

**SEEING THEMSELVES  
AS CAPABLE AND  
ENGAGED READERS**

*Adolescents  
and Re/Mediated  
Instruction*

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## INTRODUCTION

It's not often that a newspaper reporter telephones me, but when such occurs, I typically brace myself for a barrage of questions that need to be answered in as short a time as possible, typically 10 minutes or less. Yesterday was the exception, however. The reporter announced that he was calling from *USA Today* and that he wanted to have an extended discussion with me on the topic of aliteracy and its possible connection to a story he would be writing on the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress in reading results that were to be announced shortly. *Aliteracy*—the capacity to read but electing not to do so—is one of the most vexing problems facing secondary educators today.

Adolescents who, for whatever reason, are not motivated to engage with school-related reading can be said to be aliterate in that domain. These are the students for whom content-area reading seems irrelevant—not worth their time or effort. They are the same students who kept me awake at night as a classroom teacher in New York and Texas, worrying that I had not properly motivated them to want to read and learn from the state-adopted history text provided by the school. Although I looked for ways to turn things around for them, I had little understanding then of concepts such as self-efficacy, student engagement, and re/mediated instruction—concepts that are central to this paper and its focus on finding ways to engage youth in school-related literacy tasks that capture not only their attention but also their belief in their capability to perform such tasks successfully. If this paper accomplishes its purpose, readers will understand the difference between remedial and re/mediated instruction, as well as the implications of this difference for assisting all adolescents—particularly those who are alliterate—to see themselves as capable and engaged readers.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF EXPLORING SELF-EFFICACY AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Based on a review of the research on effective literacy instruction for adolescent learners that I wrote as part of a paper titled *Effective Literacy Instruction for Adolescents* (Alvermann, 2001) commissioned by the National Reading Conference, it is evident that students with high *self-efficacy*—the confidence that they have the capacity to produce a desired effect—are more likely to engage in school-related reading than students with low self-efficacy. Perceptions of self-efficacy are central to most theories of motivation, and the research bears out the hypothesized connections. For example, providing adolescents who are experiencing reading difficulties with clear goals for a comprehension task and then giving feedback on the progress they are making can lead to increased self-efficacy and greater use of comprehension strategies (Schunk & Rice, 1993). Similarly, creating technology environments that provide feedback and heighten students' motivation to become independent readers and writers can increase their sense of competency (Kamil, Intrator, & Kim, 2000). The research is less clear, however, on the shifts that occur in students' engagement with reading over time. Although decreases in intrinsic reading motivation have been noted as students move from elementary school to the upper grades, explanations vary as to the cause, with a number of researchers attributing the decline to differences in instructional practices (Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998; Oldfather & McLaughlin, 1993).

The role of self-efficacy and engagement in student learning takes on additional importance when one considers aliterate youth who can read but for any number of reasons choose not to do so. These are the students who defy our best attempts to interest them in subject-matter reading. They are the ones who fall further and further behind each year because they have missed out previously on so much of the content that is needed as background knowledge for reading in the subject areas. What to do?

I want to argue that as educators we must resist the temptation to rely on an outdated notion that we can metaphorically "fix" learners. Instead, I believe, along with Luke and Elkins (2000), that we should be in the business of "fixing" or "re/mediating" the instructional conditions in which they learn. Admittedly, this change in focus calls for moving beyond what traditionally has been an endless search for some method (or magic bullet, if you will) that promises to "fix" or "remediate" secondary school students' so-called deficits in reading or motivation to read. This older form of remediation is not to be confused with the current term *re/mediation*. *Re/mediation*, in the sense that Luke and Elkins (2000) used the term, involves refashioning curricular and instructional conditions so that they incorporate multiple forms of media (e.g., trade books, textbooks, magazines, newspapers, visual images, videos, CD-ROMs, music lyrics, and the Internet). Adolescents possess a rich background of experiences in working with texts that go beyond traditional print and engage them as capable readers, as O'Brien (2001) discovered in his work with so-called "at-risk" learners enrolled in a high school media lab and discussed in the article "'At-Risk' Adolescents: Redefining Competence Through the Multiliteracies of Intermediality, Visual Arts, and Representation."

