Sara Kajder

Meeting Readers:
Using Visual Literacy Narratives in the Classroom

Pacey was the first of a small group of students in period 3 eighth-grade English class to take me up on the challenge of developing a *visual* literacy narrative. He was enrolled in the film studies program offered through our high school, which provided an instant "hook" into this assignment. Outside of school, he was constantly refining his art, reading about film, watching films, shooting film, etc. Despite his very literate practices outside of school, inside our classroom there were often days where I didn't know whether or not his mind had come to class with his body.

Initially, I'd come to know Pacey as a well-liked student with a great sense of humor—but one who did just enough work (written, performative, participatory) to avoid my radar screen. However, through this assignment, I came to know Pacey as a nonreader and nonwriter. Using iMovie to create a movie just short of 2 minutes in length, Pacey's composition was a visual, auditory, and experiential journey into his beliefs and experiences when it came to work with print texts. His work began with images of Pacey-as-toddler, snuggled into a parent's lap with *Goodnight Moon* or other "standards." I expected that we'd start by hearing about his early literacy experiences, and yet, his voiceover leapt to today. He spoke of English class as "the place that kills your reading, teaching you to read to not fail" and of reading as a lonely activity. Here, alongside idyllic images of Pacey as

child reader were the words "Pacey the school reader, a role I play because you require it from me."

Simply put, I learned more about Pacey in those five minutes than I ever thought possible. This article is as much about my coming to really see Pacey as it is about the ways that we were able to use the visual literacy narrative to tap into his out-of-school literacies, engage his interests, and get him reading and writing successfully inside the classroom. Quickly defined, the visual literacy narrative is a short, concise, digital video in which students are challenged to meld still images, motion, print text, and soundtrack (both narration and music) in communicating ideas/insights/discoveries about who our students are as readers and writers. Students in this class used iMovie to build their digital video as we were working on Apple computers. In a classroom with PCs, we could have just as easily done the project using Microsoft MovieMaker, another piece of software that allows the user to create and edit digital videos.

I met Pacey and his peers while working in his school as a professional development literacy coach/consultant. My charge was to work alongside teachers to integrate technology into their teaching in such a way as to lead all students to be more successful readers and writers. This work evolved from my "reinvention" of a required task that instructed teachers only to have students "write a literacy narrative of 2–4 pages in length, double-spaced in 12-point type."

Adding the visual component grew out of seeing student engagement increase during previous lessons and activities where they were challenged to take graphic notes when reading or to draw pictures to represent their understanding of a char-

acter. Here, we could use technology to engage disinterested students and enrich the assignment by incorporating images into a visual literacy narrative where students could expand their options for expression and decrease dependence on words alone.

Adolescence has often been described as a journey of self-discovery, a time when adolescents measure the width and breadth of the world and figure out where they fit in that world. Literacy narratives are a step on the journey of self-discovery. Pacey's use of visual imagery merely reflects his understanding of an increasingly plugged-in, digitalized world. It is inevitable that 21st-century adolescents are going to see (no pun intended) visual imagery as an essential component of narrative.

However, many 20th-century teachers feel less comfortable with the theory, techniques, and technology associated with visual literacy. In keeping with our digitized age, I'll recommend three websites to support your work with integrating visual literacy into the narrative lives of your students:

A great website for beginners is maintained by Keith Lightbody in Australia. It contains explanations, research, and helpful links about visual literacy in the classroom: http://members.ozemail.com.au/~leemshs/visual.htm

San Diego Unified School District has a very detailed and helpful website for producing and using iMovies in the classroom: http://edtech.sandi.net/handouts/imovie/

Search NCTE's ReadWriteThink website for dozens of lesson plans by middle school teachers. Type in *visual literacy* and limit your search to grades 6–8. http://www.readwritethink.org/

Who says self-discovery is just for adolescents? Good luck on your journey as you measure the width and breadth of our visual world.

—Nancy Frey

Into the Classroom: Writing a Visual Literacy Narrative

Big Ideas: Our Reader's Stories

As the first assignment in all of the English classes I teach, I ask students to compose a letter, introducing themselves to me as a reader. In order to set this up, I begin by discussing a range of suggested reading lists from *How Reading Changed My Life* or *I Hear America Reading*. I share my experiences as a reader, holding up my father's bedraggled, yellowed copy of *Moby Dick* that took us several years to read aloud or my beloved copy of *Ballet Shoes*, complete with duct taped edges that no longer hold the binding together. Sometimes, we discuss several of the letters from *I Hear America Reading* (1995) that Jim Burke's class received from across the country, ranging from students in kindergarten to a convict serving a life sentence. In other classes, I include the Modern Library's list of the Top 100 books of the 20th-century (Yardley, 1998) as it ran in *The Washington Post*, examined alongside comic Steve Martin's (1998) response/parody. The idea is to immerse students in a rich discussion about reading and, more important, to risk and share their own stories about reading.

