

The Hunger Games and *Little Brother* Come to Life on VoiceThread:

Helping Students Respond Visually to Young Adult Literature

In a world where reality television rules the prime-time slots, students do not step back to consider how the shows in which they have become entrenched are mediated or constructed events. Kellner (2009) argues that the dramatic events created by the media often involve competition; these spectacles “are highly public social events, often taking a ritualistic form to celebrate society’s highest values” (p. 1). As teachers, we can push students to see patterns of ritual in these shows and to identify the formulas that make them work. Young adult (YA) novels such as *The Hunger Games* (2010) can help facilitate these discussions.

In our undergraduate English Education program, I teach a course titled “Digital Media and Technology in English Language Arts.” In this course, I strive to engage students in critical conversations about technology and media and ask them to use appropriate forms of technology to respond to and analyze various forms of media, including television shows, Web pages, and young adult novels, with technology or media as a central theme. Two YA novels I use for this class are Collins’s *The Hunger Games* (2010) and Doctorow’s *Little Brother* (2008). *The Hunger Games* offers opportunities to explore the idea of constructed events in media and to challenge students’ view of media, while *Little Brother* allows students to explore ways in which society might appropriate technology to fight a cause.

In *The Hunger Games*, the United States has

become the nation of Panem after a political uprising of unspecified cause. Panem is divided into twelve districts, and every year, each district must send a male and female tribute to fight in the annual Hunger Games. How is the winner determined? The last tribute living wins. *The Hunger Games* focuses on the experience of Katniss Everdeen, the female tribute from District Twelve. Collins’s novel raises many questions about society and our reality television culture, and when implemented purposefully in the classroom, can lead students to critically examine the ways in which reality television shows are mediated experiences for the participants and the viewers. Still fueled by the Twilight series novel-to-movie phenomenon, even my college students cannot wait for the impending and much-hyped release of *The Hunger Games* movie. Students enjoy imagining what the scenes and characters might look like; they enjoy visualizing the novel.

In *Little Brother*, the protagonist Marcus finds himself in the wrong place at the wrong time when he chooses to skip school one afternoon. As a result, Marcus and his other tech-savvy friends get arrested by the Department of Homeland Security when there is a bombing in San Francisco. Once he is released, Marcus and his friends use their extensive knowledge of technology to hack various systems and free one of their friends still held captive by the government. This novel offers a commentary on Big Brother government that is accessible to young readers, and it teaches readers a lot about technology in easily accessible

language. My students find themselves really riled up about issues of privacy after reading *Little Brother* and start thinking about ways in which they may be unknowingly “watched” as they move through their daily lives.

Responding Visually to YA Novels: The Assignment

A course examining media and technology offers opportunities to seamlessly and purposefully integrate the visual, the spoken, and the written in published multimedia products. NCTE/IRA Standards for English Language Arts (1996) require “students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes” (Standard 12). This standard frames the visual response assignment that I ask students to create as part of their reading of *The Hunger Games* and *Little Brother*. Through this assignment, students develop an understanding of visual literacy and its importance in the English Language Arts curriculum.

The assignment asks students to create a visual response that requires thoughtful commentary from viewers and asks them to consider ways that visual images can be used to help their own students develop critical responses to texts. Working from Debes’s (1969) definition, I share with the class my broad definition of visual literacy as the ability to interpret, analyze, and make meaning of information presented in the form of an image. I then guide the students through using principles of visual rhetoric to examine the ways in which components work together to compose images that relay thoughtful, intentional information.

I ask students to present their visual response through VoiceThread (<http://www.voicethread.com>). VoiceThread is a free, online application that allows users to create a series of images or slides. They can then record audio for their images, type text, and/or mark or highlight specific features of their image as they discuss it. Finally, VoiceThread allows other users to record, either through audio or typed text, a response to products users publish on the site. Users have the option of keeping their product private and inviting other users to view it or of publishing it to the general VoiceThread community. These options make VoiceThread a versatile, low-tech tool to implement with students in a classroom.

The visual response assignment asks students to develop a visual image or a series of visual images to represent their response to issues in *The Hunger Games* and/or *Little Brother*. I have students publish their images on VoiceThread. Their images must move beyond depicting scenes from the novels; they must make a critical commentary on the issues surrounding technological advancement, constructed/mediated events in media, etc. as presented in the novels, as explored in their reading responses to the novels, and as discussed in class. The image(s) must also be more than a simple photograph. I encourage students to experiment with digital media, such as photo-editing programs, to alter the images and represent them in a way that helps push the message they are trying to convey to the audience. Because

VoiceThread allows students to incorporate written or recorded audio text, I require students to write and record a brief explanation of the ideas they are trying to convey through their image(s). I then have students take time in class to respond to each other’s visual responses, leaving either typed comments or recorded comments with the use of a microphone I provide.