Coming to grips with the many facets of young people's lives that may influence their willingness to engage with a re/mediated curriculum is, of course, beyond the scope of this paper. What is within reach, however, is a look at text-related activities that adolescents say engage them as

learners and make them feel competent as readers. Students' self-perceptions of how capable they are as readers—in other words, their sense of self-efficacy—generally affect how motivated they are to engage academically with a variety of texts (e.g., a biology textbook, a mathematical equation, a CD-ROM version of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, a poem, a novel, a newspaper clipping, music lyrics on the Internet, or a Web-inspired virtual tour of the Modern Museum of Art).

If academic literacy instruction is to be effective, it must address issues of self-efficacy and engagement (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; for related information, refer to the article "Contexts for Engagement and Motivation in Reading" [Guthrie, 2001]), and that's where this paper begins. Following a brief introduction to the research on self-efficacy and engagement, I describe a group of students who could benefit from re/mediated instruction. Next, I provide examples of re/mediated instruction, the research that supports it, and adolescents' views on what they find engaging about the kinds of texts that make them feel capable as readers. These examples are drawn from the literature and from data I have gathered during the past several years as principal investigator for three funded research projects involving adolescents and their engagement with multiple kinds of print and nonprint texts. I conclude with a set of educator guidelines that have their bases in this research.

## RESEARCH ON SELF-EFFICACY AND ENGAGEMENT

The potency of one's beliefs about the self is phenomenal. In adolescence, as in earlier and later life, it is the belief in the self (or lack thereof) that makes a difference in how competent a person feels. Although the terms *self-concept* and *self-efficacy* are sometimes used interchangeably in the research literature, they actually refer to different constructs. For example, an adolescent may have a good self-concept of herself as a reader, but her answer "Not very" to the question "How confident are you that you can comprehend a primary source on the Boston Tea Party?" would indicate low self-efficacy for that particular reading task. A statement about self-concept is domain specific, whereas one about self-efficacy is task specific (Pajares, 1996). Moreover, instructional conditions that are known to increase students' capacities to feel competent in dealing with difficult reading tasks have been linked to their willingness to work harder to achieve success on those tasks (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997).

In an extensive review of how instruction influences students' reading engagement and academic performance, Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) concluded that various instructional practices, while important, do not directly impact student outcomes (e.g., time spent reading independently, achievement on standardized tests, performance assessments, and beliefs about reading). Instead, the level of student engagement (including its sustainability over time) is the mediating factor, or avenue, through which classroom instruction influences student outcomes. Guthrie and Wigfield's conception of the engagement model of reading calls for instruction that fosters: student motivation (including self-efficacy and goal setting); strategy use (e.g., using prior knowledge, self-monitoring for breaks in comprehension, and analyzing new vocabulary); growth in conceptual knowledge (e.g., reading trade books to supplement textbook information, viewing videos, and participating in hands-on experiences); and social interaction (e.g., collaborating with peers on a science project, and discussing an Internet search with the teacher).

Other research on effective literacy instruction has shown that secondary school teachers contribute to adolescents' sense of competence and self-worth when they are able to convince the students that they care about them as individuals and want them to learn (Dillon, 1989; Dillon & Moje, 1998). It also is the case that teachers' perceptions of students' motivation to learn influence how hard the teachers are willing to work to instill in them a sense of competence and self-worth. For example, Patrick Finn (1999), an educator born into a working-class Irish Catholic family on the South Side of Chicago, has devoted a lifetime to exploring teachers' perceptions of working-class adolescents and what those perceptions mean in terms of the education that students receive. According to Finn, there are two kinds of education in the United States: "First, there is empowering education, which leads to powerful literacy, the kind of literacy that leads to positions of power and authority. Second, there is domesticating education, which leads to functional literacy, or literacy that makes a person productive and dependable, but not troublesome" (pp. ix-x).

Students also seem aware of distinctions in the quality of education offered them, and some are speaking out, as in the case of one young woman who was overheard telling a roomful of high school teachers:

We know we aren't very well educated. We know there are things we should know by now that we don't. But we're not stupid; most of us are really smart. You just need to show us, break it down for us, work with us and expect us to do it. (Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, & Hurwitz, 1999, p. 10)

This young woman's point and Finn's (1999) call for "empowering education" notwithstanding, it is the case that teachers (and for that matter, entire school systems) face difficult issues today that are not always under their immediate control. For example, current legislated attempts to raise the bar for student performance and enforced accountability measures are but two factors that often dictate the kinds of texts teachers can use in class, the content they are obliged to cover, and the timeline in which to accomplish certain objectives. Taking these sorts of constraints into account, it may take considerable maneuvering, a balancing act, and communitywide support for teachers to feel they can concentrate on developing students' sense of self-efficacy and engagement, especially when laboring under conditions in which they have little say. As one veteran teacher recently confided in me, "I know what I'm supposed to do and what I'd like to do. Walking the line between the two is the difficult part."

