

Reading in a Participatory Culture

Remixing *Moby-Dick* in the
English Classroom

EDITED BY

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with Katie Clinton, Jenna McWilliams,

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Preface

One Teacher's Story

Becky Rupert

I was first introduced to New Media Literacies (NML) when Daniel Hickey, a learning sciences professor at Indiana University, stopped by my classroom one afternoon. Daniel asked if I would be interested in testing a new *Teachers' Strategy Guide (TSG)* that had been developed by Henry Jenkins and some very smart people from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He wondered if I would be willing to work with Michelle Honeyford and an Indiana team to help develop and test assessments for the *TSG*. I said yes, and at that moment, without really knowing what I was in for, I found myself embarking on the most interesting and fulfilling classroom adventure I'd had yet in my teaching career.

When Daniel told me that my kids would be reading *Moby-Dick* as part of the study, I have to be honest—I hesitated. When I told colleagues what my students would be reading, they raised eyebrows, asked me why, and then quickly, nervously wished me good luck. At that time, I taught at a small alternative high school; many of my students were jaded by years of traditional schooling and severely lacking in the academic skills other students their ages take for granted. Many battled to stay awake, focused, and interested, even while reading edgy and relevant young adult fiction that I had handpicked for them. I knew and loved *Moby-Dick*, having read it myself as an undergraduate and then again as a graduate student, but I also knew that it was a big book—a really big book—one full of complexities and allusions to works and worlds my students would not know, full of big words that were going to be unfamiliar, and laden with 19th-century sentence constructions that might overwhelm them. Teaching this book was going to be a big challenge, I thought, and it might take a miracle to pull off. But I had said yes, and I was willing to give it a try.

I didn't count on the intelligence already within that group of students and on their willingness and even eagerness to figure out the complexities together. The *TSG* helped me tap into and enlist their collective intelligence as we discussed the book together. The *TSG*'s first module, "Motives for Reading," asked students to consider their own motives for reading the book, as well as those of their classmates, and even my reasons for teaching it. These differing reasons for reading, reflecting our differing identities, backgrounds, and perspectives, provided multiple lenses through which we could make meaning of the text together. In addition, the *TSG* provided strategies for reading that my students found familiar and even fun and gave me ideas for taking these strategies even further, deepening and expanding my students' understanding of literary texts. Our class became a collective, participatory community deeply engaged in exploring *Moby-Dick*.

The *TSG*'s real beauty is the way its themes and approaches can be remixed and appropriated for other works of literature. In 2009 and 2010, with the help of Daniel Hickey and Jenna McWilliams, an Indiana University graduate student and former NML researcher, I taught the postmodernist text, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990), using the new media literacy practices of remixing and appropriation (themes found in the second unit in the *TSG*), with equal success. This time, students tweeted in character and created poetry from a collective Twitter feed and then later created fan fiction around specific chapters in *The Things They Carried*. These lessons, though not directly in the *TSG*, were an easy and natural outgrowth of the second unit's principles and themes. In this process, my students developed a deep and personal connection to Tim O'Brien's work, much as we experienced when we read *Moby-Dick* together.

Following our *Moby-Dick* unit, my students and I took a field trip to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where Ishmael and Ahab had embarked on their journey to follow the white whale. I intended the field trip as reinforcement of my students' learning and as a celebration and the culmination of our work together. We wanted to explore the area, go whale watching, and see Ricardo Pitts-Wiley's Mixed Magic Theatre production of *Moby-Dick: Then and Now*, starring Rudy Cabrera—another *TSG* "expert voice." My students were already fans of Rudy, having watched him in several NML videos. We did all those things, but what surprised me more than anything was the very intelligent way my students were able to discuss *Moby-Dick* with experts. In their conversations with MIT Melville scholar Wyn Kelley, Rudy, and Ricardo, my students tapped their own "expert voices" regarding the book. They asked Ricardo intelligent and insightful questions

about his choices in writing and staging the play. Their conversation with Wyn in an upper conference room at the New Bedford Whaling Museum further confirmed that my students knew the book through and through. They argued cogently that Melville's chapter "The Town Ho's Story" was an important part of the book, despite the insistence of "experts" that this chapter served little purpose; they argued that this "story within a story" was a sort of foil to the chapter "The Cabin Table" and that both ultimately helped the reader understand the complex social and cultural tensions at play on the *Pequod*. I was a proud teacher sitting at that table as my students talked to Wyn.