I provide students with support in creating their visual responses. First, we create VoiceThread accounts and tinker with the program in class. We practice critiquing various visual images and edited photographs by becoming familiar with visual rhetoric and then using it to apply various criteria to “reading” images and discussing them with the class. We also look at how manipulating images with photo-editing software alters the ways we read them. I provide students with resources for various free photo-editing software, such as Photo Plus (<http://www.serif.com/free-photo-editing-software/?MC=FSSPHOTOPLUS>) and Google’s Picasa software (<http://picasa.google.com>). Additionally, I show students how to use the Paint program, standard on PCs, to edit images.

Finally, it is important to allow time for class discussion prior to asking students to create a visual re-

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sponse to novels. Groenke and Maples (2008) note that many literature teachers use discussion as a predominant mode of communication because “we know discussion affords students opportunities to hear diverse viewpoints and perspectives.” These discussion opportunities allow students to express and revise their perspectives on texts before producing a critical, formal response to them. To prepare my students for our in-class discussion, I provide a few questions about *The Hunger Games*¹ and *Little Brother*, including the following overarching questions:

- In what ways do *The Hunger Games* and *Little Brother* comment on technology, media, and society?
- What positive statements do the novels make about technology and media? What negative statements do they make?

- What key passages support these statements?
- What key passages stand out to you as a reader?
- What commentary do these novels offer about the convergence of society with ever-increasing technological developments?

Students’ responses are not multimedia projects in the sense that they are using video-editing software and incorporating music; rather, the focus of the project is primarily on the images they create. The VoiceThread platform results in products that run more like sophisticated slide shows, with commentary not only from the creator but from other users in the VoiceThread community, prioritizing the image over other multimedia elements students might integrate through other technological platforms. In fact, one requirement of the assignment is that students create their own image(s) using a camera and digital-editing software, which avoids copyright issues generated when students grab images from the Internet. Finally, I evaluate students’ projects based on their depth of analysis, insight, and meaning, their evident integration and manipulation of image(s), and their polish and attention to detail (see Fig. 1).

	16–20 points	11–15 points	6–10 points	0–5 points
Depth of Analysis/ Insight/ Meaning	Outstanding analysis of the issues technological advancement poses to society as presented in your novel; clear meaning conveyed through final image(s); intent of meaning as indicated through statement is clear in visual response	A sufficient analysis of the issues presented in your novel; an idea of the meaning conveyed through the final image(s) is present; intent of meaning as indicated through statement somewhat connects with visual response.	An inadequate analysis of the issues presented in your novel; little idea of the meaning conveyed through the final image(s); intent of meaning as indicated through statement has little connection with visual response.	Little effort made to construct a visual image that is original and presents a commentary on the novel.
Evident Integration and Manipulation of Image(s)	Excellent work creating your own image and manipulating it to deliberately convey critical thinking and a clear message!	A decent effort at creating your own image and manipulating it to convey some critical thinking and a message.	A questionable effort at creating your own image and manipulating it; little critical thinking evident; no clear message.	Little effort made to create and manipulate your own image; no critical thinking evident; no clear message.
	8–10 points	5–7 points	2–4 points	0–1 point
Polish and Attention to Details	Excellent work communicating credibility and professionalism through clear, thoughtful format and presentation!	A good job of presenting your work.	Some improvements needed so that your work comes across as serious and academic.	Work seems sloppy or like a draft; presentation was slapdash.

Figure 1. Rubric for visual response project

The Responses Students Create: Tony's Example

Students love *The Hunger Games* and *Little Brother*, and they love discussing them; however, they express much uncertainty about how to respond via a visual medium. While they initially struggle with this response assignment because it is outside the paradigm of what a traditional literature assignment looks like in their experiences, students always succeed with it.

Tony was a student in my class a couple of semesters ago, and his visual response, "Weapons of Mass Protection," represents the approach students take by using a single image they have created and recording a commentary on it (see Fig. 2). Notice the small icon with an avatar bubble above it; that icon indicates that Tony recorded his thoughts for others to hear as they view his image. Tony's initial comment in his product "Weapons of Mass Protection" reads:

In the Dystopian novels *The Hunger Games* and *Little Brother*, we can see the characters struggle with how they will defend themselves from the dangers society has brought upon them. This is no different from the society in which we live. At one point or another, we must choose how we will defend our values. We might choose to defend ourselves with technology, just like Marcus does in *Little Brother*. We also might choose to use something less mechanical, like Katniss does in *The Hunger Games*.