## STUDENTS WHO COULD BENEFIT FROM RE/MEDIATION

Expecting students to become engaged and capable readers is a key point to remember when attempting to re/mediate the instructional conditions in which they are taught. Too often, as demonstrated in the example of the young woman in the Schoenbach et al. (1999) report, students who have not kept pace academically with their peers recognize the seriousness of their plight but tend to place full responsibility for remedying it on their teachers. Witness, for example, the young woman's words: "You just need to show us, break it down for us, work with us and expect us to do it" (p. 10). At first glance this might seem like an isolated example. I would argue, however, that it is not. The young woman is representative of a larger group of adolescents who most teachers would identify instinctively as being disaffected with school learning. They are the students that columnist Patrick Clinton (2002) describes this way:

They're in the last row, wearing a look that all teachers know, one that says, "I'm invisible. I have nothing to say. Don't call on me." They don't have their books. They didn't read the assignment: They forgot; they had to work; it was just boring.... There are kids like those in the back row of almost every high school classroom in America. In some poor schools, they're in all the rows.... High school teachers will tell you [these are kids who] can read the words but not the content. (pp. 4-5)

If they are not reading content, but they can read, just *what* are they reading? According to *Adolescent Literacy: A Position Statement* (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999), published by the International Reading Association's Commission on Adolescent Literacy, youth of the Net Generation, some 20 million strong, engage in multiple literacy practices—e.g., they e-mail, instant-message, surf the Web, read video game magazines for tips on how to win, participate in online chat rooms, and read bulleted information on teacher handouts—but they do very little reading from the traditional textbook.

Youth with a history of low motivation for engaging with traditional print media present particular challenges to their teachers. Because they read their textbooks so infrequently, they typically will not have acquired the requisite background knowledge, skills, and specialized vocabulary needed for comprehending most subject-matter material. Minus these attributes, it is a sure bet they will struggle with the academic tasks that are commonly at the very center of content-area learning. For this reason, I believe it is worth our time as educators to explore innovative ways of motivating youth to engage with reading, thinking, talking, and writing about a wide range of texts so that they have increased opportunities for experiencing how it feels to be capable and engaged learners. Admittedly, all this sounds good in theory, but does it play as well in the "real" world? Read the following examples and see what you think.

## EXAMPLES OF ACADEMICALLY ENGAGED AND CAPABLE READERS

### A High School Basic-Level English Class

Picture this: A high school English classroom in rural Georgia. It's 10:35 a.m. and the start of what Mr. Donlon (all names are fictitious) hopes will be a successful 40 minutes with his basic-level juniors. It's his favorite class of the day, partly because the 23 kids enrolled in the school's basic-level English curriculum are the hardest to motivate. Most can read reasonably well, but they opt not to get their information through traditional print sources. They go to great lengths, in fact, to avoid reading assigned passages in the statewide adopted anthology. For example, when Mr. Donlon asked them to prepare a class read-aloud of Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, three boys in the class offered to bring in the "real" thing. They showed up the next day with a video that contained Dr. King's full speech and pictures of his family.

Another day, while I was again an observer in the classroom as part of a research project I was conducting, the scenario played out a bit differently, but the message was the same: no engagement. This time, after the students had read Langston Hughes' poem "Mother to Son," Mr. Donlon tried to interest them in finding parallel imagery for the famous line "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair" in another poem by Hughes titled "Dreams." With little enthusiasm and much rolling of eyes, the students dutifully went through the motions of analyzing the two poems, though not without protest. They claimed they were bored, that neither poem related to their lives, and that the author was from a different time and space. When the bell rang, it was difficult to tell who was most relieved—the kids, Mr. Donlon, or myself.