My experience using the *TSG* was a huge success. My students' learning far exceeded expectations. In addition to this being a challenging and fun teaching journey for me, I discovered a framework that continues to affect my teaching in surprising and positive ways. I hope that other teachers who bring new media literacy practices into their classrooms have as much success with it as I continue to have.

New Literacies in an Age of Participatory Culture

Katie Clinton, Henry Jenkins,
and Jenna McWilliams

At first glance, playwright, youth organizer, and community activist Ricardo Pitts-Wiley might seem a peculiar inspiration for a book about digital media and participatory culture. Although Pitts-Wiley is enthusiastic about the potential of new media, much of his work is distinctly low-tech. He writes and produces remixed versions of such classics as Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* for a traditional venue: the community stage.

But something magical—something *participatory*—happens on that stage. First, his plays' universal themes are seasoned with immediacy, with issues that resonate with his community. His play *Moby-Dick: Then and Now*, for example, intermingles the themes of Captain Ahab's obsessions, his fatalism, and his willingness to place his crew in peril with contemporary urban gang culture. The whaling trade from Melville's book becomes the drug trade in the contemporary retelling; Ahab becomes Alba, a teenage girl whose brother has been killed by a "WhiteThing" a mysterious figure for the international cocaine cartel; she devotes her life to finding, and killing, those responsible for her brother's death.

In *Moby-Dick: Then and Now*, Pitts-Wiley chose not simply to revise the story, but to incorporate aspects of Melville's version in counterpoint with Alba's quest for vengeance. As the young actors pace the stage, telling their story in contemporary garb, lingo, and swagger, a literal scaffold above their heads holds a second set of actors, who give life to Melville's original tale. The "then" half of the cast is generally older and whiter than

the adolescent, mixed-race “now” actors. The play’s meaning lies in the juxtaposition between these two very different worlds, a juxtaposition sometimes showing commonalities, sometimes contrasts.

Reading in a Participatory Culture reflects an equally dramatic meeting between worlds. New Media Literacies (NML) emerged from the MacArthur Foundation’s ground-breaking commitment to create a field around digital media and learning. The foundation sought researchers who would investigate how young people learned outside the formal educational setting—through their game play, their fannish participation, “hanging out, messing around, and geeking out” (Ito et al., 2010). The goal was to bring insights drawn from these sites of informal learning to the institutions—schools, museums, and libraries—that affect young people’s lives. Right now, many young people are deprived of those most effective learning tools and practices as they step inside the technology-free zone characterizing many schools. Other young people, who lack access to these experiences outside school, are doubly deprived because schools are not helping them to catch up to their more highly connected peers.

New Media Literacies—first at MIT and now at University of Southern California—has brought together a multidisciplinary team of media researchers, designers, and educators to develop new curricular and pedagogical models that could contribute to this larger project. This initiative has been informed by Henry Jenkins’s background as a media scholar focused on fan communities and popular culture and by the applied expertise of Erin Reilly, who had previously helped to create Zoey’s Room, a widely acclaimed online learning community that employs participatory practices to get young women more engaged with science and technology. The NML team brought together educational researchers (such as Katie Clinton, who studied under James Paul Gee, and Jenna McWilliams, who has an MFA in creative writing and teaching experience in rhetoric and composition) with community-based media literacy veterans (like Anna Van Someren, who ran an afterschool program at the YWCA). Flourish Klink, who had helped to organize the influential Fan Fiction Alley website, which provides beta reading for amateur writers to hone their skills, and Lana Swartz, who had been a classroom teacher working with special need children, also joined the research group. And the development and field testing of curricular resources involved NML in collaborating with other academic researchers, such as scholars engaged in Howard Gardner’s GoodPlay Project at Harvard and Dan Hickey, an expert on participatory assessment at Indiana University. NML also worked with youth-focused

organizations such as Global Kids, with classroom teachers such as Judith Nierenberg and Lynn Sykes in Massachusetts and Becky Rupert in Indiana—Nierenberg, Sykes, and Rupert were rethinking and reworking TSG materials for their instructional purposes—and with scholars such as Wyn Kelley who had long sought new ways to make Melville's works come alive in classrooms around the country.

