

# The Trouble Is English: Reframing English Studies in Secondary Schools

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**I**t's Tuesday morning in Sybil Wilson's tenth-grade English classroom. As students enter, Sybil reminds them of where they are in their unit on *Women in Society*. Yesterday, she assigned the young adult novel *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson, and she expects this novel will spark good conversation about issues related to young women's voices in society and experiences in school settings. She hopes that many of the students will empathize with the experiences of its female protagonist and that the book will raise awareness about issues of date rape and other forms of victimization. She also hands back the analysis of magazine advertisements they completed on Friday. As part of the unit, Sybil had asked students to find and critique portrayals of women in popular teen magazines using the lens of feminist theory. Hopefully, through a critical analysis of these images of women, students will learn to see advertisements as unrealistically constructed. Finally, she's looking forward to next week, when the students will read one of her favorite authors, Kate Chopin. She's chosen to conclude the unit with Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," a fine example of American writing. She plans to point out Chopin's powerful use of suspense and the unexpected twist at the end of the tale that underscores the entrapment of women by societal norms of the time. As the bell rings, Sybil takes attendance and looks forward to the lively discussion she hopes will follow as they continue the unit.

In his *RTE* article "The Trouble with English," Alan Luke (2004) gives voice to complicated issues regarding the future of English—a discipline that, since its inception in the late nineteenth century, has negotiated diverse subject matter, purposes, and pedagogies. As Luke notes, "What counts as

English' has become somewhat unclear" (p. 88). Indeed, over the past 20 years, two collective attempts in the United States to answer questions about the nature of English content—the English Coalition Conference in 1987 and the IRA/NCTE Standards project in 1996—struggled to articulate a cohesive disciplinary framework. More recently, Luke's article, Bob Fecho's "*Is This English?*" *Race, Language and Culture in the Classroom* (2004), and edited volumes such as *Teaching English Today: Advocating Change in the Secondary Curriculum* (Barrell, Hammett, Mayher, & Pradl, 2004) explore continuing tensions in how the study of English is understood. As Luke observes, English studies is "utterly troubled by diversity—that of our students, of our own disciplinary and trans-disciplinary trainings, and of the very historical dynamics of English as living cultural and social, political and economic entity" (Luke, 2004, p. 87). After more than a century of debate, it would seem that secondary English still suffers from an identity crisis and remains disconnected from a stable curricular domain—a sense of the culturally relevant tradition in which students and teachers are participating (Applebee, 1996).

This disciplinary breadth may have appeal—and indeed be definitive—for some English educators, as it affords a variety of purposes, topics, and skills. However, we argue that a merely celebratory approach to the diverse manifestations of the discipline may naturalize curricular choices that are never sociopolitically neutral, and that the multiple ways in which texts are framed within contemporary constructions of the discipline warrant close scrutiny. Indeed, examining the sociocultural hierarchies implicit in the ways in which texts are positioned in and out of classrooms may significantly broaden our ability to ask questions about texts and power—the heart of the English education mission "to envision a more democratic and just society" (Alsop, Emig, Pradl, Tremmel, & Yagelski, 2006, p. 281). To ignore these positions risks a significant silence regarding the ways in which texts live in, shape, and are shaped by the world.

Sybil Wilson is a composite representation of an English teacher that typifies much of what most preservice English teachers have seen and experienced in U.S. classrooms. Our aim is to articulate textual frameworks often competing and unnamed in English curriculum (and evident in Sybil's classroom) and to argue for a particular reframing of the curricular domain of English studies that will broaden the analysis of texts and their contexts in relationship to race, class, and gender, especially in secondary schools. According to Applebee, curricular domains "define the saliency of different experiences to the overall conversation" (1996, p. 58); they frame the purposes and content of academic disciplines, giving them shape and

distinction, and can afford texts or topics degrees of relevance. Drawing on work in curriculum theory, cultural studies, and media education (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984; Buckingham, 2003; Ellsworth, 1997), we attempt to illustrate “the trouble with English” (Luke, 2004) by suggesting three text modality frameworks at work in Sybil’s classroom and the concomitant domain claims they make in terms of how texts and students are positioned as they study English. We conclude by suggesting a fourth modality framework, one that attends to concerns of curricular consistency and coherence while also addressing the often missing or erratically addressed dimensions of English studies: the social, political, and economic dimensions of text production, representation, and reception.

