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## **Mask-making as Representational Process: The Situated Composition of an Identity Project in a Senior English Class**

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### **Abstract**

Eisner, Gardner, and others have argued that the arts should be better integrated into the K-12 curriculum. In this study we examine three high school senior boys who, as part of a unit of instruction on identity, each produced a mask through which he artistically expressed his sense of self. Using a sociocultural framework based in the work of Vygotsky, we analyzed the boys' composition of their masks in terms of their goals for working on the project, the material and psychological tools they employed to produce the masks, and the settings in which they learned how to use their compositional tools for such purposes. Based on both concurrent

and retrospective protocols that the boys produced in conjunction with composing their masks, we investigated their processes of composition as what Gee terms *identity projects*; i.e., as efforts to project themselves into their mask texts and as part of their long-term projects to explore and develop their personal and socially-situated identities. Each participant used the mask-making composition as an occasion for inscribing his experiences, beliefs, and emotions into the text, albeit in different ways and toward different ends. The study concludes with a consideration of the use of arts in literacy education, a reconsideration of the limitations of language-based-only conceptions of literacy, and the possibilities for expanded learning opportunities when English/Language Arts classes open up students' textual tool kits to allow for broader opportunities to engage with the curriculum.

## Introduction

Students in English language arts classes are typically assessed through their writing, often through what Bloom (1956) would consider to be the least demanding cognitive tasks of short-answer or forced-choice questions (Langer & Applebee, 1987) or formulaic essays. By restricting literary response to particular interpretations and essay forms, educators contribute to what Goodlad (1984) calls the “flat” atmosphere in schools (p. 108). This lackluster quality may follow from the low levels of cognition expected of students in school, the lack of generative thinking that they are asked to bring to their school work, the disconnection between students' lives and interests, the required ways through which they may respond to the curriculum, and the paucity of options through which they can express their engagement with the texts they read. Gardner (1983) has advocated for the expansion of activity and assessment in schools by capitalizing on students' multiple intelligences in order to allow for broader access to school participation and success.

While many schools take a bland, limited approach to teaching and learning, Eisner (1998) argues that schools do not have to be this way. In fact, there are places in school where dynamic expanded notions of schooling abound (Eisner, 2002). Many classrooms in schools—including those in such lowly regarded areas as home economics and agriculture—are marginalized in relation to the “core” subjects of math, science, history, and English; yet provide occasions for composition and meaning construction far more dynamic than what generally occur in the purportedly more demanding academic courses (Smagorinsky, 1995; Smagorinsky, Pettis, & Reed, 2004; Smagorinsky, Cook, & Reed, 2005; Smagorinsky, Zoss, & Reed, 2006).

In this study, we examine how one high school British Literature classroom used the arts as one feature of the curriculum and how the inclusion of the arts affected three boys. We

explore the extent to which literacy and identity development can occur during the process of artistic composition. To do so, we investigate the composing processes of three seniors as they engaged in an identity project: They each designed and created a plaster mask to represent themselves (see Figures 1-3) as part of a thematic unit on identity. We situate this study within a line of inquiry through which we have argued for a broadened notion of composition that includes not only writing but art, drama, dance, and design (O'Donnell-Allen & Smagorinsky, 1999; Smagorinsky, 1997, 2001; Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1994, 1995a, 1995b; Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 1998a, 1998b, 2000).

To understand these three students' socially-situated processes of composition in creating identity masks, we focus on the following question:

What do think-aloud and retrospective protocols reveal about the students' composing processes and identity representation and construction during their production of the masks in terms of: a) the students' goals for composing their masks; b) the compositional tools with which they produced their masks; and c) the settings in which they learned how to use their compositional tools?



*Figure 1: Alan's Mask*



*Figure 2: Jay's Mask*



*Figure 3: Peta's Mask*

In order to consider this question, we adopt a Vygotskian perspective of learning that emphasizes the volitional, goal-directed, tool-mediated action in social context that people engage in as they produce cultural texts (Wertsch, 1991). We next outline the major tenets of our understanding of this Vygotskian perspective and the role of texts and identity work in the mask compositions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Our theoretical framework is situated within larger discussions of text, identity, and learning. The activity of composing an identity mask is situated in the social networks of the classroom, the school, and the larger community in which the students are participants. Wertsch (1991) argues that activity requires attention to goals, settings, and tools. For instance, we recognize that the students' volitional creation of the mask (goal) was situated within the social contexts (setting) of both the classroom and the home and that to accomplish the production of the mask, students used a variety of tools (particularly, for our purposes, what we call schematic tools such as narratives). Furthermore, we consider the creation of the mask to be a text composition activity in which the students both explored and embodied their personal and cultural identities. We next outline our understanding of text and identity.

#### **Text**

For this study, we define text in the expanded and inclusive way that Witte uses (1992; cf. Smagorinsky, 2001; Flood, Heath, & Lapp, 1997/2005; The New London Group, 1996). According to Witte, "studying the production and use of 'writing' from a perspective that privileges spoken or written linguistic systems of meaning-making and ignores other systems of meaning-making can hardly yield a comprehensive or a culturally viable understanding of 'writing' or 'text'" (p. 240). Every text for Witte is situated within a social context that may include a number of other texts and intertexts. Intertext refers to the dialogue that a text has with other texts in the tradition of Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) heteroglossic dialogism. In this study, there were two main texts: the identity masks that the students created in class (mask composition) and the discourse regarding emerging identities that the students produced through talking about their masks (identity composition) as they inscribed that identity in the masks. Both forms were ongoing and provisional texts that underwent changes while the students worked through the composition process. Furthermore, each text was informed by intertextual connections to texts from both in- and out-of-school experiences.

Being able to use media of different types requires the use of what Wertsch (1991) describes as a cultural tool kit. Within that tool kit students have a variety of mediational tools that allow them access to media and begin the process of composing meaning.

Smagorinsky (1995, 2001) has argued that within most settings, a limited set of culturally valued tools are sanctioned. In most language arts classrooms, for example, arts-based tools, such as drawing and mask-making, have little currency. In contrast, linguistic essays have substantial cachet and are not only accepted but also expected as the appropriate tools for representing meaning-making. Masks and other artistic texts are not necessarily authorized in most English classes because they do not fit within the verbal and logical economies of schools writ large, and the language arts curriculum in particular.

### **Identity**

While students' communication skills are most often revealed through writing and other linguistic formats within language arts curricula in the United States, the student's development as a person is not necessarily integral to that teaching and learning. A number of educators, however, have questioned this neglect of the person in schooling throughout the last century. Dewey's progressive tradition (e.g., Dewey, 1916) emphasizes the ways in which conceptions of identity need to be addressed in school if education is to be a space for developing thoughtful democratic citizens (cf. Cook, 2004). The Anglo-American Conference at Dartmouth College in 1966 later brought "the British pedagogy of growth" (Applebee, 1974, p. 231) to U. S. educators, helping to generate interest in both learning processes and personal development through engagement with the language arts curriculum. Yet since that time, identity work has been, according to Gee (2003), insufficiently attended to in schools in mainstream instruction, even if, as Applebee finds, this focus has remained an undercurrent over time. This developmental approach attends to the whole student, not just the skills that they evidence in assessment.

Our approach to this question is consistent with Gee's (2003) claim that "All learning in all semiotic domains requires identity work" (p. 51). Through young people's engagement with video games, he argues, they construct a *projective identity*, which references two related meanings of the word *project*: "to project one's values and desires onto the virtual character" and to see "the virtual character as one's own project in the making, a creature whom I imbue with a certain trajectory through time defined by my aspirations for what I want that character to be and become" (p. 55). This interrelation of learning and the development of identity (Wardekker, 1998), personality (Valsiner, 1998), social futures (The New London Group, 1996), personal growth (Dixon, 1967), and similar personal qualities and destinations is a growing interest among researchers concerned with human development. Gee's notion of a projective identity is particularly germane to our own work, given that we seek to understand the degree to which learners in school project themselves and their experiences, values, beliefs, aspirations, worldviews, and so on into the texts that they produce in a British literature curriculum; how the process of doing so contributes to their articulation and understanding of those experiences, beliefs,

and other dimensions of personal growth; and how those texts in turn enable them to reflect not only on whatever formal properties are valued in the setting of the classroom but how their texts may serve as provisional representations of who they are and where they are headed through their experiences in and out of school.

All of these conceptions of text and identity are congenial with Vygotsky's (1978, 1987) emphasis on volitional, goal-directed, tool mediated action in social contexts. The texts in this study are the masks, which in turn serve as identity projects the students are composing within the setting of their English class. In this classroom the cultural tool kit includes both traditionally sanctioned and less frequently employed tools in the activity of creating identity masks. Further, we see this inclusive notion of student assessment as embracing a more democratic notion of composition, one that invites students from a variety of contexts to become personally and meaningfully involved in the school activity. Artistry in this context is a means for engaging differently and individually each of the participants toward the common goal of creating an identity/mask composition (Moody, 1990). We next outline the study's research methods, followed by an introduction to the students who participated in this activity and the context of their composing of the masks.

