occurs in the selection and sequence of biographical events constructs the subject's identity from the point of view of the biographer. Differing versions of a life story create different identities. Audiences who know and like the subject will respond differently from those who might dislike her/him or feel indifference. Print biographies can describe events and thoughts, but cannot reproduce sound or motion. In considering the biases of biographer, audience and medium, students can explore and appreciate the differences between print and electronic, official and unofficial biographies.

These explorations can extend to official websites and unofficial fansites. Students can consider representations of celebrities from various online perspectives (the official site, Wikipedia, blogs, fansites, and so on) and see how they are constructed by different authors for different audiences and purposes. They learn that *all* biographies contain purposeful prejudices, and that readers negotiate their own versions of what occurred.

A specific example of such purposeful biographical biases is martinlutherking.org. On first examination, readers would assume that the ".org" suffix means that this website represents a non-profit organization, and they might reasonably infer that the organization is celebrating the life of a Nobel-prize-winning human rights activist. The owners of this URL, however, are members of a white supremacy organization that is using the site to re-present the life of Dr. King in very purposeful and unflattering ways. The biographical details that it presents are very different from those presented by nobelprize.org or thekingcenter.org, each of which use URLs that also contain the non-profit ".org" suffix. Similar lessons can be learned if students search for biographies of current actors, athletes or musical artists. Discovering who owns, and has authored, the sites can be useful in understanding the biases represented in the texts. Whois.net is an online service that provides registration information for most domains (some domain registrations use aliases or proxies to hide their owners' identities, which is a useful lesson in itself).

The original intended learnings of studying biography can be value-added in a new media environment when students examine multiple re-presentations and their

resulting identities. The media studies lens enhances and supports the literature learning.

FANFICTION REVEALS AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Fanfiction is a term that describes a highly personal and interactive form of fan involvement: fan-created stories derived from established works. While some fans might enjoy re-reading a book, purchasing a movie for multiple viewings, or wearing a T-shirt, those involved in fanfiction insert themselves into the fictional world by using the established characters and settings in their own stories. The WWW fanfiction libraries (www.fanfiction.net) are places where fan-authors can not only share their works, but can comment on others' work and see comments on their own work. The libraries also represent tribes of like-minded enthusiasts who enjoy – not just particular stories – but the entire setting, characters, ethos and worldview in which the stories occur.

Fanfiction entries number in the hundreds of thousands. Some of the titles are inspired by current pop culture texts, such as movies, TV, manga, and so on. Many are inspired by traditional literary works found in school curricula. There are over 30 entries for *The Kite Runner,* just over 300 entries for *To Kill a Mockingbird,* and almost 1000 for *Holes*. Reading fanfiction allows students to read widely, but to simultaneously consolidate their knowledge of the primary text upon which the fanfiction is based. Depending on the criteria they apply as they skim and scan, students can read to identify stories that are inventive, characters that are accurately represented, or writing styles that are accurately presented. Reading the comments other readers have made allows them to reflect on their own reading experiences, and adding their own comments encourages them to both think critically about the original work and its fanfiction offspring and how to write constructive criticism.

Students can also consider the reasons for and pleasures of creating and sharing fan fiction, a new media participatory activity not possible before the WWW. They might discuss which kinds of fanfiction they themselves might create, and why. They might examine the ads that support the fanfiction site and infer why advertisers would have purchased ad space on that site, that is, what do the ads tell us about the fanfiction community?

Working with fanfiction can profoundly change students' position vis-à-vis literature and the literary experience. For example, rather than seeing a novel as a specimen for deconstruction and analysis, they might see it as the beginning of a long conversation of narratives, where succeeding works are responses to the content or the form of their predecessors. Because fanfiction texts carefully preserve the narrative codes and conventions established in the original work, reading fanfiction can sensitize students to narrative. Reading the comments following the fanfiction stories might help them better understand audience address, how the stories can mean different things to different readers, and how different readers might evaluate and respond to the narrative qualities. Exploring the overall body of fanfiction titles, students might consider why some titles have thousands of entries while others have few – is this a

measure of the popularity of the original work, or of how hard it might be to create an authentically rendered new story?

MOVIE POSTERS AS REPRESENTATIONS OF NARRATIVE WORLDS

Posters serve similar functions for movies that book covers serve for books. Book covers invite readers to purchase books; movie posters invite audiences to attend movies. The designs and wording of movie posters purposefully sort and select target audiences. The codes and conventions used in the posters invite some viewers and disinvite others.

