Chapter 24
Composing Texts and Identities in an Alternative High School English Class

Mary Beth Hines
Indiana University, USA

Michael L. Kersulov
Indiana University, USA

Leslie Rowland
Indiana University, USA

Rebecca Rupert
Monroe County Community School Corporation, USA

ABSTRACT
This chapter is drawn from a qualitative case study of one alternative high school English class, tracing students’ engagement and resistance with digital media and school-based literacy practices, exploring how each student’s use of literacy and digital media led to the formation of particular identities in the social sphere of the classroom. In this chapter the authors focus on two students, Callie--loud and socially dominant-- and Nina, quiet, reserved, outside the social circle. The authors trace the students’ respective discursive practices in two composition units-- a multimodal children’s book unit and a Theater of the Oppressed unit. The chapter argues that both young women have strong literacy skills and are strategic in using them, thereby creating particular identities as they produced texts.

INTRODUCTION
Becky, a 9th/10th grade English teacher at an alternative high school in a mid-sized Midwestern town, laid out the ground rules for the final project of the year. The assignment invited each student to reflect upon how power works in the school, culminating in a multimodal photo-essay that would be presented to the class. As Becky distributed a handout with guidelines for the project, the students enthusiastically shouted out their approval, and one student’s voice soared above the others. “Alright! I’m sooo getting Ms. Jackson!” yelled Callie. She was referring to another teacher at the school, whom Callie obviously disliked. Hearing Callie’s call for vengeance, Becky halted the conversation to emphasize that students were to treat all individuals, especially teachers, with
respect, securing permission before photographing or interviewing. She reiterated the importance of representing teachers respectfully, but Callie interrupted her: “Yeah, but what if we block out their faces?” Callie presented her rationale, arguing that a double standard existed for teachers and students regarding cell phone usage at the school. That is, she said, while students were banned from using cell phones during classes, Ms. Jackson bluntly talked on the phone and took phones away from students who left their cell phones out on their desks. Teachers were to make and enforce the rules, and students were to follow them blindly, Callie argued. Given that there were only five teachers at the school, the idea of anonymity was a moot point, and teachers need to be treated respectfully, Becky restated.

This particular moment not only highlighted the kinds of critical multimodal literacy projects that students created in Becky’s class, but it also showed some of the ways that students alternately engaged in and resisted literacy practices and digital media. Callie asked an ostensibly innocent question about the project, thus engaging with the assignment. However, in asking permission to represent teachers anonymously albeit unfavorably, she not only maneuvered to discredit Ms. Jackson, but she also challenged Becky’s notions of what counted as being respectful of teachers. Moreover, the engagement and resistance the students demonstrated served other purposes as well, creating and reinforcing particular identities that students valued. As Callie persisted in the double standard argument, she proved yet again that she could channel her discursive practices into playful subversion that elicited laughter from her peers. She was reminding all that she was the core of the social network of the class, a coveted position that she worked hard to sustain.

These issues of engagement and resistance—with school, with literacy practices, with digital media—are at the heart of an ongoing professional dialogue about how the profession should best meet the needs of nonmainstream students and those from historically under-represented groups—those marked as different because of ethnicity, income, gender, physical and mental abilities, religious affiliation, etc. Alternative schools offer pathways to success for some students, and it is there that the problems with resistance and lack of engagement are magnified.

In this chapter, we feature two students in Becky’s 9th/10th grade English class in an alternative school, the boisterous Callie and her best friend and silent partner, Nina. We trace how the two students crafted both texts and identities with digital media in the writing classroom. The chapter draws from a qualitative case study of Becky’s class and explores the following research question: What identities did students compose as they alternatively resisted and embraced the use of digital media in the writing classroom? In the next section, we situate our work within and against the backdrop of current theory and research in English classrooms, elucidating the assumptions driving the study.

BACKGROUND ON THE STUDY

This study draws from scholarship on new literacy studies, theories of identity as performance, and research related to the achievement gap.

New Literacy Studies

While emphasizing digital media and its impact on classrooms, this study utilizes sociocultural perspectives on literacy practices and identity performances. From a sociocultural perspective, meaning is not made within the mind, a cognitive process, but is made socially, within particular contexts where various social, cultural, historical systems and forces traverse and complicate discursive practices. From this vantage point, meaning is always situated, contingent upon the specific