## **Method**

### **Data Collection**

#### *Data not Subjected to Formal Analysis*

Daily field notes were recorded and forwarded to the teacher, third author Cindy O'Donnell-Allen, for verification. Cindy kept a teaching journal in which she reflected on her teaching in light of the research project. Like the field notes, her journal primarily served to provide the instructional context for the mask activity. Cindy also provided curriculum materials such as handouts, lesson plans, and other artifacts of her teaching. These curriculum materials helped to corroborate the narrative produced in the field notes.

#### *Protocols*

Three boys (Alan, Jay, and Peta—all pseudonyms) volunteered to provide protocols during or following their compositions of identity representations on their masks. Cindy, the teacher, volunteered to host the study, so she was not selected for protocols. The 3 boys were part of a subset of students who volunteered to be focal students. Limited personnel (i.e., only 2 researchers available to conduct think-alouds while the whole class did masks simultaneously) required us to select 2 students for the think-alouds. We chose Alan for the study because of his interests in becoming an artist; Jay because he was skeptical of the arts activities in Cindy's class. Peta became available for a protocol



because he came in on a different day and was among the whole set of volunteer students in the study. Because of their presence or absence during days when the mask-making took place in class, the students provided either a concurrent or retrospective protocol. Following collection, all protocols were transcribed for later analysis. We next outline the procedures for each type of protocol.

*Concurrent protocol.* Alan and Jay worked with research team members in an isolated area of the cafeteria (where the mask design took place) with a tape recorder running to capture the thinking aloud and interaction with the researcher. We refer to the protocols taken in school as *conversational* because the researcher sat with each student and prompted him to verbalize either while working or after returning to class following working at home. The researcher posed questions about decisions he made for his mask, and asked him to elaborate on remarks made about the mask design. At times, while the student was painting a section that required little explanation, the researcher posed more general questions about his experiences in the class, occasionally at the student's initiation. In addition to these conversational protocols, Alan provided a more conventional, solitary think-aloud (Ericsson & Simon, 1993) as he spent additional time at home working on his mask.

*Retrospective protocol.* Peta missed the class sessions dedicated to composing the designs of the masks and painted his at home. When he returned to class with his completed mask, he sat with the second author and used his mask as the basis of a discussion about his prior composing process. The researcher used question prompts similar to those used with Alan and Jay as they worked on their masks, but Peta's account of his process was a reconstruction of prior thinking and thus considered a retrospective protocol.

### *Masks*

The data included photographs of the masks themselves, which while not analyzed, were useful in helping to understand the verbalization from the protocols.

### **Data Analysis**

The field notes, teaching journal, curriculum materials, and masks were not subjected to a formal analysis, but rather were consulted either to reconstruct the context for the mask activity or corroborate information revealed through the protocols. The three protocols were collaboratively analyzed by the first two authors, and their analysis was reviewed and verified by Cindy. The question of reliability through independent coding was thus addressed in that we discussed each coding decision until we agreed on how a unit of text should be coded. In addition, one of the student participants was located through internet searches and provided further verification of the analysis.



The coding system embodied principles from our theoretical framework. We identified three general types of codes to help us understand the students' situated composing processes. *Goal* provided the structure for the activity of their text production; *tool* refers to the mediational means employed to solve goal-oriented problems; *setting* served as the social context in which they used a compositional tool. The full set of codes and their frequencies is listed in Table 1. Table 2 then provides a compendium of the codes with examples of each from the protocols.

### *Goal*

We identified three kinds of goals in the protocols: those related to the *context* of production, those concerned with the *mask quality*, and those emerging from the students' senses of *self* as they composed their masks.

*Context.* Within the context of production we found two goals related to the *materials* of production: goals in which the materials provided an *affordance* (e.g., when they could use paint to cover up a mistake) and those in which the materials served as a *constraint* (e.g., when they had to wait for paint to dry). Cindy's requirements also provided a *teacher-imposed framework*, such as when she required students to produce a cluster or preliminary sketch before working on their masks. Finally, students worked within a *temporal framework*, such as the time limits of the class periods that delimited some of their decision-making.

*Mask quality.* The students identified a variety of goals related to the quality of their masks, including *color relations* (i.e., how colors go together), the anticipated *effect* of the mask on the viewer, an *emphasis* such as a shadow to make a feature stand out, the *expressiveness* of the mask's features, the *form/color relations* that enabled the colors to stand out on the contours of the mask, the *precision* of brushwork to render details, the generation of *repeated elements* to form a pattern, the *spatial relations* among icons on the mask, and the *texture* of the mask surface.

*Self.* We identified a number of goals related to the students' personal reasons for producing their masks: their *communication* of an idea or emotion; their *expectations* with respect to the mask's quality; their *expression* of emotions; their use of the masks to reveal or develop their *identities*; their *investment* in the activity; their attribution of *meaning* as either *ambiguous* or *direct*; and their *projection* of self into the mask through images, colors, and symbols.

Table 1: Codes and Frequencies

| Category   | Alan | Jay | Peta | Total |
|--|------|-----|------|-------|
| Goal:Context:Material affordance                 | 9    | 2   | 3    | 14    |
| Goal:Context:Material constraint                 | 15   | 7   | 2    | 24    |
| Goal:Context:Teacher-imposed framework           | 8    | 7   | 5    | 20    |
| Goal:Context:Temporal framework                  | 6    | 2   | 1    | 9     |
| Goal:Mask Qualities:Color relations              | 8    | 6   | 6    | 20    |
| Goal:Mask Qualities:Effect                       | 9    | 2   | 7    | 18    |
| Goal:Mask Qualities:Emphasis                     | 10   | 0   | 1    | 11    |
| Goal:Mask Qualities:Expressiveness               | 5    | 3   | 4    | 12    |
| Goal:Mask Qualities:Form/color relation          | 2    | 3   | 3    | 8     |
| Goal:Mask Qualities:Precision                    | 1    | 3   | 0    | 4     |
| Goal:Mask Qualities:Repeated element             | 4    | 2   | 5    | 11    |
| Goal:Mask Qualities:Spatial relations            | 5    | 0   | 0    | 5     |
| Goal:Mask Qualities:Texture                      | 4    | 3   | 0    | 7     |
| Goal:Self:Communication                          | 12   | 3   | 10   | 25    |
| Goal:Self:Expectations                           | 3    | 4   | 4    | 11    |
| Goal:Self:Expression                             | 8    | 3   | 13   | 24    |
| Goal:Self:Identity                               | 10   | 6   | 16   | 31    |
| Goal:Self:Investment                             | 6    | 2   | 9    | 17    |
| Goal:Self:Meaning ambiguous                      | 2    | 0   | 6    | 8     |
| Goal:Self:Meaning directly attributed            | 3    | 4   | 10   | 17    |
| Goal:Self:Projection                             | 12   | 5   | 11   | 28    |
| Setting:Intercontext:British Literature          | 5    | 13  | 6    | 24    |
| Setting:Intercontext:Home                        | 20   | 5   | 20   | 45    |
| Setting:Intertext:Art objects                    | 3    | 0   | 1    | 4     |
| Setting:Intertext:Personal experience            | 5    | 4   | 7    | 16    |
| Tool:Artist's Qualities:Emotional mediator       | 9    | 3   | 8    | 20    |
| Tool:Artist's Qualities:Spiritual mediator       | 2    | 0   | 6    | 8     |
| Tool:Artist's Qualities:Anxiety reduction        | 2    | 0   | 0    | 2     |
| Tool:Artist's Qualities:Frustration              | 2    | 0   | 1    | 3     |
| Tool:Artist's Qualities:Knowledge of technique   | 6    | 0   | 2    | 8     |
| Tool:Artist's Qualities:Patience                 | 4    | 2   | 0    | 6     |
| Tool:Artist's Qualities:Reflection               | 9    | 2   | 13   | 24    |
| Tool:Design Convention:Abstract design           | 1    | 0   | 2    | 3     |
| Tool:Design Convention:Contrast                  | 3    | 4   | 0    | 7     |
| Tool:Design Convention:Detail                    | 8    | 2   | 0    | 10    |
| Tool:Design Convention:Genre                     | 2    | 1   | 3    | 6     |
| Tool:Design Convention:Pattern                   | 0    | 6   | 3    | 9     |
| Tool:Design Convention:Proportion                | 1    | 4   | 1    | 6     |
| Tool:Design Convention:Representation of emotion | 5    | 2   | 6    | 13    |
| Tool:Design Convention:Rightness of fit          | 0    | 0   | 3    | 3     |
| Tool:Composing Process:Cluster/outline           | 7    | 5   | 0    | 12    |
| Tool:Composing Process:Formative evaluation      | 16   | 4   | 5    | 25    |
| Tool:Composing Process:Materials-based process   | 19   | 6   | 6    | 31    |
| Tool:Composing Process:Nonlinear thinking        | 0    | 0   | 7    | 7     |
| Tool:Composing Process:Pre- or post-writing      | 0    | 0   | 6    | 5     |
| Tool:Composing Process:Problem-solving hierarchy | 7    | 7   | 4    | 18    |
| Tool:Composing Process:Provisional text          | 10   | 2   | 6    | 18    |
| Tool:Composing Process:Sketch                    | 10   | 5   | 1    | 16    |
| Tool:Composing Process:Verbal plan               | 3    | 6   | 1    | 10    |
| Tool:Image:Mental map                            | 2    | 5   | 0    | 7     |
| Tool:Image:Narrative                             | 15   | 5   | 7    | 27    |
| Tool:Symbol:Color                                | 23   | 4   | 9    | 36    |
| Tool:Symbol:Facial features*                     | 43   | 0   | 9    | 52    |
| Tool:Symbol:Linear element**                     | 9    | 2   | 6    | 17    |
| Tool:Symbol:Nonfacial features***                | 9    | 3   | 6    | 18    |

