Creating Digital Comics in Response to Literature: Aesthetics, Aesthetic Transactions, and Meaning Making

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I did the scene where Ponyboy recites a poem that Robert Frost wrote about the sunset. And Ponyboy was like confused and questioning. You can’t find . . . you don’t have a lot of movies out there or books that have sentimental moments. I call it sentimental because just the poem alone, you never know, you wouldn’t expect a guy to say something like that. Maybe girls would say it, maybe a preppy guy would say it, but a Greaser? . . . And I liked the scene the way it went, the way the sunset is, and just the way the poem sounds. It’s really nice.

—Liza (all names are pseudonyms)

At the time Liza reflected on her choice to represent a “sentimental” scene from The Outsiders (Hinton, 1967), she was an eighth grader participating in a reading support class. Her teacher, Ms. Singh, had invited students to recreate a scene from the novel with the software program Comic Life. Narrated by 14-year-old Ponyboy, The Outsiders tells the story of two rival gangs from opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum and conveys Ponyboy’s search for meaning within a violent and uncertain world. Comic Life provides customizable templates that enable users to import images and to input their own text into dialogue bubbles and narration boxes. In Liza’s reflective and exploratory recounting of why she chose her scene, she describes its emotional resonances, comments on dominant conceptualizations of masculinity, and expresses her appreciation of the sensory language in Robert Frost’s poem, “Nothing Gold Can Stay.”

When we asked students to speak with us about their experiences creating a digital comic to represent a scene from The Outsiders, we expected them to talk about the appeal of using new technologies and digital literacies in school. Many students, though, described their learning in language more closely aligned with the arts, self-expression, and literary response. Students spoke enthusiastically about the opportunity to be creative, to use their imaginations, and to share their own perspectives on the novel. George, for example, told us he was “hooked” by The Outsiders, a book he described as “intriguing.” He also said that he enjoyed using his “creative power” to create his “all custom” comic.

Given the visual nature of the students’ comics as well as the students’ perspectives on the creative experience of producing them, we argue that it is illuminating to consider students’ digital compositions with theoretical lenses attuned to the arts, aesthetics, and literacies (Vasudevan, 2010) and to transactional theories of response to literature (Rosenblatt, 1982). Starting with the premise that “students are legitimate authorities on issues of teaching and learning” (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 345) and on their own literate lives, we further contend that rich descriptions of students’ creative processes, products, and perspectives have implications for integrating the digital arts into classrooms.

Theoretical Perspectives on the Arts, Literacy, and the Aesthetic Transaction

The Arts and Literacy

In drawing connections between the arts and literacy, Eisner (2003) asserts, “In much language teaching, pedagogy is directed in ways that are highly rule-abiding . . . . But we also need to promote the student’s recognition that language has a melody, that cadences count, that tropes matter, that metaphors mean” (p. 342). Eisner (2003) notes that a narrow focus on the linguistic aspects of literacy
limits meaning making. He writes, “Literacy itself can be thought of not as limited to what the tongue can articulate but what the mind can grasp. Thus, in this sense, dance, music, and the visual arts are languages through which both meaning and mind are promoted” (p. 342). Nicholson (1999) similarly advocates for engaging the arts to build meaning and promote understanding, noting, “[t]he visual, performing, and practical arts . . . offer more than an avenue for indulging in idiosyncratic and extraneous self-expression, but constitute a means of perceiving and conveying understanding” (p. 109). Both Eisner and Nicholson underscore meaning making as inherent to encounters with the arts and with literacy—goals that are often sidelined in “rule-abiding” and test-driven pedagogies focused on recall and comprehension.

Theorists thus point to possibilities for re-envisioning literacy education with arts-based perspectives (Landay & Wootton, 2012). As Gadsden (2008) argues, “The choice should not be supporting students’ foundational abilities versus supporting students’ imagination, artistry, and learning of art” (p. 32). Dire concerns about students’ comprehension skills currently animate the curriculum, policy, and testing spheres; however, Heath’s (2004) studies of language and literacy in arts environments add an important nuance to this preoccupation. As she contends, “The arts encircle learning with meaning and thereby make comprehension and

NOW ACT!

• Create contexts to support the aesthetic reading stance. To promote “lived-through” experiences, invite students to read (or listen to you read) without frequent interruptions for comprehension checks or responses to closed questions. At times, it may be generative to pause and ask, “What are you noticing, thinking, or feeling?” or “What questions do you have?” Instead of asking students to make a “personal connection” on demand after they read, lead them back to their sensory experience of the text. Rosenblatt (1982) suggests:

  Questions can be sufficiently open to enable the young readers to select concrete details or parts of the text that had struck them most forcibly. The point is to foster expressions of response that keep the experiential, qualitative elements in mind. Did anything especially interest? Annoy? Puzzle? Frighten? Please? Seem familiar? Seem weird? (p. 276)

• Seek out a range of digital arts computer software programs and apps. Invite students to respond to literature with software programs and apps that give them opportunities to draw, create comics, and craft their own stories.

