Chapter 8

A study of students' artistic interpretations of *Hamlet*

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Where do 'texts' end and other forms of expression begin? This is not just a question for French philosophers. It has long been recognised that language use and development is inextricably linked to other forms of cognitive activity and cultural practice, and that language and literacy can be developed, inter alia, through non-linguistic activity.

Peter Smagorinsky and Cindy O'Donnell-Allen exploit this insight richly in their chapter, which details and evaluates a number of related strategies to bring visual and kinaesthetic thinking into teenagers' emerging responses to Shakespeare. The results are useful not only as guides to research and evaluation but in offering a number of good ideas for classroom practice. Note, too, the authors' openness and honesty in discussing unsuccessful practice. Their account of the sexual and racial taunting that spoilt the work of one group raises questions of classroom management and pedagogy that are equally as important as those raised by the more successful examples. Beginning researchers, above all, should never underestimate the importance of the unsuccessful experiment or survey. (Consider, for example, the potential impact of a piece of research that failed to show children learning anything from going to school...).

Like all good developmental work, Smagorinsky and O'Donnell-Allen's work is not 'theory-free'. In fact, one of the authors is a leading developer of post-Vygotskian learning theory. The teaching approaches identified and evaluated below are understood in the context of a rich and contemporary theoretical framework relating semiotics (the study of signs) to learning theory. Thus, the chapter can be read at a number of levels: as a list of teaching ideas that did or did not 'work' to varying degrees; as an attempt to apply a cultural semiotic approach in the classroom, and as a critique or development of cultural semiotics itself through an investigation of a series of related 'real world' situations. Here, then, we have evidence of 'impact' in educational research, an attempt at allowing theory and practice to develop in mutually enhancing ways.

Overview

As many observers of school have noted, formal education is centred on students' facility with language, particularly analytic and rational uses of language (e.g. Gardner, 1983). The research we discuss in this chapter suggests the potential of other ways of thinking and talking in school. We focus on the 12th grade English class of co-author Cindy O'Donnell-Allen and her students' artistic interpretations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Customarily, US students who read Shakespeare are taught through teachers' lectures in which they impart literary critics' interpretations of the play. In this research we report how students talked as they discussed how to interpret – without teacher intervention – various characters from *Hamlet* through their production of large drawings that they inscribed with pictures and words that represented their understanding of the play. Our guiding questions for our study were:

1   In what ways does the overall social environment of the classroom contribute to the recognition of art as an appropriate way to interpret literature? In what ways do students' histories with school affect their engagement with the climate in a particular classroom?
2   In what ways does a small-group setting potentially enable exploratory talk to contribute to the production of an interpretive text? How do groups negotiate relationships in small group activities, and how do these relationships contribute to the academic work they produce?
3   What kinds of thinking did the students engage in during their discussion of how to interpret *Hamlet* through an artistic medium?

To answer these questions, we use a theoretical framework grounded in cultural semiotics, a field that is based on the study of signs. The view of semiotics that we draw on emerges from a Peircean (Hartshorne and Weiss, 1931-1958) conception articulated by Bakhtin (1981), Wertsch (1991), Witte (1992) and others. From this perspective, any given sign – whether linguistic, musical, graphic, architectural or appearing in any other form-takes on meaning through constructive acts on the part of the perceivers. Signs are not fixed objects with a single, objective meaning. Rather, a sign may be interpreted differently by people who bring different experiences, agendas, knowledge of codes, and other frameworks to their interpretations. A written text, in this view, does not have a fixed meaning, even if it is designed to convey something particular – see, for instance, the ways in which civil laws are interpreted by judges, lawyers and other stakeholders in the legal system.

The same sort of interpretation takes place when 'readers' perceive the signs of non-written texts. Art, for instance, presents spatial configurations of signs for beholders to perceive and attribute meaning to. From a semiotic perspective, *any sign system* has the potential for offering a pattern of signs for creators to suggest and perceivers to interpret. Witte (1992) among others (e.g., Smagorinsky, 1995, 2001; Suhor, 1984) has argued that a 'text' consists of 'any ordered set of signs for which or through which people in a culture construct meaning' (p.269). While writing may have privileged status in school,

from a semiotic standpoint it is not necessarily the best vehicle for expression under all circumstances, including school learning.

As Wertsch (1991) points out, however, particular sign systems are 'viewed as being more appropriate or efficacious than others in a particular sociocultural setting' because they 'strike their users as being appropriate or even . . . the only possible alternative, when others are, in principle, imaginable' (p.124). Consistent with Witte (1992), he argues that people employ a 'tool kit' of means for constructing meaning, rather than a limited set of linguistic tools. For schools to limit access to just a few of these tools ignores the complexity of human behavior and the diversity of approaches people have to solving problems.

Extending the metaphor, Smagorinsky and Coppock (1994) argue that people cannot simply carry the tool kit about and use the tools indiscriminately. Rather, the value of the psychological tools comes through the way in which they are valued locally. So while a tool such as musical composition might be a culturally valued means for interpreting literature in one context (e.g. Tchaikovsky's musical score for *Romeo and Juliet* is valued in musical and theatrical circles), the same tool is typically not valued in English classes. A semiotic perspective raises the question that if the tool enables the development of psychological growth in a learner, why is it less valued in the institution of school than other tools (such as writing) that tradition has sanctioned as having unique powers? What is preventing educators, as Wertsch would argue, from imagining other alternatives?