But today something quite different was in store for all of us. Mr. Donlon had downloaded a lesson plan titled "Langston Hughes and the Blues" from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum (n.d.). His goal was to help students connect Hughes' poetry to the blues and, as an aside, to recognize the influence of the African-American experience on so much of American music, including rock. To meet this goal, he had obtained a copy of a recording of Robert Johnson's "Cross Road Blues" from the local library's folk collection, which he played as the students settled into their seats.

Then, using an annotated copy of Johnson's lyrics for "Cross Road Blues" found on the Internet as a lead-in to the lesson, Mr. Donlon invited student volunteers to read the lyrics out loud. This day, unlike an earlier one involving the reading of Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech, there was no shortage of enthusiasm among the students. They engaged fully with both written and oral forms of expression, and most importantly they behaved as capable learners. Midway through the 40-minute period, Mr. Donlon invited the class to divide into groups of three or four students each and discuss how the two poems, "Mother to Son" and "Dreams," were similar to or different from Robert Johnson's "Cross Road Blues." The small-group discussions were lively, and from the students' perspective they served to make the reading more interesting.

This observation is in keeping with earlier research (Alvermann et al., 1996; Wells, 1996) involving multisite case studies of adolescents and their perceptions of discussion in schools across four regions of the United States. In these two studies, students said they learned best and felt most

capable as learners when they were allowed to talk about what they had read, viewed, or heard in class. They claimed that discussions among students, rather than just between teachers and students, kept their attention better and made classes they ordinarily disliked more interesting. They also spoke out in favor of talk-alike discussion groups in which students, not the teacher, decided the makeup of the groups. To their way of thinking, students who liked to talk a lot should get together so that students who talked less could have some floor time. Finally, they thought that their level of engagement in content-area discussions depended almost entirely on a teacher's ability to make the topic of the selection they read for discussion interesting. As one young woman put it, "Now my group, you give us a good topic, we can make a discussion. I guess the discussion depends on the topic; if the topic is boring, you ain't going to hear nothing" (Alvermann et al., 1996, p. 259).

In addition to commenting on the usefulness of small-group discussions, several students in Mr. Donlon's class opted to conduct their own searches on the Internet following the lesson on Langston Hughes and the blues. Among the sites visited was one titled "Robert Johnson and Crossroads Curse," about the myths that have grown up around this legendary performer from the Mississippi Delta. (For other ideas on how to use the blues to engage hard-to-motivate students in literature study, see Copeland and Goering [2003].)

A broader range of texts could have been tapped and used to re/mediate the curriculum in Mr. Donlan's basic-level English class. For example, following the suggestion of Bertelsen and Fischer (2002/2003) in the article "Mediating Expository Text: Scaffolding and the Use of Multimedia Curricula," Mr. Donlan might have arranged for his class to participate in a Web-inspired virtual field trip to a bluegrass festival. Dubbed a "video trek" by Bertelsen and Fischer, this multimedia event might have motivated Mr. Donlon's students to make a compare/contrast chart of the blues and bluegrass music (e.g., their places of origin, their different tempos, and their best-known performing artists). To find information for this compare/contrast chart, the students might have consulted a trade book, a history textbook, or a CD-ROM encyclopedia article on blues and bluegrass music. They also might have consulted an archive of artists' music on the Web (such as Hall Music) or interviewed a local newspaper reporter who writes about upcoming music events in their geographic area. The point is that using a variety of media to interest aliterate adolescents in school-related reading may provide them with opportunities to see themselves as capable and engaged readers after all.

## A Middle School Science Class

Carol Lloyd, a former middle school science teacher and currently a teacher educator at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, recalls the following experience about her students' exploration of environmental issues through song lyrics. In her article "Song Lyrics as Texts to Develop Critical Literacy" (Lloyd, 2003), she begins with a vignette in which she describes how she involved her 12- and 13-year-old students of various academic achievement levels in an elective class called Ecology and Botany:

There was no textbook for this class, so I based my teaching on my knowledge of ecology and my personal commitment to protecting the natural environment. I had been greatly affected by the political activism of the 1960s (especially the civil rights movement in the United States), the gasoline crisis of the early 1970s, and...classes in human ecology I had taken as an undergraduate at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

I wanted my students to consider how the things we do often affect our environment. I believed that if they understood that relationship they might begin to understand the concept of active citizenship (Lankshear & Knobel, 1997); they might understand that part of the responsibility of citizens is informed, active participation in democratic society.