• Introduce students to principles of design and aesthetics to shape their digital compositions. Drawing on perspectives from Molly Bang (see “For Inquisitive Minds,” p. 112) and others, explore with students how artists make choices related to line, color, spatial arrangement, and font to make meaning and to communicate symbolically.

• Tie to Common Core State Standards priorities. The Common Core State Standards are guided by several priorities, including that students demonstrate independence; respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline; comprehend as well as critique; value evidence; and use new media effectively. When students create comics in response to literature, they seek images and backgrounds on their own initiative, while simultaneously experimenting with software. These processes require a high level of independence, attention to audience, and awareness of genre conventions. Students also use “technology and digital media strategically and capably” as they pay attention to symbolism, spatial arrangements, image selection, and color.

• Go meta. After students create their comics, drawings, or other digital productions, invite them to explain how and why they made their artistic and literary choices. Ask them to analyze how their digital creations shaped or added new insights into their interpretation of the book.
engagement fundamental for participation” (Heath, 2004, p. 339). In the arts, comprehension is not an end in itself, but a fundamental aspect of participation in endeavors shaped by the pursuit of meaning.

**Reading and Writing as Transaction**

Considering the relationship between literacy and the arts provides a framework for analyzing how students in this study drew on the affordances of the digital arts to render emotive, perceptive, and sometimes humorous interpretations of *The Outsiders*. At the same time, transactional theories of reading and writing also provide lenses for analyzing students’ creative and meaning-making processes. Rosenblatt (1982) explores the relationship between the reader and the text, envisioning reading as “a transaction, a two-way process, involving a reader and a text at a particular time under particular circumstances” (p. 268). She asserts that the meaning we make is shaped by the purpose and stance we bring to the reading event. A reader’s stance may fall along what she calls the aesthetic–efferent continuum, drawing from the Greek meaning of aesthetic (“to sense” or “to perceive”) and the efferent (“to take away”). She contends that teachers often lead students away from the “evocation” they create in their minds while they read, to answering questions after they read, resulting in a “focus on presenting a ‘correct,’ traditional interpretation, and on knowledge about technical devices or biographical or historical background” (Karolides, 1999, p. 165). To Rosenblatt, knowledge of literary terms can enrich the aesthetic transaction, but they are “vacuous concepts without recognition of the importance of stance. . . . ‘Form’ is something felt on the pulses, first of all” (1982, p. 276).

While Rosenblatt’s theories of reading have received widespread recognition in the field, her perspectives on writing have not been as fully considered. In language similar to the language she used to describe reading, Rosenblatt (1989) contends, “Writing, we know, is always an event in time, occurring at a particular moment in the writer’s biography, in particular circumstances, and under particular external and internal pressures. In short, the writer is always transacting with a personal, social, and cultural environment” (p. 163). Just as she describes the “live circuit” (Rosenblatt, 1986) that exists between the reader and the text, she also emphasizes the “live ideas” that the writer draws on when he or she is composing:

> Live ideas have roots drawing sustenance from writers’ needs, interests, questions, and values; live ideas have tendrils reaching toward external areas of thought. A personally grounded purpose develops and impels movement forward. The quickened fund of images, ideas, emotions, attitudes, and tendencies offers the means for making new connections, for discovering new facets of the world of objects and events—in short for thinking and writing creatively. (p. 165)

In Rosenblatt’s conceptualizations of both reading and writing as dynamic and sensory transactions, she attends to experience, meaning making, and creativity in ways that we see as having a resonance with the arts and with the students’ reading and writing processes within the Comic Life project. As we explore below, however, we also seek to build on and extend these insights as they relate to responding to literature with the digital arts.

**Empirical Perspectives on Incorporating the Arts into Language Arts**

With the increase in standardized testing upon passage of the No Child Left Behind legislation (NCLB Act of 2001) and with the enhanced attention to nonfiction texts within the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), many would argue that language arts education is moving closer to the efferent end of Rosenblatt’s continuum. Despite emphases on testing and print literacies, however, educators and researchers have documented classrooms where students engage with the arts, literacy, and multiple sign systems (Albers & Harste, 2007; Siegel, 2006). Cowan and Albers (2006) invited fifth-grade language arts students to draw, make

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sculptures, and write poetry to develop “complex literacies.” Whitin (2005) analyzed fourth-grade children’s interpretive sketches in response to literature and highlighted the central power of students’ talk about these representations, naming them as “socially negotiated metaphorical interpretations” (p. 392). In these ways, the arts are integrated as essential tools for thinking and meaning making (Short, Kauffman, & Kahn, 2000), rather than as curricular “add-ons” or isolated “activities.”