In this chapter, we examine an alternative to interpreting *Hamlet* through a conventional essay or exam. We study small groups of students in Cindy O'Donnell-Allen's English class as they interpret characters from *Hamlet* through discussion, drawing and creative writing. We next describe Cindy's class and then the students' production of *body biographies*, the medium through which the students interpreted the play (see O'Donnell-Allen and Smagorinsky, 1999; Smagorinsky, 2001; Smagorinsky and O'Donnell-Allen, 1998a, 1998b, 2000 for more detailed reports of this research).

Context of the study

Classroom talk does not take place in a vacuum. Cindy worked throughout the year to provide an environment that allowed all students opportunities for making personal connections and thinking open-endedly about problems through classroom activities. Her class included:

- a reader-response pedagogy;
- process-oriented classes designed to promote personal reflection and growth among students;
- activity-based and student-centered methods of developing literacy skills;
- reliance on students' life experiences to inform their understanding of literature and to provide the basis for their writing topics;
- frequent use of small groups, exploratory discussion, response logs and nontraditional assessment.

The class's reading of *Hamlet* took place at the beginning of the second semester of the students' senior year and illustrated many of Cindy's values. The reading took about three weeks and included performatory readings (i.e. simultaneously reading and acting out the scenes), listening to segments from an audio recording of the play, watching segments of the Zeffirelli film version of the play, translating Shakespearean dialogue into familiar language and discussing the play frequently.

At the end of the unit, Cindy told students to organise into five small groups. Each group was assigned a central character in *Hamlet* (Hamlet, Gertrude, Claudius, Polonius, Ophelia or Laertes) whom they would interpret through the construction of a body biography, an activity she had read about in an *English Journal* article (Underwood, 1987). She adapted the original activity so that students used body biographies as a tool for character analysis. Cindy provided a handout (see Appendix) that described their responsibilities.

To produce a body biography, students were instructed to place a seven-foot long sheet of butcher paper on the floor and have one student lie down on it. Another student then drew an outline of the student's body on the butcher paper. The group filled in this outline with art that represented the character's traits, relationships, motivations and experiences. They supplemented their art with relevant quotations from the play and their own original written text about the character. To show their understanding of significant events, choices and changes involving their character, students were encouraged to consider colour, symbols and the placement of their text and drawings as they designed their body biographies.

Method

Data collection

A portable tape recorder was used to record the group's discussion during their production of their body biography. The transcribed tapes are the primary data source for the analysis of the group processes. In addition, the classes during which the body biographies were produced were observed by two researchers who took field notes during the class sessions.

Data analysis

Coding process

The body biography tapes were transcribed, then checked by a research assistant, then rechecked for final verification of students' identities and accuracy of the transcription by Cindy. Students were not available for member checks because they had graduated by the time the tapes were transcribed and verified.

We then coded the transcripts of the small group discussions to identify the specific role of the body biographies in the students' interpretations of characters from *Hamlet*. We developed the coding system in the following way:

1   Prior to reading the transcripts we generated a set of prototypical categories based on the coding systems developed from prior studies of both classroom discussions and think-aloud protocols (Marshall, Smagorinsky and Smith, 1995; Smagorinsky, 1997a; Smagorinsky and Coppock, 1994, 1995a, 1995b). We also drew on theories of communication (Barnes, 1992; Witte, 1992). This system provided descriptions of each statement at two levels. Level One was organised around the semiotic perspective described by Witte (cf. Peirce, 1931–1958) and was designed to identify the ways in which students developed social processes to engage with contexts, texts and intertexts (connections between texts) to produce their body biographies. Level Two was designed to use Barnes's (1992) notion of *exploratory* or *final* talk to identify the ways in which the small group setting enabled students to use discussion as a vehicle for developing new ideas about their topic. Exploratory talk is tentative and provisional and usually involves the search for ideas. Final talk is polished and usually expresses an idea that has previously been thought through by means of exploratory thinking.

2   We collaboratively read through transcripts of four groups, which totalled 92 single-spaced pages of discussion and 2,904 coded units, with a unit roughly corresponding to one sentence. We discussed each statement in each transcript, its role in the students' effort to produce their body biography, and its relationship to other statements in other transcripts. This discussion caused us to continually assess both the individually coded statements and the coding system as a whole, and to assess, rename and reorganise the prototypical categories throughout the process. As a result of this process we developed a theoretically-related set of categories to account for each unit in the data set.

3   We collaboratively read through each transcript a second time, applying the coding system through a discussion of each unit. Agreement on the code for each unit took place through discussion.

4   Following the second coding cycle, we looked at the total number of codes and eliminated categories that occurred fewer than five times per transcript, collapsing them into the nearest category in terms of definition.

Coding system

The coding system consists of two levels. The next sections describe each level of codes and explain relevant categories in Level One.

Level One

Under Level One we identified five general types of statements that contributed to the students' body biography productions, and one type that included off-task talk. These five general types of statement are reviewed next, with brief descriptions of categories that appeared frequently.

Social process. These statements indicated how students related to one another as they worked. Group members acted variously to promote cohesion,

sort out roles, act on personal relationships, and otherwise work to establish a social climate within which to produce their body biographies. These social processes contributed to the establishment of a set of social relations that affected how they worked on the assignment. We developed three categories for social process codes.