### **What Seems to Be the Trouble?**

Scholars of the field have offered various accounts and historiographies of the shifting claims for what and why English “is” (Applebee, 1974; Gere, Fairbanks, Howes, Roop, & Schaafsma, 1992; Miller, 1991; Pirie, 1997; Scholes, 1998; Willinsky, 1991). While interpretations of the causes and consequences of the current state of English studies differ—particularly in terms of literacy and composition (see, e.g., Miller, 1991; Willinsky, 1991)—most researchers concur that the study of literature, or of canonical print-based texts, holds preeminence in English classrooms, especially in high school and college. Yet despite this seemingly bounded focus, English is utterly troubled by diversity, by texts and media taken up for study, and by the very purposes for the enterprise itself that circulate and claim what English “is” within classrooms (Luke, 2004). On the surface, the study of literature often seems troubled primarily by diverse purposes, media, and representations, emerging from the academic genealogy and traditions of the discipline as well as from contemporary, local, or departmental influences. However, such tensions and discrepant domains both emerge from and engender a curricular “trouble” that remains unnamed: the inconsistent, unexamined, and sociopolitical ways text modality is assumed and framed in English classrooms.

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### **Diverse Purposes**

The purposes for studying literature, rooted in early access issues based on class as well as gender, continue to seemingly hold sway even in most twenty-

first-century classrooms. While most often not explicitly concerned with “civilizing the masses” (Willinsky, 1991), the study of English—particularly literature—still usually clusters around a fairly static, not to mention overwhelming, set of historical purposes: to improve morality and instill ethical and cultural history; to prepare good workers; to create an elite through exposing students to a classical tradition or a tradition of literary criticism; to produce good citizens; to foster personal growth; to offset inequity; and to encourage enjoyment and appreciation (Applebee, 1974; Gere et al., 1992). More recently, Greene (1995) has argued for an aesthetic view of literature, where students have “increasingly informed and ardent encounters with artworks” leading toward “the stimulation of imagination and perception, a sensitivity to various modes of seeing and sense making, and a grounding in the situations of lived life” (pp. 137–138). Suffering under an abundance of competing mandates, English studies in the high school setting often ends up as a “grab bag” of approaches, topics, texts, and experiences; the results contribute, at best, to curricular variety and flexibility, but not with sociopolitical neutrality, and sometimes at the price of curricular coherence (Applebee, Burroughs, & Stevens, 2000). Given this variety of purposes, what subject or curricular content do English teachers teach? Skills and content driven by state tests? Character development? Literary theory and criticism? Self-knowledge? Class-based literacies providing upward mobility? Charged with educating students in terms of academic literacy, moral development, cultural tolerance, media savvy, literature appreciation, standards achievement, and civic responsibility, most English teachers (ourselves included) frequently end up feeling like the so-called jacks-of-all-trades—and masters of none.

### Diverse Media

In addition to competing purposes, the study of English seems troubled by competing text media. Nonprint and electronically mediated texts can mark somewhat problematic terrain for English teachers in the United States and have not easily been incorporated in secondary curriculum, despite their cultural prevalence. After all, as Luke suggests, “At the heart of modern school curriculum . . . is the teaching of the authority of print culture” (Luke, 1993, p. xiii). Of course, not all English curriculum has been print focused; in the 1930s, English teachers were already thinking about their curricular relationship to the moving image, and today secondary English curriculum sometimes does include the study of film (although rarely television or radio) or filmed versions of novels or plays (see, e.g., Costanzo, 2004; Golden, 2001); indeed, a small but growing number of (well-financed) schools house

small production studios. In addition, many English education scholars in the United States are addressing and engaging a wider range of media through discourses on literacy (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Beach, 2007; Hobbs, 2007; Morrell, 2004a, 2004b) and proposing new ways to incorporate a variety of media in English classrooms. In fact, the themes for both the NCTE and NCTEAR 2007 Conventions included a range of literacies (and the texts associated with them).

Sefton-Green (2006) observes that research on new media has brought a “renewed focus on young people as ‘writers’ or producers” (p. 293). Many out-of-school programs have demonstrated the ways in which student engagement with and production of a variety of texts have found energy and purpose. Tremmel (2006) lists several places where young people are working with a range of media production, often in community or after-school settings, or in school settings that collapse “the separation between school and community” (p. 35)—a powerful element in culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1997). Among them, Tremmel overviews “a university-community partnership called Digital Underground Storytelling for Youth (DUSTY)” (Hull & James, 2007, p. 255), a youth digital media production in West Oakland, California, that provides spaces in which students, with mentoring from university students and faculty, usually represent their own lives and communities. Many scholars argue that engaging students in a range of media production is an important part of student agency and critical work (Goodman, 2003; Hull & James, 2007; Buckingham, 2003), as production can also help students understand the language and choices of a variety of media representation.

