Writing on the walls: Supporting 21st century thinking in the material classroom

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The teaching of language as multimodal is an epistemological stance toward writing.
- Writing on walls build participatory communities, despite curricular opposition.
- Student-made material, multimodal texts create rich text environments in classrooms.
- Teachers facilitated students' engagement with 21st Century cultural competencies literacy practices.

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ABSTRACT

A school's walls are taken-for-granted spaces, not seen as central to teaching. This article asks: How do teachers facilitate writing on secondary classroom and hallway walls that helps to build rich text environments through texts that are local, material, and multimodal? Further, how are those texts reflective of literacy practices appropriate for the 21st Century, resistant to standardized curriculum, and built on students' literate lives? Findings suggest that teachers used butcher paper, markers, post-its, magnetic tile words, and walls to engage students in 21st Century literacy practices. And, even within a test-focused curriculum, students produced an array of multimodal compositions.

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1. Introduction

The gauntlet of middle school hallways passed through while changing classes focuses the mind on one's destination. One day, during Ann's journey between classrooms, a wall (see Fig. 1) covered with writing caught her attention.

Drawn to the colors, different papers, different sizes, writing, and drawings, she stood, transfixed, blocking traffic. Going back during class, the wall's texture became more clear, though the writing begged more questions, like: What was that assignment? Why that design? How did students design that poster? Who was the audience? While Ann debriefed her experience after encountering this wall, Anna shared experiences with similar walls, filled

with writing, from her own research site. We committed to better understand, then, the writing on these walls, why these texts were posted on the walls, and the teaching practices that led to them.

By attending to walls during site visits and examining images, we realized that the walls, ceilings, and boards formed the foundation of the classrooms' print-rich text environments (Sailors & Hoffman, 2012). Together, we posited that the writing on classroom and hallway walls was worth a systematic examination that acknowledged the multiplicity of texts and of the literacy practices that produced them. Classroom walls that hold student work have been named "Writing Walls" (Parr & Limbrick, 2010, p. 588), "literate" (Kaufman, 2000, p. 24) and vertical "learning" spaces (Harste, 2009, p. 45). They also function to demarcate lives and identities "within and beyond the school walls" (Schultz, 2002, p. 384) or have been "translated … into a graffiti space" (Leander, 2002, p. 207). All of these descriptions, though, do not fully capture the nature of the texts and the writing practices that produced them, particularly the material, multimodal nature of the writing

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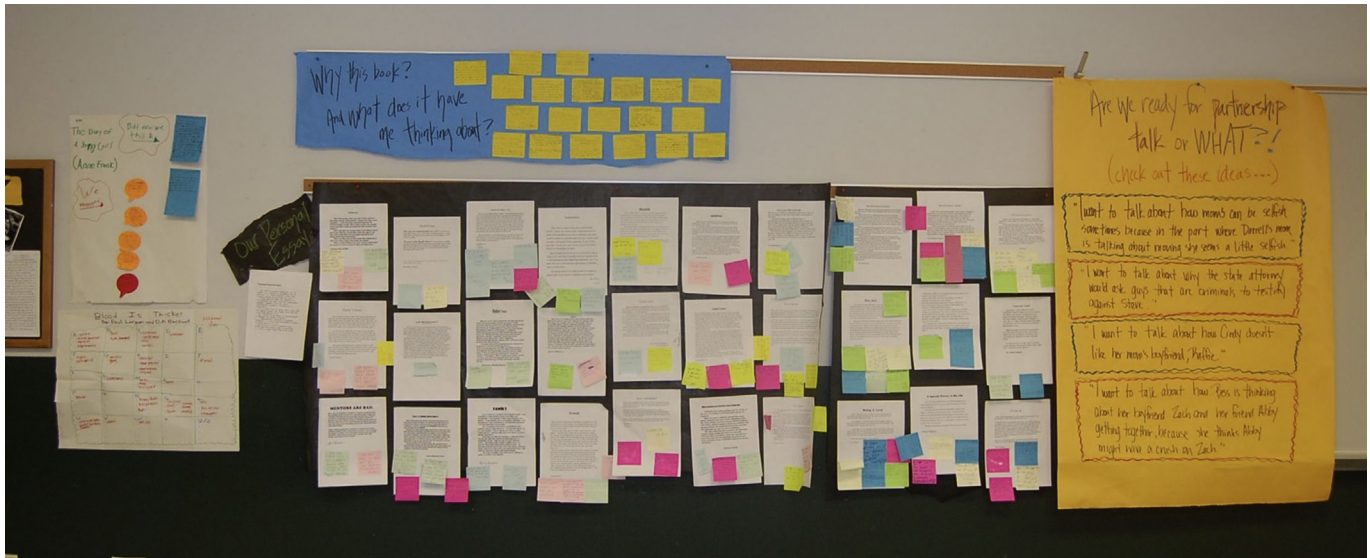
Fig. 1. A multimodal, seventh grade hallway wall.