Productive codes describe the types of interaction that contributed to the students' production of their body biography representation. These social processes allowed them to function as a group as they produced their body biographies. One type of social process occurred when students would identify a *role* they would play, such as looking up quotes from the play, working on a poem about the character, or drawing images on the body biography. Students would also contribute a *strategy* that helped move their production along. Students would *request clarification* when they wanted another student to repeat or reiterate a prior remark. Finally, on occasion a student would issue an *order* to another group member, usually to help get that person on task and help move the project along.

Constructive codes occurred when students would make statements to support other group members emotionally through positive remarks toward one another. They would on occasion provide an *affirmation* for one another in the form of a supportive or esteem-promoting statement. Students would also pay one another a *courtesy*, often in the form of a compliment or word of thanks. Another constructive process occurred when students would provide a *self-assessment* of their contribution to the production. Students also engaged in playful talk labeled *facetiousness*, often for the purpose of making the task fun and enjoying one another's company.

Destructive codes involved exchanges that were insulting, degrading or abusive. These social processes contributed to the establishment of a set of social relations that worked against students' production of the body biography. These codes included *discourtesy* and *resistance to discourtesy*, usually in the form of insults or rude comments to other group members and responses to these statements. *Apathy* codes were assigned to statements where students explicitly stated a lack of engagement with or motive for school work

Context. Context codes described students' attention to aspects of their environment that constrained their efforts to work. In our view a constraint is not necessarily limiting, but rather can facilitate activity by channelling it productively. Contextual factors referred to by the students included the *teacher-imposed framework*, particularly the body biography assignment but also any other rules or guidelines provided by Cindy for the class as a whole, either social or academic. Students also referred to the *material framework*, such as the availability of colored markers and other tools for producing their body biographies. A third frequently mentioned constraint was the *temporal frame-work* that provided them with the deadline and limitations on class time within which they worked. Finally, students considered the *social framework* when they considered the appropriateness of certain terms (e.g. 'pissed') for a school setting.

Text. Text codes described references to the source text, *Hamlet*, independent of their effort to represent it through the body biography. Most talk about the

play came through their discussion of how to depict it in their interpretive text. At times, however, they stopped to discuss the play itself, and then returned to their effort to represent it in the body biography. We identified two types of textual codes: *description*, which was a literal summary of action from the play, and *interpretation*, which was an effort to make inferences about the literal action.

Intertext-graphic representation. These codes described statements in which the students discussed how to depict the original play through an image on the body biography. *Intertext* codes derive from the relationship between their current production and any prior texts that inform it or future texts that will result from it. In our coding system the initial code of *I* for *intertext* was applied to statements that referred to any text that informed the students' reading of *Hamlet*, informed their production of their body biographies, or would be informed by their production of their body biographies.

Students made five types of intertextual statements attendant to their effort to create graphic representations. They talked about the *appearance* of an image they had drawn and its contribution to the overall effect of the body biography. They discussed *spatial relationships* between the images they created, often in terms of the balance provided by complementary images. They also talked about the capacity of an image for *description* of a character or event, primarily in terms of its fidelity to the action of the original play. They discussed as well the potential of image as *symbol* in depicting the events and relationships in *Hamlet*. Finally, they engaged in *reflection* when they stepped back from the body biography and discussed its overall effect.

Intertextual: written representation. The body biography assignment required students to produce writing that represented the character, including both illustrative quotes from the play and original writing of their own. The codes in this category followed the structure of the codes for *intertextual: graphic representation*, including codes for *appearance*, *spatial relationships*, *description*, *symbol*, and *reflection*. Additional codes for the written representations were developed for statements that provided an *interpretation* in the effort to write about the character and that discussed *word choice* in their writing.

Level Two

Level Two codes draw on Barnes's (1992) argument that discussion consists of exploratory and final language. Each individual category is coded with an either an *E* or an *F* to indicate whether the remark is *exploratory* or *final*; that is, whether the remark represents an effort to think towards a solution or is in itself a statement that does not invite further discussion. Through the *E* and *F* codes we sought to understand the role of the students' discussion in leading towards new ideas.

Other codes

Two types of codes existed outside the basic coding system, statements marked as *off-task* and *inaudible*. An off-task statement was a remark that did not

concern *Hamlet*, the body biography or the students' social relations as they informed their work on the assignment. An inaudible remark occurred when (a) we could not hear a statement clearly or (b) we could not figure out the student's intentions from the available context. Because inaudible remarks occurred infrequently and did not figure into our analysis, we did not include them in Table 1.

Results

In this next section, we will provide examples of the kind of symbolic and inferential thinking that students do when interpreting literature through a collaborative artistic medium. The research base that we draw these examples from should provide a rationale that can effectively refute the idea that this kind of work is in any way unchallenging cognitively. Some might view drawing pictures as trivial. We hope that we'll show here that such is not the case. We think that we could much more easily show that a factual exam that requires the relatively low-level cognitive process of memorisation would be a far more trivial way to engage with the play.

Thinking symbolically

The group that interpreted Gertrude included five students: Rita, Jack, Dirk, Bob and James. As you will see later, this group was highly problematic in terms of its social relationships. In spite of the interpersonal dynamics, they produced a compelling interpretive text for their body biography.

The group spent a great deal of time discussing what they felt was a central event in the play, the accidental poisoning of Gertrude by Claudius. They drew a goblet falling from her hand to represent this incident on the literal level. From there, they began to discuss how the poisoning led to a series of events, passions and relationships. As they discussed how to depict the falling goblet, Rita said, 'I think we need to put something about how she really did like Ophelia, but I don't know how.'

