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Semiotic representations: Building complex literacy practices through the arts

Including visual arts, drama, and movement in English language arts instruction is not difficult and can increase students' understanding and motivation.

English studies should include translations from one sign system to another as an essential part of the curriculum. These should include translating words into action—"acting out" scenes from stories, poems, and dramas—and novels to films, reports to speeches, paintings to descriptions. This means that students in English need to begin to give substantially more attention to various media. (Myers, 1996, p. 191)

My favorite part of this class is writing. I got better at writing poetry. My vocabulary was extended when I acted out my words and drew pictures. Then we made masks. My poem came out of the mask and the mask came out of the poem. (Jack, fifth-grade student)

These statements made by Miles Myers (1996) and Jack, a fifth-grade student (all student names are pseudonyms), suggest that educators should thoughtfully consider the integration of the visual arts, drama, and movement into English language arts (ELA) instruction. Myers argued the importance of semiotic meaning construction in the study of the English language arts. That is, students must have experiences in which they construct and translate meaning across sign systems through what we call semiotic representations. When students represent meaning semiotically, they demonstrate knowledge of and facility with communication systems including art, language, math, drama, and dance. Jack acknowledged the importance that

engaging in semiotic experiences such as mask-making, writing, and drama had for him as an author. Furthermore, these experiences for him generated more interest in writing poetry. These comments demonstrate that art forms such as the visual arts, drama, music, film, and photography support literacy learning.

Whereas some researchers might define literacy more narrowly as an ability to read, write, and understand print-based texts, Harste (1994, 2000) suggested that it involves experience with a variety of semiotic or communication systems—in particular, language, drama, music, and the visual arts. For Myers, Harste, and others (Albers, 1997; Albers & Murphy, 2000; Berghoff, Egawa, Harste, & Hoonan, 2000; Cowan, 2001), including alternative communication systems as part of students' holistic literacy development is essential, especially if we want them to gain new perspectives on the world (Greene, 1995b; Harste, 2000, 2003). Learning within a semiotic approach to literacy enables learners to develop richer and more complex literacy practices and allows them to more thoughtfully and critically deal with the images and messages of popular culture. It seems necessary, then, to find space in which literacy educators can work with students to move them toward a more complex understanding and development of literacy that is explicitly linked to the visual and dramatic arts.

In this article we present social semiotics as a framework through which to talk about the role of the arts in literacy. We also address the semiotic processes through which we engage fourth- and fifth-grade students as they develop literate practices in which the arts are substantively connected

to language arts instruction. Kay (Cowan, first author) is the teacher and a literacy researcher in this class, while Peggy (Albers, second author) is a literacy researcher who works with Kay. Together, we study sign systems in the composing processes of these students.

Literacy, the arts, and social semiotics

The link between the arts and literacy is commanding more attention in recent literacy research (Berghoff, 1995; Ernst, 1993; Harste, 1994, 2003; Lambert-Stock, 2004; McKay & Kendrick, 2001; Short, Harste, & Burke, 1995). The early connections between art and reading forwarded by Eisner (1978) and Goodman (1978), respectively, precipitated further research in semiotic meaning making through transmediation, recasting meaning from written language to another sign system (e.g., music, art, math, drama), as a way to examine literacy in more complex ways (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Siegel, 1984). This work led researchers to look more broadly at literacy “as the use of language, art, music, movement, and other sign systems to explore and expand our world” (Short et al., p. 53). The International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) posited that educators must “challenge students to analyze critically the texts they view and to integrate their visual knowledge with their knowledge of other forms of literacy” (IRA & NCTE, 1996, p. 6).

For the most part, art is relegated to the margins in U.S. schools’ curricula (Eisner, 2003). Elementary teachers often feel inadequately prepared in art (Albers & Cowan, 1998), and subsequently work with art in limited ways (Eisner). As such, art is often reduced to “formulaic, craft-like activities” (Eisner, p. 29), iconic images, and symbols that accompany holidays and are created to decorate classrooms and hallways (Collins, 1995). Little substantive work in helping students develop their literacy in art in subject areas outside of art has been done. Our work as teacher-researchers in these fourth- and fifth-grade classes attempts to document the semiotic processes through which these students learn and become energized by the composing process.

