



LAYERED LITERACIES

William **Kist**
with
Peggy **Semingson**



The Multimodal Memoir Project:

Remembering Key YA Texts

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The Layered Literacies column aims to explore digital and online resources that enhance the use of young adult literature in teaching practices. Multimodal texts are increasingly present in the literacy experiences of students' lives both in and out of school (Albers & Harste, 2007). Young adults are reading and engaging with multimodal texts such as film, television, popular culture, video games, and video; these texts become facets of their identities (e.g., Gee, 2003). Multimodality is present not just in digital text(s), but also in various genres of young adult (YA) literature. We see multimodality in both YA graphic novels and Manga, for instance, as well as in the artistically influenced and visually compelling novels of YA writers such as Shaun Tan.

This Layered Literacies column, written by colleague William (Bill) Kist, explores the Multimodal Memoir Project. Through the project, students learn to make intertextual (text-to-text) connections between a variety of texts and young adult novels in order to explore their literate identities. This issue of *The ALAN Review* focuses on "Story and the Development of Moral Character and Integrity." Here we provide a concrete example of a creative approach to using a variety of YA texts to give students an opportunity to make sense of their world, to develop their sense of

self, and to foster empathy toward others. Through the Multimodal Memoir Project, students use technology to construct a digital literacy narrative while making connections to a wide variety of YA texts and multimedia.

In the assignment, Bill broadens and redefines what constitutes the notion of a "text" as a way to help his students gain insight into their own literacy narratives and to develop a multifaceted sense of self. Bill is a preeminent expert in the area of multimodal literacies. He is a professor at Kent State University in Ohio where he teaches literacy courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels. His current area of research focuses on blended learning in secondary settings.

The Multimodal Project

by William Kist

For almost ten years, I've been teaching a project called the "Multimodal Memoir." This assignment has grown from a fairly routine multimedia "literacy narrative" into a powerful process in which students begin to curate their past, and perhaps future, literacy lives. In this column, I'll be writing about my experiences with my students' Multimodal Memoirs (MM) and the many layers of textual lives they have uncovered for themselves, with a special focus on YA literature in all of its many forms.

I have written about my experiences with this assignment previously (Batchelor, Kist, Kidder-Brown, & Bejcek-Long, 2015; Kist, 2010; Kist, in press), but writing this column for *The ALAN Review* allows

me to focus on the evident strong impact that young adult literature has had on my students' literacy lives. Indeed, students have overwhelmingly referenced YA titles of all kinds when engaging in this project, demonstrating the importance of these texts in their development as literate people. This assignment is designed to invite thoughtful consideration of YA texts in students' lives; in the memoirs I have collected over the years, the evidence is clear that it has.

I should note that the assignment is not solely intended to highlight the role of YA literature in the lives of my students. And indeed, I will define "young adult literature" expansively in this column, meaning that it can take the form of any kind of text—book, film, song, visual art—that has been created expressly for and about young adults. This piggybacks on Ostenson's (2016) recent work in which he suggests that certain narrative-format video games should be considered YA texts. Several texts discussed in this piece could lie at the cusp of either young adult literature or children's literature (or both), and other texts referenced were written for an adult audience but are read widely by adolescents. My expansive definition of young adult literature encompasses all of these texts.

The point of the MM is to get students to reflect on key textual experiences of their lives, to realize that we are all shaped by the plethora of multimodal texts we have experienced, and to reflect upon how these various texts have shaped their literacy lives. Because I predominantly teach preservice teachers, the assignment is also designed to incite thinking about the implications of their multimodal lives for their future classrooms. What often occurs within the MMs is a kind of blurring of the lines regarding categories of texts. Students come out questioning why some texts "count" as legitimate texts and some texts don't and how these considerations might help them critically evaluate how the inclusion of differing texts might contribute to readers' literate worlds. In looking at the MMs that my students have created, it's clear that YA texts have figured prominently in their lives. What is also clear is that these experiences with YA texts often come outside of schools and classrooms.