Tony's response refers to the discussions students had in response to *Little Brother* about privacy and the extent to which students individually value it. Some students felt strongly about fighting for their personal privacy while others accepted that lack of personal privacy might offer benefits for society as a whole. Some students also accepted a lack of personal privacy because they had never experienced negative consequences. Examples we discussed in class included, but were not limited to, websites monitoring visits and targeting users with ads, security cameras in public places, and people taking pictures or video of others without their knowledge through their personal devices. As Tony notes, Katniss's loss of privacy in *The Hunger Games* is different from Marcus's loss of it in *Little Brother* because Katniss's lack of privacy is more overt through the lens of the television cameras.

VoiceThread offers a highlight tool that allows users to draw on their image and to point out its various features as they discuss it, and like most students, Tony took advantage of this feature by adding a large

red question mark to his image just above the knife. At this point in his commentary, Tony says:

This begs the question, "What will you choose, technology or savagery?" Each situation is a different animal. Technology can be viewed as focused and methodical. It could be the only "pure" way to defend yourself without letting emotions interfere. On the other hand, using a simple thing like a knife might be the only way to leave a reminder to your aggressor of the consequences of actions. So, what weapon will you choose to protect yourself?

While Tony's questions offer a broad commentary, they show specific connections to *The Hunger Games*

and *Little Brother* because he specifically addresses both of the novels in his initial statement. Tony then steps back to consider the broader implications he sees in both novels and in his final response to them. The computer keyboard represents the weapon used by Marcus in *Little Brother*; the knife offers a direct reference to Katniss and her fight to win the annual Hunger Games. Tony also engages his viewers by

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Figure 2. Image created by Tony in response to *The Hunger Games* and *Little Brother*

asking rhetorical questions to invite them into the “conversation” begun by his response.

As I noted earlier, students begin this project feeling some trepidation because it is outside of the mediums and paradigms typically used to respond to literature. Yet, as evidenced by Tony’s images and

commentary, they do produce thoughtful, intentional responses that compare, analyze, and evaluate the issues presented in two young adult novels. In the final portion of his response, Tony notes:

This particular project enabled me to connect with each of the YA novels on a deeper level. In my opinion, a traditional written response to a YA novel, or any novel for that matter, hinders the connection to the characters and themes presented within a particular text. By adding in or making a visual

component the focus of the response, this project allowed me to explore different visual representations that aided in my understandings of each YA novel. The response I crafted engages the two YA novels on many different rhetorical levels and depicts the authentic connection I made to the common themes and issues contained in both YA novels. My final project allowed me to present those common themes and issues that connected the two YA novels that a traditional “book report” would not have allowed for in writing alone through the use of both verbal and nonverbal language. My response was worth more than a thousand words because it was not only limited to the confines of written language, it exploded out into the realm of creative visualizations that knew no bounds.

The assignment’s invitation to focus on responding visually helped Tony further understand the novels in different ways than traditional written modes of response. He also felt that he could not have expressed the connections he made between the two novels as effectively through a more traditional written medium, such as a book report.

Visual Literacy and Textual Response

Good readers visualize events in the text (Beers, 2002). Asking students to analyze purposefully and apply visual rhetorical devices to their responses to any young adult novels will help students develop their visualization skills; it asks that they consider the

rhetorical demands of *visual* text, not just written text, thus helping them to become more visually literate. Visually literate students become “more resistant to the manipulative use of images in advertisements and other contexts”; they “can interpret, understand, and appreciate the meaning of visual messages [and] can use visual thinking to conceptualize solutions to problems” (Mestre, 2008).

Furthermore, the world in which we live is becoming increasingly visual, moving visual communication into a predominant mode (Mestre, 2008). Literacies practiced in schools need to equip students to not only read but to write and communicate in a variety of forms required by evolving 21st century literacies. Selfe and Hawisher (2004) assert, “If literacy educators continue to define literacy in terms of alphabetic practices only, in ways that ignore, exclude, or devalue new media texts, they not only abdicate a professional responsibility to describe the ways in which humans are now communicating and making meaning, but they also run the risk of the curriculum no longer holding relevance for students who are” living and communicating in digital environments (p. 233).

Tony noted that responding in a predominantly visual format required him to think beyond the confines of written communication and allowed him to respond in ways that written text alone would not. In other, more extended visual assignments with students, they have noted that the process of responding visually required them “to re-read the novel and to think about it critically as they made deliberate decisions in their selection of images” (Dail, 2011, p. 189). As teachers, we have opportunities to think outside the box and incorporate a range of literacies when asking students to respond to literature. Because my students are preservice teachers, I ask them to think about this when creating assignments for their own students. Integrating genuine opportunities to use 21st century literacies in our curriculum supports student learning through modes they already use, helps them to think critically about those modes, and encourages them to think about text in different ways.

Endnote

1. Specific questions about *The Hunger Games* and *Catching Fire*, the second book in the series, are available through Scholastic at <http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/collateral.jsp?id=36164>.

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