When novels or plays are adapted for movies, their words become visuals and sounds, and their visuals are sampled to build posters. The images, colours and fonts that are used on posters are designed by marketers to attract audiences that will hopefully enjoy and recommend the movie to others.

Posters can help students reflect on their literary experiences when they are viewed as representations of the original book or play. How closely does the visualization presented on the poster align with the students' visualizations as they read? How well does the poster represent the major themes, characters and events of the original text? How does it modify those characteristics? Might the modifications attract a different audience to the movie than was attracted to the original text? Why?

Because posters present a single image, or small collection of images, they become a distillation or summary of the story's events and themes. If students view the poster as a summary of the story, how effectively does it summarize? What is missing or distorted? Why might the designer have omitted or distorted an idea? How might the omission or distortion change the invitation? Will it invite the appropriate target audience or mislead viewers?

A wide variety of current and archived posters are available online, sometimes in a variety of languages. They provide students with opportunities to examine posters over time and geography.

Students might also be invited to design their own movie posters. Because trailers and stills are widely available online, students can choose from a variety of images when building their own version of posters. Graphics and layout programs can help them combine images and words in the styles and colours they choose. Providing students with an appropriate prompt, for example, "How does your poster help audiences understand the themes and characters in the story?" will help them to think about the literary work as they work.

Where no movie adaptation exists for a given literary text, students might imagine what the poster for an adaptation would look like, again considering the appropriate images, fonts, colours and so on to attract one or more target audiences.

MOVIE TRAILERS AS HIGHLIGHTS OF A STORY

Many classroom titles have been adapted into movies, in some cases several times each. It is not uncommon for English teachers to show the movie adaptation of a literary work in class, but this can be time-consuming and potentially light on learning. Why not show a trailer for the movie after predicting its contents? Trailers are usually two to three minutes in length, so even watching them several times consumes less class time than watching a full adaptation.

Before screening, students can be asked to predict the scenes and/or quotes from the adapted work that might appear in the trailer. As they do this, they must return to the primary text (novel, play or short story), either literally or in their memories, learning it in greater depth. As they consider the scenes and/or quotes for prediction, they are sorting, evaluating and selecting elements that connect to plot, character and themes. When they see the trailer, they can celebrate their successes in prediction and reflect on why some of their predictions were incorrect. If a predicted scene or quote was omitted, they can be invited to defend why their nominations *should* have appeared in the trailer and why.

Students can also examine a trailer to understand which audience(s) it is inviting to the movie. Some trailers might begin with highlights of the romantic aspects of the story, and then shift to the action or suspense aspects. If there is more than one trailer, they can compare and contrast them to assess which audiences are being addressed by each.

Students might also consider why some trailers go viral on the WWW while others don't. What are the qualities that cause people to share trailers? What might someone be telling friends about themselves when sending a trailer? Would they send a trailer to *all* their friends or to only a sub-group?

Locating and capturing movie trailers is not difficult. Current trailers can be found on many sites. Trailer for many older titles have been posted to Youtube, and can be saved with one of the many Youtube-saving websites (Zamzar, Keepvid).

Making trailers for literary adaptations is a common student assignment, and several have been posted to the WWW. Students can view, compare and contrast, and rank these for their authenticity or benefit in helping others understand the movies. Students might be invited to create their own, with appropriate prompts, for example, "How does your trailer invite appropriate audiences to the movie?" and "How does your trailer tell viewers what to expect from the movie?"

Where no adaptation exists, students might imagine what the trailer for an adaptation would look like, again reviewing, evaluating and selecting the appropriate scenes.

ADAPT A SCENE AS LITERATURE AND MEDIA STUDY

Translation is a common media studies teaching strategy, and is referenced by David Buckingham (2003) in *Media Education*. Translation involves transferring a message from one medium to another, in this case from paper page to video screen. The

challenge of translation is that students must understand and use the codes and conventions of each medium as they translate. The strength of translation as media study's gift to literature study is in how it forces close reading of the literary text. If students don't know the source text completely and comprehensively, they cannot produce an accurate or appropriate translation.

In the English class, this strategy asks students to select a brief moment from a literary work and then adapt it for video presentation by storyboarding the scene. (Storyboard forms vary, and many can be found by placing "storyboard" in a search engine.)