\*Tool:Symbol:Facial features include cheek, chin, eyebrows, eyes, forehead, mouth, mustache, nose

\*\*Tool:Symbol:Linear elements include angular, curvilinear, rectilinear

\*\*\*Tool:Symbol:Nonfacial features include heart, musical notes, shadow, tear, vine, water drop

Table 2: Codes and Examples

| Code               | Definition   | Example  | Frequency |     |      |       |
|--------------------|--|--|-----------|-----|------|-------|
|                    |  |  | Alan      | Jay | Peta | Total |
| <b>Goal</b>        |  |  |           |     |      |       |
| Context            | Structure of mask activity: expectations for composition, affordances & constraints of materials | "I am just drawing the outline of what I plan on using it for." -Jay   | 38        | 18  | 11   | 67    |
| Mask Qualities     | Elements of mask composition   | "I painted it in one night and it's got, you know, the vines here. I tried to leave covering my mouth. It's just, I guess the way I write and stuff. I bring it out, it's kind of entwined and fluid and it just seems natural—the vine. And I've got the leaf as my lips." -Peta  | 48        | 19  | 26   | 93    |
| Self               | Personal reasons for producing mask  | "I was representing the—when your thinking, you're not thinking, you know, linear or anything, its just—its not one thing, it's like multiple things and its like the rain of ideas and thoughts just happened to be going on." -Peta  | 56        | 27  | 79   | 162   |
| <b>Tool</b>        |  |  |           |     |      |       |
| Artist's Qualities | Students' emotional, psychological make-up and technical skills                                  | "On the black side it is going to cry...little hearts...red hearts because I feel for my friends. Not literally cry for my friends, but I feel for them a lot." -Jay   | 34        | 7   | 18   | 59    |
| Composing Process  | Activities and composing moves students used   | "Right now I am almost done with the first eye. I am basically just doing the outline of it. It is coming out pretty good. It could be a little better." -Alan   | 72        | 35  | 36   | 143   |
| Design Conventions | Customs or practices within art community  | "[I'm] trying to find the best pattern for an oval because see with the circle it kind of hooks over and with an oval you have got to stretch it out a lot." -Jay  | 20        | 19  | 18   | 57    |
| Image              | Mental maps or narratives invoked to visualize or articulate a composition decision              | "I do care what my work looks like. I took this home and sanded it. And like I just sketched it. I care what it is going to look like at the end. Because it is something that matters to me. I don't want to do just something really quick and have it sloppy looking." -Jay   | 17        | 10  | 7    | 34    |
| Symbol             | Composition element used to represent an idea, emotion, or facial feature                        | "This "V" represents the wrinkles of some sort of question or confusion about something. Red is turning out pretty good. I don't know if I should keep it red or just basically keep the yellow on top of the head, or maybe go with another color above red. But I think I am going to cover the whole forehead red so it would probably look better." -Alan  | 84        | 9   | 30   | 123   |
| <b>Setting</b>     |  |  |           |     |      |       |
| Intercontext       | Recurring social practices   | "I am real uneasy talking about stuff like...we were talking about poets and how they portrayed it. I don't know, I think I understand more of what they are saying, because I can agree with, I mean, I can feel a lot of what they say, and especially with visual artists, you know, painting and stuff. I like a lot of Picasso and van Gogh and stuff like that. It is really interesting." -Alan | 25        | 18  | 26   | 69    |
| Intertext          | Connections and dialogue among texts   | "I just like very basic compositions. Kind of primordial. It's just my style. I don't like—I mean I like modern day and I like technology and you know I'm real big into computers, but when it comes down to my writing and stuff, and my imagination and all of that." -Peta   | 8         | 4   | 8    | 20    |

### Tool

Tools are implements, either material or psychological, through which people act on their environments (Wertsch, 1991). The tools that we identified in the students' composition of masks fell into five categories: *artist's quality*, *composing process*, *design convention*, *image*, and *symbol*.

*Artist's quality.* A number of qualities of the students' psychological or cognitive makeup contributed to or at times obstructed their efforts to compose their masks. These included what we termed *emotional mediators* (e.g., the use of an icon such as a tear drop to represent an emotion), *spiritual mediators* (e.g., the use of the color brown to represent a spiritual connection to the earth), *anxiety reduction* (e.g., the process of creating images as a way to reduce stress), *frustration* (i.e., the inability to produce a facet of the mask), *knowledge of technique* (e.g., the use of particular brushes for particular kinds of lines), *patience* (e.g., the willingness to spend additional time to improve the mask's appearance), and *reflection* (i.e., how the provisional version of the mask itself at any point prompted the students to think about and represent themselves).

*Composing process.* The protocols revealed a variety of processes in the students' composition work, including the use of a *cluster or outline* to generate ideas, *formative evaluations* made during the process of composition, the use of a *materials-based process* (i.e., a plan that emerges through engagement with the materials of production), the use of *nonlinear thinking* rather than step-by-step planning in the production of the mask, *pre-or post-writing* in relation to the mask design, the use of a *problem-solving hierarchy* to compose the mask so as to prioritize decision-making, the regard of the mask at any point as a *provisional text* subject to further work, the use of a *sketch* prior to working on the actual mask, and the generation of a *verbal plan* to guide production.

*Design convention.* Design conventions were tools that represented some custom or practice within an artistic community. Conventions that we found in the protocols included *abstract designs* to represent ideas, *contrast* between mask elements, the use of *detail* for emphasis, the employment of *genre* features such as gothic elements, the use of a *pattern* for colors and images, the use of *proportion* between and among mask elements, the *representation of emotion* through the art, and the *rightness of fit* in terms of an element's location and relation to the rest of the composition.

*Image.* Schematic tools included two types of *image* based on the students' personal experiences. Damasio (1999) equates an image with a mental image or mental pattern. We categorized such images as *mental maps*. We coded a second type of image

as *narrative*; these were the stories that the students produced to account for a design decision on the mask.

*Symbol.* Students represented ideas on their masks in four areas: *color* (e.g., Peta used brown because it is the color of the earth), *facial features* (including cheek, chin, eyebrows, eyes, forehead, mouth, mustache, nose), *linear element* (i.e., line configurations that were angular, curvilinear, or rectilinear in order to represent something; for example, Alan described his use of linear elements by saying, “The way that a curve is real slight, so I might come into a conversation real slowly. Or I really disagree with it and the sharp points are when I really get after it and say my mind—that will be it. So it is like points of anger or really confusion toward something.”), and *nonfacial features* (e.g., heart, musical notes, shadow, tear, vine, water drop; for example, Peta explained his use of a vine by saying, “I just made the vine red because . . . it’s like a life that was kind of entwined through it all.”)

### *Setting*

Setting codes described the activity setting in which the students learned how to use the tools they employed and concerned the *intercontext* or *intertext* of production.

*Intercontext.* We use Floriani’s (1993) notion of intercontext to account for recurring social practices in a social setting. For instance, in Cindy’s *British Literature* class the students routinely used writer’s notebooks to sketch out ideas for compositions, including their masks. The students also relied on routines from *home*, particularly personal artistic processes that they drew on from prior work to satisfy both school and personal goals.

*Intertext.* Barthes (1981) and others have described the ways in which all texts are interconnected; each text is derived from and in dialogue with a prior text and anticipated future text. The students drew on two kinds of prior texts: *art objects* such as Mayan art from which Alan borrowed images or conventions, and *personal experiences* that provided the texts for narratives that the students inscribed in their masks.