We draw from the theory of social semiotics to explore the potential of the visual arts to develop complex literacy practices—habits in reading and composing—in which thinking through multiple sign systems is necessary to read and produce a complex semiotic system or text (Albers & Murphy, 2000). Such thinking extends educators’ current understanding about the role of art in reading and language arts classes. Social semiotics is a study of sign systems or communication systems including art, music, drama, mathematics, and written and oral language that are socially located within the signmaker’s environment and experiences. Each sign system consists of forms of representations and conventions that allow humans to communicate, interpret, and represent meaning. The more experience one has with a sign system, the more one will choose this system to represent meaning (Berghoff et al., 2000). That is, the more learners understand the tools, techniques, and language of a sign system, the better they are able to integrate it with the texts that they produce. We frame our work within the following social semiotic principles (Albers & Murphy, 2000): (1) learners produce meaning through semiotic systems, or collections of elements used in relation to others to represent meaning; (2) literacy is the ease with which learners can create or interpret others’ semiotic systems; (3) texts are ideological; and (4) texts are generative. In simple terms, we explain these principles through our use of a text created by Carolyn, a fourth-grade student, in which she recalls the sadness she felt when her best friend moved away (Figure 1). The whole text—the artwork—contains a number of signs that when created or read collectively are known as a semiotic system or what we call a semiotic text. Each element (individual images, words, color, cotton, and so on) within this text is a sign that has meaning for both the signmaker and the reader of the text, though these meanings will necessarily be different because of the signmaker’s or readers’ experiences and backgrounds. This semiotic text is recognizable to the larger community—her classmates and those who read this text—because she chose signs that have common cultural meanings. A smiling face and a person cartwheeling often represent positive or happy signs, whereas the image within a thick circle crossed diagonally with a red line suggests negative signs. The signmaker produces these

FIGURE 1
Carolyn's semiotic text



signs easily, and readers can interpret them readily. In essence, these signs are not constructed independently but are ideological and carry the beliefs of Carolyn's community and culture. When she presents this text to her classmates, they share their interpretation in conjunction with her own explanation. In this sense, semiotic texts are always generative; that is, they have the potential to extend the initial meaning of the signmaker (Kress, 1996).

Within the framework of social semiotics, we turn to the work that we do with fourth- and fifth-grade students to help them build stronger and more complex literacy practices. By literacy practices, we mean that students reflect consciously on their created texts, the ideologies that underpin these texts, and the process through which they make meaning. They develop habits of composing that are continually under revision in terms of how and what is represented. Each text informs future texts and processes. In supporting students' literacy practices, we teach from a semiotic perspective in which we design curriculum and literacy engagements with the belief that all sign systems inform

the texts students create. Students may create a written text, such as a poem, but the experiences leading up to this writing involve systems such as art, music, math, movement, and drama. Likewise, an art work will involve students' use of music, drama, and language.

The semiotic experiences that we describe next are part of our teaching practices and are elements within a larger inquiry-based curriculum in which students' lives and interests are foundational to the work we do as ELA teacher-researchers.

Building a context for semiotic thinking

Learning to write well often proves to be one of the most difficult areas in the English language arts. Designing a context in which writing is semiotically positioned is essential. Many students experience "blank-page" syndrome and often struggle to find topics on which to write. We identify the following three important elements to help students

write with force and power: (1) ground the writing in personal experience, (2) offer personal choice in the writing topic, and (3) present the writing from a semiotic perspective (Cowan, 2001). An arts-based, interdisciplinary approach to writing instruction, by its very nature, encourages composition and brings additional strengths to the writing process (Cowan, 2001). As this process takes place—as cognition is coupled with affect (Sadoski & Paivio, 1994)—students become more actively engaged in the writing process, imagery increases, and so does students’ ability to synthesize and analyze information (Sadoski, Goetz, & Fritz, 1993; Sadoski, Goetz, Olivarez, Lee, & Roberts, 1990; Sadoski & Quast, 1990). Students are positioned not just to write but to write with force. Through a series of visual and performing arts lessons we have designed, our students invariably write with better clarity, precision, and imaginative creativity.

Although neither of us has had formal training in the visual arts, Peggy has training in drama, and we are both committed to personal inquiry into the role of the arts and literacy. That is, we continually seek out professional resources, ideas, and workshops that enable us to more thoughtfully and semiotically engage students as they evolve in their literacy. The semiotic texts that students create in our classes are rooted deeply in their lives, and thus, their stories are fused with their beliefs about the world in which they live. As you will see, students’ texts are pleasant or painful and enable them to talk about topics safely and, for some, with artistic distance. Semiotics positions students to inquire into and create texts that demonstrate their power, or lack thereof, in ordinary life settings such as family or school.