Attention to multiple sign systems has shaped not only how students engage with and respond to print texts, but also the inclusion of digital and multimodal texts, including graphic novels and comics, within the curriculum (e.g., Carter, 2009; Dallacqua, 2012). Danzak (2011) analyzed how English Language Learners explored identities through the production of their own comics as they read and discussed a range of immigration stories. O’Brien, Beach, and Scharber (2007) showed how “struggling” readers developed a richer sense of literate competence as a result of reading and writing digital media. Reflecting the pervasiveness of print-based literacies in schools, however, Christianakis (2011) found that young people continue to face many obstacles to reading and writing multimodal texts, documenting students’ inventive, yet often thwarted, attempts at “smuggling in various semiotic sources, genres, and symbolic tools across semiotic borders to create multimodal texts that did not privilege alphabet writing or school-taught genres” (p. 49).

Even as the semiotic richness and imaginative literacy practices that students engage with outside of school often find few outlets in school, students’ perspectives on their own learning have been similarly missing from larger conversations about the nature and purpose of literacy education. We also lack a broad research base that considers how young people use digital tools to respond to literature when they are intentionally invited to do so in school. In this article, we consider the affordances of analyzing digital compositions in response to literature with lenses attuned to the arts, the aesthetic transaction, and student perspectives.

**Research Context, Methods, and Analysis**

This article draws from a larger study exploring Ms. Singh’s efforts to incorporate multimodal literacies into her eighth grade Academic Intervention Support (AIS) Reading classes within a semi-rural school over a two-year period. During this time, Ms. Singh was a member of a teacher inquiry community exploring multimodal literacies in which we (Kelly and Sean) both served as researchers. Approximately 25% of students in Ms. Singh’s school qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and 90% of students identify as White. In accordance with state education guidelines, students are placed in AIS Reading classes if they score below the passing score in English Language Arts on the state exam.

Students take AIS classes alongside their “regular” English classes until they achieve a passing score on the ELA portion of the state exam. At the time of the study in this particular school, AIS teachers had a certain degree of freedom to design their classes in accordance with their instructional goals and student needs. Many AIS classes are characterized by a focus on literacy skills, including comprehension, vocabulary, test-taking, and summarizing, often through work with short literary passages or worksheets. Ms. Singh’s AIS pedagogy was unique in its inclusion of both entire novels and multimodalities.

In the Comic Life project, Ms. Singh first provided students with opportunities to read and discuss *The Outsiders*. She then invited them to write a script based on one scene of their choice from the novel. With the assistance of the school’s librarian and media specialist, Ms. Singh introduced students to comics and graphic novels as well as to the Comic Life software. Students then began to experiment with Comic Life to create a multimodal representation of their scene, conducting their own
Internet searches for images to represent the characters and setting and making their own decisions regarding the incorporation of dialogue and narration into their comics.

Data were collected in three of Ms. Singh’s classes and from the 17 students within those classes who provided research consent. Data sources include field notes from classroom observations approximately two times a week for three months, interviews with Ms. Singh, interviews with students, scripts students wrote to represent a scene from the book, and students’ digital comics. Our data analysis process was inductive, iterative, and recursive (Seidel, 1998). Preliminary data analysis was informed by grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and multimodal data analysis (Jewitt, 2009).

We began by open coding the scripts, comics, interviews, and field notes. We then developed data analysis charts to look across the comics within such categories as scene selection, image choices, frame count, color scheme, etc. As we looked across the data sources to refine our codes, we identified emerging themes and patterns, including the students’ integration of a broad spectrum of popular culture texts into their comics, the collaborative nature of learning across many aspects of the Comic Life project, and the students’ primary focus on image selection to render their interpretation of their chosen scene.

As we continued to notice the emergence of central themes of creativity, choice, and imagination across the student interviews, however, we found that reading the data with theoretical lenses attuned to the arts, literary response, and student perspectives provided more nuanced understandings. When we returned to the data set with these lenses, we further focused and refined our questions and analysis. First, we considered the aesthetic qualities of students’ comics. In this way, our analysis centered on the “sensory, expressive, and technical characteristics” (Tavin, 2007, p. 41) of students’ digital compositions as we paid attention to the presence and impact of image selection, color choice, and overall design on the meaning students made in their comics and how they expressed it. Second, we drew from Rosenblatt’s discussion of aesthetic transactions in both reading and writing as rooted in the senses, in perception, and within the students’ social worlds. Third, we shifted our attention to students’ perspectives as we read the data carefully for instances when they talked explicitly about their composing processes, the reasoning behind their choices, and their artistic intentions.