## **Context of the Investigation**

### **The School**

The research took place in a large (1,662 students) two-year senior high school in the Southwestern United States. The school was the only high school in a college town of close to 90,000 residents located about 20 miles from a large city. Most students and faculty were white, with the largest minority groups among the students being Native American and African American. At the time of data collection, the high school was

beginning its second year in a modified block schedule. Students enrolled in eight courses, attending four 84 minute classes per day, with each class meeting every other day.

## **Participants**

### *The Teacher*

At the time of the data collection, Cindy was in her ninth year of teaching in public high schools in Southwestern U.S. cities. She valued play-oriented activity, multimedia composing, group work, process-oriented approaches to writing, reader-response approaches to literature, strategies for inquiry-based and inductive learning, methods for instructional scaffolding, and assessment through student portfolios. She was strongly influenced by two factors in her orientation to teaching. First, her mother was a kindergarten teacher and her own young children were at the time enrolled in a play-oriented kindergarten. Her exposure to the constructive nature of kindergarten activities of play, projects, and growth-oriented learning informed her approach to teaching high school students. Second, she was influenced by her first professional assignment as a drama teacher and structured her classes to promote activity, interaction, and performance in responding to literature.

### *The Student Participants*

*Alan.* Alan was an eighteen year old, European American male with strong artistic sensibilities and abilities. “Art,” he said, “is basically the only way I can express myself”; he hoped to establish a career as a commercial artist. He described his art as “distorted art, [where] you can make your own worlds and your fantasies and stuff like that.” His “distorted” approach was not always appreciated by others, including his art teachers, who preferred more literal representations of his subjects. Alan resisted their criticisms, saying, “Because I draw a tree in the air it doesn't mean that I am confused because I don't know where it belongs. . . . I just think distortion is another world that we create.” His junior year art teacher “did not like my ideas and he would give me actually a low grade on stuff that I would spend hours on.”

While working on his identity mask, Alan talked about his artistic process: “I haven't painted in a while, probably because I have been doing a lot of coloring with Prismacolors [colored pencils] and like map pencils and stuff.” He said that he would draw with his Prismacolors and map pencils when he felt he needed more practice before painting, often spending hours working on details in his drawings. Spending three to four hours a night was not uncommon in Alan's art practices, “because when I do stuff like that, it is in great detail.” In addition to taking his senior classes and working on his own drawings and paintings, Alan was also taking architectural design at the local Vocational-

Technical school. He had applied to an art college in another state and wanted to find a career in the arts so that he might “enjoy something that I do.”

*Jay.* Jay, also eighteen, was a European American male who said that he was more oriented to the sciences than to language arts or humanities; he identified electrical engineering as a possible career. Even with a strong Baptist commitment, his parents encouraged Jay’s interest in Eastern philosophy and religion, including the central design in Jay’s mask, the Chinese yin yang symbol. Jay regarded his interest in Chinese culture and philosophy as

an interesting thing between me and my friends. We just enjoy it. It's interesting and it's kind of like an article of clothing that gets worn. . . . I enjoy looking into it. It's like looking into another world. Seeing it, but still knowing where mine is. . . . There is something else out there that is different that we haven't found out yet.

During an interview based on his writing portfolio, he said that while he generally enjoyed Cindy’s class, he was skeptical of the sort of arts-based activities that the mask production typified. When asked about his approach to the class, he said that it was “just a class that I go and put my time in.” Jay found the greater certainty of the sciences to be appealing: “In physics you are allowed to get up and roam around and you have to try to find the answer for yourself. In English, there is no real answer. It's just sit down and come up with something.”

Jay described the first semester of Cindy’s class as “really easy” and “fun.” Activities such as making masks, he said in retrospect, “wasn’t real writing, it was just kind of experiences.” In contrast, “real writing is you have to sit down and you have to write your essay in a format to turn in and—two or three pages—that is what I deem real writing. I don't enjoy it, but that's how I see real writing.” In Jay’s view, “We didn't do any writing the first semester”; their writing was more centered on personal narratives and response to literature through reading logs and other less formal pieces.

*Peta.* Peta was an eighteen year old male who claimed a number of nationalities and ethnicities in his heritage: “Cherokee, Delaware, Kiowa, Sioux, Cheyenne and Arapaho; English, Irish, Scottish, French.” He did not always find school to be compatible with his ideas about education. With long black hair and deep copper skin, his appearance resembled many Native Americans we have encountered who identify strongly with their cultural heritage and seek to convey this identity through their choices for personal appearance through clothing, hairstyle, etc.



He had experienced difficulty with school in the past, particularly with absences. He said,

I've got too much stuff to do. I am supposed to be so many different things. I am supposed to be a leader and all of that. I guess school kind of makes me upset. Mainly, I realize how many people there are just so mindless.

Colleagues of Cindy's who worked with Peta told her that his orientation to time—e.g., his difficulty in keeping schedules, being punctual, and meeting deadlines—made it hard for him to meet the expectations of school. While working on a life map for Cindy's class, he said, "I don't like the idea of this life map being linear either. It doesn't make sense. No way in life is linear."

Both of his parents, he said, were artists, an affinity that he believed he shared. Peta's artistry was connected to the expression of his thoughts through storytelling and writing. Unlike his peers whom he labeled as "mindless," Peta sought to engage his mind on a number of levels.

He described how he thought as follows:

I am telling you a story as I write or draw. I guess I could tell stories, and it does make sense. Stories are always told with drawings more—at least to me they are. That is how the entire Indian history was—all is with stories. Sit there and tell stories and I guess you would have little drawings on pieces of leather and stuff. I guess drawings are more suited to storytelling than actual thought processes. I guess thought process is storytelling. . . . You learn more from expression than just sitting there thinking.

Further compounding Peta's challenges in satisfying school requirements, his father had abandoned his family a few years previously and his mother had a series of medical problems that required extended periods of hospitalization. Peta was working two part-time jobs to help with the family's finances; shortly after the mask activity featured in this study, he dropped out of school.

### **Cindy's Class**

**Jay:** My normal English experiences are you come in and you do the work. You do their writings they want you to and you have homework and you really don't know the teacher

at all. There's no personal level. You just come in and you do it and leave and that's all you take with you. But here [in Cindy's class], I think you're just going to have a lot more memories—something I can take with me in a real way.

**Researcher:** What's not memorable about what you're accustomed to?

**Jay:** You don't remember every paper you wrote. I mean you remember the big ones, but I mean you go day to day and you write like this—you answer the questions and that doesn't really relate to your life at all. You won't remember that. That has no importance at the time. I mean it's a grade and that's all it is. Here we're getting something that's—we can tell our kids that we did—tell our friends—something that's interesting.

Here Jay described what was unique about Cindy's class: the memorable nature of the activities they did. He also revealed the way in which an activity-based class such as Cindy's might be regarded by people viewing it from the outside; he said that his parents "think it is kind of a joke that in English class we are making a mask. . . . They couldn't figure out why you would do something like that in an English class rather than in an art class." He said that he had to

explain Ms. O'Donnell-Allen a little bit because at the first day of English, she said that her mother was also a teacher. Kindergarten teacher. And she does a lot of little artistry things. She relates them to lessons. And I told that to my parents and then they understood a little more where she is going, instead of this she's having this make masks and do fun things, she's having us learn that it's more interesting. Something that we will remember.

Following this explanation, Jay said, "They saw where she was coming from, and they understood that—what was going on, because we are doing a writing assignment about this." This conventional assignment reassured them that Cindy's class was indeed an English class and was less of a "joke."

#### *Instruction Preceding the Mask Activity*

Cindy's students produced their masks as part of a unit on Identity. While a distinct unit in her instructional design, the unit was part of a year-long exploration of identity issues. The first day of school was August 21; on September 7 Cindy introduced outlines for the

Identity unit; students began making their masks on September 19; on October 3 they turned their masks in; and on October 19 they shared their masks with their families at an evening gathering at the school. We next review the major points of instruction in conjunction with the mask activity. We should stress that while we introduce the different activities in linear order, in fact her instruction was more cyclical. On any given day students might write in their writer's notebooks, use those entries to help them plot their life maps, take entries from their reading logs to initiate whole-class discussion topics, and so on.

*Composing activities.* From the first day of class, Cindy positioned writing and composing as central activities. Students kept writer's notebooks, formally-bound books with blank, unlined pages used for exploratory writing. All students and Cindy kept these books and shared entries with the class regularly. Throughout the semester students prepared writing portfolios as well, consisting of several polished pieces that illustrated their growth as writers. Additionally, students kept a writing folder in the classroom from which they would choose items to include in the portfolio. The surface of each writing folder was decorated with images and words that represented things that the students liked (front) and disliked (back).