Relived experience through language and drama

We begin the composing process by informing students that they will be writing, but first they will be playing with words, linking experience with positive and negative words, synonyms and antonyms. On paper, we ask students to list in a phrase or sentence two or three of the best—the most positive—things that they ever have experienced. Students then pick one of the experiences and recapture it in their minds. This becomes the focused experience about which they will create semiotic texts. In qui-

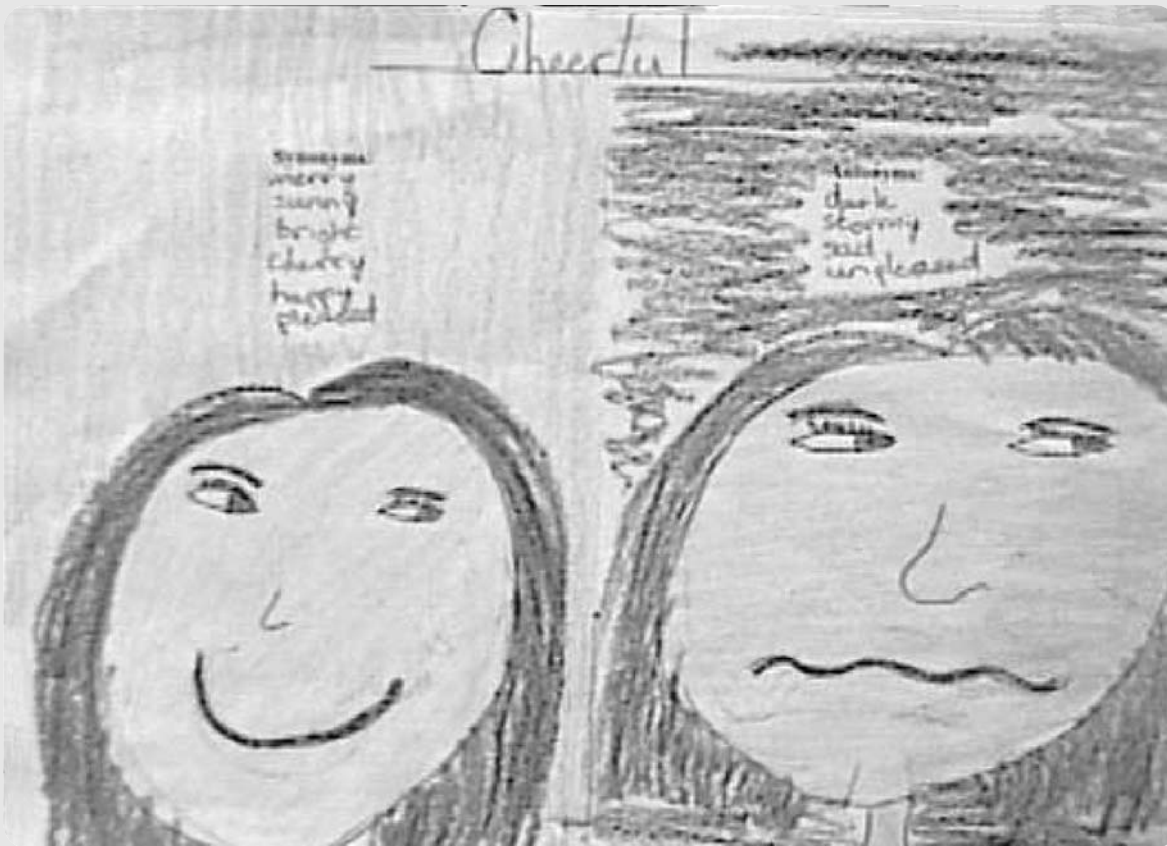
et, they close their eyes and remember the event, thinking about questions such as “Who was there? What happened? What made the experience so great?” For several moments, students vicariously relive this moment and relish the experience. As the students open their eyes and begin again to make eye contact, we ask them to think about this question: What feelings do you associate with the event you thought about? Students write these words on paper, and words such as *happy* and *merry* are generated. In a similar process, students are asked to think of a word that describes the emotion they felt when they experienced an event that had a negative impact on them; *sad* and *sorrowful* come to mind for many of them. Students often generate simple adjectives such as these, but we are not concerned. This is early in their composing process, and we will engage them further in word study to develop more complex and interesting language.

After connecting students’ personal experiences to feelings or affect, we invite them to dramatize one of the emotions they listed. To demonstrate, both of us take turns to act out an emotion we want to share. With our backs to the students, we relive the experience, turn to face them, and act out the emotion. Students study our body language and facial expressions and then guess the emotion we are trying to convey. We ask students to write down their guesses, and then we reveal the word we dramatized. One by one, students take the floor and dramatize their emotion. After they have acted their emotion, students have a chance to share their event. Caitlan said,

Gloomy. She’s the feeling that I wanted to dramatize. My best friend moved away, and I felt really sad, like the color gray. It was hard to be alone, and no one would talk to me. I felt dark and down, like black in a dark, dark world. You think of black and you don’t smell or taste anything.