We then looked again at the comics with students’ perspectives in mind and constructed case studies drawing on these multiple data sources and frameworks (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). The following questions guided our inquiry and our writing of the four case studies below:

• How can description of students’ perspectives, processes, and products shed light on how they responded to literature with the digital arts?
• How can analytical lenses attuned to the aesthetic qualities of the students’ comics illuminate how they conveyed their understanding and expressed themselves in their comics?
• How can analytical lenses attuned to aesthetic transactions illuminate the nature of students’ responses to the book in their comics?

We selected the four students for the cases because they 1) provide contrasting and complementary insights into how students approached the assignment and made creative decisions, 2) the students were most forthcoming in their interviews about their learning processes and perspectives, and 3) taken together, they speak to crosscutting themes in the data. The four cases are representative of the great diversity of popular culture images the 17 students in the study incorporated into their comics, from Twilight to Family Guy, from popular singers to athletes, from soap opera stars to professional wrestlers.

The cases also suggest how students’ comics often reflected the narrative features of these popular culture texts, such as the use of comedic non sequiturs.
prevalent in many adult animated sitcoms and the evocation of high emotion in anime. The four cases also reflect the students’ references to the aesthetic experiences of creating the comics and responding to the book; in interviews, 13 of the 17 students used phrases like “using my imagination,” “being creative,” “loved the book,” and “expressing myself” when describing their thoughts about the project. Finally, the cases are representative of the students’ articulations of the rationale behind their semiotic choices, naming, for example, how their choices in images, color, and design enabled them to render plot points, character traits, and broader themes in their scenes. In interviews, 14 students provided what we considered substantive rationales for their choices, two provided more limited elaboration of their reasoning, and one did not articulate a rationale at all.

Delia
Near the back of the row of computers, Delia stared intently at her computer screen, silently moving images around until she was satisfied. In interviews and at the end of class, she was talkative, demonstrative, and friendly, but while constructing her comic, she worked with a quiet focus and an air of seriousness. As the images, words, narration boxes, and dialogue bubbles accumulated on her page, Delia would at times let out a small sigh if their arrangement did not meet her expectations.

Delia included the most frames in her comic of any student, and her comic draws most directly on comic book conventions, with impactful image choices, contrasting background colors, and bold fonts.

Delia recreated the deadly confrontation between the two rival gangs, the Socs and the Greasers, in an empty park late at night. She started by imagining the scene, explaining, “I just like kind of pictured the whole scene in my head. I’d just close my eyes at that point and think about what it’d be like if I was just standing there.” In visualizing the scene in this way, by putting herself directly within it, Delia’s approach has resonance with how Rosenblatt (1982) describes the reader’s transaction with words on a page, noting, “We participate in the story, we identify with the characters, we share their conflicts and their feelings” (p. 270).

Delia’s comic is edged with menace and her choice of images, dialogue, and colors evoke the sense of danger Delia pictured in her head. Across the 35 frames and six pages of her comic, Delia chooses shadowy images to suggest the darkness of the park at night, selects neon font colors to communicate the charged atmosphere of the ensuing fight, and adds disquieting dialogue to reveal the fear and anger of her characters (see Fig. 1).

While Delia’s comic deftly captures essential dialogue and the numerous plot points in her scene, her comic stands out for its visual acumen related to image selection for the main characters. Delia

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![Figure 1. Delia references comic book conventions in the design of her comic and utilizes a symbolic image of a grinning skull to connote meaning.](image-url)
chose an uncanny image of a grinning skull with a full head of hair to represent Bob, the menacing Socs gang member. The stylized representation of Bob as a pompadoured grinning skull is a powerful device that draws the eye and compels the viewer’s attention throughout the pages of Delia’s comic. The grinning skull motif has long been symbolic of death; it is therefore a particularly compelling choice for Bob, who is stabbed to death by Johnny as he attempts to drown Ponyboy in a park fountain.

Delia’s selection of a handsome boy with a swollen eye and a bloody lip to represent Johnny is suggestive of the violence he will endure at the hands of the Socs. Moreover, the image evokes sympathy and compassion—emotions that many readers of The Outsiders feel for Johnny, a good-natured character who is beset by tragedy. Through image selection, Delia thus conveys her understanding of the emotional appeal of Ponyboy and Johnny, while representing their entitled and violent antagonist, Bob, with a sinister visage of demise.

As Eisner (2003) notes, she visually represents how “tropes matter, that metaphors mean” (p. 342).