Nevertheless, such media work still remains at the fringe, rather than the center, of secondary English curriculum as it is enacted in the United States. Various new standards argue for the incorporation of film studies in English teacher preparation programs, the inclusion of “viewing” as part of the English language arts, and the important role of multimodal and multimedia texts in student learning (see, e.g., IRA/NCTE, 1996; NCTE, 2003a; NCTE, 2003b). And despite evidence of engaging and powerful youth media production in both school and nonschool contexts (Goodman, 2003; Hull & James, 2007; Morrell, 2004a, 2004b; Tremmel, 2006), most English classrooms remain resolutely, even protectively, focused on print-based texts.

## Diverse Representations

Another trouble with English might be summarized, simplistically, as “the canon wars” (see, e.g., Gates, 1992; Guillory, 1995). Marked by Matthew Arnold’s notion that English studies must be culturally focused around “the

best that has been thought and said in the world” and dating at least to the 1892 report of the National Committee of Ten that established uniform lists of preparatory readings for colleges and universities, the field of English in U.S. classrooms has struggled over which texts should be read and by whom for most of its existence. Despite an increasing array of print-based literary texts from which to choose, the range of literature taught in American secondary schools has changed little over the last century, persisting as “a curriculum dominated by familiar selections drawn primarily from a white, male, Anglo Saxon tradition,” where the most frequent author in the curriculum is William Shakespeare (Applebee, 1993, p. 82). And, while U.S. American classrooms become increasingly diverse (Melnick & Zeichner, 1998), the texts encountered and the representations they afford have most often remained surprisingly narrow and limited.

### **Framing English Studies: Modalities and Metaphors**

In this nexus of competing curricular purposes, media, and representations, the salient features of English texts often shift between construction and content. “English is both subject and object . . . instructional medium and message” (Luke, 2004, p. 91). Studying texts . . . can mean anything from attending to rhetorical strategies, to internalizing moral lessons, to learning about history, and/or to “experiencing” another culture, each of these suggesting a slightly different disciplinary domain. However, each of these processes also suggests a different relationship between the text and what it represents—from reliable conduit, to unreliable distortion, to transparent experience. According to Hodge and Kress, modality “refers to the status, authority and reliability of a message, to its ontological status, or to its value as truth or fact” (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p. 124). The naturalized, shifting ways text modalities are constructed in English classrooms not only confuse the study of texts but are themselves a political move, marking textual distinctions embedded in networks of social, political, and economic power (Bourdieu, 1984). Luke, citing Bourdieu, argues, “We risk becoming a profession involved in the systematic production and distribution of particular brands of capital, without an ongoing critical appraisal of the force and consequences of our actions” (2004, p. 87). We argue that competing curricular purposes, media, and representations are in dialogic relationship with another curricular “trouble” that warrants such close critical appraisal—the unexamined, shifting text modality frameworks that reinscribe particular capital on texts, audiences, and literacies.

Throughout the remainder of this article, our aim will be to frame—

and then reframe—English studies. To do this, we suggest three modality frameworks, through the use of three metaphors, as one way of understanding and exploring the variety of disciplinary domains that currently circulate in classrooms and that give English texts relevance. What kinds of modality claims are made about the representations taken as points of study in English classrooms? What kinds of truths (or distortions) are they presumed to tell? How do assumptions about text modality position readers—what skills must they have and apply in order to read, experience, or “see through” the text?

To understand these shifting modalities, we borrow from Ellsworth’s work on curriculum and mode of address. In *Teaching Positions: Difference, Pedagogy, and the Power of Address*, Ellsworth applies her background in film studies, in particular the concept of a film’s mode of address—“who does this film think you are?” (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 22)—to school curriculum, asking, How does curriculum address students? Who does the curriculum think the student is? We would extend her questions even further, asking, What does the curriculum think the text is? In what ways are texts presumed to represent their subjects, and for what purposes? What kind of work are texts expected to do in schools, particularly in English classrooms? In short, how are texts positioned?