Students can decide camera angles, distance and movement, as well as composition, set decoration, costume design and casting. Casting can become an especially powerful part of the process, as students consider a variety of actors, debating who can best represent the nuances and personalities of the characters. Each of their creative decisions will drive students back to consulting the literary work, and will require them to be interpretive and creative.

Students will learn the codes and conventions of video as they delve deeper into the literature. They will also come to appreciate differences between print and video representations, for example, that most books present stories that occur in the past tense, in first or third person, while video stories occur in the present tense, mostly in the third person.

As students complete their creative tasks, they can also critique each other's work and defend their own creative decisions.

ANALYZING THE ADAPTATION OF LITERARY WORKS TO VIDEO/AUDIO

The translation strategy described in #5 can be extended so that students produce video or audio adaptations of brief scenes from literary study, either from storyboards or scripts. Again, attention must be paid to characterization, voice, appropriate uses of camera angle, distance and movement in video or the creation of appropriate spaces and effects in an audio representation.

The challenge here is to measure student learning, as there will be lots of evidence of student enthusiasm. Students need to be reminded of what they are demonstrating: understanding and appreciation of theme, characterization and plot.

Learning can be measured in at least two ways. One is to have students adjudicate their own finished audio/video, that is, explain what they intended and how well they think they achieved it. A second is to ask students to log the production process, noting what codes and conventions they planned and used, and why. It will be through the explanations as much as the completed texts that they will reveal what they understand and appreciate in the literary work. These methods will also allow teachers to assess how well students understand the codes and conventions they used, which can provide evidence of media literacy learning.

When applied to existing commercial adaptations, students might be asked to view or listen to selected portions of the video or audio text, then analyze and evaluate how

well the literary work has been translated. This might occur as a whole-class activity, in small groups, or as solo activities. Scenes might be assigned, or students might be invited to choose their scenes for analysis.

The analyses can become especially powerful if there is more than one adaptation available. In this case, comparing and contrasting two adaptations of the same scene can boost students' awareness both of the meanings of the original text as well as their ability to discuss the codes and conventions involved in the translation. Sometimes locations are changed or lines are omitted or re-assigned, all of which can provide opportunities for discussion. If the adaptations occurred at different times in history or were produced in different countries, additional conversations can occur about how the production conditions or audiences might have influenced the resulting adaptations.

An example of such a comparison might involve *Hamlet*. Olivier's *Hamlet* was produced in 1948 in England, while Michael Almereyda's was produced – and set – in 2000 America. Students can compare and contrast how one version recreates Elizabethan costumes and props, while the other adapts costume, set, accent and acting to the 21st century. In the first adaptation, Polonius is stabbed while hiding behind a tapestry; in the second, he is shot while hiding in a closet.

EXPLORING VOICE THROUGH DESCRIPTIVE PROSE

Many movies are made from screenplays that have been adapted from novels, but several are made from original screenplays. If the movies are popular, they are sometimes novelized, or translated into novels based on the screenplays and movies. This strategy uses novelization (a real-world job) to explore notions of voice and prose expression. Writers who create novelizations must begin with the screenplay's dialogue and sparse directions, then write the descriptive prose that captures and communicates the setting, action, feelings, and so on that occur in the movie's images, sound and movement.

Students might select a brief scene, then watch and log its use of images, editing, sound, music and dialogue. They would also transcribe the scene's dialogue. They would then produce the prose that would capture and communicate the movie experience. The prose style, voice and description would have to be true to the movie representation.

This exercise allows students to invent the prose that will help readers understand, appreciate and enjoy what has been communicated in the multi-media cinematic experience. A scene's tension, action, humour or romance must be captured in a voice that is true to the original work. The word choice and prose style must match the movie's aesthetics and culture. If students choose different scenes from the same movie, they can then compare and contrast their novelizations using these criteria, and they will enhance their sensitivity both to the viewing experience and to the nuances of narrative prose.

T-SHIRT DESIGN AS CHARACTER STUDY

T-shirts are ephemeral – the newspapers of fashion – and personal. They can be purchased in high-fashion or discount stores, customized in boutiques, or embellished by fabric paint at home. The logos or statements they carry might be inconsequentially banal or personally meaningful. They are also integral to the study of media and popular culture.

T-shirt design can be used to support character study when students are asked to design the T-shirt that might be worn by a literary character. As they read and think about the character, they identify the character's values, culture and level of extroversion. They then design the T-shirt and must be prepared to explain and defend the design. They might identify the moment in the story in which the character would wear the shirt, as an appropriate shirt might change as the story progresses.

