BUT WILL IT WORK IN THE HEARTLAND? A RESPONSE AND ILLUSTRATION

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In their 1996 article published in the Harvard Educational Review, The New London Group (which includes three of the authors in this issue of JAAL) proposes a framework for teaching in New Times. We read the article when it first came out and sensed its impending significance—but at the time we could not wrap our minds around the meaning of “New Times.” Its shift in emphasis from text to design was a conceptual change we weren’t ready for at the time, having just begun to think about how forms of popular culture and technology intersect with learning in formal and informal settings. What has happened to us in the intervening years has probably happened to many JAAL readers. Like it or not, we have entered the world of the Internet—as teachers, researchers, and, for some, as parents. We have witnessed multinational mergers of information and entertainment technologies. We have been flooded with images from popular narratives and media -- the indelible iconography of a blue dress or a Teletubby. We have seen the faces of ethnic cleansing and heard the euphemistic discourse of clean and precise bombs. The juxtaposition of these disparate images and technologies sends us reeling, but it does not have the same effect on the teenagers we know well, who have come into literacy and life in the midst of new technologies. Competing images don’t confuse them as they do us. For instance, one of us has teenage sons who admire both Woody Guthrie for the political messages in his music and Marilyn Manson for what they see as his critical stance on gender identity. They humor their English teachers’ romantic visions of “the writing process,” and “the writer’s life,” knowing full well that they will return home to multitask their way through their assignments -- with WordPerfect and Internet open, phone and CD at hand, a book or two in their laps. New Times, indeed, and times that will be more easily accessed by those who have the resources--which brings us back to the New London Group and the set of papers at hand. All these papers include pedagogies that teach students to examine either the
semiotics or the political economy of popular cultural forms, including popular
technologies, thus inviting critical readings of access, resources, and symbolic codes.

The New London Group advocates for a pedagogical framework that includes four
approaches relevant to the papers in this themed issue: situated practices, overt instruction,
critical framing, and transformed practice. Situated practices are those that involve
immersion in local discourses with attention to the lifeworlds of individuals within a
particular community of learners. The New London Group refers to situated practice as
“mastery in practice” (1996, p. 84), noting that individuals acquire knowledge and practice
its application in particular sociocultural settings. Overt instruction is the sort that guides
and scaffolds the learner’s metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness, leading to the
conscious control of knowledge that does not develop through immersion. Critical framing
is the act of situating knowledge within its social, cultural, historical, and political contexts.
Teaching students to read texts for their ideological underpinnings would be an example of
such framing, thus helping students to develop critical awareness of how knowledge is
constructed and whose interests it serves. Finally, transformed practice is that which re-
contextualizes meanings, breaking down naturalized frames of reference and constructing
new meanings in new social spaces. It is this practice that enables the learner to
productively work with the tension derived from the juxtaposition of two opposing
discourses. Although the theoretical grounding for these practices can be found in the
sometimes esoteric language of cultural studies, feminist poststructuralism, critical social
theory, and critical discourse analysis, all of the authors in this issue provide pragmatic and
accessible applications of these theories.

Alvermann and Hagood focus on situated and critical practices. They are careful to
value the lifeworlds that Max and Sarah represent and to show how these adolescents’
particular versions of “fandom” should be understood as agentic and discriminating rather
than duped or swept away by media and marketing. When they talk about implications for
teaching, they emphasize that the teacher should start from a position that acknowledges
students’ pleasure in particular forms of popular culture and respects students’ judgments. Yet the move from this situated perspective, existing as it does within the immediate lifeworlds of the students, to a more critical framework is a crucial step to take in media education. Alvermann and Hagood delineate several approaches to a critical framework, but the goal in all of these approaches is to help students examine the political economy of popular consumption, how group affiliations influence consumption and taste and how systemic power differences result in the privileging of particular tastes over others. These processes are connected at the local level to social and cultural group identities and at the global level, to multinational corporations that disseminate across a wide range of audiences and geographies. While forms of popular culture can be oppositional and resistant, they are also co-opted by and reproduced through the very authoritative structures they oppose, and this is a paradox which the pedagogy suggested by Alvermann and Hagood would address.