In describing how teachers might assist students in deepening their aesthetic transactions with books, Rosenblatt (1986) suggests, “The student should be helped to pay attention to the interfusion of sensuous, cognitive, and affective elements” (p. 127) within their reading experiences. We would argue that the opportunity to create a scene with the Comic Life software allowed Delia to build upon her aesthetic transaction with the book and enabled her not only to communicate her cognitive understanding of the scene, but also to render the scene’s emotional resonances and broader themes.

**Tanya**

During class in the computer lab, Tanya usually sat next to her close friend, Mara. Chatting quietly as they worked, the pair frequently studied and commented upon one another’s projects. For her comic, Tanya chose to represent a reflective conversation between Johnny and Ponyboy as they reminisce about the past and consider the difficult choices ahead. While lacking the undertones of violence and conflict in Delia’s work, Tanya’s comic reflects a similar impulse to convey the emotional tenor of the scene through character selection. When we asked her what was the hardest part of the project, Tanya indicated that she labored most over the choice of characters, exclaiming, “It took me forever! Like most of the class periods, I was just looking. I was like, ‘No . . . no . . . no!’” She went on to explain how she decided upon anime characters:

> I didn’t want to choose people that everyone knew, like a lot of people chose Edward [from the Twilight movies] and things like that. I didn’t want to do that. I like mine to be different from other people’s, so like I wanted to do something unique and stuff. So, I thought that would be cool to do, and I thought that like these characters fit it perfectly, so I chose them.

Revealing she had little familiarity with anime prior to the project, Tanya said she thought the characters would work “perfectly” because of their large, soulful eyes and gentle features. She explained that she chose sketches of anime characters from fanfiction websites because they were “more original” than the “official” images.

To set the scene, Tanya places her two contemplative protagonists on a windswept beach. Another striking image of a sunrise painted in rich reds and golds captures the essence of the line, “nothing gold can stay,” from the Robert Frost poem that figures prominently in the boys’ conversation. This image appears in most of Tanya’s frames, and seems almost to become a character itself. It fills the comic with melancholy beauty and sets a warm and reflective tone, very similar to how the sunrise in the novel elicits a philosophical conversation between the boys. The image of the beach, with its cold blues and deep purples, contrasts with the glowing sunrise and is suggestive of the uncertainty of the boys’ coming adulthood. In the penultimate page of her comic, Tanya brings together in an uneasy tension on one page these compelling images: the warm sunrise, the cold beach, and the thoughtful characters.

In addition to reflecting the emotional tenor prevalent in anime, there is also a sweeping cinematic quality to Tanya’s comic, where color sets the mood of the scene and where close-up facial shots predominate (see Fig. 2). Tavin (2007) notes that one definition of aesthetics refers to how encounters
with the arts can promote a “heightened awareness, radiance of mind, or a moving disposition” (p. 41). Tanya’s intentional choices in words, images, and color allowed her to create a comic in which she could express a heightened awareness of this turning point in the boys’ lives.

On the final page of her comic, Tanya includes both the entire Frost poem and one frame composed as a flashback representing all the Greasers together as young boys. The flashback is presented in grayscale and has been modified by Tanya to feature horizontal lines running across it. Interestingly, S. E. Hinton does not include this particular flashback in the chapter. In making this choice, Tanya not only takes her own creative license, but also underscores the feeling of nostalgia and the passage of time imbued in the scene. As a creator of the comic, and also as a writer of this new component to the scene, Tanya transacts with the novel, with her own imagination, and with the images she has located in her Internet searches. With all these resources at her disposal, Tanya has “the means for making new connections, for discovering new facets of the world of objects and events—in short for thinking and writing creatively” (Rosenblatt, 1989, p. 165).

Tanya herself spoke frequently of enjoying the opportunity to be creative throughout the project, noting:

I liked the freedom to rewrite the whole script. . . . I thought it was really fun to do because I like being creative and I liked how we got to like put the story into our own point of view, like how we would see it. So I thought that was cool. And mine was really different! . . . Because I used like cartoon characters and anime and just like changed everything . . . . I learned that I’m a lot more creative than I thought I was.

Liza

On the first day of class in the computer lab, Liza talked excitedly with students next to her as she typed in search terms for male soap opera stars from General Hospital and Guiding Light. She seemed to know exactly what she was looking for and where to find it. In no apparent rush to make her image selections, she used two entire lab periods for browsing images and saving images for possible future use. By the end of her search, she had accumulated a wider assortment of images than most students. Drawing upon her “linguistic-experiential reservoir” (Rosenblatt, 1989, p. 164) of soap operas to compose her comic, Liza constructed her scene with images of television characters very well known to her (see Fig. 3). She explained:

My characters are based on, you know, something that I watch every day and I tried to involve it in my real life, with the characters. And I ended up choosing people from General Hospital and soap operas because soap operas are part of my everyday life or every week life. It’s interesting and it keeps me motivated.