They might also consider which brands or styles of T-shirt characters might wear or refuse to wear. Would a character wear a muscle shirt, a long-sleeve, or a wife-beater? Would the character be comfortable in any brand or only one? If a modern-day Hamlet were mounted, would the lead character wear Nike, Puma, or Fubu? Might he wear a shirt connecting him to Alice in Chains or Rage Against the Machine?

This study might help students consider the whole fashion phenomenon of T-shirts, and who wears them for what reasons, why they come into and out of fashion, and so on. They can also understand the media studies concept of "representation", and how it connects to the representations that are created in literature.

FACEBOOK PAGE AS CHARACTER/BOOK STUDY

Social networking sites are very popular among teens, and most are adept at using them. This activity asks students to represent a character from a story through a social networking web page, for example, Facebook. Students would describe various characteristics of the character, and would have to defend their selections based on the original literary work. The first fields to be filled might be superficial characteristics related to appearance, but as students "flesh out" the account, they will have to research to know more about the character. If they add blog posts, friends and messages to the page, they will have to know the character even more intimately. In the case of characters from older fiction (pre-internet), they might have to imagine activities and preferences for current products, and would have to use their awareness of the character to make these judgments. While main characters might seem the obvious choice, pages for minor characters might encourage them to delve deeper or engage creatively with the work.

In addition to facilitating a better understanding of the primary literary work, students can use this activity to better understand the representations of gender, race, class and age that occur in literary works and in social networking environments.

AUDIO REPRESENTATION TO ENHANCE UNDERSTANDING POEMS

Poetry is an aural medium using rhythm, pacing and sound as essential parts of its message. New media production facilitates students' deeper understanding of poetry and its power. Students would read a poem into a sound-editing program, using one or many voices. They might then add layers of voices, music and sound effects to enhance the experience and meaning of the poem.

Powerful recording and editing software is available, either pre-installed or as a free download, for most operating systems (*GarageBand* for Mac OS or *Audacity* for Mac OS and Windows). These programs provide students with professional-quality editing power on a digital (lossless) level. Students can modify the pacing or pitch, add reverb or limit the dynamic range of voices. They can adjust volumes and dynamic ranges of background music and sound. All of these techniques can enhance the aesthetic qualities of poems, and can help students better understand and interpret the meanings.

If students create individual representations of the same poem, they can compare and contrast their interpretations to better understand both the codes and conventions of the poems and their creations. Students could also discuss how different audiences might make different meanings of the texts based on their prior knowledge of the music and sound effects. They might even intentionally add intertextual references to their production, for example, music that is recognizable and carries meanings from a popular song, music video, television or movie soundtrack.

ILLUSTRATIONS TO SUPPORT A POEM'S MEANING

Some companies are now producing what they call "graphic poems", an extension of graphic novels, based on the lyrics of epic songs, for example, Gordon Lightfoot's *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald.* Students might produce their own graphic interpretations of poems, either as "graphic poems", single images or collages. This study would focus students on poems' images, metaphors and themes. It would also allow them to consider the power of images and their juxtapositions.

A range of computer programs allow for a variety of representations of poems. PhotoStory, iMovie, PowerPoint or Keynote could be used to animate and vocalize poems, where images and lines of poetry could move on and off the screen. Alternatively, the poem might be delivered using a pre-recorded vocal soundtrack while only images appear on the screen. All the codes and conventions mentioned in #10 above could be used on the soundtrack, with the moving images adding an additional layer of meaning.

Graphic poems might be created from narrative poems, whose narrative forms provide students with a strong structure. For more adventure and experimentation, students might develop graphic poems from lyric or prose poems, for example, T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost or Leonard Cohen.

Literature and media studies can have a healthy symbiotic relationship in the classroom. In fact, the more the distinctions between literary and media texts are blurred, and the more each is used to enhance the understanding of the other, the more powerful the learning. Literature studies can benefit from the variety of ways that

media studies activities encourage students to engage with, better understand and appreciate literature and the literary experience. Media studies can benefit from the strong linguistic and cultural base that literary studies provides, and can help students to see how people's 21st century literary experiences may be provided by quality media works. In the process, students can see the connections between content and context, as I did, and learn the nuances and rich interplay between creator, audiences and media that connect multimedia texts to traditions in literature.

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