C. Luke’s paper moves through all four practices within the New London pedagogical framework as she describes the teacher education course she designed. The lectures represent overt instruction, providing students with the metalanguages needed to understand the semiotics of various forms of media and technology. Tutorial groups provide students with situated practice within a smaller self-selected community of learners who make sense of the lectures in relation to their lived realities. The assignments require that students critically frame their learning by considering the social and cultural constitution of the media and technology sites they examine. In addition, they engage in transformed practice by using the critical frames they develop to evaluate technological tools for use in their future classrooms. Luke characterized the shift in her students’ thinking from an understanding of “knowledge as transmission” to an understanding of “knowledge as design.” Building on The New London Groups’ conception of knowledge as design, Luke’s course directs students attention to the structure and order of existing designs (through semiotic readings) before engaging them in the process of designing images and texts as they redesign contexts for their use.
A. Luke’s paper focuses closely on critical frames and transformed practices in its discussion of Australian approaches to critical literacy. As Luke explains, historical and political conditions in Australia in the 1980s made it a conducive context for critical approaches which now involve developing in students an understanding of the social nature of genre as they write within and against permeable generic forms. Luke’s paper demonstrates how a curriculum can be designed for New Times through an emphasis on critical literacy that focuses on analyzing how texts work. Rather than directly addressing issues related to social justice, Luke’s approach to critical literacy seeks to make textual codes available to students so that they are compelled to examine the ideological underpinnings of the texts they read and begin to understand the ways they are positioned by texts. Rather than viewing the interaction between reader and text through a cognitive lens, Luke argues for an approach that shows how cognition is constituted in the cultural, focusing, for instance, on such questions as “For what kind of reader was this text constructed?” This kind of critical framing is especially important in light of the social identities students form as they interact with multimedia and other forms of popular culture. In order to prepare students for the influence of global economies on the distribution and consumption of texts and other resources, students must know how to read and revise popular technologies through critical framing and transformed practice.

At the risk of oversimplifying, we want to suggest that C. Luke’s and A. Luke’s papers foreground textual analysis whereas Alvermann and Hagood’s paper foregrounds audience analysis. In arguing for a combined text/audience approach to media studies, the cultural studies theorist Jere Paul Surber (1998) notes that research on audiences in media signaled an important departure beyond a focus on the text itself. As he points out, however, “such approaches must not lose sight of the facts that readers not only produce interpretations of texts but are produced as subjects by the texts they read . . . ” (p. 245). As educators from the U. S. originally trained in a personal growth model of language teaching and learning, we often feel conflicted about the role of language arts teachers in
negotiating how much emphasis to place on how texts position readers and how much emphasis to place on how readers can reconstruct meanings in texts. It seems to us that one of the most important roles a teacher can serve when participating in discussions of media texts is to mediate the text in critical ways, helping students to traverse social and institutional discourses--the discourse of the dominant popular culture as well as the official and unofficial discourses of the classroom. The difficulty of this kind of pedagogy lies in the ease with which it can tip the balance toward teacher-directed practice. Yet the role of the Language Arts teacher has long been ambiguous in that the teacher is cautioned to lead without squelching individual freedom. Gemma Moss (1989, 1995), who writes about critical theories related to literacy teaching, points out that a humanistic pedagogy is no less ideologically based than a critical pedagogy. As educators, she argues, we need to acknowledge that we want students to read texts in certain ways because we hope to influence the sort of people our students will become. Related to this set of articles, when we think about the people we want our students to become, we realize that, in part, we want them to use media and technology for their own important purposes. However, we also want them to learn to engage in critical readings of media and technology--readings that make visible the social and institutional ideologies at work.

We turn, now, to an example of multiliteracies in New Times from the midwestern “heartland” where we live and teach. Our purpose in this paper is not only to comment on the work of the other contributors, but also to show the relevance of their work to adolescents in a specific context, a place not known for cutting edge trends or technologies. Here we offer an example from our research on computer-mediated communication among adolescent females in the Midwest to underscore the significance of the contributors’ discussions of popular culture and technology. In our discussion, we examine the purposes served by a particular kind of Internet communication (Instant Messaging) in the life of one girl and her best friend, and we point to the need for new pedagogies that both incorporate and offer critical frames for new literacies.
Sam (all names in this article are pseudonyms) is a thirteen-year-old girl who lives in a small midwestern university town. She is European American and working class; her parents are both maintenance workers who place a strong value on education and feel it is important for Sam to have access to the Internet. Ideally, Sam and her eleven-year-old twin sisters are meant to go online for research purposes, to enhance their typing skills, and marginally, to communicate with their friends. Sam’s mother, who knows very little about the Internet (“I don’t know how to get on it. They have to do it all for me!”), has gendered expectations that the skills will be useful if Sam wants to become a secretary. Sam’s father, who is concerned that his daughters have a fast, upgraded computer so they can “stay with the game, not just stay ahead of the game,” has grown increasingly concerned about the dangerous and time wasting elements of computer communications, and has begun to place extensive restrictions on Sam’s Internet options.