When students share visual imagery like Caitlan’s, we stop and point out her use of color and metaphor. Kay explained, “Caitlan, ‘like black in a dark world’—that’s a really strong simile. Can you all see that? Did you notice other powerful words?” Students then share imagery they found strong in Caitlan’s words. With each dramatization, all of us record on paper both the word associated with the emotion and our near guesses. We talk about near guesses as synonyms. We then talk about opposites

FIGURE 2
Language study, cheerful



of this word, or antonyms. Students become familiar with and understand the context in which these literary terms are used.

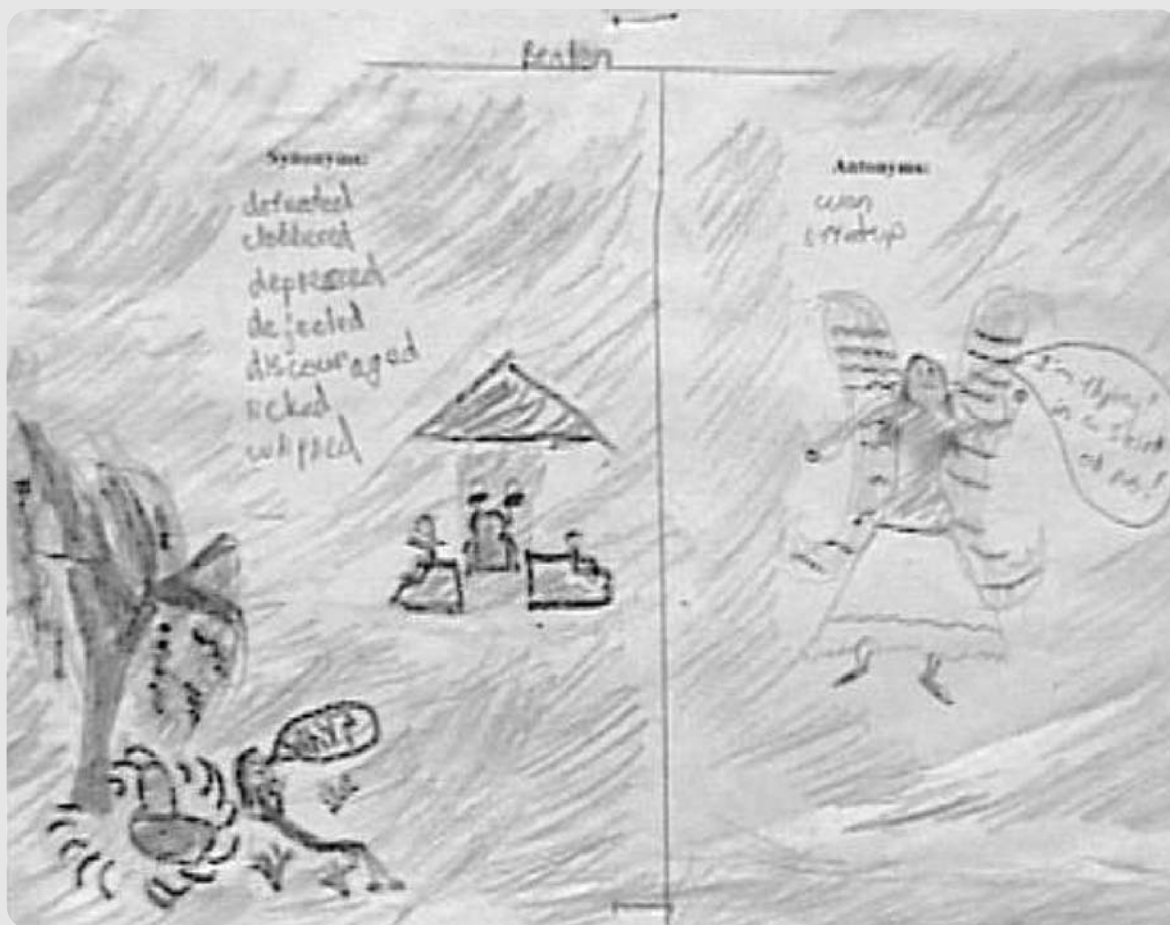
Word choice, verbal agility, and illustration

Following this playful approach to word study in which they have already had six to eight encounters with the word, students inquire into shades of meaning using computers and art. Computer work enables students to speed up the physical processing of language. That is, they can think much faster when they keyboard than when they physically write on paper (Cowan, 2001). As a result, short-term memory is not bogged down in slowness of handwriting. "I feel like I'm on fire," stated Warren as he composed on the computer.

We talk with students about how authors choose words purposefully when they write. Students write their self-selected words across the center of a blank page folded in half. One half of the paper is to write out synonyms and the second half for antonyms. Using a thesaurus and a thesaurus software program, Kay demonstrates how these tools enable students to take an ordinary word like *sad* and find a word that more clearly explains their emotion. They then generate a list of synonyms and antonyms for the word. Jack stated, "We write down the word that we felt—we found words that weren't common—and write down words that are powerful." Once this list is generated, students illustrate the synonyms and antonyms of this emotion (see Figures 2 and 3).