Each of our three metaphors assumes a different kind of text modality and corresponding role for students. In the first metaphor, texts are sacred; they have endured because they convey universal human truths, and while rhetorical, they are supposedly seen to accurately correspond to a “reality” that transcends their historical location. Students, then, are potential scholars, encouraged to know and appreciate these texts. In the second metaphor, texts are predators, and students are thus potential prey; students must arm themselves against the deceptive rhetorical and ideological strategies of these texts and their misrepresentations, and are discouraged from finding pleasure in them. In the third metaphor, texts are transparent windows to other times and cultures, and students are encouraged to be tourists, or in the case of literature about oppression or social injustice (such as the Holocaust or slavery), witnesses. All of these frameworks exist and circulate in English classrooms simultaneously.

In response, we suggest a reframing of English by proposing a fourth metaphor, in which the diversity of English curriculum—and the complicated ways texts are understood, circulate, and work in the world—become its subject: texts as culture, located in political, economic, and social networks of production and reception. Students, in response, become ethnographers. Through this metaphor, the “trouble” with English becomes the

domain of English—the trouble is English—as English explores the diverse social, economic, and political landscapes of textual production, representation, and reception.

### **Text as Sacred: Students as Scholars**

Most historical accounts of literacy and schooling in North America acknowledge the moral and religious roots of education (see, e.g., deCastell & Luke, 1994). “English” emerged from various practices of reading, grammar, oratory, rhetoric, and literature in the late nineteenth century (Applebee, 1974), and it is from these roots that the concept of the sacred text emerges. Applebee observes the early influence of both religious and nationalist agendas in the teaching of literature, calling this literature’s ethical or cultural heritage. Religious instruction and the teaching of reading were firmly entwined; indeed, literature education emerged as part of a colonialist project for moral or “civilizing” instruction (Applebee, 1974; Willinsky, 2004). Secular texts appeared in reading instruction as nineteenth-century Romanticism reconfigured the role of both the artist and of art itself. Applebee notes, “The artist would have a different kind of knowledge—to the Romantics usually a ‘higher’ kind—which was no less essential than the rationalism to which it was opposed,” and thus from this perspective, “all art is in essence moral” (1974, pp. 22, 23). The assumed moral didacticism or elevated discourse of “great” literature, and the privileged insight or perspective of the individual artist into human experience, remains a frequent approach to contemporary classroom texts and an important part of the role of texts in English classroom discourse.

The sacred text, then, is assumed not only to provide an accurate representation of its subject, but a profound one; the subject domain is elevated and universal—a truth that transcends historical or cultural context. The rhetorical strategies of the text are positioned as skillful and integral methods for conveying these truths, and teachers are to encourage a “love of literature” and of reading and/or books (or sometimes other texts, such as film) as ways of providing students with access to profound lessons and insights into human experience (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994). In order to engage with these texts successfully, students are thus asked to be scholars: to closely attend to rhetorical strategies and themes, and to the voice of a single author whose work is both of its time and timeless.

In Sybil Wilson’s classroom, our metaphorical teacher takes up “The Story of an Hour” as a classic—one that transcends historical and cultural context to accurately and profoundly represent the experiences of women



or, more generally, experiences of dependence, entrapment, and power. Sybil's pleasures and engagement with this text—its status as “one of her favorites”—are held up as a model for students, whom she hopes will also come to love this author, short stories, or reading in general. Likewise, the rhetorical features of Chopin's text are admired and elevated; positioned as “scholars,” students can better attend to Chopin's style and strategies as powerful vehicles for her themes while also negotiating the other modality frameworks and positions circulating in Sybil's classroom.