From there, the group discussed Gertrude's loyalties in the play, particularly those toward three key characters: Claudius, Hamlet and Ophelia. They considered her divided loyalties between Claudius (her second husband and the brother of her first husband, King Hamlet) and Hamlet (her son who disapproved of her second marriage and suspected Claudius of murdering King Hamlet). They represented these loyalties in two ways, in her *heart* and in her *head*.

The group decided to draw two hearts, one split between Claudius and Hamlet and one devoted to Ophelia. Dirk and Bob discussed what the divided hearts symbolised:

Bob: Working on her heart?
Dirk: We're going to show like Claudius and Ophelia, and the broken hearts is going to be where she was disgracing, finding out that Claudius was trying to poison her.

Bob:	So, which one is gonna be her-
Dirk:	That one, yeah.
James:	What about King Hamlet?
Dirk:	[inaudible] Hamlet decided to have [Ophelia] as a [inaudible] and to marry her and then at the end [Gertrude] finds out that Ophelia dies and she is heartbroken about this. And [Gertrude] is heartbroken about Claudius, trying to find out, she finds out that Claudius was trying to kill her. That's what we're going to do.

Dirk's account of the play was not entirely accurate; Claudius intends to poison Hamlet's drink, not Gertrude's. Gertrude is the one, however, who drinks from the poisoned goblet. Claudius watches without intervening so he won't implicate himself in the poisoning. The effect of Claudius killing Gertrude, however, is the same. In their presentation of the body biography to the class the following week, Rita explained that in the divided heart, 'One is Hamlet, Claudius, and she is split between them. Then she has a big heart for Ophelia because I really think she liked her.'

The discussion of the character's head followed. This discussion was similar to the one about the heart. Rita decided to draw the head as a skull. Later they decided to divide the head into three sections and have each section embody a character central to Gertrude's feelings of ambivalence:

Bob:	Do we divide her head in the middle?
Rita:	Yeah, you know why?
Bob:	Because she loves Claudius, she loves Hamlet Senior.
Rita:	We should crack it. You know like when cartoon characters like are skiing and they like hit something-
Bob:	Oh yeah, and it like separates.
Rita:	-and their whole body is like cracked, and they go like- Because she's got all these different parts, or-

The body biography composition, then, was not simply a drawing. It evolved through what we thought was a very sophisticated discussion of a very difficult work of literature. What's notable is that this discussion took place entirely without the benefit of adult guidance. While Cindy had provided direction during the reading of the play, the group's discussion, interpretation and composition came about independently. As should be evident from the discussion, their talk was exploratory and constructive, often building on one another's contributions to create a collaborative idea.

Connecting with characters

One group of four girls (one of whom was mostly absent) interpreted the character of Ophelia in their body biography. One way that the group understood Ophelia was by thinking about her as if she were a modern teenager. They did this in spite of the fact that, when making the assignment, Cindy had decided not to require personal connections to the characters. She would

ordinarily encourage such responses, but did not want to require students to talk publicly about their personal experiences with the controversial themes of incest, murder, betrayal, etc. that run throughout the play. In this case, her respect for her students' sense for privacy and propriety outweighed her beliefs about response to literature.

In the following excerpt, the girls discussed Ophelia's relationship with her father and how they might depict it. In their consideration of this relationship, they talked about Ophelia as if she were a friend:

Carly:	What else did she do? She had, oh, she talked to Hamlet. Oh, and she had followed her dad, she obeyed her dad.
Sherri:	Right.
Ann:	That's right, I forgot about that.
Sherri:	Draw it in kind of a little circle. She wasn't scared of Hamlet, was she?
Carly:	No-
Ann:	But she was hurt by him.
Carly:	She was really hurt by him, though.
Ann:	If we had an old study guide-
Carly:	Oh, my gosh, if we could just even go through the book. She did so much more that we're not even thinking of, let's see-
Sherri:	What about that part where Hamlet says, 'You're not who you think you are'? Remember that time-
Ann:	When he tells her to go to the nunnery?
Carly:	Oh yeah, was that-? She must have a real low self-esteem. We should probably put that down there.
Sherri:	A low self-esteem?
Ann:	Well, I mean, how could you have a high one with all those people around you telling you what to do and-
Carly:	Yeah, really.
Ann:	Telling you to go to the nunnery.
Carly:	Do we ever hear her and like Laertes talking, like maybe we should put something like Laertes in there.
Ann:	Yeah, Laertes told her not to date Hamlet.
Sherri:	Oh, that's right.
Carly:	What else?

This excerpt shows how they thought about Ophelia in terms of their own understanding of how girls act in society. Both their comments about Ophelia's self-esteem (a relatively modern concern) and their teen language (e.g., the order 'not to date Hamlet') suggest that they viewed Ophelia in light of their modern experiences as teenage girls. By making this connection with the character, they constructed an interpretation of the ways in which Ophelia established relationships with other characters in the play.

This brief excerpt shows how their personal connection, and their effort to depict Ophelia's relationships in the play, led them to discuss the character in ways that showed some insight into her psyche.