These restrictions are bad news for Sam. Communication is her main reason for being online. Indeed, it is so important for her to be electronically connected to her friends that she continues to log on whenever she can get away with it. After she comes home from school, Sam generally begins a ritual of computer communication that, far beyond wasting time from her point of view, sustains and extends her social network. Sam has a number of different electronic communication options to choose from as she sits at her family computer and logs on to America On-line (AOL) for her one-to-two-hour sessions each day. Each one of these options (email, chat rooms, and Instant Messaging) offers a specific purpose for her in terms of the kind of tone and language she wants to use and the overall social and practical goal of the communication. We will focus our attention on her use of Instant Messaging (IM).

IM-ing is for brief, casual real-time communication with peers. Through an AOL Instant Messaging display monitor, Sam knows which AOL-equipped friends from her email buddy list are online at a given time and can immediately begin communicating with any one of them. Sam’s father, who controls the parental control account, restricts her
buddy list to twenty people. IM communications, although typed, mimic face-to-face conversations. They are peppered with a distinct shorthand lingo (e.g., how r u?)--often the shorter the better--and the norm is to type and send short, overlapping messages in the spirit of continuous interruption. IM users, for example, will even type and send a singular smiley face emoticon to indicate, despite the interruption, that they are still listening, even nodding in approval to whatever that person is saying. Often Sam is IM-ing Karrie, her best friend who has recently moved to another midwestern city.

Sam finds IM-ing to be an especially satisfying activity that involves her with shared knowledge and intimacies, and allows her, to a large extent, to observe the activities of her peers from a comfortable, if not circumspect, vantage point. What has been particularly interesting to us is the extent with which Sam negotiates language and social networks as she electronically communicates with her peers in real time. Instant messaging, we found, demands multiliteracies as it defines and mediates social status. Although we don’t want to claim that through her Internet activities Sam engages in the critical analysis of language, we are finding the sophistication of rhetorical choices she makes during these minute-to-minute interactions very compelling.

Negotiating the Language of IM

Rather than speaking in one voice, Sam is conscious of choosing different tones and language styles depending on who she’s Instant Messaging. In discussing her online relationship with Karrie, Sam observes that she is not only able to talk about a richer variety of topics with her best friend due to the many reference points they share, but she also discusses these topics in a “softer and sweeter” tone. Correspondingly, she has observed her tendency to give shorter, more pointed answers to peers she has less interest in talking to. Karrie said about her special Internet relationship with Sam: “The only reason I really use Instant Messages is basically to talk to her. I mean, I talk to everyone else, but the only person I REALLY like to talk to is her.” The girls feel that their bond influences the breadth, depth, and tone, of their Internet messages. Other audiences result in a different
set of language negotiations. Sam notes that she pays more attention to her spelling when she considers the person she’s addressing to be “smart,” for example. Sam has even copied the “voice” of an Instant Message correspondent who accidentally got onto her buddy list, in order to maintain the connection:

Sam: This girl, she thinks I’m somebody else. She thinks I’m one of her friends, and she’s like “Hey!” and I’m like “Hi!” and I start playing along with her. She thinks that I’m one of her school friends. She doesn’t know it’s me. She wrote to me twice now.

Bettina: So She’s this person that you’re lying to almost ...

Sam: Yeah, you just play along. It’s fun sometimes. It’s comical. Because she’ll say something like “Oh [a boy] did this and we’re going to the ski house,” or whatever, and I’m like “Oh God!” and like and I’ll just reply to her. I’ll use the same exclamations where she uses them and I’ll try to talk like they do.

This kind of play brings to mind the critical feature of parody that Alvermann and Hagood discuss, citing work by David Buckingham (1998). In creating a parodic imitation of the tone and content of the anonymous correspondent’s message, Sam had to analyze how the girl’s tone worked--how it accomplished its purposes.

Besides adapting her tone, Sam is also careful to adjust her subject matter according to her particular audience. In order to convey to a popular boy in another school that she is “cool,” Sam pays attention to his choice of words and topics so as to “get into his little group of friends.” She also has little patience for the language used in kid chat rooms, calling the speech and the typing cues annoyingly immature, with aimless discussions that never talk about things (“like what’s going on”) that are important. Generally, Sam observes the kind of language people are using online and appropriates language cues for specific purposes. “It’s just the fact that I have access to it, and I get on every night,” she says, . . . and I watch other people talk to people.”
Sam and Karrie use the technology to juggle numerous language styles and conversations at a time. Each conversation takes place on a separate window, which pile up as more conversations get started. Sam routinely converses with four to eight people simultaneously, while Karrie manages around 20 windows and maintains a buddy list of 90. In the IM environment, the drama unfolds by way of multiple narratives and intersecting social discourses. In addition, adolescents at the computer routinely multitask, doing homework, watching television, and talking on the phone. As she chatted with Sam, Karrie was doing homework, eating ice cream, listening to the radio and IM-ing 22 peers. Instant messaging, accordingly, cannot by its splintered nature lead to extended conversation.