Students had two opportunities to introduce themselves to Cindy. In a "Who Are You?" activity students wrote a statement of who they were. The statement could be composed in the form of a letter to self, formal essay, video, or other form of the student's choice. Additionally, students were given the option to have a parent or other significant adult write a letter or prepare a video introducing the student to Cindy. These letters often provided Cindy with important information about her students not always available through experiences in the classroom.

Three more composing activities focused on students' memories and perceptions of themselves: life maps, an "I remember" activity, and a mirror writing activity. With the life maps, students drew autobiographical journeys representing significant events in their lives (Kirby, Limer, & Vinz, 1988), a project that included at least 10 images depicting these landmark events. From the life map, students then chose one event to develop later into a personal narrative.

In the "I remember" activity, students composed a cluster of childhood experiences using a web-like graphic organizer in their writers' notebooks. Then the students contributed one of their personal memories to a class cluster. The students next did a free-write about one of the details in their personal cluster. From this free-write they chose a "vivid line" that Cindy then composed into a class poem based on the students' memories. The poems for each of Cindy's classes were displayed as large posters in the classroom.

For the mirror writing activity Cindy brought in photocopies of self-portraits by painters Norval Morrisseau, Pablo Picasso, and Vincent van Gogh; photographs of Morrisseau and Picasso; and a copy of Sylvia Plath's poem "The Mirror" that she projected on a screen. After a line-by-line analysis of the poem, Cindy then passed out the pictures and self-portraits and asked, "What's the difference between the photographs and the portraits?" Students discussed how one shows how they see themselves and the other how others see them. Cindy then gave the students small mirrors and asked them to compose a chart of characteristics based on how other people perceive their outer appearances. Students used metaphors and symbols in their charts to describe their physical features. From the chart, students wrote a longer prose statement describing how a photographer would see them, using a third person perspective to speak about themselves.

*Reading activities.* Reading activities in Cindy's British Literature class often ranged outside both the canon and the British Isles. Students kept a reading log and participated in response-based discussions about literary excerpts. Reading logs were kept as double-column journals in which students were encouraged to record affective responses, generate questions about the text, or other constructive response to the reading. Cindy explained: "We won't read and answer questions; we will read and ask questions." The reading logs were used as springboards for the discussions of literary selections. Discussions around these texts began in small groups, in which students shared their reading logs aloud and generated a topic and a discussion question for the whole class. These topics and questions then shaped large group discussions that followed.

### *The Mask Activity*

On September 19 the class met in the large lobby outside the school's main gymnasium. Cindy introduced Candace, who worked as an artist in residence for the state Council for the Arts and had previously taught English in one of the district's middle schools. She told the students how she'd made her own mask and proceeded to show masks at various stages of development. She next asked for a volunteer and went through the physical process of mask construction on the student's face. When the student model's plaster was dry, Candace helped her peel the mask off, and the rest of the class began to work in pairs to create their plaster shells and decorate them with foam brushes and paint, twine, glue, ribbons, feathers in black, pastel and multicolored hues, stars, and rhinestones.

On September 21 the class met again in the hallway lobby, and Candace again joined them. Cindy first modeled how she had used her own writer's notebook to create a cluster that outlined her sense of identity, saying, "Think of some qualities that make up your character." She told the students they could either do a cluster or a more conventional outline. She then explained how she had moved from the

cluster to her mask, thinking about such things as color, placement, and symbols, which Candace then explained further.

On September 25 Cindy was absent. Under the supervision of a substitute teacher and the second author (a certified teacher who began assuming the teacher's role when Cindy was absent), the students finished their plans for their masks. On September 27 Cindy returned and the students decorated their masks in the school cafeteria; on this day Alex and Jay produced their concurrent protocols. She told the students that during the week of Oct. 19th she'd have a "social interaction" or "get together" during which they could display their masks and do a written self-portrait based on their journal entries in response to the mirror activity.

## Results

In this section we outline how the protocols reveal the goals, settings, and tools associated with the unique compositional process of each boy. We begin with goals in order to situate how the students saw themselves within the context of the class and the identity unit, as well as how they discussed their personal goals for the mask and the representation of their identities. We then discuss the tools with which the students worked to compose their identity and mask texts. Finally, we discuss the intertexts and intercontexts as settings within which the students inscribed meaning in their masks. While these results are presented here as separate categories for the benefit of the reader, we recognize that the goals, settings, and tools that the students worked with were intertwined and often overlapping.

### Goals

Goals structured how the masks were composed by providing each student a destination toward which to work. We classified their goals as originating in the affordances and constraints of the instructional context, as contributing to the qualities for the masks, and as serving to help students reach their personal goals for the composition.

#### *Context: Mask-Making as Part of the Classroom Culture*

Wineburg and Grossman (2000) have noted that the implementation of an integrated curriculum often falls short of fully embedding two or more disciplines in one classroom, with the integrated secondary subject given little more than lip-service at best. In Cindy's classroom, the arts, as embodied specifically in the mask-making project, were an integral part of the English curriculum unit on identity. Cindy's purposes for the identity unit, and the mask project in particular, included having the students "see themselves as writers" and "to take risks and think for themselves." During the identity unit, she posed this question for herself in her teaching journal:

How can I provide the structure and opportunity that will invite my students to learn, that will allow them to become engrossed in work masquerading as play? Can giving them [artistic] options be part of the answer? Perhaps.

Cindy's notion of what an English class should look like did not always fit with what her students thought English classes should be, especially Jay. He said, "This is just an unusual English class. It's more creative than what we are used to, and I don't paint masks, and I have never painted a mask in my English class before." When asked what he felt he was getting out of the project, he said, "I'm learning more . . . about myself." This statement suggests how Cindy's goals for the identity unit were being embodied in Jay's mask composition.

The mask activity in this classroom, while part of a larger unit on identity, was also part of a more general effort on Cindy's part to provide experiences for students that were centered in play, exploration, and the arts. The instruction preceding the mask activity illustrates the diversity of approaches that were used in the class to encourage students to draw upon their personal experiences and their work with the various texts that Cindy provided. Her classroom was rich with attention to identity: Students read autobiographies and personal narratives, viewed self-portraits, wrote metaphors for their own self-images in mirrors, and composed class poems about their collective childhood experiences in schools and on playgrounds.

The students were shown explicit links between what writers and artists do in their own identity development and what the students might do toward the work of their identity creation and provisional development. The structure of the identity unit in Cindy's class allowed for the students, on multiple occasions and in multiple media, to make connections among literature, their personal experiences, and their identities. By making this identity unit a nuanced, recursive collection of activities, Cindy gave the students opportunities to see how literature, composition, visual art, and their own thinking could be brought together in potentially meaningful ways.

While working on his mask, Alan said that even though he had started the mask in class, he "would probably rather do this at home," because he did not have as much time as he needed during school hours. He spent several hours a night working on his personal art, and he appeared to incorporate the mask into this greater project. He tempered his dedication to the mask assignment, however, saying, "This isn't for a contest or anything, so I am not going to go to great detail with it or get stressed out over it." Within the

context of the identity unit, though, the mask composition was something that Alan spent considerable time on.

Jay was feeling his way through the class, knowing that he was working in an unfamiliar medium. In contrast, Peta's remarks about the mask suggest that he shared Cindy's goals: "We had to paint it, and I wanted to paint it representing myself." Given that he rarely did school work that he found irrelevant, Peta's conception of the task appears to have shifted from an assignment directed by Cindy to a project that he undertook for his own purposes. Peta took his mask home to complete it and returned after several days of absences with his completed mask in hand. Additionally, he wrote a poem in which he voiced his concerns with the people he encountered in his life. We discuss this poem in more detail later.

All three boys invested time outside school to think about and complete their masks, a level of dedication that Cindy did not require for the assignment. This commitment to the composition attests to students' achieving Cindy's goal of allowing them "to become engrossed in work masquerading as play."

#### *Mask Qualities: Creating Meaning in a Visual Text*

The masks, like other written texts the students composed about their identities, included elements or qualities that the students inscribed with meaning. For instance, when the students wrote metaphors about their faces in the mirror writing activity, they gave new meanings to the physical features they perceived in the mirrors. Likewise, the students inscribed meaning by using line, color, and shape. In this section we discuss the students' goals for the physical mask text, and in the next section we continue this discussion of the mask in terms of the identity text.

Alan said that the lines on his mask indicated how he saw himself interacting in conversations. He said,

The reason why I put points on some of it is because it kind of brings out the facial expressions. . . . The way I did the lines and where I put them . . . brings out features in his face. The way that a curve is real slight [indicates the way] I might come into a conversation real slowly. Or I really disagree with it and the sharp points are when I really get after it and say my mind—that will be it. So it is like points of anger or really confusion towards something.