I opened our consideration of the broad concept of ecology through a song by Cat Stevens (now known as Yusuf Islam), a well-known folk singer at the time. In “Where Do the Children Play?” Stevens tells the listener, “We’ve come a long way, we’re changing day to day” through advances in technology and engineering, but in doing so we have destroyed much of our environment. He rhetorically asks, “But tell me, where do the children play?” to encourage the listener to consider some of the human and environmental costs of progress.

I played the song while students read a copy of the lyrics.... I asked them to think about the things they saw around them, to consider if there were things that related to the song that they noticed on their way to school or as they drove around with their parents. They began to talk about events in their community from the new perspective of human impact on the environment. Picking up on Stevens’ lyrics about roads that “just go on and on” and unchecked construction, they focused on the new housing developments and accompanying roads running through what had been farmland in their semi-rural community. Their discussions moved quickly from casual observations of tractors and building materials to ways in which these developments altered their environment and affected plants and animals. They were in the beginning stages of becoming informed citizens (Singh & Moran, 1997). (Lloyd, 2003)

Carol Lloyd’s earlier success in motivating young adolescents of varying academic achievement levels to engage with sophisticated content in the areas of ecology and informed citizenship is a good example of how one middle school teacher re/mediated her instruction by moving beyond the traditional textbook and curriculum. Because there was no textbook for the course she developed, Lloyd had to rely initially on her own experiences and on the lyrics of ecologically reform-minded musicians such as Cat Stevens to convey to students the need to consider how people and technological advances can affect the natural environment. Gradually, as Lloyd’s students grew more critically aware of the impact of a society’s decision-making powers on their own immediate environment, they began asking the kinds of questions that informed citizens need to have answered.

If Lloyd were to teach this same middle school class today, she might want to increase the range of texts from which her students could choose. For example, moving beyond song lyrics, she might involve them in “Broom Forest: A Tall Trees Simulation” (Fretwell & Frostick, n.d.), which was developed as a Web-based teacher resource in conjunction with the PBS series *Journey Into Amazonia*. In this simulation, students construct a support system that will stop a top-heavy tree from toppling over for one minute. One of the objectives of the simulation is to learn how trees that grow in shallow soil, such as that found in the Amazon basin, have developed interesting support strategies that allow them to remain upright without using taproots. This activity might be especially well suited to those students in Lloyd’s class who can read but typically choose to avoid doing so. It is conceivable that they might find the tall trees simulation an engaging entry point into a unit on how environmental factors affect plant growth over time.

Assuming that they became engaged in the hypothesized unit, Lloyd might develop a mini-lesson on facilitating her students' choices in texts to read on the Web that have to do with environmental influences on a species' development. For instance, she might initiate the lesson using a free teacher resource, a Web quest titled "Evaluating Web Pages" (Valenza, 2001), which shows students how to evaluate the credibility and authenticity of information found on the Web. The Web quest at this particular site addresses several of the learning goals listed in the *Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning* (American Library Association & Association for Educational Communications and Technology, 1998) and the *Technology Foundation Standards for All Students* (International Society for Technology in Education, 2002).

Currently, in her position as a literacy teacher educator at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, Lloyd uses her earlier success in teaching with song lyrics to show prospective and practicing content-area teachers how the lyrics' storytelling or poetic representations of social, economic, and political injustices can serve as texts for developing students' critical literacy. For example, she suggests Phil Collins' haunting song, "Another Day in Paradise" to open up classroom conversations about various social and economic issues surrounding homelessness. Similarly, students can download song lyrics that depict ongoing political debates over environmental issues. Consider Joni Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi" with its memorable lines "They paved paradise, and put up a parking lot" or the treatment of the indigenous peoples of North America depicted in Robbie Robertson's music video *Showdown at Big Sky*.

## An After-School Media Club

Research that my doctoral students and I have conducted on aliterate adolescents' use of the Internet to acquire song lyrics (Alvermann, Hagood, Heron, Hughes, Williams, & Yoon, 2002) offers a glimpse into the fervency of their desire to engage with this type of literate activity. This research also provides evidence of how student engagement contributed to perceptions of increased self-efficacy, especially among those who were thought to be the least capable readers. In terms of its ability to attract and sustain the interest of 12- to 15-year-olds in reading digital print, searching the Internet for song lyrics ranked first. It easily overshadowed the popularity of other forms of media use (e.g., magazine reading, video gaming, and e-mailing). Girls in particular were fond of making lyric notebooks, which they shared with their friends and used as props when they performed their songs in each other's company. They told us that the larger the notebook (assuming, of course, that it contained lyrics from the "right" recording artists), the more popular the notebook owner. They also told us that they valued this kind of reading because it gave them information they could not obtain elsewhere. As one individual noted, "Most radio songs are censored versions of the original lyrics. You can get the real lyrics off the Web if you don't have money to buy the CD."