The Assignment

The assignment started out very simply, drawing from an activity created by my friend Denise Stuart. I saw her do "multigenre" (Romano, 2000) autobiog-

raphies with her students at the University of Akron. She asked her students to bring in objects related to their reading and writing pasts. I decided to take this assignment and add a multimodal component so that my students would not only include multimodal texts that had been important to them, such as films, music, and even fashion, but also so they would compose their memoirs in a multimodal format. For the project, students are invited to build their memoirs in PowerPoint or Prezi or within video editing systems such as iMovie. Each student is required to present his or her memoir to the entire class. This presentation can be accompanied by live narration on the part of the writer or via a prerecorded soundtrack. In sum, the memoir itself is designed to be multimodal, and students are challenged to compose in a medium likely unfamiliar to them. Since I typically give this assignment to preservice teachers, I have included a prompt for the project that asks students to reflect upon what this work has meant to them as future classroom teachers (see Figure 1).

Sometimes I start the project by using texts that have been written to help kids become better memoir writers (Bomer, 2005; Goldberg, 2007). I show them my own MM that I have created in PowerPoint. It is filled with all the important texts of my life, including many key YA texts, such as *Harriet the Spy* (Fitzhugh, 1964/2001), *A Wrinkle in Time* (L'Engle, 1962/2007), and the Encyclopedia Brown series of mysteries. I talk about how these texts were very influential for my literacy development.

Once I've given the students the basic guidelines of the assignment, they are off and running. They use new technologies and various video editing systems and apps to organize and exhibit their experiences with both very old and very new media. Soon, students not only realize how multimodal and multilayered their literacy lives are, but also how some very dominant aesthetic threads are evident. I've seen inquiry pathways that they may have never acknowl-

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Multimodal Memoir Project

This assignment encourages you to think about all the various texts of your life. Your own history as a reader and writer of various texts has a significant impact on your teaching career. Doing the following exercises should help you reflect on your own multigenre literacy past.

Your objective is to create a screen-based representation of the influence of these various texts on your life. Such texts may include books, films, television shows, music, newspapers, magazines, sports, restaurants, food, cars, fashion, architecture, and/or interior design (to name a few examples). Visit Google Images, Flickr, Yahoo Image Search, YouTube, etc., and find some non-copyrighted images or video clips related to the important texts of your life. You may also want to create your own images/clips using a camera checked out from the IRC or your own camera.

You may create this assignment in any one of the following programs: VoiceThread (<http://voicethread.com/#home>); Powerpoint; digital storytelling tools such as Storymaker (<http://story-box.co.uk/sm.php>), Umanjin (<http://www.umajin.com/>), or MixBook (<http://www.mixbook.com>); or comic book portrayals of a character or yourself using Comic Life (<http://plasq.com/comiclfe>). Audio may be recorded using Audacity or some other recording software.

If you use one of these digital storytelling tools, you will just go to that website and call it up when it comes time to present your autobiography. For example, you would go to VoiceThread and set up an account. Embed your images into VoiceThread and add a commentary—either text and/or voice commentary. Then you would log into VoiceThread on the day of your presentation and take us through your autobiography.

You will not turn anything in physically. You will be graded on your presentation that day.

You will be assessed based on:

1. Have you presented some specific and important artifacts from your life? Did you just get something out of today's newspaper, or are the objects/artifacts presented obviously meaningful from your past? Does your autobiography appear to have been just thrown together at the last minute, existing almost as a list, or has some real thought gone into it? Is there a balance between emergent literacy years, adolescent literacy years, and adult years? (30 points)
2. Has some creativity gone into the creation of the autobiography? (20 points)
 - a. Are there one or more themes about your multimodal life running through your autobiography?
 - b. Did you build a presentation with innovative use of graphics and/or music? That is:
 - Did some thought go into the graphic design used in the slides or video?
 - Were there some relevant, interesting music clips included?
 - Were there some uses of sound effects?
 - Were there some video clips included?
 - Was there some imagination displayed (humor, pathos, interesting juxtaposition of images and/or sound, etc.)?(Please note: Not all of these elements must be included.)
3. In your presentation, how thoroughly did you present a reflection on the place nonprint-dominated media held in your life? Are there multiple kinds of texts represented? Have you reflected on lessons you have learned from your multigenre past? (20 points)
4. Do you make implications for how reflecting on your multigenre past may shape your eventual instructional practices, if they haven't already? (20 points)
 - Do you give specific examples of how multigenre texts will be used in your classroom in the future?
 - Are these implications thoroughly explained (rather than just saying, "I'll play music in my classroom")?
5. Is your presentation between 5 and 10 minutes long? (10 points)

Figure 1. Multimodal Memoir assignment prompt

edged come to the forefront of their consciousness during this assemblage experience, often related to the YA texts they read or viewed during adolescence.

YA Texts and the Multimodal Memoir

Over my years of assigning this project, I've seen several central themes related to students' past experiences with YA texts. First, I've noticed that students often mention YA books and other texts as linked to important milestone events or phases in their lives. The ways in which students link texts to important milestones shows how the YA texts become a part of their lives—allowing them to grow, learn, and develop as adolescents and as readers. Either the YA texts include characters undergoing similar life experiences—books by Judy Blume (Blume, 1972/2007, 1975/2014) are often mentioned as examples of this trend—or the YA texts cited provided escape from difficult situations, such as the much-loved Harry Potter series (Rowling, 2009). One student remarked, “Harry was my gateway to another world.” The Harry Potter series is often included in the memoirs, not only for the immersive escape it provides through reading the texts, but also for the excitement of the life events surrounding the books, such as the midnight book-release parties at bookstores or the first-day release viewings of the films. In fact, several students have discussed that an important literacy element of the Harry Potter phenomenon was the experience of comparing and contrasting the Harry Potter books with the films. These experiences with book series are often described in addictive terms, with students reporting that they devoured the books as fast as they could be published.

Many times, experiencing a certain book, film, or show was itself the milestone. Many students recalled the first chapter book they read, for example, or the first film they viewed at the cinema. Such films are often those created for a young adult audience. Musicals—both on Broadway and in films—are also often mentioned as being these kinds of milestone texts, experienced once and then repeated again and again in a kind of ritualistic way. The act of revisiting YA texts via the MM served to help students realize how important the reading and viewing of these YA texts was during this crucial adolescent period of their lives. Going through the exercise of creating the MM helped them shape a vision of themselves as literate people

from a very young age and realize just how multimodal their literate lives are.

Another main theme of the MMs related to YA texts is that students encountered and enjoyed most of these texts outside of school—and not just books with controversial themes. Students reported that, even by middle school, there was more of an emphasis at school on canonical texts, such as *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Frank, 1952/1993) or *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960/2010), leaving little room for any other kind of reading. Sadly, students often report that there was little “choice reading” time after elementary school and that, not surprisingly, this was the time their interest in reading diminished. In fact, within my students' memoirs, the key YA texts during adolescence were more often introduced to them by parents, grandparents, other relatives and friends, or librarians outside of school.

As students reminisce about the key texts of their lives, they often bring up pop culture texts created for young adults. Many students talked about the boy bands they first followed during early adolescence or the television shows that meant so much to them throughout adolescence. One student explained how she liked to go through songbooks to find lyrics: “Music is huge for me. It is poetry in one form or another.” She explained that The Verve and Modest Mouse, two of her favorite bands, provided hours of listening and reading pleasure during her teen years. Students also often remarked on texts that they shared with their siblings and family members. They included the famed Friday night ABC sitcom lineup known as TGIF, which included *Boy Meets World* (Gibson & Young, 1993) and *Full House* (Franklin, Miller, & Boyett, 1988). One student talked about the life-changing event of meeting an actor from the television series *One Tree Hill* (Hamilton & Stoteraux, 2004).