Students' letters in Pacey's class were honest, surprising, and set the tone for much of our work ahead. Some students spoke of being defeated by grades, reading groups, and pull-outs. For them, reading was neither purposive nor pleasurable. Those books that left impressions were the novels that they'd failed to understand in class, and which continued to resurface in summer school or in later grades. Students were frank about their strategies, explaining what it meant to make their way through in-class reading by paying attention in class to what the teachers or "smart kids" said about texts in order to know what would be needed on a test. For others, reading was an immersive and necessary experience. They spoke of "literature as a life manual" or of the excitement they experienced in being moved by story—some to great extents, such as JaNhea, who described her experiences in refining a "shower reading" tech-

nique in which she uses one hand to hold the book and the other to "squeegee shampoo up my neck and onto my head, just because I don't want to waste the time away from my reading."

In beginning where students were as readers, the letter assignment allowed us an entry point into the larger assignment of the literacy narrative. Literacy narratives invite students' own stories and experiences into the classroom, providing a writing space meant for the exploration of what student writers think, read, understand, and know about their own skills and experiences. Myers (1996) explains that "reading and writing are acts of self definition," and the literacy narrative is a space for students to explore those selves (p. 130). By growing the task into a "visual" literacy narrative, we opened up the "tool-set," challenging and inviting students to bring their out-of-school literacies into play within the classroom.

Digging Deep

Writing allows us to explore, challenge, and ultimately act on what we know, but we first have to discover what it is that we have to say. I want students to work beyond what could be a surface-level piece, something that dashes over what they've read—or not read—without saying much of anything at all.

To expand the ideas that students included in their letters, I asked them to bring two "reading artifacts" to class before I introduced the assignment or had them put pen to paper. Some students brought worn copies of children's books and others brought artifacts that pointed to where they did their best reading—blankets, some flashlights, and, in one case, a bottle of shampoo (the label of which had been the text the student was most likely to read on any given day). Pacey brought in a piece of finish-line from his middle school cross country meet the previous day. He explained in his reflective writing:

> So, to me, reading is something that I get through so I can cross the finish line. No hidden mysteries there. I read to get it done. I get it done so I can move on to what I really want to do. Enough said.

Students were also asked to make an annotated bibliography of the books found in their home, on their bookshelves, or in the place where they most often read. This opened Pacey some, as he began to write about the library media center. These words became a base for a large section of his eventual written script:

> I don't hang out in libraries. I stopped in the media center because it was the one place that wasn't littered with kids that I didn't know and who didn't seem at all interested in the Navy brat who had just stumbled through the door. The librarian, Mrs. Shina, noticed me, called me over, and handed me a card. I didn't know what to say or think. She thought I was a reader. The card had my name on it, and there was something oddly attractive about how the plastic cover caught the light. She handed me a book and nodded toward the couch in the corner, away from the window. It was as if she knew.

He then listed the books that he'd read with her— *Ender's Game*, *Holes in My Life*, *Eragon*, and *Milkweed*. His annotations didn't focus on the story in the novels, but on the dates he began and finished each title and the places on the shelves where she'd kept the book for him to collect and read.

Making Meaning (on paper and on the screen)

The next stage of the work was to have students write their narrative scripts. Alongside their written narrative, students created storyboards to help guide the visual writing that needed to be done in anticipation of pulling together a "filmic" narrative. Here, images were aligned with the words that students would read aloud and record to form their digital video. Most students planned to take pictures of their reading places (however "untraditional" it seemed to include a bench at the bus depot or the break room at the 7–11 as a reading place) or the people who had influenced their habits (good and bad). Others planned to use more abstract images, scanning original work or relying on a class CD of images from the holdings of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

For Pacey, it wasn't enough to use pictures to show the places or texts that had influenced his path as a reader. Instead, he wanted to take a big-

SIDE TRIP: VISUAL LITERACY RESOURCES FROM READWRITETHINK

Developing a Definition of Reading through Analysis in Middle School
(http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=11)
Grades 6–8
Students will interact with a variety of different texts to uncover a broader meaning of reading.

Developing Reading Plans to Support Independent Reading
(http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=836)
Grades 6–8
Students identify books they have read recently and look for patterns connecting those that they enjoyed the most. Once they have analyzed their past readings, students complete a reading plan and make a simple wish list of books they hope to read in the future based on their preferences in the past. The finished list becomes another supporting resource to guide independent readers.