**Negotiating Social Networks**

As she juggles messages and language styles, Sam believes she is enhancing her social relationships and her social standing at school. Because chatting is so easy for her, Sam finds herself talking “a lot more” to friends than she would otherwise have time to in or outside of school. When asked why IM-ing is immediately better than the telephone or face-to-face equivalent, Sam and Karrie both agree that their online conversations erase awkwardness:

Karrie: Yeah, I don’t like the long pauses, like we don’t really have pauses, like for people that I really don’t know as well, then you just sit there [when talking in person] and go, “Uhhhhhhhh,”

Sam: and you don’t know what to say...

Karrie: and [it] gets a bit awkward.

Without having to worry about unwieldy, gaping silences, Sam says she not only talks to friends more, but she does so with more ease than she could muster on the phone or in person. This ease of communication is particularly useful when talking to members of the opposite sex; there is no fear of turning “bright red” or running out of things to say. “You can always think of something,” Sam says. IM-ing also seems to encourage a kind
of openness not apparent with telephone calls and face-to-face interaction. The appearance of intimacy allows boys to tell Sam and Karrie more than they normally would:

Sam: You get more stuff out of them. Yeah. They’ll tell you a lot more, cause they feel stupid in front of you. They won’t just sit there and...

Bettina: So it’s a different medium and they can test themselves a bit more and...

Sam: So they know how we react and they don’t feel stupid cause they don’t have to think about the next thing to say. I can smile [using an emoticon] or I can say something to them.

Turkle (1995) relates similar findings in her discussion of a fourteen-year-old boy who felt online flirting far surpassed the real life equivalent. “At parties, there is pressure to dance close, kiss, and touch, all of which he both craves and dreads” (p. 226). On the other hand, the illusion of anonymity that computer-mediated communication provides can encourage some individuals to take risks they wouldn’t ordinarily take (Gumpert & Drucker, 1998).

In general, Sam and Karrie believe that their IM relationships enhance their social status, establishing a kind of social currency that keeps them in the know. Karrie thinks that being online makes her more popular in some peers’ minds. “It depends on how you use it,” Karrie says. “Like sometimes things happen on there, like funny things, and then you get better friends because of things you can talk about.” Sam, who plans to switch schools in the fall from the local parochial middle school to the public high school, says she’s been using IM in order to get to know some kids from the new school, and learn about “their inside jokes and stuff” and other pertinent social gossip. Knowing who is popular and who is going out with whom will allow her a smoother transition and will in turn guarantee a more solid social network when she starts school.

So as not to appear a “loser” with no other windows to juggle, and in effect, no other friends to keep her preoccupied, Sam chooses to wait a certain amount of time before typing her responses and is careful not to send messages to the same person in succession.
Sam: Yeah, and if you’re talking to the people from [her new school] that have tons of people on their buddy lists, and they’re talking to five or six people, you can’t be . . . like “hello hello hello,” like that, try to get them to talk to you, ‘cause you know they’re talking to all these different people and it gets annoying . . .

Bettina: And how do they know how many people you’re talking to?

Sam: They don’t, they just assume, cause I’m not, I don’t saying anything for a while, I don’t answer their question ...

The assumption then, is that everyone is talking to at least three or four different peers.

Withholding a response in this context is not considered an insult, but a status symbol. In addition, if someone from Sam’s buddy list suddenly appears online, she sometimes waits until she is IM-ed first, especially if this person is someone she intends to impress. It would be a social gaffe, she thinks, if she were too immediately effusive. Timing is therefore a crucial signifier in the world of IM literacy.