Students share their work with one another, and look across their list to see if one of the synonyms

FIGURE 3
Language study, *beaten*



more precisely reflects their emotion. We ask, “Do you find additional words that might be useful as you think about writing?” Fourth grader Ray struggled with his word choice, saying

I don't know. I started out with *frustrated* and *proud*, but these were bad words. I didn't feel that way. I got mad at myself and got sad. I couldn't figure out a word that really described my emotion. I read *melancholy* in the thesaurus, looked it up, and knew that word was exactly what I wanted to convey.

Words that others chose include *eager*, *passionate*, *bothersome*, and *edgy*. As new words are introduced in the context of their past experiences, we encourage students to think about how their un-

derstanding of their initial word has broadened and how word choice is essential to good writing.

Art as a system of communication

At this point in the composing process, we conduct several minilessons that examine art as a knowledge domain. Both of us are self-taught artists. We often read professional and trade texts in the arts and practice art techniques as part of our commitment to the arts and literacy. Drawing upon Bang's work (1991), we introduce students to elements of art including line, shape, color, and design. We look at curved and straight lines and invite students to respond. Intuitively, they associate angular lines with such concepts as anger, war, and

FIGURE 4
Warren's poem and pencil drawing, "Militant"

"Militant"
Militant lives
Inside the souls of men
Who are violent
Stiff,
And rigid....
When militant appears,
He is not kind,
He is not polite.
His bitter cry
Slashes through your soul
As he goes for the kill.



violence and curved lines with calm, peace, and order. We then introduce students to shades of meaning in color, viewers' responses to color, and textures. Using a color wheel, we talk about tints and hues and how shades of color—for example, red to pink—elicit different responses. We connect the discussion of line to color and ask students to explore the difference between a thick red angular line and a thin pink angular line. We then move into the significance of texture. Students explore texture by feeling the different surfaces in our room and discuss the messages we receive from them. What message does a smooth wall send? Glass mirror? Polystyrene? Stucco?

Semiotics of reading, writing, and art

Within the 90-minute class period, students have a number of experiences that integrate reading, writing, drama, and art. On the next day, we introduce a Caldecott Medal-winning book, *Shadow* (Brown, 1982), to further inquire into visual imagery, emotional connection to language, and the craft of writing. *Shadow* is a long poem adapted from an African folk tale that personifies a shadow in terms of who it is and what it does, as well as when, where, why, and how it does these things. We closely study Brown's choice of words, use of extended metaphor, and the effect of the words on the reader. Students hear the rhythm and discover how simile sounds and looks and how metaphor and personification take on life: "But Shadow does not sleep./It is always watching./If you open your

eyes in your sleep,/Shadow is there./It has already stolen back like a thief..." (unpaged). This part of the process intrigues students like Annie, who stated, "I like reading *Shadow*. This helps us write our own similes. 'Outrageous smells like smoke, damp and dark.'" After engaging artistically and linguistically with their relived experience, students are anxious to begin their own writing. Returning to their illustrated words, we guide their writing with such questions as these: How does the word—*envy*, *ebullient*, *tremendous*, *sorrowful*—move? Where does the word appear? Where does the word live? When does the word appear? What does the word do? What nourishes the word? Why does the word perform these acts?

Using a computer program, students write an initial draft of their personification poems. At the same time, they create drawings of their protagonist, moving between these two sign systems to generate imagery. By this time, their creative juices are flowing, and they write at a tremendous pace, sharing words, passages, and drafts with one another. We then talk about free and blank verse in their poems, phrasing, and word choices, and together we work on their poems and offer ideas to one another to increase the impact on the reader. Students revise their initial drafts and emphasize words that will catch a reader's interest. After we review basic aspects of conducting constructive criticism, they critique one another's poems in small groups, sharing strong aspects and asking questions about unclear words or phrases. Students can either accept or decline these suggestions because ultimately, this writing is theirs. Warren's poem and drawing, both entitled "Militant" (Figure 4), demonstrate his attention to shades of meaning in both language and art.

"Militant" clearly demonstrates Warren's knowledge of and precision with both art and language, and it becomes a study in Warren's use of irony and his ideological beliefs. Visually, curved lines should suggest protection (Bang, 1991), but Warren's use of curved lines in Militant's smile, scar, body, and landscape do not protect but place those in Militant's life in harm's way. Warren's use of tight, thin, cross-hatched lines in the hair, collar, and knife represent the "Stiff,/And rigid" beliefs held by Militant. Warren chooses precise and powerful words that speak directly to the emotions he wishes to convey: "His bitter cry/ Slashes" as

Militant “goes for the kill.” This semiotic text arises from Warren’s interest in and commitment to speak to social issues such as war, civil unrest, injustice, and domestic violence. He does so descriptively through extended metaphor and knowledge of viewers’ response to design, line, and shape.