### Text as Predator: Students as Prey

Despite the cultural and historic significance of texts mediated by film, television, radio, and the Internet, and the unique, often central role these texts play in the pleasures and identities of adolescents—let alone in larger democratic, economic, and social practices (McChesney, 1999)—most secondary English literature curriculum remains limited to texts mediated by paper: novels and textbook anthologies (Applebee, 1993). When they do appear, electronically mediated texts—as well as many noncanonical print-based texts, such as young adult literature, graphic novels, manga, and zines—are often (although not always) taken up under the rubric of the “popular.” In secondary English curriculum, concepts of the “popular” often serve as an “other” that haunts criteria for selected texts, curriculum, and concepts of culture—indeed, an “other” that can represent the tastes and identities of various communities and students whose literacies and pleasures don't usually find legitimacy and representation in school settings (Bourdieu, 1984). When included in English classrooms, “popular culture” texts are often positioned either in opposition to literature or as motivational/accessible links to traditional English curriculum. For example, in their ethnographic work on popular culture and English curriculum in the United Kingdom, Buckingham and Sefton-Green observe that there are different purposes and readings encouraged by teachers who include both “literature” and “popular” texts. According to the authors, teaching literature is often perceived as “developing students' receptiveness to something that is seen as fundamentally good”; media teaching, however, is about “encouraging them to resist or ‘see through’ something that is fundamentally bad” (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994, p. 132). In tracing the history of media education in the United Kingdom, British scholar Len Masterman calls this the “representational” approach to media: students study texts to uncover and resist ideologies associated with media representations and narratives (Masterman, 1995).

The predatory text, then, is assumed to provide a false and distorted representation of its subject and to use rhetorical strategies to manipulate and deceive; the student is “a potential victim of language who must learn to resist through rational analysis” (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994, p. 135). Indeed, in this model, pleasure—rather than something to be cultivated or investigated—may instead be a symptom of deception (Buckingham, 1995). In order to engage with these texts successfully, students are thus asked to resist their subject position as prey and understand the rhetorical strategies of the text as deceptive and manipulative, and to locate the text in capitalist processes—the result of corporate, rather than individual, production, intentions, and ideologies (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994).

Sybil uses popular media, in the form of magazines and advertisements, to encourage students to “see through” media representations of women and critique their unrealistic expectations. The mass-produced origins and economic purposes of these texts are made more salient; rhetorical strategies are framed as deceptive, and Sybil asks students to use feminist theory in their ad analysis in order to uncover ideological agendas. Student pleasures in the images, the magazines, or the products are considered irrelevant to the study of these texts and may even be discouraged.

### **Text as Window: Students as Tourists or Witnesses**

In their efforts to respond to diverse students in classrooms, many educators have developed “culturally relevant” pedagogies (see, e.g., Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1997; Wortham & Contreras, 2002) designed to reflect the lives and experiences of young people that are typically left out of school curricula. Often these efforts revolve around literature, as educators work to broaden the cultural depictions available in schools and to expose young people to positive portrayals of many different groups in terms of race, language, gender, and ethnicity (see, e.g., Bishop, 1992; Johnson, 2000; Johnson-Feelings, 1994). Multicultural texts are often used in culturally diverse settings in order to build community and break down stereotypes across cultural groups, and to build self-esteem, involvement, and performance within groups (Spears-Bunton, 1992); in addition, as many school systems continue de facto segregation (Kozol, 2005), educators look to literature to provide exposure to lives, worlds, and cultures beyond the daily experiences of students increasingly separated by race, ethnicity, and especially class. Whether addressing cultural outsiders or affirming cultural insiders, texts positioned as windows are naturalized; their construction—as an object of

study—loses saliency. The subject of the text not only gains prominence but also appears unmediated; the text is a direct conduit to an experience, culture, or history, and the author is either invisible or considered reliable and neutral. In order to engage with these texts successfully, students are thus asked to be tourists, or in the case of literature on social injustice, witnesses: as tourists, they use the text as a vicarious experience of travel, exploring and learning about other locations, times, and cultures; as witnesses, they use the text as a vicarious experience of oppression or violence, potentially gaining empathy with victims and an ability to testify to the consequences of social injustice.

Sybil's choice of the novel *Speak* can be premised on the metaphor of text as window. The story of Melinda—her traumatic experience with date rape, the pressures she faces in high school, and her family circumstances—is a direct opportunity for students to meet and empathize with a peer who has experienced a particular kind of social injustice and victimization. Sybil does not emphasize the pleasures of such a text, nor hold up its rhetorical devices for study and emulation, as drawing attention to the constructed nature of the text diminishes the sense of text as access to experience.

## **Reframing English Studies in Secondary Schools**

How would a student in Sybil's class answer the question, "What is English?" Are "English" texts constructions to be analyzed or experiences to reflect on, shifting the domain from construction to content? Diverse purposes, media, and representations often flow in and out of modality frameworks; for example, a film might be sacred (to be studied), predatory (to be critiqued and resisted), or a window (a transparent conduit) and might be included to help students reflect on an important issue or to help them develop certain literacies or vocabulary valued in academic discourse. Multiple and shifting frameworks can be occupied by any text—a poem, an autobiography, or a blog. Significant patterns can be recognized regarding texts and frameworks (Whose texts are sacred? Whose texts are predatory?). Yet, modality frameworks are not bound by genre or medium, and not only the framework but also the purposeful and naturalized shifting bears particular attention. This fluidity may leave teachers and students with potentially incoherent curriculum; equally as problematic, it also may leave the criteria and context for these changing modality frameworks unexamined.