Exploratory talk as a means to understanding

The group that interpreted Ophelia built on their personal connection to the character to interpret her symbolically in their text. The assignment called for the students to use both art and writing to interpret the character. The girls in this group came up with the original idea of combining art and writing when they decided to draw her hair in the form of phrases:

Carly: What are we going to put for her to obey her dad?
Ann: I don't know, we need some kind of symbol.
Carly: Maybe in her hair.
Ann: We could put something, and then have like 'Listen to dad'-
Carly: See, we could put on her hair, instead of actually drawing hair, we could write 'Dad' in like the curves, do you know what I am saying?
Ann: Yeah, I think so.
Sherri: Okay, but we can't draw it in back of her, she's like-
Ann: We could put like 'Listens to dad, obeys dad, dad died,' et cetera.
Carly: Yeah, Dad slash Hamlet.
Ann: We could like list all of the things that made her go crazy in her hair.
Carly: Okay, yeah! That's awesome! Good idea, okay.
Ann: Okay, but I don't think I'm going to turn that into a coffin.
Carly: Okay, that's good because that would be-I'm sorry if I put my butt in your face-I'll draw it in her hair.
Ann: And her hair has to be brown, too, that's what color her hair was.
Carly: Okay, can I, with chunks of black, like one letter being black or something. Okay, I'm going to, is it okay if I write a song in here?
Sherri: Uh huh.
Carly: Okay, where is her first song? What does she say first? She says something really interesting first. Where's the, no, okay, maybe not. Should I just put all of her songs because they're not very long and they all say something interesting? Or should I put that-?

This example illustrates a process that is a key aspect of composing a meaningful text. That is, not only does the text represent their thinking, but the process of composing the text enables the students to reflect on their ideas in such a way that they generate new meaning. The process works in this way:

1 The group works out a way of functioning socially (which, as I'll show next, does not always happen the way you'd hope).
2 Group members generate images of the play that they picture in their heads and then try to describe to the other students.
3 Other students then respond to these proposed images and compare them to their own images of the same character, scene or relationship. This response usually requires students to clarify both their image and their reasons for believing it is fitting, and to discuss which images best suit the play as they understand it.

4   Individual group members then explain to one another the image that they
    think should go into the body biography. In doing so, the group needs to
    discuss why they think that particular images are apt. This discussion
    typically involves a return to the text they're interpreting so that students
    can defend particular interpretations.
5   When they reach agreement through discussion, they draw the image into
    the body biography.
6   Once included on the body biography, each word and image then becomes
    part of a text that they can use as a source of further reflection, discussion
    and interpretation.

We saw this process in each group composition. Another example comes from
the body biography of Laertes produced by June, Lisa, Troy, Venus and
Courtney. Here they discuss how to depict Laertes' relationship with Hamlet,
whose death he causes. In the discussion, the students generate images of the
character in their effort to come up with the text of their body biography:

Courtney:	Should I draw him stabbed?
June:	That looks good.
Courtney:	Like a little quotation. He looks like-write, 'I will kill you.'
June:	Right, write revenge.
Courtney:	Hamlet jumps in the grave and starts choking Laertes? So, which one is which?
June:	Well, whoever chokes Laertes.
Troy: T	his is a long, long poem.
Cindy:	[The period is almost over.] You need to make arrangements to finish up in my class. You can use my room all you want or you can take your thing with you, it is completely up to you. You can use my room almost anytime.
June:	Oh, what should I write here?
Courtney:	I don't know.
June:	And right here I will put-uh, blood.
Courtney:	Write, 'You murderer' or something.

To this point, the discussion primarily served to move them toward agreement
on what had literally happened in the play and how to symbolise the characters'
feelings toward one another. This effort prompted June to return to *Hamlet* to
pose an important question about the character's motivation. As Cindy walked
past their group on her rounds, June asked:

June:	But why did Hamlet come to Laertes?
Cindy:	They were fighting.
June:	I don't know why.
Courtney:	Yeah, but why did he start? Because Laertes was in the grave and then he went and jumped after him? What did Laertes say?
Cindy:	And Hamlet tells him to 'Hold off thy hands.' So Laertes is apparently the one that does it first. He warns him, he says, 'Get

> away from me. There is something in me that you don't want to mess with.'

June: So this is Laertes here?

Courtney: Right.

Lisa: I don't know, write murderer or something. Okay, what about, just say that, like-

June: Okay, have you got some quotations? I think we write the quotations on here, right?

Lisa: Yeah.

Venus: And then, I don't know, there are two more [quotes to write down in the assignment].

June: Is this where they were fighting in the grave?

Venus: No, it is when he tells them, it is when they are fighting and he tells them that the king knows.

June: Okay, okay, look then, we should write this by his wound. Okay, then we should do it right here where he stabbed him and kills him. So maybe we should do like by the stab, you know.

The students in this group were not exceptional students. Their grades fell in the B–C range. At one point June was in danger of failing the semester and had to do extra work to bring her grade up. Yet here she shows herself to be a thoughtful reader of a complex play, generating questions to help her understand this key relationship. Remarkably, at a point in the class when she would ordinarily be packing her books and looking forward to meeting her friends in the hallway between classes, she began raising new questions about the play. The reason she posed these questions was that her group needed to use the body biography to represent the character, and to know the character she needed to pose questions that would help her group explore his relationships.

The discussion transcripts illustrated a number of similar instances that thoroughly rebut the idea that these are 'just drawings'. Rather, they are interpretive texts that are produced through extensive discussion and reflection on the meaning of the play, conducted almost entirely without the intervention of an expert adult.

Establishing working relationships

So far we have described the potential of collaborative body biographies for promoting discussions that depend on high-level inferences about the literary characters. In analysing the discussion transcripts, we also learned that the groups collaborated with different degrees of social cohesiveness. Of the four groups we analysed, we found that the Laertes and Ophelia groups performed up to Cindy's highest hopes for both the cognitive complexity of their work and the social dynamics through which they worked.