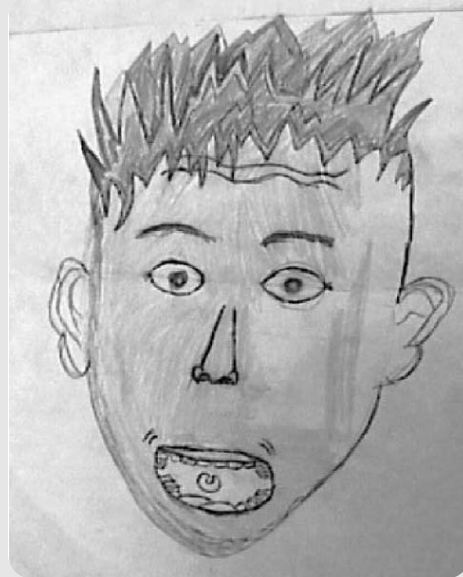
Mask-making, visual imagery, and semiotic texts

Experiencing learning through multiple sign systems is precisely what we believe enables students to perceive their world in new ways (Eisner, 2002; Greene, 1995a; Harste, 2000), solve problems, read and write, and create texts that are interestingly complex. Eisner wrote that the arts help us “notice the world” (p. 10), “stabilize ideas through inscription in art” (p. 11), and enable learners to become creative problem solvers through the creation of three-dimensional projects.

With the positions of Eisner (2002), Greene (1995a), and Harste (2000) in mind, the lesson shifts to the building of a three-dimensional (3-D) papier-mâché mask that captures in color, line, and texture the essence of the focused experience the students wish to portray. Although this project appears to be artistically complex, the art knowledge and techniques are simple and can be implemented easily. Furthermore, the materials are those with which teachers will have familiarity: cardboard boxes, shredded paper, tempera paints, and glue mixture.

With 3-D construction, students must become creative problem solvers. They must consider a number of art and language questions about line, color, and texture: Will their mask have rounded or angular lines? How will color inform the emotion being conveyed? How do they want the skin to appear? Smooth? Rough? They must also consider the technical aspects of handbuilding in papier-mâché as they sculpt or attach various facial features and other decorative elements. They must consider how their personification poems relate to the mask and how the mask will relate to the poem. Just as they drafted their poem, students draft preliminary drawings of the 3-D mask they will make, as shown in Figure 5. These illustrations act as guides for their 3-D masks and allow them to revise and rework the two-dimensional drawing before beginning their mask.

FIGURE 5
Drawing draft, “Tremendous”



Before they begin building their 3-D masks, students study their own faces, assuming the mood of the emotion they are planning to depict. Next we ask them to feel the different features of their own face, the mouth, the eye sockets, the cheekbones, the lips, and so on. Having done this, students prepare a rough sketch of the proposed mask on the corners of cardboard boxes (Figure 6), and we cut out the eyes and mouth.

Once this part of the project is complete, the students create 3-D sculptures of their emotion with papier-mâché. The shredded paper is soaked in water ahead of time and drained, which gives the paper pliability. The paper is divided into several pie tins and a glue mixture is poured on top. Students knead the mixture into a pulp and, once ready, they begin to cover their cardboard mask with a thin layer of papier-mâché. At this point, we demonstrate several sculpting techniques, including one in which the nose can begin with a fist full of papier-mâché that is molded into a triangle and then placed above the mouth. Students then shape the nose to fit their emotion. Moving back and forth between their initial sketches, the mask, and their own faces, students sculpt the mask’s facial features. Because papier-mâché is a thick medium, it

FIGURE 6
Cardboard corners with preliminary sketch of face



takes about a week for the masks to dry in the open air, but they can be more quickly dried with fans, with exposure to the sun, or with heat in an oven. While masks are drying, we move on to other language arts experiences, such as literature studies, writing stories, and so on that may or may not be related to these semiotic engagements.

Once their masks are dry, we remind students about our study of color and shades of meaning. We demonstrate how colors change when mixed with white or complementary colors. Students squeeze various tempera paints onto a polystyrene plate and experiment to achieve the closest color they can that represents their emotion. They then decide on the exact color(s) and paint their mask. Students often choose to decorate with glitter, feathers, jewelry, and other materials that will enable them to create a precise and imaginative semiotic text. Students now return to their personification poems, make final revisions related to their mask, and print them out. These semiotic texts are placed on the classroom wall for all to see, read,

and discuss. Personal investment in this literacy experience elicits strong texts from each and every student. Wendy's (Figure 7) and Allen's (Figure 8) semiotic texts are representative. The written and the art texts demonstrate clear understanding of literary terms and knowledge of art. To semiotically represent *anguish*, Wendy wrote several poems, including "Sorrow," her favorite, to accompany her mask entitled "Anguish." Allen's use of deep red, curved, up-turned lines expresses *enthusiasm*, which is emphasized with glitter on the cheekbones and under and above the eyes.