Liza drew upon what Rosenblatt (1989) calls “live ideas” to guide her composing process. Rosenblatt argues that for writers, a “personally grounded purpose develops and impels movement forward” (p. 165). Although Liza was “compelled forward” by her interest in modern day soap operas, she was also aware of the time period in which the book took place and was impacted by multiple viewings
of the movie based on the book. She therefore kept true to her interests, but made different choices for other aspects of the comic, explaining, “If you put modern stuff in here and then you saw the movie, it just wouldn’t look right, so I wanted to at least do the background true to the thing, like the hospital and the sunset and the rooms. You want to at least try to do most of that so that it looks right.” With her choice of tough but sensitive male soap opera stars and the reflective commentary on why she chose her scene that we included at the beginning of this manuscript, Liza’s comic reflects the meaning she made during the transaction.

Liza was very outspoken about the creative affordances of the Comic Life project, noting on numerous occasions that these types of engagements should be more prevalent across the curriculum. She asserted that teachers should:

give [students] something that they’re interested in so they’ll do the work, so you don’t have to yell at them or give them zeros. Let them express themselves, like art. You tell them to just grab a piece of paper and start painting. They’ll show you, you know. It has to be free, it has to be a lot of freedom.

Evan

A student of seemingly boundless energy, Evan reacted to class activities with bursts of engagement, at times working diligently and at other times choosing to distract and tease other students. He was of two minds toward The Outsiders, declaring at one point that he “liked” the book, while at another time deriding it as a “stupid” book. In class discussions, it was clear Evan was not transported by the book’s language or plot and that he was disinterested in other students’ interpretations. Evan refused to write a script for his chosen scene without significant cajoling from Ms. Singh. His lack of an aesthetic transaction with the book seemed to carry over into his work with the software. After finding Elvis images and incorporating them into his comic, he did little experimentation with fonts, background color, or dialogue to set the tone or add further dimension to the scene (see Fig. 4).
Evan spoke often about the project as being “hard.” While many students also used similar language, their comments often focused on the limitations of the software program, slow computers, or lack of time. Delia, for example, called the project “excruciatingly difficult.” She was frustrated when class time was limited and when she was unable to correct what she saw as flaws in her comic, noting, “Hmm, well, one thing that I’d definitely change are the pictures because they look sort of foggy and you can’t really see what it was, so I want to make it so they’re more clear and you can see everything. . . I think maybe if I’d have had a little more time, then I’d feel better.” By contrast, Evan described the difficulties this way:

We really had to analyze the book and find, like, facts about the people. We had to go back and find descriptions of the people, then we had to find pictures that fit the descriptions so we had to keep relooking, going back and forth. The most challenging was you had to keep going back and forth in the book, back to the scenes. When you messed up, you had to start all over again.

Evan uses “had to” six times in this response, a striking contrast to Delia’s language where she reveals her own initiative and her concern for the aesthetics of her comic. Despite the built-in freedom to take creative license and to work at his own pace and across modalities in this project, Evan took on what Rosenblatt might characterize as an efferent stance, searching the book for information to “take away” and import into his comic. Thus, Evan seemed to interpret the purpose of the assignment as aligning with more traditional or “rule-abiding” learning goals (Eisner, 2003): accuracy (“pictures that fit the descriptions”); literal understandings (“facts about the people”); and print-focused (“going back and forth in the book”).

Evan also spoke directly, though, to how different he found this project as compared to his other experiences in AIS reading support classes:

**Evan:** Well, we’ve never done big projects like this in AIS classes. It’s always been like tests.
three times a week on the books we’re reading. It’s been a lot more fun this year with all this.

**Sean:** And looking back, do you feel you’ve learned more with this kind of stuff or with tests?

**Evan:** Well, with this because I actually get interested.

**Sean:** How was it with the tests?

**Evan:** With the tests, I just kind of failed.

Despite his intermittent aversion to the Comic Life project, here Evan seems to indicate that this kind of multimodal learning might have potential to hold his interest and perhaps interrupt his resignation to previous failures. As a “veteran” of many AIS classes, Evan stands out to us as a cautionary tale of how years of accumulated efferent reading pedagogies (“tests three times a week”) can also curtail students’ writing processes. We also include his case as an important counterpoint to claims that projects of this nature might automatically engage even the most reluctant students. (Evan’s case, while reflective of the experiences of some boys in the class, is not meant to represent the experiences of all boys in the study, many of whom were deeply engaged by the book and the comic production. See Wissman, Costello, & Hamilton, 2012.)