Peer Review: Narrative
(http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=122)
Grades 6–8
"I liked the story about you and Paul. I think you should add a little more detail and you should change the end two sentences so it will sound better." Sound familiar? This student response to a peer's draft is all too typical. The PQP technique—Praise–Question–Polish—encourages student writers to find and correct their own errors, using self-editing knowledge to empower them as writers, rather than asking them to make others' corrections.

Defining Literacy in a Digital World
(http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=915)
Grades 9–12
Through listing and observation, students identify the many texts that they read and compose—including books and magazines, television shows, movies, audio broadcasts, hypertexts, and animations. By creating an inventory of personal texts, students begin to consciously recognize the many literacy demands in contemporary society. With this start, they create a working definition of literacy that they refine and explore further as the term continues.

Exploring Literature through Letter-writing Groups
(http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view. asp?id=397)
Grades 9–12
This lesson asks students to discuss literature through a series of letter exchanges. It can be used as a one-time assignment in conjunction with any work of literature or it can be used throughout the year with the students discussing and making connections among a number of literary works.

"The following lesson plans were compiled by the ReadWriteThink staff. ReadWriteThink is a nonprofit MarcoPolo website maintained by the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), with support from the Verizon Foundation. We provide free lesson plans, interactive student materials, Web resources, and ELA standards to classroom teachers."

—Lisa Fink
readwritethink.org

ger risk and reveal more of what he knew and experienced. He explained in his writer's journal:

> I need to be able to show you what I do when I read. For Alyssa, this meant showing her comfy chair and favorite throw. For me, I think it means showing with a video camera how I work around a page. It might be hard to get it right, but I think that is the only way that someone can read this narrative and know anything about who I am as a reader.

Pacey used one of our class digital cameras to record short clips of his paths through the first few pages of *Holes in My Life*, the first book he'd read with Mrs. Shina. Instead of working left to right, he wove in and out and up and down the page, using iMovie to add color and pull viewer's attention to the lines as he worked to connect, re-read, gloss, re-read, and construct meaning.

Though I was excited to see students' interests engaged when it came to thinking about using technology in the project, this wasn't an assignment that I wanted to command too much instructional time. I wasn't the "technology expert" in this classroom; instead, I fed their interests as readers and writers and, I hope, challenged them to think about ways of framing and writing their narratives. My students were encouraged to use the technology expertise that they brought to the classroom because, although I could help them focus, organize, and prioritize by asking questions about the ways that they were using "new" tools to package or illustrate their narratives, the reality was that they knew much more than I did about how to make things happen on the screen.

That said, 14 students of the 28 in this class eventually chose to create a visual narrative, and we spent a week developing and discussing their work. I was able to cycle them through the three computers in the classroom and provide time before and after school for them to develop their pieces. They also composed outside of class, at home, and in film classes that the school offered. Here, infusing the technology didn't add to the time I'd allotted for the class to complete their narratives. Instead, some students instinctively reached for the technology tools as the best medium for telling their particular narrative, in much the same way that others instinctively selected pencils and paper.

Shaping the Story

Revision is typically a tough task for student writers, and revision in this activity was no exception. In this case, a great deal of that resistance came from the idea that students didn't feel it necessary to revisit their writing. What opened students in this case was a list of revision prompts from Bomer's *Writing a Life* (2005, pp. 159–168):

1. Where are you in this piece?
2. Revise by telling the truth (about how you felt).
3. Revise by telling "lies" (or, compensate for what you can't remember).
4. Revise by leaving things out.
5. Revise by telling another side of the story.

These prompts made revision accessible and encouraged students to take on sections of their writing as opposed to reworking the entire narrative.

In Pacey's case, he focused on what he could leave out. The difficulty he began to face when putting the images with his recorded narration was that there were too many words that were telling his readers what to see, what to think, etc. In his revision, he cut description, offering:

> I've never seen a movie or a documentary that had someone talking the whole way through like this. Yeah, it's my story, but it's going to become my story as seen by a reader. Why give it all to them? I want them to work.

Pacey's written script went from the front and back of a sheet of college-ruled notebook paper, to only the front of one page. It wasn't that the length was an issue; it was that he needed to provide space for the images to take on some of the narrative work.

> **I wasn't the "technology expert" in this classroom; instead, I fed their interests as readers and writers and, I hope, challenged them to think about ways of framing and writing their narratives.**

The last step in the process was for Pacey to record his script, narrating sentence by sentence and recording directly within iMovie. He then sequenced the length of the images so that what we saw on the screen was aligned with specific passages from his script. Again, as the English teacher, my job was to help Pacey develop the narrative so that it was concise, deliberate, and thoughtful. My questions were meant to push him to consider how his narrative was working to convey meaning, not on where he was pointing and clicking.