Students' literacy experiences within a semiotic perspective provide strong support for and generate future texts. The use of image as a representational mode has its effects on the very nature of students' written language. Sarah, a fourth-grade student, stated that art helps her "imagine in my head. Then I write it down, and move it heavy into dialogue." For Drew, these literacy experiences "light you on fire. I work fast, very fast, when I create." Acting, in particular, "helps me get similes." Like Drew,

Mary's semiotic texts are inspired by drama: "Plays help me be like my father in acting. I understand the pacing of quotes and lines." As these students explain, literacy is necessarily semiotic and involves all sign systems.

As students represent meaning visually, the desire to write descriptive texts is strong. Creating and reading semiotic texts, such as those presented, demand that learners have complex strategies in place and also constitute a new perspective for thinking about literacy.

Performance and reflection

As Greene (1995b) wrote, "Teachers must emphasize the importance of persons becoming reflective enough to think about their own thinking and become conscious of their own consciousness" (p. 65). Students' performance and reflection complete this literacy experience (Figure 9) and enable them to become conscious of what it is that they have learned. Students point to their mask and then read their poem with expression. Students respond with such comments as, "I like how you repeated 'outrageous'" or "Your phrase, 'dark and down; black in a dark, dark world' really made me feel gloomy."

Our purpose with these students is to help them become strong communicators and internalize these literacy experiences so that they become conscious habits of mind (Dewey, 1944). In other words, students develop habits in strategy use and habits in knowledge and practice of sign systems that help them develop strong literacy practices. Once such experiences become habits of mind, students develop new insights on their own writing, creating, and talking about their texts, as well as on the composing process. Kay's curriculum is grounded in students' lives and experiences, talk, collaboration, analysis, and problem-solving skills, all of which help students develop higher level thinking and interest in complex texts. As we mentioned earlier, these literacy engagements are experienced throughout the year. That is, students are always involved in word study; they continually work and think semiotically as they develop their texts, collaborate with one another, and discuss strong writing in literature. These become their practices in literacy, so that they can consciously choose from a

FIGURE 7
Wendy's poem, "Sorrow," and mask, "Anquish"



"Sorrow"

It sweeps through the body
and leaves a person
feeling tired and drained.
Their eyes are left dark and flat,
searching for meaning.
It will not remain long,
but can leave a person
hallowed forever.
It takes no form,
just a breath of air.
And it has no voice,
for it is silent.
It floats freely,
Searching
For the dejected, torn, and
lonely.
For it is sorrow itself.

FIGURE 8
Allen's mask and poem, "Enthusiasm"



"Enthusiasm"

Enthusiasm is just a little kid
Excited about life.
If something has happened
He looks on the bright side.
When he enters you
Lights glimmer and spark.
As he stays longer,
The spark becomes a flame...
A flame that will melt away
hatred,
deceit,
and depression.
No one sees his body,
But all see his glow—
The glow that grows brighter
With every flame he lights.
He won't stop lighting sparks,
Not until the earth glows bright
With Enthusiasm's flames.

repertoire of strategies to help them design and create projects that they wish to develop.

The literacy experiences presented here are conducted over three consecutive 90-minute periods (which can be split according to individual schedules) with a portion of another class devoted to

FIGURE 9
Student reads poem next to wall with masks



performance and reflection. With some advanced preparation (for the papier-mâché and the cardboard box corners), these experiences can be implemented by all teachers. Addressing standards and assessment are always in Kay's mind as she designs literacy engagements. To facilitate and expedite learning, projects such as the one presented address a number of different standards. All are in the context of authentic reading, writing, visualizing, listening, and speaking components of English language arts instruction and learning. Kay explains,

Long before I found my way to literature indicating that comprehension increases as cognition and affect are connected (Sadoski & Paivio, 1994), I realized from observing my students that they could master and express themselves more easily in written form when English language arts instruction was connected to visual and performing arts instruction. As I made these observations, I realized that the visual and performing arts, by their very nature, connect the student to both affect and cognition, and there is increased energy in the learning experience. The experience takes on an emotive quality, and the student easily moves to higher order thinking processes and remembers the con-

tent long after it has been taught. Beyond this *major advantage* of an integrated approach, the present emphasis [in the United States] on accountability and addressing the standards made me even more aware of the efficiency of the approach. For instance, with the lessons we describe in this project, a number of standards are addressed, several of which are assessed [whereas] others are not. The point is that assessment ranging from vocabulary development to comprehension of text to writing in a meaningful way cuts across many standards. This often is not the case when skills are taught in isolation.