**Digital Responses to Literature:**

**Aesthetic and Efferent Composing**

Reflective of diverse purposes and creative approaches, the students’ comics include an eclectic mix of images and narrative styles. The comics reveal not only the evolving media landscape young people navigate, but also how they work selectively within that intertextual landscape to make their own meaning. Many students chose to go beyond didactic renderings, selecting metaphorically resonant images from a range of cultural texts, creating their own dialogue, and infusing their comics with

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**Comic Strips and Cartoon Squares.** Both include helpful resources, connections to CCSS, and links to online tools for creating comics.


**Incorporate software and apps to support the digital arts in response to literature.** A wide range of resources, many of them free, can help students create visual responses to books and engage in their own “artful storytelling,” including the software programs Storyjumper ([http://www.storyjumper.com/](http://www.storyjumper.com/)) and Storybird ([http://storybird.com/](http://storybird.com/)) and the apps Strip Design and Doodle Buddy. Characterized by a high degree of interactivity and malleability, many of these programs allow users to draw their own pictures, to upload and/or import images from other sources, or to choose from images provided to the sites by artists. Many also include tools for teachers to manage student accounts, set privacy controls, and track student progress.

**Put down the red pen.** Learn about procedures for engaging in descriptive review. The National School Reform Faculty provides a helpful protocol here: [http://www.nsrfharmony.org/protocol/doc/describing_students_work.pdf](http://www.nsrfharmony.org/protocol/doc/describing_students_work.pdf).

In addition, the following resources illustrate the powerful insights that emerge when teachers describe, rather than evaluate, student creative work:

carefully chosen colors to connote the mood and tenor of their scenes.

Analyzing the aesthetic qualities of the students’ comics allows for understanding how they selected images, colors, and dialogue to reflect their understanding and to suggest deeper themes in the novel. As evidenced by their frequent talk of using their imaginations and being creative, many students drew on the affordances of the software to “discover what it is to make a shape, an image, to devise a metaphor, to tell a tale—for the sake of finding their own openings into the realms of the arts” (Greene, 1991, p. 39).

In analyzing students’ aesthetic transactions (or lack thereof), we can see parallels between Rosenblatt’s aesthetic–efferent continuum of reading and the students’ digital composing processes. In what we term “aesthetic digital composing in response to literature,” students leverage the multiple digital, artistic, personal, and popular culture resources at their disposal to connote a mood, theme, or deeper insight into the human condition. Through intentional, yet often unpredictable and generative creative processes, students provide exposition for their chosen scene, craft dialogue for the characters, and seek out images, color, and design elements to render their response to literature. At times, these images and narrative structures are drawn purposefully from popular culture texts students have an affinity for, as in Liza’s choice of characters from soap operas; at other times, these images are chosen for their desired symbolic effect, as in Delia’s choice of carefully chosen colors to connote the mood and tenor of their scenes.

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### INTO THE CLASSROOM WITH READWRITETHINK

**Using Comics to Support Literature Study**

Teachers and students can use the ReadWriteThink.org Comic Creator (http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/student-interactives/comic-creator-30021.html) to compose their own comic strips for a variety of contexts (prewriting, pre- and post-reading activities, response to literature, and so on). The organizers focus on the key elements of comic strips by allowing students to choose backgrounds, characters, and props, as well as to compose related dialogue. For more ideas, visit:

- **Comics in the Classroom as an Introduction to Genre Study**
  
  Multidimensional, challenging, and popular with students, comics provide an excellent way to introduce the concept of genres.
  
  http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/comics-classroom-introduction-genre-188.html

- **Book Report Alternative: Comic Strips and Cartoon Squares**
  
  Students must think critically to create comic strips highlighting six important scenes from a book they have read.
  

- **Comics in the Classroom as an Introduction to Narrative Structure**
  
  This lesson uses comic strip frames to define plot and reinforce the structure that underlies a narrative. Students finish by writing their own original narratives.
  

- **Book Report Alternative: Examining Story Elements Using Story Map Comic Strips**
  
  Comic frames are traditionally used to illustrate a story in a short, concise format. In this lesson, students use a six-paneled comic strip frame to create a story map, summarizing a book or story that they’ve read. Each panel retells a particular detail or explains a literary element (such as setting or character) from the story.
  
of a grinning skull. The students often describe their choices in sensory, affective, and emotive terms and articulate how the multimodal elements work together to embody a feeling or mood.