Greene advocates that students "be moved to ponder the relationship between what is within human consciousness and what human beings

project into the cosmos beyond" (1978, p. 66), but such questions about texts and meanings remain located in the individual rather than the sociopolitical. As Luke observes,

[W]hat is needed is a renewed sense of the purposes and consequences, powers, and practices of English, of the intellectual, ideological, and moral force of all forms of representation and, equally, a strong sense of "English" as language, as mode of information, as a multifaceted and ambivalent force within and across the practices and technologies of economic and cultural globalization. (Luke, 2004, p. 94)

A final metaphor locates texts and these shifting textual frameworks within the larger context of the social, political, and economic dimensions of text production, representation, and reception: the metaphor of text as culture.

### **Text as Culture: Students as Ethnographers**

The relationship between English curriculum and concepts of "culture" has a long and diverse history—from literature's position as elite (and "civilizing") culture, to the emergence of multicultural curriculum and texts, to concerns about cultural literacy, and most recently to the growing influence of cultural studies in secondary English curriculum (Appleman, 2000; Carey-Webb, 2001; Pirie, 1997; Soter, 1999). Culture can be a civilizing agent, a representation (or experience) of a presumed other, a conduit of capital and belonging, and a contested site of meanings and identities. Our model draws from this last approach, in which the cultural text can include an array of signifying practices and is understood in relationship to social and economic economies of production and reception. As Morgan notes,

In practice this means exploring culture as individual texts, local signs and symbols, everyday practices, and felt experiences on the one hand, and simultaneously as institutionally grounded representations, shared 'structures of feeling,' systemic regimes of discourse, and historically sedimented practices on the other. (Morgan, 2004, p. 36)

Such questions can potentially broaden the scope of what English "is" and make explicit how such textual distinctions are embedded in networks of social, political, and economic power (Bourdieu, 1984).

Thus, text as culture can provide a view of text production that includes social, economic, and political contexts, and it gives similar attention to audience engagement so that student questions can address relationships between texts and the communities or demographics that find pleasures, uses, and meanings. Teachers, in turn, can facilitate study of how

texts and their meanings are produced and circulate. As education scholar and practitioner researcher Bob Fecho notes of his own reframing of the teaching of English as “critical inquiry,” “I no longer had to see myself as an expert on a range of cultures. Instead, I needed to be an expert on how to inquire into culture” (2004, p. 145).

In addition, not only does this metaphor allow for a fuller consideration of the ways in which texts are formed, circulate, and find meanings, but its circularity allows for a disruption of what might initially appear to be the stability and isolation of each of the three elements: production, text, and audience. For example, if the producers of a film change elements based on focus-group responses, can the focus group/audience also be considered a producer of the text? Similarly, if producers of a text successfully target a particular demographic, could they have been said to produce not only the text but also the audience?

Finally, text as culture may allow a meta-analysis of school curriculum and can incorporate study of modality frameworks themselves; students and teachers not only explore the ways in which texts live in the world but also the ways in which texts are positioned in school. In the United States, the growing conversation around media literacy draws attention to the variety of literacy practices in which students engage, validates a range of student proficiencies, and creates a bridge to academic practices. However, much of this scholarship still underscores a need for critical work with particular texts, without attention to what it means to selectively frame some texts as requiring a particular critical approach. The framing of texts in classroom practices can then become a significant part of understanding curricular change, and the new meanings, purposes, and domains generated (or not) by the addition of texts.

This is not to say that text as culture is an “un-troubled” metaphor; indeed, while this frame can serve to clarify the curricular domain of English, it may also muddle and disrupt many taken-for-granted understandings in the field. Framing English studies relative to issues of production, text, and audience blurs the long-standing binaries that often go unquestioned in English: literature vs. composition; audience vs. author; high vs. low; and good vs. bad. In addition, content then becomes the conduit of curricular coherence; other scholars, such as Ladson-Billings (1995), theorize pedagogy much more prominently in understandings of coherent instruction. Relatedly, such a metaphor, while potentially engaging students in exploring the sociopolitical positioning of texts and literacies, cannot escape its own sociopolitical location; inscribed as an academic subject, a culture metaphor is not immune from the potentially disenfranchising language

and the practice of academic experience (Finn, 1999). As Ladson-Billings reminds us, we must continue to ask “what objectives are served by a particular vision of coherence” (1995, p. 158).