The Gertrude and Claudius groups, however, while completing the task, did so in ways that we found distressing. Certain students in these groups were, at times, cruel to one another and quite willing to let others do the work for them. The Gertrude group produced a remarkable body biography nonetheless,

primarily because Rita spent considerable time outside class working on it. The dynamics of the Claudius group, however, showed up in the careless attitude that one group member took toward the task and the body biography's appearance.

We will next review examples of both the constructive dynamics of the Ophelia group, and what we considered to be the destructive dynamics of the Gertrude and Claudius groups. We will then conclude by thinking about both the benefits and the risks of conducting class in ways that are open-ended and allow students both personal and intellectual freedom.

Ophelia group

The four girls in the Ophelia group worked with remarkable cohesiveness. Indeed, they could serve as the poster girls for constructivist classrooms. Their discussion was characterized consistently by the following kinds of statements:

Affirmation: These statements affirmed the worth of another group member's contribution. They were more than simple statements of agreement. Instead, they praised another girl's contribution and, by implication, the girl herself.

Inclusion: These statements invited other students to participate in the project. Most often they were offered to more quiet, less assertive students in order to give them roles and opportunities to contribute.

Courtesy: These statements conveyed consideration toward another student, often in the form of a routine civility.

We will highlight one example to show the group's supportive way of working together. The following exchange took place shortly after they began working. Ann had lain down to be traced and worried that her fingers appeared to be fat because the outline had inflated their appearance. Here is how their conversation unfolded:

Ann:	Oh, not bad – okay, we could go over it with like the marker and make it look a little thinner.
Sherri:	Your fingers are not that fat, so don't worry.
Carly:	It is like, oh, finger exercises. Okay, let's – was she wearing a dress? That might be easier, oh, she was wearing the dress, then we'll just put on a dress.
Ann:	Yeah, because they went like tight here and then they just, like all the way down.
Carly:	Do you want to do that?
Sherri:	Yeah, weren't you saying you were just going to do bare feet?
Carly:	Yeah, we'll do bare feet, okay.
Ann:	You wanna trace your sketch?
Carly:	Okay, is it okay if I go ahead and, like, do the dress?
Ann:	Yeah.
Carly:	You sure?
Ann:	Yeah.

Carly:	Any of you guys want to do it?
Sherri:	No, it doesn't matter.
Ann:	I wouldn't know where to begin.

This excerpt illustrates patterns that recurred often during their collaboration. Ann's self-deprecating remark about the size of her fingers was immediately met with an affirmation from Sherri and Carly's humorous effort to ease her anxiety. The group then began to discuss how to depict their character on the body biography. First, however, they discussed the roles each would take in the interpretation. Carly tried to include the others in the work, only taking a role for herself after offering it to the others. Her effort at inclusion was met with Ann's self-deprecating remark about her ability to provide a good drawing. They then began a discussion of how to draw the character's literal appearance, based on how she'd appeared in the play and film. The group went on to support one another in the production of a thoughtful interpretive text.

On the whole, the relationships established by this group fit well with Cindy's ideal notion of how students would perform. The students:

◗ chose a character to interpret;
◗ engaged in exploratory discussion;
◗ discussed and clarified possible images to include in their body biography;
◗ used these discussions to come to a more sophisticated understanding of the play;
◗ reflected on the images of their text for further understanding;
◗ treated one another with respect, support and appreciation.

We see this group as illustrating the potential for how students negotiate the open-ended structure Cindy provided. In particular, they illustrate the kinds of productive and cohesive social relationships that they can establish in this context. In this all-girl group, these relationships appeared to support girls during moments when they expressed negative self-esteem.

Gertrude and Claudius groups

We next describe the dynamics that took place within two of the class's five groups. When we studied the discussion transcripts, we were very disturbed by some of the interactions that took place. Before we present and discuss them, we would like to ward off one possible interpretation of what follows.

The students who did not use the body biography activity as Cindy envisioned they might were, in general, disaffected and disengaged from school. Their grades were poor for the most part, but not because the students lacked intelligence. For reasons that were we could not discern – and, in some cases, that their parents found baffling – they did the least amount of work possible and consistently undermined other students' efforts to take the work seriously. We were particularly bothered by their cavalier attitude because Cindy intended that her educational design would help to motivate students who were turned off by school.

In many cases, her goals were indeed realised. Most of the students whose interactions we report here were not 'honour roll' students. They were typical high school kids in the spring semester of their senior year. For the most part, they were far more interested in the prom, in graduating, in next year's plans, and in their social lives than they were in schoolwork. As these discussion transcripts indicate, however, they discussed *Hamlet* in sophisticated ways while producing their body biographies.

However, there were also cases where the freedom that students were granted was abused, as were the feelings of other students. It's important to note that these students were equally disengaged during other parts of the class and, according to both school records and parental reports, school in general. We see, then, the small group activity simply making their lack of involvement more overt than you would see in a class where students are expected to sit quietly and listen.

The two groups we next review, in contrast to the Ophelia group, often engaged in exchanges characterised by discourtesy, resistance to discourtesy, and apathy.

In the group that interpreted Gertrude, Jack provided the axis for the group's social relations. Jack was tall, forceful and talkative, often overpowering other students in the group socially. He had a way of delivering abusive statements with a chuckle. He directed most of his derisive comments to Rita, the only girl in the group, and Dirk, the only African American.