In fact, locating and printing hard-to-find lyrics off the Web was so important an activity that it actually resulted in status being conferred (or withheld) on the basis of an individual's success in acquiring such information. This status afforded girls with low self-efficacy for school-related reading a sense of power and independence in their relationships with other girls who were judged to be more school-literate than themselves. Reflecting on this particular phenomenon that we observed in our 14-week media club study caused us to remember a similar finding by Finders (1997). In her research on girls' literacy practices in and out of school, Finders noted:

A new independence is afforded to adolescent females through literacy. It might be argued further that the recognition of their literacies...signifies a reintegration into society and their acceptance as adults by adults. In other words, literacies served as a visible rite of passage, as a cultural practice to mark oneself as in control, as powerful. (p. 19)

In addition to writing about adolescent females who experience independence through literacy, Finders (1997) reported at length on the various ways the girls constructed themselves as competent or capable readers. We found the same phenomenon operating in our media club study, but it was not limited to the girls' behavior. For example, one of the boys with a low self-efficacy for school-related reading (a ninth grader reading at the fifth-grade level) demonstrated that he could comprehend fairly complex technical passages in a magazine for video game enthusiasts. Another boy, who rarely turned in school assignments that required reading, voluntarily helped his friends read and make predictions about forthcoming episodes of *Dragon Ball Z*, a popular Japanese animé that currently has 489,000 Web sites devoted to it. He told us that *Dragon Ball Z* was a bit like King Arthur's quest for the Holy Grail but a lot more fun to read because "it kept you guessing and predicting what would happen next."

More and more, it seems, the literature is providing innovative teaching suggestions on how to use aliterate adolescents' interests in popular culture, the Internet, and music as potential conduits for engaging them in school-related reading tasks. For example, *New York Teacher*, the official publication of New York State United Teachers (NYSUT), recently published an article titled "Breaking Boundaries: Teachers Tap Technology as a Tool for Reaching Higher Standards" (Ward, 1999) describing an innovative technique called "Learning With Lyrics." The technique was developed by social studies teacher John Chase and health teacher Brian Burgess, both 10-year veterans in a small upstate New York school district. The NYSUT publication quoted Chase as follows:

Teachers can help students develop higher order thinking skills through the use of contemporary music. The assignments are right on target with the new Regents standards. Our students have to do research, analysis and synthesize data-based information.... It's very powerful when a student challenges a popular song because the research doesn't back up the message in the music. (Ward, 1999, p. 28)

Chase founded Musicians United for Songs in the Classroom (M.U.S.I.C.) as a nonprofit organization to promote the interdisciplinary use of popular music in education. The M.U.S.I.C. Web site features a song directory and index of more than 2,800 songs that are relevant to education. It also provides links to suggested classroom activities, the Reading Room (a list of annotated books related to music that are a "must" read), a discussion hotline featuring the stories behind the songs, and a gallery in which students' visual projects and written work are posted.

Although I support much of this newfound enthusiasm for re/mediated instruction, I want to offer a cautionary note—a heads-up, if you will. As others have written before me (e.g., Hagood, 2001; Luke, 1997), the practice of using adolescents' interests in popular culture, the Internet, and especially music as a means of engaging them in school-related reading can backfire. I would argue that not only is such appropriation questionable from a pedagogical perspective, it is also open to criticism by those who would deplore turning young people's media pleasures into content-area reading lessons.

## An Urban High School Literature Class

It's not often that a university professor leaves familiar surroundings to take up residence in a high school classroom for a year. But when that happened, as it did in Carol Lee's case a few years ago, the move was triggered by her decision to try out a theory that she had been mulling over in her mind. She chose to teach an urban high school literature class filled with underachieving ninth graders, many of whom were illiterate when it came to school reading. Lee's theory, which became the basis for her Cultural Modeling Project (Lee, 1997, 2001), was situated in Vygotsky's (1986) notion of the zone of proximal development, in which a more knowledgeable other (in this case, the teacher) guides and supports learners by modeling, or scaffolding, a particular process before expecting the learners to apply it.