In sum, a text positioned as culture is a constructed representation born from and existing through dialogic processes between producers and audiences. The relationship of the text to what it represents (its reality status) is contextually determined and must be understood in relationship to networks of economic, political, and social practices. Thus, the framing of texts in classrooms—as sacred, as predator, as window, as culture—is not neutral or self-evident and is itself born from assumptions emerging from these networks regarding the salencies of text traditions, purposes, and audiences. Students may explore how different texts are positioned both in and out of the classroom; modality frameworks themselves may become a subject of study. In order to engage with these texts more successfully, students are thus asked to be ethnographers both in and out of the classroom: to study the lived way texts are produced and provide meanings, pleasures, status, stigma, and identities to individuals and groups (Beach, 2007; Egan-Robertson & Bloome, 1998; Morgan, 2004; Morrell, 2004a).

### **Reframing English Studies: Extending Current Research on Practice**

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and to consider how such positions—never neutral—emerge from sociocultural networks of power. Whose texts are sacred? In what contexts? Under what circumstances do we consider rhetorical strategies as predatory? As revelatory? Thus, not only are texts cultural, but so are their curricular frameworks. As such, we have chosen to focus our lens on a composite of teaching, in the form of Sybil Wilson. While Sybil and her teaching are clearly a construction, they represent the actual practices we have witnessed in

the classrooms of teachers, both experienced and novice. And, they represent some of the teaching that we have done ourselves. Moreover, we believe our conceptual argument also works to support, challenge, and extend current research on practice in English education.

“Text as culture” has broad implications for English classrooms—im-

plications that need much further exploration, and continued development through practice in classrooms. Certainly, literacy scholars have argued that texts can be read from multiple, contrastive stances (Yenika-Agbaw, 1997) or through a variety of critical, theoretical lenses (Appleman, 2000; Soter, 1999). For example, Yenika-Agbaw (1997) illustrates the stances that a reader might take toward the book *Christmas in the Big House/Christmas in the Quarters*, ranging from pleasurable, to multicultural, to post-colonial. Likewise, Appleman provides many clear, classroom-based examples of applying critical literary theories in a high school English classroom and argues passionately for the value of multiple perspectives. In each case, however, texts and perspectives seem to be brought together selectively, and the focus then remains persistently on texts mediated by paper and primarily canonical texts.

Currently, the closest model for a new kind of textual positioning in secondary education can be found in media literacy and media education curriculum (see, e.g., Buckingham, 2005), which embeds texts in fluid and dialogic relationships with production and audience. While these elements are already familiar in fields such as communication, folklore, and cultural studies, and in some forms of secondary writing pedagogy, secondary English literature studies have not formally included these relationships in the study of texts—traditional literature or texts mediated by screen or oral communication. Yet a cultural text is not completely defined by its mediation, nor does this mean a rejection of current curricular texts, which for many teachers and communities would be difficult and perhaps unwelcome. Instead a “text as culture” framework can also mean a repositioning of what is already taught, or as Morgan suggests, an opportunity to “use existing curricula for this wider analysis” (Morgan, 2004, p. 48). As noted by Buckingham and Sefton-Green,

Media education often includes (or at least implicates) production practices, strategies, and economies; secondary English often ignores the applicability of such questions for novels, textbooks and anthologies, or evidence that book publishing is increasingly becoming a multinational, monopolistic enterprise, and one which is intimately connected with other media industries. In neglecting these factors, English implicitly sanctions the view of publishing as a genteel cultural enterprise, and as a result adopts an idealized, asocial view of cultural production. (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994, p. 135–134)