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Popular media representations often set so-called digital literacies at odds with the values and norms of traditional print culture. This book's authors wanted to work across that divide, envisioning a generation of students who could read with a book in one hand and a mouse in the other. In this view, the new media literacies could supplement and expand traditional print literacies in ways that enriched our culture and deepened our appreciation of classical stories. New media platforms and practices were giving students much greater opportunities for communication and expression than could have been imagined by any previous generation. But to participate meaningfully, young people needed to be able to read and write; they needed to know how to connect their contemporary experiences to a much older tradition, and the literature classroom represents a particularly rich environment for fusing these different ways of learning.

Jenkins and Kelley knew when they first met Pitts-Wiley that they had found the perfect co-conspirator on this journey. Pitts-Wiley had gone into an institution for incarcerated youth and helped these young men to learn to read *Moby-Dick* by encouraging them to identify closely with a single character and speculate about what kind of person that character would be if he were living today. In the process, he encouraged them to reimagine *Moby-Dick* as a novel about not the 19th-century whaling trade but rather the 21st-century drug trade—both dangerous professions involving men on the margins of their society who were loyal to each other and to their leaders in their ruthless pursuit of their economic interests.

Pitts-Wiley, in turn, took inspiration from the stories these young men created for his own new stage production, *Moby-Dick: Then and Now*. In the process, Pitts-Wiley became a passionate advocate for getting communities to read and discuss classical novels together. While Pitts-Wiley saw remixing as an important strategy for constructing a productive dialogue with young people around literary works, he was also emphatic that remixing should

emerge from a meaningful engagement with the original work. As an African American, he was very aware of how his culture was often “ripped off” by White artists without any acknowledgment of its original meanings and contexts. He asserted his right to draw on the literary canon, but he also insisted that his students pay respect to those who came before. Creative reading worked hand in hand with critical and close reading.

When the Mixed Magic Theatre met NML, the collaboration took all involved outside their comfort zones, forcing each to think more deeply about core assumptions regarding literacy, learning, and cultural expression. Here’s how Pitts-Wiley recalls this encounter:

I didn’t feel dumb or unprepared, but I doubted whether I had the language to translate what I was doing into a form that both sides would understand and appreciate. I knew I wasn’t up to speed with the technology and concepts the NML team was working with and I wasn’t sure they were going to be helpful in putting a play on stage. However, as the work proceeded, both sides realized that it wasn’t about allowing technology to dominate. Rather, we were both interested in better understanding how pop culture, access to information, powerful sound, and visuals can hamper or enhance the learning process. I was doing things, as a theater artist, to get my cast to perform with informed honesty, and I came to see that NML was looking for ways to synthesize this process into something that was concise and replicable. As we did so, we were both looking for ways to work around generational, economic, and cultural differences that made the world of MIT and the world my young actors inhabited miles apart.

This book tells the story of what happened when these collaborators sought to bridge these two worlds, what they learned from each other about reading in a participatory culture, how they translated that learning into a framework and a set of classroom activities, and what happened when those approaches got into the hands of gifted teachers. As NML sought to explore how a curriculum for the English language arts classroom could draw upon the mindsets and practices of a participatory culture, it used Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* as its model text and Pitts-Wiley’s play *Moby-Dick: Then and Now* as an example of a contemporary theater adaptation, to develop what NML calls the teachers’ strategy guide. The *Teachers’ Strategy Guide (TSG)* is not simply a lesson plan that tells teachers what to do, but rather represents an approach for teaching