**Monitoring the IM Landscape**

Although Sam doesn’t show much awareness of how she might be manipulated by the chat/IM technology, she reveals her intricate understanding of how she and her friend can manipulate it for their purposes related to power and identity. Sam is quite adept at using the buddy list indicator to monitor her friends online and control her message flow. To combat excessive or unwanted messages, she often turns off her buddy list indicator so her friends can no longer tell that she is simultaneously online. Sam also tries to surreptitiously discover who is currently talking to whom and what they happen to be talking about by IM-ing inquiries to friends and asking them to report back to her. She also passes along her own investigative information, adding to a web of online surveillance that complicates and adds intrigue to the basic IM exchange. Karrie went so far as to track her boyfriend into a chat room, assume the “male” identity of “snowboarder911,” and try to find out what kind of conversations he was having. She also investigated the girl who mistakenly thinks Sam is her best IM buddy. By researching AOL user profiles, Karrie
found her age and geographical location. When Sam and Karrie choose to enter chat rooms that are not age-specific, they lie about their age and certainly don’t list it in their sketchy user profile so as to pursue “adult” conversations with older people. Indeed, the girls like that they can control the rhetorical contexts of their interactions, sometimes through the surveillance of others, and sometimes through careful consideration of issues related to status, age, and gender.

Media theorist Sefton-Green (1998) claim that digital communication begins to blur the distinction between childhood, adolescents, and adulthood in the sense that these terms are defined by their social use rather than by biological age. Children and teens, for instance, interact with adults in chat rooms based on interest rather than age. However, Sam’s desire to hide her age and Karrie’s gender posing show that the social and power relations related to age and gender that exist outside the Internet inhere within as well. Other research suggests that gender inequities are actually reproduced through online communication, both in the length and number of conversational turns affording to males over females (Herring, 1995) and in the regulation of topics that emerge from heterosexist assumptions (Silver, 1997/8). Yet, since the physical body is not present in Internet interaction, Sam and Karrie have more space for play, parody, and performance. They can manipulate their voice, tone, and subject matter to hide or transform their own identities and to monitor the interactions of others.

Because Sam and Karrie are aware that their moves are also being watched and regulated by their parents, both girls have become savvy in their ability to overcome the restrictions on their online communication practices. Sam, whose father disallows IM but allows emails, has learned that she can block her buddy list every time her father is at home and never receive IM messages in his presence. She and Karrie also rely on a number code system. When Sam’s father walks into the room, she types a certain number and begins to write about (or do) her homework so that he won’t think she’s wasting her time (“It’s kind of fun, cause your parents don’t know what you mean, so if you wanted to tell them...
something you could make up anything you wanted to.”) She also continues to IM her friends when her father is at work, but covers her tracks by flooding the tracking device with educational sites and adding his name to her buddy list so she can track any time he’s online during his work day.

Sam is computer literate to the point that she knows more about the AOL computer controls than her father. When these controls need to be changed, he types in the master account password but she instructs him where to go. As we were videotaping Sam during an IM session, Karrie IM-ed for some advice. She had successfully located her mother’s password but had not been able to figure out how to change her user profile in order to include a more expansive list of interests than her mother wanted her to include. Sam directed Karrie to a number of menus, and after 30 minutes of frustrated persistence (and calm encouragement from Sam), Karrie figured it out. GTG (got to go), Karrie typed, and signed off to her best friend--LULMTAS (love you lots more than a sister).

Educating for New Times

When we compare the sophistication of Sam’s rhetorical choices to the simple linearity of the writing process as it is often represented in the classroom, we understand why so many students over the years have told us that they are bored by the pace and sequence of writer’s workshop and that they fake their rough drafts after having completed final ones in a flash. Consequently, we are attracted to the promise of Beach and Lundell’s (1998) claim that when their students participated in a computer-mediated communication exchange, they learned “writing and reading as social strategies” (p. 93), a finding in keeping with the patterns we observed in our time with Sam. Sam used Instant Messaging to bond with her best girl friend and gain some measure of control in social relationships. With regard to gender, although Sam is not using her online chats to break down gendered frames of reference, she is using these chats to claim some control over her position in the male/female binary. With her body out of view, she is able to alternately observe, monitor, and engage the words and minds of boys.
Clearly, even in the heartland, we educators need to offer our students (whether they are preservice teachers or adolescents) multiliteracies for New Times. If we choose not to, then those students who have the resources to teach themselves at home will have privileged access over those who do not (Garton, 1997; Haywood, 1995). If we choose to do so, then the articles in this issue of JAAL provide us with specific strategies for critical and transformed practice. In keeping with these papers, we can study and appreciate the lifeworlds and social literacies that girls like Sam and Karrie bring with them to school. But in addition, we must help students to critically frame their experiences and readings of media and computer-mediated texts. As C. Luke’s paper makes clear, students need to examine the ways that they are used by New Times technologies even as they use these technologies for their own social and linguistic purposes.
References