From this description of the qualities of lines on Alan's mask, we infer that Alan projected his identity into the meaning of those lines. The lines on Alan's abstract design



of primary color fields and black outlines were not simply lines; rather, the lines represented how he saw himself. More to the point, these lines and color were inscribed with the experiences that Alan had in social interactions. He chose to enter conversations cautiously as well as head-long, and the speed of his entrance was reflected in his choice of lines: curved for slow and sharp for quick. He went on to say,

The reason why I am putting sharp curves such as like points and stuff on it, first of all is because my face, personally, everybody sees themselves different. And if I want people to portray me a certain way, then I will draw it. But if they see me as something else, then they can draw it. But it is my mask, so I guess I will take advantage of it and I guess I will see what I can do with it.

For Jay the qualities of the colors in relation to each other on the mask were of paramount importance. Because he chose the yin yang as his primary design, he had two colors to work with and therefore spent a lot of his time working on the precision of the line that delineated the yin from the yang and on the texture of the mask. His reasons for using the yin yang form on the mask were twofold: 1) he had an interest in exploring Chinese culture, and 2) the binary quality of the design fit with his idea of his identity. He said that the yin yang “explains me pretty well. I have two sides to myself. . . . I mean, I can have a really nice side that is fun to be with. There are times when I just want to be alone, and I am kind of angry.”

In contrast to the simpler designs of Alan and Jay, Peta’s mask contained a number of different elements: vines, leaves, swirls, rain drops, multiple fields of color, geometric shapes, and a variety of lines. Each quality within Peta’s mask had a specific meaning and function. For example, when talking about the vine, he said, “I just made the vine red because . . . it’s like a life that was kind of entwined through it all.” Peta also said about the swirls: “Well, the thing is, chaos is very circular. And randomness is very circular. So it’s just kind of—I guess nature is kind of chaotic.” Like Alan and Jay, Peta used abstract qualities in the mask to describe aspects of his life, here using swirl shapes as representations of chaos. However, unlike Alan and Jay, Peta also chose to include more realistic and natural elements, such as the vine and the leaves to represent his connections to nature.

Another example of how Peta inscribed meaning in the qualities of his mask appears in his statements about the color relations in his mask. He said of the blue swirls in a purple field on the forehead of his mask:

I wanted that to look like a rain image and I wanted the purple—since I had already used blue for the rain, I wanted the purple to give it sort of a mellow because the way I think. The way I actually think is pretty calm. The way I feel is very, I guess, sort of—I wouldn't want to say violent, but it's kind of that degree.

On the forehead, then, Peta created a text that reflected both the mellow (purple and blue rain image) and violent (chaos swirls) aspects of his identity. The mask included relations that conveyed meanings, in this case colors, shapes, and color relations, that were important to Peta.

*Self: Mask as Identity Text*

Alan said that the mask text “is supposed to represent me.” As an identity text, the mask was a provisional space for the students to play with visual qualities that represented their understandings of themselves. Alan wanted to make sure that his mask showed what he thought people did not see, but needed to see: “A lot of people don't think that I see a lot, but I do. And I want to talk about it.” Toward this end, he used red on the mouth and forehead of the mask to signify how much he thought about things and wanted to talk to people.

Jay's black and white mask embodied what he felt was his dual-sided personality. His attention to detail while making the mask also helped him to learn something about his identity. When asked what he learned through making the mask, he replied,

**Jay:** I learn that I am not a great artist. But I do care what my work looks like. I took this home and sanded it. And like I just sketched it. I care what it is going to look like at the end. Because it is something that matters to me. I don't want to do just something really quick and have it sloppy looking.

**Researcher:** So you're not going to throw this out?

**Jay:** No. I'm going to probably keep this. I'm thinking about making a stand for it if I could get some UV [ultraviolet] paint . . . and have a black light which sits in a box stand away from the box kind of three dimensional and with a black light over it, it would look rather interesting. I might set that in my room or something.

Precision mattered to Jay in his identity work: The accuracy of the symbol was tied to the value that he placed on the mask as a symbol of himself and the yin yang as a symbol of his interest in Chinese culture.

Using multilayered and elaborate patterns on his mask, Peta composed a text that reflected the multifaceted nature of his identity. He used a wide palette of colors (including blue, red, green, yellow, orange, purple, brown, and black) and a diverse set of shapes (including geometric, linear, and organic representational forms) to show that his identity was situated within a spectrum of emotions. He described his emotions and his composing process:

**Researcher:** What did you intend with that—this bright yellow and red, green, and then a kind of a more drab green in the background. What—

**Peta:** It's kind of the—it's like the sorrow and the envy and the pain that—I mean we all go through certain things and I feel that I have experienced many things to give me insight on a lot of—and it kind of reflects on how I write. And I've always noticed that, you know, you get that sort of ache when you hurt? I've always noticed that it's been stronger like on my left side.

**Researcher:** Interesting. Is that what the sharp images are?

**Peta:** Yep. I guess that it could be it. Yeah. It's sort of the pain and emotion. It's always very—like I said, I was—the way it—is always strong. I guess I always go to extremes on how I feel like being extremely happy or extremely angry.

Here Peta revealed aspects of his identity that he wrote into his mask. His personality could go to extremes, and his emotional experiences included moments of sorrow, envy, and pain. He represented these emotional experiences on his mask where the nose meets the forehead, thus locating the emotional dynamics of his identity within the landscape of his own face.

### **Tools**

Each student composed his mask in an idiosyncratic fashion. As Alan put it, “I have my own form of doing things.” We focus next on the ways in which the three boys composed details of their masks and talked about the qualities of their identities as artists/composers

and the design conventions, imagaic tools, and symbols they employed to produce their masks.

*Qualities of the Artist/Composer: Emotional and Spiritual Mediators*

As the boys talked through their composing processes, they discussed emotions and spirituality as ideas that were being symbolized in their masks. The masks were not simply compositions of color and lines. The creation of the masks included talk about the emotions that the boys felt as they composed and the emotions they wanted to represent within the colors, lines, and shapes. They further inscribed images of how they felt themselves connected with nature and the universe into the composition alongside and intermingled with the emotions. In terms of mediational tools, we looked at the ways that the boys described themselves, their emotions, their ideas about spirituality, and their talk about the process of completing the mask as qualities of themselves as artists/composers. In this section we elaborate in greater detail the emotional and spiritual mediation that the boys engaged in as part of their composing processes.

Alan's family owned Mayan masks that hung in his home. He expressed appreciation for these texts because "They portray a lot of [the Mayan] religion and a lot of mystical stuff that they believed in. I really liked how they did that." Alan said that the reason he did not choose to put his own religion within his mask had to do with time: "It is time consuming. Basically, it would take sanding and polishing, and getting the color evenly distributed to everything, making sure that it wasn't shiny here and dull here." From this statement, we infer that the process of creating a smooth, evenly distributed surface treatment could be a means for integrating a spiritual meaning within Alan's mask. Though he did include an explicit spiritual element in his mask, Alan invested several hours at home using his own paints and brushes, in addition to the time he spent in class working on the composition. In his think-aloud, Alan talked about not wanting to spend too much time on the mask "because I am not in that kind of mood. I don't really feel rambunctious or anything. So I hope this is going to turn out pretty good." So, while his mask did not have the kind of spiritual mediation that Alan imagined possible, the mask did reflect his emotional state at the time. Thus, his mask was not "rambunctious," filled with an abundance of lines and shapes; it was rather simple and to the point, very much like the way Alan said he felt when he made it.

Jay's black and white design reflects how he perceived his emotions. As we noted earlier, he saw himself as having two sides: "a really nice side that is fun to be with" and a side that wanted to be "alone ... and [is] kind of angry." By choosing the yin yang, Jay created a space for himself within the composition to show those two sides. In a narrative illustrated later in this paper, Jay had planned to put hearts on the black side of his mask to show his compassion for his friends. Although the hearts that he had planned to paint

on the black side of his face did not appear, the meaning and intent of empathy imbued in the hearts was still part of how he saw emotions within his identity.

In contrast to the stark simplicity of Jay's mask, Peta's mask design was flush with chaos and colors. Peta's mask contained a circular quality and sense of nature and emotion that were likely part of his upbringing within a Native American family and extended community which valued a relationship with nature. (See Jacobs, 1998, for an extended treatment of this relationship.) Peta included natural elements in his mask with vines, leaves, water drops, lightening bolts, and colors. He gave the colors their own significance: "That's why I did brown—is because it's earth tones. As a background. And it just happened to be the color of my skin, but it's—it has nothing to do with my skin."

The elements of nature within the mask—the water, lightening, leaves, and earth tones—were composed in groups that touched and interwove in ways similar to Peta's description of his philosophy: "I just kind of have my own philosophy. Just—there's so many holes in everything, you know, so I just take a little bit from everything." These same shapes and colors also refer to the emotions that Peta felt: sorrow, envy, pain, and extremes of happiness and anger. The elements of his composition, like his own philosophy coming from "a little bit of everything," include indications of emotion, nature, and spirit. The mask functioned for Peta as a text in which to represent his continually evolving ideas about his own emotions and philosophy.