Rita was task-oriented and grade-conscious and was the impetus for most productive work within the group. She often made self-deprecating remarks both during this assignment and at other points during the year. She was particularly worried about being fat and unattractive, in spite of standing 5′2″, weighing 105 pounds, and being described as pretty by many who knew her. Rather than being met with affirmations following her self-critical remarks, as happened to Ann in the Ophelia group, she instead made herself vulnerable to the taunting of Jack. The group's relations were established early in their discussion. After Rita served as the figure for their body biography, the following exchange took place:

Rita: Don't smell my breath whatever you do.
Jack: You already ate one bag [of chips] a minute ago. Rita, you're a pig. That's why we had to size down your thighs. We had to do a little constructive surgery.
Rita: My crotch is not that low.
Jack: No, that is a pretty low crotch. Do you want me to fix that for you?
Dirk: Well, what are we supposed to do – draw you buck naked or something?
Jack: No, Dirk, please.
Dirk: I'm pretty sure-
Jack: Don't go there, man.
Dirk: We'll just draw some lines like she had clothes on and that is why her crotch is so low.

Jack:	All right, tell me how high, Rita, like up in there?
Rita:	That's good, I don't care what it looks like.
Jack:	It's a good thing.
Dirk:	We'll draw the chi-chi's now.
James:	Man, that is, that is weird.
Rita:	No boobs. (Laughter) I don't have any, and no, you're not going to draw any.
Dirk:	She lookin'-
Jack:	Yeah, she looks – we can reconstruct, but we can't reconstruct that much.

This early exchange illustrates processes that took place frequently during their discussion. Rita served as the subject of various insults, mostly from Jack. These abusive remarks toward Rita, we found, discouraged collaboration and cohesion in working on the project. Jack spent much of the period talking off-task while Rita and others worked on the interpretation, only to have Jack insult their work, typically with a chortle.

In addition to feeding on Rita's insecurities about her appearance, Jack's comments toward Dirk were at times blatantly racist. In the following segment Dirk referred to a black marker he was using for the body biography, and Jack insulted him repeatedly:

Jack:	What's up, Bucky?
Dirk:	I had black.
Jack:	What's so great about black? Black stinks.
Dirk:	You got a point? Huh? I smell good. What're you talking about?
Jack:	You smell so good – if you took a bath.
Dirk:	I was going to mention that I found some markers in the drawer.
Jack:	Hey, what are you doing, son?
Dirk:	Same thing you're doing, son.
Jack:	Well, now what are you doing? You're just messing everything up.
Dirk:	Come on now.
Jack:	Just take your black marker and get away from me, man. You hear me, boy?

This segment needs little explanation, other than to say that it illustrates the destructive relationships that Jack maintained within the group. When we listened to the tape of their discussion, we were discouraged to learn that the process of construction had included such exchanges. The finished appearance of the body biography belied the brutality of Jack's treatment of other group members. Had Rita not taken the body biography home over the weekend to work on it, we suspect that the final appearance might have been less remarkable.

A second problem that affected both the Gertrude and Claudius groups was the varying degrees of commitment of the different students. Both groups included students who performed poorly in school, primarily because they

consistently did not complete assignments. In the Gertrude group, two of the five students did not pass the class and one passed with the lowest possible grade, though each was given plenty of opportunities, encouragement and incentives to perform.

These degrees of commitment resulted in widely varying individual efforts to contribute to the group project. One key episode in the small group discussion of the Gertrude group came early when the students were discussing the time frame Cindy had provided to complete the assignment. In considering how they would need time outside class, the group interacted as follows:

Rita: You guys, we're not coming in [during a free period] – I'll do some of this over the weekend.

Jack: Rita's like – sacrifice. We're not coming in. You're right, I ain't coming in.

Rita: She should have given us like two periods to do this in.

James: Shoot, I can't do this, I gotta work.

When Rita declared that she would work on the body biography at home, the other group members lost all urgency in contributing equally to the project. From this point on, the transcript revealed Rita's efforts to initiate an interpretation while Jack led a series of unrelated discussions about the film *Forrest Gump*, an upcoming car wash sponsored by the cheerleaders, the impending state basketball tournament, the qualities of different brands of shoes, their preferences in snack foods and other topics.

The Claudius group also had problematic dynamics. This group included two students who were hostile to Cindy throughout the semester and in general hostile toward school and other students. When in groups, they tended to undermine other students' efforts. In the next excerpt we show how Jerry tended to work against the group's goals, demonstrating an apathy that showed up in his group's body biography. The group was discussing how they might draw a crown on Claudius's head:

Jay: The crown can be something that stands he stands for.

Cale: Somebody draw the crown.

Jay: For incest.

Cale: Draw the crown, what?

Jay: Well-

Jerry: What are we supposed to do now? Don't be disappointed if this doesn't look so good.

Cale: I don't understand. [inaudible] Jerry! Jerry, why did you do that?

Jerry: Because it doesn't matter what it looks like as long as we get our representation. He told me to draw the crown, and I said, 'OK, but don't get mad at me if I draw it badly.' And everybody goes – [makes a grumbling noise]

Cale: That looks like trash, Jerry. Jerry, that is one rotten crown, dude.

Jerry: Do you like it? Incest!

Cale: Actually, incest could be adultery.

Jerry: Oh, who cares.