Lee, an African-American educator with considerable knowledge about both her discipline specialty (literary analysis) and the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) speech community, used a form of talk widely practiced within that community to teach her ninth graders how to comprehend the canon. The talk form is known as *signifying*, which involves innuendo, double entendre, satire, and irony, and is dense in figurative language (Pearce, 1999). It often involves forms of ritual insult but is not limited to insult. An example of signifying might be "Yo mama so skinny she can do the hula hoop in a cheerio" (Lee, 2001, p. 122). In using this special form of language play as a means of scaffolding her ninth graders' literary responses to books in the canon that had previously been thought to be too difficult for them to read, Lee was making use of the students' tacit knowledge of how *signifying* works. Under her guidance and support, this group of underachieving students began to hypothesize the meanings of various tropes, ironies, and satires found in the canon. In effect, they were transferring what they knew about *signifying* to interpret the discourse of difficult canonical texts and to change their interpretation when the evidence warranted such action.

Although the Cultural Modeling Project was designed specifically to assist struggling readers in analyzing literary texts, it has applications across subject areas. For example, Ballenger (1997) used it to teach students enrolled in a multigrade (Grades 5 through 8) Haitian bilingual science classroom. Like Lee (2001), Ballenger was knowledgeable about certain features in the students' everyday discourse that could be helpful to them as they learned to comprehend a more formal style of reading and talking about science. In this instance, it was the Haitian style of argumentative discussion that scaffolded students' participation in the scientific discourse of the classroom. Briefly, argumentative discussion, which is a prominent feature of everyday adult interactions in Haitian society, is reflected in the adults' animated debates about politics, sports, and religion. Often engaged in purely for entertainment purposes—much like signifying—argumentative discussion involves constructing a relationship between evidences and claims, just as scientists do when interpreting data. Argumentative discussion is a discourse acquired by younger members of Haitian and Haitian-descent society as they first observe (and later participate in) this storytelling genre. In the particular setting that Ballenger described, children were encouraged to express themselves in both Creole and English as they used culturally familiar speech patterns to present their arguments and defend their personal opinions about things they observed in science class, such as the conditions necessary for mold to grow.

In both cases, Lee and Ballenger took steps to re/mediate traditional instruction in their respective content areas so that it made use of and supported the language and the everyday cultural practices of their students. They scaffolded complex processes and academic tasks that were less

familiar to students by drawing on highly motivating and familiar language patterns in the students' speech communities. In doing this, they were able to provide new learning opportunities in ways that engaged the learners and facilitated a sense of self-efficacy.

In my own research on the uses that adolescents make of a range of media texts, I observed a type of scaffolding similar to that used in the Lee and Ballenger studies. In my study, however, the scaffolding involved a long-term exchange of e-mails between Ned (pseudonym), a 14-year-old underachieving African-American student and Kevin Williams, an African-American doctoral student who was a member of the research team. Both Ned and Kevin shared an abiding interest in an Atlanta-based rap group known as Goodie Mob, an acronym for "The Good Die Mostly Over Bull." Three members of this four-member rap group—Big Gipp, Khujo, and T-Mo—had been Kevin's close friends in high school.

Kevin, sensing Ned's interest in the rap group, offered to share what he knew about the members personally. To initiate the conversation, Kevin invited Ned to e-mail him and provide some background on what he already knew about Goodie Mob. In writing to Kevin for the first time, Ned positioned himself as someone who was knowledgeable about different kinds of rap. For example, he signaled that he knew Goodie Mob was famous for its socially conscious lyrics about the ills of society, at least from the perspective of individuals who live in U.S. urban areas known colloquially by their residents as "the hood." Later, in reflecting on why he had been drawn to Ned, Kevin noted, "To have a person [Ned's] age be able to recognize the social relevance of a group like Goodie Mob shows that this young person has developed some very needed skills."