Thus, emerging work in media literacy and media education seems to provide particularly promising models for “text as culture,” as it takes up a wide range of texts and a wide range of questions regarding text production,

representation, and reception. For example, the Center for Media Literacy recommends “five key questions” based on authorship, format, audience, content, and purpose that students might ask themselves about all texts: “Who created this message? What creative techniques are used to attract my attention? How might different people understand this message differently than me? What values, lifestyles, and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message? Why is this message being sent?” (Share, Jolls, & Thoman, 2005, p. 7). Buckingham’s *Media Education: Literacy, Learning, and Contemporary Culture* (2005) organizes text study around production, language, representation, and audience and argues for a variety of questions across English texts. For example, a production question might consider (among other things) questions of media regulation as students ask, “Who controls the production and distribution of media? Are there laws about this, and how effective are they?” (Buckingham, 2005, p. 54). Studying media languages might raise questions about, for instance, text genres: “How do these conventions and codes operate in different types of media texts—such as news or horror?” (p. 56). Media representations might raise questions about bias and objectivity, as students ask, “Do media texts support particular views about the world? Do they put across moral or political values?” (p. 58). And studying audiences might, among other things, include questions about audience social differences; students might ask, “What is the role of gender, social class, age and ethnic background in audience behavior?” (p. 60). Such approaches, which in both the media literacy and media education examples include the exploration of text production, use, and circulation, would position students as both researchers and ethnographers as they work to deepen their understandings by “making the familiar strange” (Buckingham, 2005, p. 71). While articulating a comprehensive curriculum model is beyond the scope of this paper, these models in media literacy and media education seem to provide examples of text-inclusive approaches that explore the sociopolitical ways in which texts are produced, circulate, and find meaning(s).

Informed by this model, Sybil’s curriculum would probably undergo a fundamental reorientation, as she and her students would not only locate texts in flows of production and reception but also consider the sociocultural contexts in which we situate texts and readers. Rather than positioning ads as “bad,” Chopin as “good,” and *Speak* as “real,” all texts might be taken up through shared questions around production, representation, and audience—questions drawn, perhaps, from the examples given above. Using these questions, students would be positioned to inquire into texts in ways



that acknowledge what they already may know and do with some text—for example, their familiarity and interest in teen magazines—but in ways that push this inquiry more deeply by framing new questions around these familiar texts and then extending these questions across and into different texts. Importantly, the construction and role of text hierarchies and modality frameworks would itself become a point of study, as students attend to the ways and contexts in which the texts in their lives (TV shows, video games, novels, textbooks, etc.) may evoke particular modality framings, by whom, and in what circumstances. Finally, Sybil, in her role as teacher, would potentially be repositioned. While still expert in many aspects of English “content,” Sybil might recognize the skills and knowledge that students already bring to her classroom, and her new role, like Fecho’s (2004), could be broadened to tap into her expertise as inquirer.

To reframe English studies in this way will, of course, have implications for the preparation and education of teachers. The “methods” of teaching English may clearly need to shift and broaden to include a fuller range of production methods (film studies and TV production along with writing and composition) and text media (TV, radio, film, and other nonprint media along with literature anthologies, textbooks, and other print-based text). More importantly, however, such a shift may represent new ways of thinking about the purposes, practices, and substance of secondary English. In a recent article, Tremmel (2006) argues that education reform requires attention to the fragmenting Cartesian-Newtonian paradigms within which we are habituated to think about education, and a move toward new models informed by dialogue, integration, and broader contexts of learning and literacies. A culture model increases the need for teachers and teacher educators to understand texts and research/interpretation in situated, dialogic ways. English methods will thus need to better attend to text framing within English curriculum and explore the implications of rendering invisible (and thus neutral) the constructed nature of some texts, while framing the constructed nature of other texts as not only salient, but dangerous. We argue that attention to text as culture, including the modality frameworks that position texts, illuminates significant, unnamed inconsistencies and may allow for broader sociocultural inquiry in secondary English classrooms. Subsequently, rather than knowing “everything” about the content of particular texts and communicating this to students, the charge for teachers will be to explore the sociopolitical contexts of text production, representation, and consumption, and to offer students new ways to question, understand, and study the variety of texts in their lives.

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## Call for Nominations for Exemplar Award

The CCCC Executive Committee announces a call for nominations for its Exemplar Award. This award will be presented, as occasion demands, to a person whose years of service as an exemplar for our organization represents the highest ideals of scholarship, teaching, and service to the entire profession. The Exemplar Award seeks to recognize individuals whose record is national and international in scope, and who set the best examples for the CCCC membership. Nominations should include a letter of nomination, four letters of support, and a full curriculum vita. The nominating material should be sent to the CCCC Exemplar Award Committee, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096; or [cccc@ncte.org](mailto:cccc@ncte.org). Nominations must be received by **November 1, 2008**.

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