In looking at the body biography, we had to agree with Cale that Jerry had drawn one rotten crown. Jerry's remarks, like Jack's in the Gertrude group, need little explanation. He appeared eager to impress on others his apathy and to inscribe it in the group's body biography. In doing so he undermined the kinds of relationships that can lead to the productive sorts of discussions we have described in other groups.

In this case, Jerry interpreted Cindy's assignment as a licence to produce a sloppy interpretation. Cindy had told the students that they would get graded on the ideas they were representing, rather than on the quality of their art. Her thinking was that she didn't want to reward good artists and punish the bad, since the goal of the activity was literary analysis and not art. Jerry's view that 'it doesn't matter what it looks like' was typical of his apathetic attitude toward school and the other students in his group. The other students did not appreciate the trashy appearance of his drawing or his conduct during the group activity.

Discussion

Our study of these students' artistic responses to characters from *Hamlet* illuminates several points for us as teachers and researchers:

1   Organising classroom discussions of literature around students' production of an artistic interpretation allows them to talk about a difficult work of literature in ways probably not available in conventional teacher-led discussions of literature (see Marshall, Smagorinsky and Smith, 1995). In particular, this organisation enables students to use exploratory talk to think their way through difficult interpretative points. Through exploratory talk they are able to arrive at a more polished interpretation, which they then inscribe in their artistic interpretation. While tentatively final, this interpretation may be revised as students have the opportunity to see and reflect on their interpretive text, see the spatial relationships among aspects of their interpretation, and continue thinking about and revising their understanding of the play.

2   This final interpretation is a consequence of students' symbolic thinking. Often they would use symbols from their knowledge of personal relationships or popular culture to depict their understanding of characters from *Hamlet*. Such symbolic thinking greatly surpasses the rote learning that characterises much literature instruction in American schools (Applebee, 1993). Furthermore, the artistic medium of the body biography enables them to depict these symbols in ways not available in conventional written assessments.

3   Small group discussions at times live up to their theoretical ideal and at times are affected by destructive interpersonal dynamics. The product of such discussions (i.e. the body biographies) might reveal dysfunctional group dynamics (as in the Claudius group) or mask them (as in the Gertrude group). Teachers need to be aware that using small groups without direct teacher involvement may have the effects aspired to by progressive

educators but may also reinforce inequalities that exist in students' lives outside school. There needs to be some degree of *goal congruency* between teacher and students if the students are to work faithfully without direct guidance or supervision. In planning the body biography task, Cindy believed that the task would fit with her overall goals for a dynamic, meaning-centered classroom. And for many students, it surely was. We see these exceptions as demonstrations of the challenges that teachers face, rather than as reasons not to conduct open-ended classrooms. Teaching authoritatively might make the problems less visible, but would not make them go away.

We see this research as supporting the view of cultural semiotics with which we began this chapter. For most students in the class, the body biographies that these students produced served as powerful mediums through which to interpret the play. We feel that we have empirical support to back up the argument that students ought to have more varied opportunities for expression and interpretation in their experiences in school. While this view is held by increasing numbers of teachers (e.g., MacLean and Mohr, 1999) and theorists (e.g. The New London Group, 1996), it has little credence among policymakers who increasingly believe that school effectiveness and student learning are best measured through standardised tests. We hope that our work can contribute to the growing body of research that supports expanding, rather than restricting, students' opportunities for success in school.

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Appendix A: the body biography assignment

For your chosen character, your group will be creating a *body biography* – a visual and written portrait illustrating several aspects of the character's life within the play.

You have many possibilities for filling up your giant sheet of paper. I have listed several, but please feel free to come up with your own creations. As always, the choices you make should be based on the text, for you will be verbally explaining (and thus, in a sense, defending) them at a showing of your work. Above all, your choices should be creative, analytical and accurate.

After completing this portrait, you will participate in a showing in which you will present your masterpiece to the class. This showing should accomplish these objectives. It should:

▶ review significant events, choices and changes involving your character
▶ communicate to us the full essence of your character by emphasising the traits that make her/him who s/he is
▶ promote discussion of your character, (esp. regarding gender issues in the play).

Body biography requirements
Although I expect your biography to contain additional dimensions, your portrait *must* contain:

▶ a review of significant happenings in the play
▶ visual symbols
▶ an original text
▶ your character's three most important lines from the play.

Body biography suggestions
1. *Placement* – Carefully choose the placement of your text and artwork. For example, the area where your character's heart would be might be appropriate for illustrating the important relationships within his or her life.
2. *Spine* – Actors often discuss a character's spine. This is her/his objective within the play. What is the most important goal for your character? What drives her/his thoughts and actions? This is her/his spine. How can you illustrate it?
3. *Virtues and Vices* – What are your character's most admirable qualities? Her/his worst? How can you make us visualise them?
4. *Color* – Colors are often symbolic. What color(s) do you most associate with your character? Why? How can you effectively work these colors into your presentation?
5. *Symbols* – What objects can you associate with your character that illustrate her/his essence? Are there objects mentioned within the play itself that you could use? If not, choose objects that especially seem to correspond with the character.
6. *Formula poems* – These are fast, but effective, recipes for producing a text because they are designed to reveal a lot about a character. (See the additional handouts I gave you for directions and examples)
7. *Mirror, Mirror* – Consider both how your character appears to others on the surface and what you know about the character's inner self. Do these images clash or correspond? What does this tell you about the character?
8. *Changes* – How has your character chanced within the play? Trace these chances within your text and/or artwork.