### *Composing in Three Ways*

Cindy provided time during class for all students to create clusters or outlines of their ideas about identity. In these pre-composing activities, students could list qualities of color, placement, and symbols and draw small versions of possible mask designs. All three boys participated in the pre-composing activities of drawing thumbnail sketches and writing prompts to plan their masks. However, each boy chose to use these planning activities differently as he composed his mask. We outline here some of the details about their individual processes.

Alan chose to work late in the night because he preferred to work at home where he could use his own acrylic paints. He produced a lengthy think-aloud protocol while working at home. As he painted, Alan did not rely solely on his original design plans. Instead, he began a sort of dialogue among himself and the mask and the tape recorder in which each brush stroke informed the next. He said, "I started just going with it and adding stuff to it." This decision-making process of choosing which qualities of paint and design he wanted to keep or change represents what Eisner (2002) calls the work of art working on the artist.

Alan's composing process was also tied to his concerns about aesthetics (he wanted something that looked good), the message he wanted to convey to viewers (he wanted people to see that he had something to say even though he was often quiet in class), and the practice of painting with color (in the past he had given up painting to return to colored pencils in order to fine-tune his knowledge of color and shading). The decisions Alan made about color, shape, and symbol were embedded in a sophisticated vocabulary and grammar of image and iconography. His choice of an abstract design of shapes and colors showcased his interest in "distorted" representations of ideas and provided a space for him to imbue specific meanings about his identity.

While Alan worked with a complex visual grammar of colors, shapes, and symbols, Jay worked with just two elements: His focus was on two colors and the shape that resulted from putting the two together. His choice of the yin yang symbol provided him with a distinct referent from which to work. During the thumbnail drawing portion of the project, he drew a number of different variations on the symbol. He found that drawing the sinuous line that demarcated black from white was difficult to draw smoothly on the oval shape of his mask. Thus, he practiced drawing that line on small ovals on his paper before committing the line to his mask, a task further complicated by the rise of his nose on the mask. When he began painting, however, he realized that the paint was forgiving and that he could change the design if he needed to. "It's not exactly that [it] is set in stone. It's like you can always go back and change it." Jay's multiple thumbnail drawings and working and reworking of the shape with the paint indicates that the mask composition process involved provisional texts that he could continually revise until he found the shape he liked.

Peta's design process was largely informed by his views of the people he encountered and the writing he composed about those views. He began the mask-making process with a poem about the hypocrisy he saw in people around him in school and in the community. Unfortunately, we do not have the original poem as Peta placed it on the page, so it was not possible to examine how the layout of the poem may have related to the layout of the vines, swirls, and water drops on his mask. We do not have the poem because Peta did not like to have people read his writing; he preferred to read his work aloud, to ensure that the listener understood his context and meaning: "Because I know people can look at this [writing] and perceive it differently than what I meant it" to be. Knowing that we cannot fully bring Peta's voice into this discussion, we include the poem here as a running line of text in order to show how this piece of writing was tied to the decisions he made about his mask and how this poem was then rewritten as a new poem after the mask was finished.

All of your nice guys' and gals' faces of innocence smiling with such a lie  
that you think can't be seen but I have lost my ignorance and refuse to  
play the drama of joy and misery for I am my keeper and the thrilling fluid  
binds my words

After Peta worked on the vines and swirls on the mask, he decided to change this poem. He reported that the process of composing the mask was much like his process for composing poetry: "It was very vigorous." Then Peta read the poem with the changes that the mask helped him to make:

With all of your nice boys' and girls' faces of innocence smiling and  
blushing, with such a lie that is thought not to be perceived and I have lost  
my innocence and I will refuse to play the drama of joy and misery for I  
am my own and the rolling fluid vines of my words with the pouring and  
beating drops of my mind raise up the rage from deep inside.

The meanings of the visual symbols on Peta's mask reflected some of the same ideas found in his poem: He related that the yellow nose surrounded by a pink triangle represented "the inner rage" and the space where pressure builds; the jagged edges represented the intense emotions of "sorrow and envy and the pain"; and the vines represented control of the self and were used "for holding things back." The visual symbols, though, also diverged from the poem: The swirls were chaos, the vines were the interrelated connections, and the brown was the earth. The rage that Peta inscribed in the mask within the vines and water drops was articulated as part of the poem. The line, "for I am my keeper and the thrilling fluid binds my words" changed so that the reader could see that Peta's words were bound by his rage: "for I am my own and the rolling fluid vines of my words with the pouring and beating drops of my mind raise up the rage from deep inside." Thus, the mask composition was both a mediated and mediating process (Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 1998b) that informed how Peta both thought about and articulated his personal, social, and political concerns.

#### *Using Design Conventions, Images, and Symbols to Convey Meaning*

In order to convey meanings in their masks, the three students used a number of design conventions, images, and symbols. We outline here the design conventions that refer to the principles and elements of design used by the visual art community (e.g., contrast, detail, line, pattern, and proportion). We then discuss the images that the students used to describe the mental maps and narratives they used in their texts. Finally, we describe the symbols the students used to convey meaning.



Alan was familiar with design conventions from his art classes in school and his art-making at home. He described how he used shapes to convey meaning and emotion: “If you look at his eyes, it looks like they are staring straight at you, but with a confusion, and showing a lot of emotion with the curves and the points I put on the end.” By using curves and points near the eyes, he was saying that this person on the mask—his depiction of himself—had a lot of emotion, including confusion. He went on to say, “You can make a circle in here or you could shape it to the chin. It could mean something totally different, just by the way it presents itself.” Here, we see Alan giving any shape the possibility of having a diversity of meanings, depending on how those shapes were presented. Alan knew that diction in his mask mattered if he wanted his viewer/reader to understand the message of his text. We further posit that what Alan said here about the eyes and the circles is an example of how he used the tool of narrative to inscribe meaning within the symbols embedded in his text.

Jay said that the yin yang symbol was important to show that he had two sides of his personality: the “nice side that is fun to be with” and the side that wanted “to be alone” and was “kind of angry.” He used the contrast of black and white to show the dissonance between these two sides of his personality and then inscribed this pull between two emotional states into the yin yang symbol. The yin yang that he composed was informed by the mental map he had in his mind of how to express the duality and complexity within his personality.

Peta’s design reflected his taste in composition “I just like very basic compositions. Kind of primordial. It’s just my style.” His design contained “primordial” elements of chaos, rain, thriving plant life, and lightning. He did not choose to use Western conventions for color-symbol relationships, choosing instead to use colors to portray his own thoughts of rage and calm (e.g., the blue and purple field of both chaos and calming rain). As Peta described the mellow yet chaotic space at the top of his mask, he, like Jay, used a narrative tool to depict how rage was inscribed in his identity as revealed through the mask.

### **Settings**

Each student’s mask was a visual identity text that referred to other visual and linguistic texts. Alan used colors and lines to refer to his understanding of social settings in which he found himself misunderstood by his peers. Jay used the yin yang to show both his interest in Chinese culture and his dual-faceted personality. Peta’s mask was both a referent and source for his poetry, while his poetry was referent and source for his mask. Thus, each mask was a construction of texts (symbols of identity and interests) that originated in other texts (intertexts) and other contexts (intercontexts).

### Intercontexts: Social Practices from Home and School

The intercontexts we discuss here are the recurring social practices the students referred to in their talk about the mask texts. Within Cindy's class there was an established social practice for writing in a variety of media (e.g., using the writer's notebook, making clusters as pre-writing activities, and composing visual and linguistic texts such as the life map). How the boys used these intercontexts as well as the social practices they encountered at home are the focus of this section.

The social practices surrounding artistic composing for Alan were smoothly integrated into his mask text. Alan reported that he was uneasy with verbal communication, though he found some solace in the words of poets, when it came to their portrayals of themselves as artists. So this visual composition was well-suited for Alan, a serious and dedicated artist. Alan's prior practices of making art at home afforded him the experience and the materials to invest a high level of commitment to the mask text, using his own paints to compose his mask.

In contrast, Jay said that he did *not* draw on the social practices that were embedded in the class activities prior to the mask composition:

**Researcher:** Did the clustering activity generate the ideas that resulted in the mask?

**Jay:** Not really. I'm not using any of the ideas that I had for my mask.

**Researcher:** Where did the ideas for the mask come from if not from that cluster?

**Jay:** Oh, from my brain. Just from what I remembered and just what I thought about.

**Researcher:** Well, what did the clustering activity do? Was it kind of a throw away or did—

**Jay:** Yeah, just kind of throw away. . . . It was something for the assignment grade. But not something that I would really do.