> **At the end of the film, there was a pause that lasted just long enough for me to grow concerned. Then, they applauded. And Pacey grew before our eyes.**

"Talking the Text"

We took time in class to view or read aloud those literacy narratives that students wanted to share with the whole class. For one of the first times in my teaching, I had unanimous participation. As Sahar explained, "Well, that's just because we all want to talk the texts . . . we got to hear the other readers' stories, and now we need some airtime, too." We hadn't conducted a formal peer review, so, for many of the students, this read-aloud was meant to see how another reader made meaning from their experiences.

Students were invited to use time before or after their reading or screening to reflect on their process of developing the narrative or to share something that would help to focus the audience's attention on a particular aspect of the text. Most of the students didn't take me up on that offer, relying on the context of the read-aloud to do the work of setting up what they had to say. Pacey, however, set up his story by offering:

> I think that this was the easiest and the hardest writing that I've done. When I work on a film, it's external. This is internal. It's a little raw. I'm going to show you something that I didn't know.

Using the classroom projector and my laptop, we were able to project Pacey's video onto the overhead screen for full-class viewing.

Students were riveted to Pacey's work as it walked them through a familiar place but through his eyes. They knew Mrs. Shina. They knew the corner of the library where they'd never noticed him sitting and reading. They knew the risk it took for him to not only admit to the crazy paths that he'd take through the page, but to show it in color, calling attention to its uniqueness, its flaws, and its brilliance. At the end of the film, there was a pause that lasted just long enough for me to grow concerned. Then, they applauded. And Pacey grew before our eyes.

End Points

In starting the school year by recognizing the different reading experiences, talents, and struggles of the students in my classes, I believe that we established a basic premise for the remainder of the course: we are all readers. We might not all read the same texts. We might not all read for the same purposes. But, we all engage with words and images and sounds in an attempt to make meaning from the texts that we encounter. That's a very big part of what my classes are about. Further, I wanted to establish, from the start of the course, that I valued my students' voices and wanted to respect the stories that they brought into the classroom as readers. Yes, we had pressures of state-mandated, high-stakes assessments and a curriculum full of more required content than could be taught. But, we needed to really see one another and the possibilities of what reading could be in order to get to the work at hand.

In his final journal entry addressing this project, Pacey was still working his way through the big lessons that this project had taught him about himself as a reader and, perhaps more important, the ways in which working with a visual text allowed him to see something that his previous work with only print text had not. He explained:

> I still am not sure that I'd define myself as a reader, but I'm closer. I never sat down and thought about why I read or don't read—it was easier to just not read. Part of me thinks that I was tricked a little into

this, but in watching my video, I see myself as a reader. It isn't pretty, but it's there in ways that I don't see if I read through these notes. Not sure what's up with that, but I'm going to keep coming so I can figure it out.

References

Bomer, K. (2005). *Writing a life: Teaching memoir to sharpen insight, shape meaning—and triumph over tests.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Burke, J. (1995). *I hear America reading.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Martin, S. (1998, September 21). The hundred greatest books that I've read. *The New Yorker, 74*(28), 148.

Myers, M. (1996). *Changing our minds: Negotiating English and literacy.* Urbana, IL: NCTE.

Yardley, J. (1998, July 28). The list of great novels: Read it and weep. *The Washington Post*, p. D2.

Sara Kajder is assistant professor of literacy education at the University of Louisville, Kentucky. She is also the author of *Bringing the Outside In: Visual Ways to Engage Reluctant Readers* (2006), and *The Tech-Savvy English Classroom* (2003).

James Strickland—2006 CEL Exemplary Leader Award Recipient

James Strickland is recognized nationally as an instructional leader and as a distinguished author of several books, including *The Subject Is Writing* (edited with the late Wendy Bishop), *Engaged in Learning: Teaching English 6–12* (coauthored with Kathleen Strickland), and *From Disk to Hard Copy: Teaching Writing with Computers*, among others.

James has also coauthored other books with Kathleen, including *Making Assessment Elementary, Reflections on Assessment: Its Purposes, Methods, and Effects on Learning*, and *UN-Covering the Curriculum: Whole Language in the Secondary and Post-Secondary Classroom*. Strickland has edited more than 20 books for Heinemann Educational Publishers.

During the last seven years, Strickland has delivered at least 10 keynote addresses. He is currently Professor of English at Slippery Rock University, Pennsylvania. James Strickland continues to serve as a mentor, teacher, author, and editor, and he embodies all the values and ideals of leadership that qualify him to receive this year's CEL Exemplary Leadership Award.

Don't miss James Strickland's presentation, "'Do It Write': Some Thoughts on the Importance of Writing Instruction," Monday, November 20, 2006, during the Conference on English Leadership (CEL), Nashville, Tennessee.