In what we call “efferent digital composing in response to literature,” on the other hand, students are more concerned with the literal and the accurate. The images chosen do not reverberate with meaning or significance to the composer, and they may have only a surface-level connection to the story. Students pay little attention to other semiotic affordances of the software program to express the affective dimensions of the scene, to render a heightened sensibility, or to take their own creative license with dialogue or characterization. Little attention is paid to the overall design, and students eschew customizing the work in favor of a standard template. Efferent digital composing is often a solitary process pursued for utilitarian ends. This composing stance can also reflect the reading stance, as it did in Evan’s case, when he expressed a lack of engagement with the novel.

Drawing upon Rosenblatt’s theories of reading and writing yields compelling insights into how students responded to literature within their comics. At the same time, the students’ comics also provide compelling insights into how the digital arts can inform transactional theories of reading and writing. First, we contend that digital composing not only reflected, but in some cases extended students’ initial transaction with the book. In writing about the implications of her transactional theories, Rosenblatt (1982) asserts, “After our reading, our initial function is to deepen the experience. . . . We should help the young reader to return to, relive, savor the experience” (p. 275). When students reflected on the process of choosing their scene and creating their comics, there were times when they referenced the transaction they created while they read: students spoke of characters who captured their attention, of language choices that engrossed them, of feelings that emerged as characters faced difficult decisions or loss. Yet, in our view, the creation of the comic and the dialogue within it not only helped students “savor” the initial evocation, it also allowed them to transact with the new text they were creating on the screen in ways that added to their understanding.

Second, in describing the aesthetic stance, Rosenblatt (1981) often uses terminology connected to the aural, arguing that readers “pay attention to the sound, to the kinaesthetic and emotive reverberations of the words, and thus . . . make a poem” (p. 17). In aesthetic digital composing, the visual is more predominant as students imagine the scene in their heads and search for images, sometimes finding ones that matched their internal visions, but also finding unexpected images that contribute different dimensions to their transactions.

Third, another extension of Rosenblatt’s theories of reading and writing in light of the digital arts can be found in an expanded notion of “live ideas” (those ideas drawn from past experiences with life and language). For 21st-century students, the vast diversity, availability, and ubiquity of images in the digital landscape means they are drawing from an unprecedented set of influences for their compositions.

Finally, through digital composing processes that took place in a shared space where students were encouraged to view and comment on each other’s work, aesthetic transactions moved from the internal and private to the external and public.

“Felt on the Pulses”: Implications for Language Arts Education

This study suggests the value in attending to Rosenblatt’s perspectives on writing as well as continuing to problematize misunderstandings of her perspectives on reading, especially the recurrent conflation of the “aesthetic” with limited notions of “personal” response (Lewis, 2000). Rosenblatt has long argued against teaching literature primarily from an efferent stance, noting that it forecloses the aesthetic transaction and will thus impoverish the analysis that could come after. As she writes, “If there has
not been an aesthetic evocation . . . analysis will be like algebra, an intellectual exercise, an efferent analysis of components or devices in the text” (1981, p. 20).

The significance of the analysis undertaken in this article lies, therefore, in the invitation to consider how young people respond to literature with digital tools in ways that deepen and extend the aesthetic transaction. In both reflecting back on their evocations, as well as recreating a scene through visual means, many students created comics that revealed and enhanced their thinking about and responses to the book. Aesthetic digital composing in response to literature also provides opportunities for students to tap into the experiential, sensory, creative aspects of reading and writing, and, in Rosenblatt’s (1982) words, to express how literature is “felt on the pulses” (p. 276). We therefore contend that engaging with the digital arts, far from being ancillary to literary analysis, can in fact inspire and enrich it.

We also argue for the value of drawing upon perspectives within the arts and literary response to inform research, theory, and practice in digital composing. Across the interview transcripts, the students consistently spoke to how the project engendered new insights into themselves and their abilities to be creative. Engagement with the digital arts in which software programs allow for experimentation and expression through color, line, font, image, and narrative creates opportunities for students to express their responses to literature in exploratory ways across multiple sign systems. As researchers, analytical lenses attuned to the arts and aesthetics also enhanced our own analyses of students’ comics.

Finally, in light of how much our expectations were upset by the students’ own perspectives on their learning and by close analysis of their comics, we advocate for listening carefully to students’ points of view, looking intently at their creative work, and producing rich descriptions of their engagements. Deliberate inquiry into students’ perspectives and careful analysis of their artistic work can provide important insights, especially within pedagogical endeavors informed by emerging understandings of literacy as multimodal and purposefully connected to students’ life worlds. By valuing students’ perspectives and taking seriously the intentionality in their choice of an arresting image or an evocative color, teachers can gain more insight into students’ literary understandings and creative capacities.

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References


Kelly K. Wissman and Sean Costello  |  Creating Digital Comics in Response to Literature


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