In this exchange Jay dismissed the value of the clustering activity in his composing process. The clusters were intended to help students collect ideas for the symbols and metaphors on the masks, but Jay already had his ideas formulated. Jay's evaluation of the

clustering activity as something he simply did for a grade reflected his ongoing narrative about English classes as being spaces where “you come in and you do the work” with his investment varying from assignment to assignment rather than comprising a dedication to the discipline. Yet he also found the mask valuable.

Peta’s and Jay’s experiences in the school contrast with each other substantially. While Jay could “do” school quite well because of his past experiences with fitting into the social practices of the school, Peta’s expectations were not as easily suited to those of the school. We mentioned earlier that Peta’s concepts of time and deadlines were different from those of his teachers. With the mask composition, however, Peta had social practices from home that were well suited to the visual text. He said, “I know the [art] techniques. Both of my parents are artists. One of my best friends is an artist. And I used to do art all the time.” The mask text, then, afforded Peta the opportunity to use the social practices of art that he had learned at home and with his friend.

The art practices were not the only intercontexts Peta drew from. He talked about how his composing of the mask was similar to writing poetry: “Everything I did—the entire painting and everything that I did was very—it was a lot like how I wrote too. . . . It was a very loose composition.” Peta composed the mask text in the same “loose” way that he composed his own personal writing. How he wrote and what he wrote for his personal interests were thus part of the intercontexts Peta worked within while making his mask text.

#### *Intertexts: How Art Objects and Personal Experience Informed the Mask*

While the students’ masks incorporated the social practices they were familiar with at school and at home, the masks also include references to intertexts—texts from a variety of media that they appropriated, echoed, and were in dialogue with as they composed their masks. Alan’s mask, with its stark color contrasts, was informed by his personal experiences, which he inscribed in the lines and colors of his mask. Specifically, he said,

I am going to have three colors: black for the eyes, yellow for the eyebrows up to about mid-forehead, and then red on up. Basically these colors really have no purpose; but the way I am arranging them, it will bring out the black even more so—that way I can get the expression that I am looking for. Colors have a lot to do with it, too, but I think the eyes have a lot to do with it. The first thing I look at in a person is their eyes. I love eyes. . . . They tell you that is where you can see everything about a person.

From his experiences, Alan determined that the eyes are key features that provide information about a person. His arrangement of colors around the eyes was critical because the yellow and red functioned as pointers to this feature, which he inscribed with significant meaning. In this case, the eyes pointed to the identity of Alan, the thoughtful person he wanted to portray as having something to say.

Jay's intertexts were also part of his personal experience; however, the text he inscribed within an early verbal plan for the mask did not end up on the final product that he turned in. On his yin yang, he described the following plan: "On the black side it is going to cry. . . red hearts, because I feel for my friends. Not literally cry for my friends, but I feel for them a lot. . . One in particular . . . has a rough time of life." Although the hearts did not appear on the final composition, the hearts still played an important role in Jay's narrative about his identity as symbols of his relationships.

The texts that Peta inscribed in his mask included his personal experiences with artistic representations of nature. We mentioned earlier how he described the circular nature of the blue swirls on his mask as chaotic and reflecting nature. Peta's experiences with this circularity of nature are also found in what he said about his own stress and inner rage when he described the pink triangle bordered with yellow that covered the nose on the mask:

I was wanting to represent the inner rage. It's coming from—you know, sometimes when you get mad, you have pressure that's like right here [the pink and yellow area]. And I put it around the brow. . . . [This part] kind of—it sets things in motion. Of course, by thinking about it and expressing it and all that stuff, it cools it down.

In this pivotal area at the center of the face, Peta marked the space in which his inner rage began and threatened to bring the chaos of swirls above it. And yet, his path to rage was not a linear one. Peta noted that "by thinking about it and expressing" the rage, he could cool it down. Within the landscape of the mask, then, Peta inscribed how he mediated his own emotions: The colors and shapes on the mask served as referents to his experience with nature and emotion.

### **Discussion**

One quality of Cindy's teaching was the way in which she was able to involve students from diverse backgrounds in personally meaningful activities. The three students in this study were drawn into the mask composition in ways that allowed them to deal with ideas

that were personally significant, “memorable,” and worthy of telling friends, in Jay’s words.

The success of an activity in a classroom may not always be attributed to how high the marks are on the assessment tools. Success may also be implicated in *how* the students experience the activity. For Peta, his engagement with the mask activity marked a shift in his involvement in school. Peta had been a student of Cindy’s the previous year, and his extended absences that year had concerned her. She expressed hope that his involvement at the beginning of this second year in her class would yield fewer absences. Peta seemed to be interested in the mask activity; unlike some of the other assignments in the identity unit, he completed the mask assignment successfully.

We attribute this completion in part to the fact that the mask was tied to his political and social interests via the poetry he was writing at the time. He expressed his distrust of his peers for their lack of self-discipline and laziness. The mask composition was an opportunity for him to represent his beliefs visually in an activity that allowed for such expression. By presenting the mask activity as a space for expressing ideas about identity and beliefs, Cindy allowed her students to think of themselves as important, thoughtful people with ideas to share with others.

This culture of the class is part of what we think kept Peta significantly involved with the project. Although he missed several days of class after the masks were initially made, when he returned to class he had his mask painted and ready to turn in for a grade and to share for the research. The intertextual relation between his poetry and his mask was revealed that day in class when Peta produced his retrospective protocol. In Peta’s estimation the missed days in school were not a sign of being lazy on his part—he had a number of responsibilities outside school. What we find significant about Peta’s engagement with the mask composition has much to do with what happened after the project ended; he dropped out of school. The mask composition was one of the last things that Peta did in school and one of the few school-initiated tasks he completed before leaving.

While not as overtly dramatic as Peta’s situation, Alan’s school experiences also reflect a student who was more on the fringe than Jay. Alan experienced moments of tension, especially in his art class, when he chose to express his ideas in ways that did not align with the ideas of the teacher. Alan took a stance as a self-proclaimed artist interested in looking at the world through a scrutinizing and careful lens. When he worked on his art, he worked for hours at a time. He was a quiet student, but that did not mean that he did not have thoughtful ideas to share; he just did not always choose to share those ideas. The mask composition was a chance for Alan to bring together two important aspects of his

life in a forum that would become a part of his English work: his art and his stance on how he wanted people to perceive him.

We see Jay's experience with this identity mask as an opportunity for him to continue to be the good student he had been in school, while at the same time allowing him some latitude to do something that genuinely interested him. His work on the mask reveals a more dynamic engagement with the English curriculum than he was accustomed to experiencing, one that afforded him opportunities for successful participation in the class.

The mask compositions embodied inclusive notions of literacy in that the texts were rich with intertexts and intercontexts, as well as provisional identity texts that the students chose to embed within them. In this alternative composition Cindy could assess how the students understood the concepts of symbol, metaphor, and ultimately, identity. When the students shared their masks with a larger community (their family and friends) two weeks after completing the masks, they included a written self-portrait to accompany the mask texts. Eisner (2002) asserts that the overlap in exploring ideas in multiple media, such as language and visual arts, does not duplicate the work. Rather, the two media provide different and possibly complementary means for getting at the same ideas, in this case identity. Furthermore, we see this inclusion of multiple media as likely to increase the participation and satisfaction of a greater number of students, each with idiosyncratic needs, makeups, abilities, dispositions, and goals. That is, by opening up composition to include visual text, students were able to express their understanding of identity. This role of activities sparking participation from students from different backgrounds and strengths positions this activity within this classroom as a democratic way of valuing students in schools (Dewey, 1916; Moody, 1990).

Lave (1996) defines learning as the production of identity-making life projects by participants in communities of practice. The community of practice that Cindy established in her classroom was designed to provide its own routines and values. Among her values was encouraging students to draw on practices from their own out-of-school lives to make their experiences in her classroom work at multiple levels. The mask-making project was explicitly designed to foreground personal identity in students' thinking about the literature they read, and was a central part of a whole unit that encouraged students to reflect on questions of identity in literature and art. The unit was integrated into the year's opening, and thus framed a month's instruction to initiate a longer, overarching discussion on students' lives in relation to the curriculum. The masks served as opportunities for these three students—each with varying degrees of engagement with the domain of English, the experience of art, and the institution of school—to do the projective work that Gee (2003) argues is central to literacy practice. The evidence from the students' protocols suggests that they engaged in a wide array of

cognitive processes and, by Lave's definition, applied these processes to a valuable learning experience. We are persuaded that educators would benefit from considering the potential of the sorts of multidimensional teaching that Cindy provided in looking for ways to enable students to find school a ripe site for extending their knowledge, broadening their horizons, and moving them more fluently into new vistas of learning about themselves and their worlds.



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