on the walls at our sites.

This article presents our analysis of the writing on classroom and hallway walls of a middle school and a high school, both under pressure to improve standardized test scores in writing. In particular, we focus on how classroom walls acted as shared spaces, display spaces, and unofficial spaces for students' writing that included social and networked writing, academic writing, multimodal writing, creative writing, and personal writing. Our research adds to the conversation around classroom writing by examining the material, multimodal writing on the walls through the lens of competencies relevant for the 21st century. By positioning the writing on the walls as local texts (Maloch, Hoffman, & Patterson, 2004) embedded within a rich text environment, we saw how the writing was socially situated, within and beyond the classroom. The questions that frame this study, then, are: How do teachers facilitate writing, on secondary classroom and hallway walls, that helps to build rich text environments through texts that are local, material, and multimodal? How are those texts—that are local, material, and multimodal—reflective of literacy teaching practices appropriate for the 21st century?

2. Perspectives: conceptualizing local, material, multimodal texts on classroom walls

We situate our work in sociocultural understandings of literacy (Vygotsky, 1986; Wertsch, 1991) that acknowledge the local expression of literacy practices, as well as the cultural and historical nature of those practices. Further, our understandings are deepened by a multiliteracies perspective that acknowledges "the multiplicity of communication channels and media [and] the increasing salience of cultural and linguistic diversity" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 5) at work in the world and in classrooms. While much of the research within multiliteracies focuses on digital texts and practices, gadgets or "media appliances" are not ultimately what multiliteracies are about, but rather, "social interactions with others" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3) that shape a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). The work presented here, then, carefully examines writing on classroom and hallway walls, how teachers and students composed that writing, and the purposes that writing held for those classroom communities. By focusing on the old technology of writing on the walls with a 21st

century lens, we "build bridges between the known and the new" (Casey, 2015, p. 26). In what follows, we explore key concepts underlying the research presented here: the materiality and multimodality of local texts in classrooms influenced by accountability and standardized testing.

2.1. Local texts in material classroom spaces

Drawing from Barton and Hamilton's (1998) discussion of literacies as social practices, termed "local literacies," Maloch et al. (2004) identified "local texts" (p. 146) as part of the text environment in classrooms. Local texts are co-created by teachers and students and grow out of "the local literacies of the classroom" (p. 146). They become "vital to an effective reading and language arts program" (p. 146) by connecting to ongoing instructional practices through the recording and facilitating of teaching and learning. Being posted on a wall does not automatically make a text local. A critical component of a local text is the "purposefulness of its use" (p. 153), or the degree to which it is actually used and referenced by members of the classroom. In this article, we draw from Maloch et al.'s conceptualization of local texts to examine how the design and purposefulness of multimodal, material, local texts on classroom walls created a rich text environment (Sailors & Hoffman, 2010).

Through engagements with a diversity of texts in the classroom, teachers can cultivate a rich text environment. Sailors and Hoffman (2010) make the argument for "the environment for literacy learning … act[ing] as both a window into literacy lives outside of school and a mirror back into the literacy activity within a school" (p. 294). Walls, where local texts live, are a semiotically porous element of the classroom (Jewitt, 2008). Walls are spaces that can either support or dissuade students' engagement (Roozen, 2010, pp. 338, 342; Leander, 2002, pp. 206–207). Research on these rich text environments and the ways they tap into students' knowledge and experience of the world, though, has often focused on elementary classrooms (Rowe, 2008; Sheehy, 2003). The question of how secondary education teachers craft "rich text environments" (Sailors & Hoffman, 2010) in classroom contexts has, according to our searches, received virtually no attention in the research literature.

"At the very moment when a wealth of powerful new literacy