A semiotic perspective

I like this class because in other classes we have to do specific stuff. In here, we can do what we can do. (Will, fifth grader)

If education is growth, it must progressively realize present possibilities, and thus make individuals better fitted to cope with later requirements. Growing is not something which is completed in odd moments; it is a continuous leading into the future. (Dewey, 1944, p. 56)

Dewey argued for a critical concept of democracy in education in which every child must be offered opportunities that allow her or him to grow intellectually and socially. Education, for Dewey, was more about acquiring a disposition toward learning and inquiry, rather than acquiring a set of skills “completed in odd moments.” Furthermore, educators must pay attention to various ability levels as they design environments in which students, like Will, “can do what they can do.” We believe that when teachers learn to teach from a semiotic perspective, one that views literacy as semiotic, multimodal, and collaborative, students will learn a variety of complex semiotic strategies, not just those focused on reading written texts. Knowing such strategies will enable them to create texts that focus on the richness of multiple perspectives rather than on a narrow view of the world. Greene (1995b) wrote,

If we regard curriculum as an undertaking, involving continuous interpretation and a conscious search for meanings, we come to see many connections between the grasping of a text or artwork and the gaining of multiple perspectives by means of the disciplines. (p. 98)

As educators who often teach across disciplines, we are convinced that literacy must be viewed as a complex process that necessarily involves thinking across and within multiple sign systems.

When we present the work of these fourth- and fifth-grade students to teachers at professional conferences, they are always surprised at the students’ literacy ability. We explain that when literacy instruction is approached from a semiotic perspective, we necessarily take notice of the work they do in class. We notice that Sarah always visualizes, writes her ideas down, and uses lots of dialogue. Drew and Mary imagine and dramatize to find forceful imagery. Jack wants to “explore it all”—study language, make artwork, and write texts, each of which is informed by the others. As their teachers, we learn to study their interests and their abilities in the various sign systems, and we support these abilities as students learn to communicate semiotically.

A question that often arises at our presentations concerns the depth of knowledge teachers must have about the arts to teach from a semiotic perspective. Neither of us has had formal training in the visual arts. Yet because we know the value of

the arts to literacy development, we make this a part of our professional inquiry. We study books on how to draw, paint in watercolor, and sculpt in various materials. Art techniques that we use do not require the expertise of an art teacher; however, we value such teachers’ perspectives and collaborate with them as we design instruction. We suggest that English language arts teachers work through their fear about doing art, and begin to draw from practices that they already do well. Teachers know how to engage students in discussions about literature, so discussing *Shadow* (Brown, 1982) as extended metaphor and personification is familiar. Text sets, too, are familiar to teachers, and creating a text set that addresses the visual arts (drawing, painting, sculpture) can inspire students to explore and develop semiotic strategies for creating texts. Teachers often use drama as part of oral language development, and so engaging students in acting out words and experiences will be familiar. Art supplies do not have to be expensive. The project we described involves very little money. Teachers often have tempera paints as part of their teaching tools, and cardboard, shredded paper, and the glue mixture are not expensive.

Part of the project of learning to teach from a semiotic experience requires a genuine belief that sign systems are essential to students’ development as readers and writers. Kress (2003) argued that the screen (computer, television, film) is now the dominant site of texts. Many students come to us somewhat literate in the navigation of the Internet, or have stories to tell of films and computer games. The screen increasingly is becoming the site of the visual, of images. This is not to say that writing is not essential to communication, nor does it mean that writing cannot appear on computer texts. But *new literacy* suggests that when written words are combined with images, both must be read with the logic of the other in mind. Students must learn how language is read, and at the same time they must learn how image is read. This entails a rethinking of theories of meaning making. We know now that the resources we offer students (e.g., art materials, drama, written texts) inform the representations that they will create. Knowledge about language is reconsidered in light of knowledge about image. Learners come to us knowing that texts comprise image, moving elements, font style, and so on. As such, a semiotic approach to literacy is a link


between what they know and what they should experience to develop literate practices that are creative and imaginative (Kress). With such an approach, learners necessarily consider how viewers and readers will respond to the semiotic texts that they design and produce. This transaction between the meaning maker and the reader/viewer then becomes more complex, both in the design and creation of the text and the reading of the text.

As a semiotic notion of literacy becomes more widely known, and representation begins to presume the influence of word, image, movement, math, and drama on one another, educators will begin to design curriculum and teach from a semiotic perspective in which these systems are viewed as vital to learning. The semiotic approach that we take and describe in these literacy engagements is but one of many that we hope will emerge in the future.

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