In their memories of films during their adolescence, students also reported gravitating toward

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movies created for adults, such as *Titanic* (Cameron, 1997) and film adaptations of Nicholas Sparks novels. Interestingly, many of the films mentioned in the memoirs, such as *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1942) and *Singin' in the Rain* (Donen & Kelly, 1952), would fit well on the Turner Classic Movies channel.

Video games were often cited by students as important YA texts in their memories. One student felt that he had had extensive literacy experiences via games with a narrative structure. "SuperNintendo was huge," he remembered. "A lot of them are role-playing games," he said. "You had to read everything that was going on to play the games. . . .

[They were] huge, rich, immersive experiences." Until he created his MM, he said, "[I] forgot how much of my literary experience didn't come from books."

It's worth noting that there is much diversity in readers' experiences with texts meaningful to their literate growth, and some of this is related to issues of access. "I didn't play video games," one student said. "I grew up with five channels. . . . My family didn't get Dish until I came to college. . . ." Important YA experiences for this student centered on varied books such as *Out of the Dust* (Hesse, 1997/2009), the *A Series of Unfortunate Events* books (Snicket, 2006), and unnamed compilations of cartoons by Gary Larson. The textual experiences that students defined as most meaningful to their reader development seem to occur outside of the classroom, even when they read traditional YA texts.

Debriefing

After the students' MM exhibitions, we debrief and attempt to peel away the layers of literacies on display. Often, students make comments such as, "I didn't know that you liked [a certain artist]! I do, too!" Or they will discuss overall trends (or anomalies) in texts that have been included in the memoirs: "I didn't

know that so many people [were in a band]" or "I didn't know that liking Choose Your Own Adventure books was so common!" or "Am I the only one who likes polkas?" Once these initial textual comparisons occur, students often start to say things like, "I didn't know you had gone through something like that," or "If I had known earlier you had survived that experience, we would have talked more." The most personally revealing elements of the MMs typically emerge during the portion when the students refer to the influence of YA texts on the challenging experiences they went through during adolescence. When students unpack the texts discussed, what is often revealed are the family literacies and common human experiences that link us all, whether we are fans of Ozzy Osborne or The Osmonds.

Multimodal Memoir has revealed several implications for my practice and for that of others considering this assignment. Perhaps the most impactful is that this assignment has been a way for me to remind my students and myself of the essential role that so many different kinds of texts play in the development of our literacy lives. From the very first picturebooks we read to the crucial YA texts we encounter in adolescence to the books and films we read today, these texts become part of us. Within the MMs, students admitted that these texts have, for the most part, helped them realize that they (we) are not alone. And no matter what specific texts have affected us, there can be no doubt that even the staunchest nonreader has been impacted by some kind of text, particularly during adolescence. I'm not sure that all of my students "get" that lesson after having done the MM or will "pay it forward" to their future students, but I do know that I have seen it engender real empathy and that it has helped students recognize the richness of their own literacy lives.

William Kist is a professor at Kent State University, where he teaches graduate courses in the School of Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum Studies. A former high school English teacher and district curriculum coordinator, Bill has worked as a consultant with schools nationally for over 15 years in the areas of adolescent literacy and technology integration. The author of over 50 articles, Bill has also penned four books, including New Literacies in Action, The Socially Networked Classroom, The Global School, and the recently published Getting Started with Blended Learning (ASCD, 2015). Bill can be found online at www.williamkist.com and at <https://twitter.com/williamkist>.

Peggy Semingson is an associate professor of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Texas at Arlington where she teaches online courses in Literacy Studies. Dr. Semingson has experience as a classroom teacher and reading specialist in both Southern California and Texas. Her research interests include social contexts of literacy learning, digital pedagogies, and online literacy teacher education. She has published in *Teachers College Record*, *Language Arts*, and *Research in the Teaching of English*. She was awarded the Jeanne S. Chall Research Grant from Harvard University in 2009–2010.

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