In responding to Ned over the course of our semester-long research project, Kevin scaffolded the literacy skills that Ned needed in order to arrive at answers to his questions about the rap group. Kevin also made it clear that he expected Ned to e-mail him regularly with information that Ned was learning on his own from searching the Internet for facts about the group's new releases. In the final week of the research project, Kevin e-mailed Ned to congratulate him on the progress he had made in finding answers to his questions and to provide the last bit of information on a situation that involved Kevin's deceased brother and the rap group. (To read the complete e-mail exchange between Kevin and Ned, see the article "Image, Language, and Sound: Making Meaning With Popular Culture Texts" [Alvermann, Hagood, & Williams, 2001].)

What intrigued me most about this e-mail exchange was the degree to which Ned engaged in some fairly complex Internet searches, maintained his interest in finding answers to his questions, communicated regularly with Kevin, and appeared to grow in his sense of himself as a capable reader and writer. I also was impressed with the innovative approach that Kevin took to teaching Ned the steps necessary for finding answers to his questions about Goodie Mob. At the same time, I recognize the difficulty of applying the approach Kevin used in this one-on-one tutoring situation in a regular classroom setting. Perhaps the most that could be hoped for would be a peer-tutoring relationship between a more skilled reader and his or her less skilled counterpart.

## GUIDELINES FOR EDUCATORS

The role of re/mediated instruction is key to assisting adolescents see themselves as capable and engaged readers. Conceptually, this approach to instruction requires a fundamental change in teachers' and teacher educators' expectations for what needs changing—students or the conditions in which they are taught. It is not a magic bullet that will improve aliterate adolescents' motivation for school-related reading tasks, but it does ensure that they will have a range of texts (print, visual, aural, and digital) with which to engage and learn from. It also offers opportunities for students to experience greater self-efficacy when they meet texts in school that they feel capable of using and find engaging. With this caveat in mind, and working from the research-based examples just presented, I propose the following guidelines:

1. Treat adolescents' interests in a wide range of texts as a plus and a source of knowledge in instructional planning. Conceptually, re/mediated instruction grew out of a need to refashion curricular and instructional conditions so that they might incorporate multiple forms of print and nonprint media.
2. Acquaint yourself with factors in school and classroom culture that affect students' willingness to engage in reading and follow-up discussions. Small-group discussions hold promise for engaging students in learning with and from texts, especially when they have a say in how the groups are formed.
3. Consider the appeal of song lyrics as possible texts for developing adolescents' critical awareness of the social, economic, and political issues that surround them on every side and influence the world in which they live. Assist them in examining any assumptions underlying the lyrics as a means of developing their higher-order, critical thinking skills. Because it is difficult to screen all of the links available on a given Web site, work with the media specialist in your building or district to develop a policy on Internet use in the classroom.
4. Remind yourself that developing adolescents' critical awareness need not be limited to one kind of text. Although song lyrics were emphasized here, other forms of media (e.g., trade books, textbooks, magazines, newspapers, catalogs, visual images, videos, audio recordings, CD-ROMs, and digital print) are equally good for teaching students how to respond critically to what they read.
5. Become comfortable with the notion that content coverage and higher-level, critical thinking are not mutually exclusive in classrooms where students see themselves as capable and engaged readers.
6. Make use of the language patterns and everyday cultural practices that are part of adolescents' lives as supports in scaffolding school-related reading. Criteria to consider in making use of such patterns and practices should address issues of feasibility (e.g., is it likely, given the current level of administrative support in your school, that you will find yourself out on a limb if you try something new?) and context (e.g., what community pressures are you likely to experience as a result of re/mediating your instruction?).

7. Look for ways to use re/mediated instruction in your content area. If you are a social studies, history, math, foreign language, vocational, or physical education teacher, identify what you liked about the teachers' instructional practices in the examples provided earlier. Note the things that you would need to change for re/mediated instruction to work in your classroom.
8. Invite your colleagues to join with you in exploring ways to help aliterate adolescents see themselves as capable and engaged readers. If you find the notion of re/mediated instruction intriguing, talk to others about it. Although finding someone who can organize a schoolwide staff effort—or even better, a districtwide effort—might be desirable, remember that a critical mass of even one (yourself) is all you need to get started.

Finally, as Greenleaf, Jimenez, and Roller (2002) remind us, “Only when adolescents read material that is important to them will they understand why one uses...reading strategies and skills, [and] only if adolescents understand why they might want to use these skills will they master them and use them” (p. 490). This, it seems, is at the heart of what re/mediated instruction can do for all students, and especially for those who are aliterate.

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