

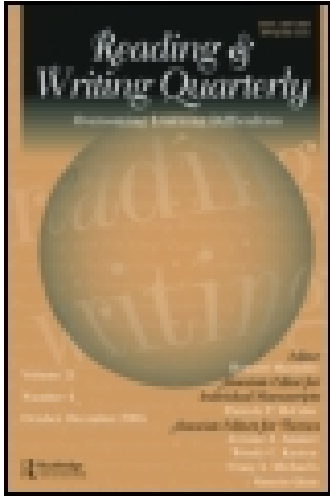
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Achtung Maybe: A Case Study of the Role of Personal Connection and Art in the Literary Engagement of Students with Attentional Difficulties

Peter Smagorinsky^a, Tricia Cameron^a & Cindy O'Donnell-Allen^b

^a University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia, USA

^b Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA

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ACHTUNG MAYBE: A CASE STUDY OF THE ROLE OF PERSONAL CONNECTION AND ART IN THE LITERARY ENGAGEMENT OF STUDENTS WITH ATTENTIONAL DIFFICULTIES

**Peter Smagorinsky
Tricia Cameron**

University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia, USA

Cindy O'Donnell-Allen

Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA

This study examines a collaborative reading of John Keats's poem, "When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be," by two high school seniors with attentional difficulties in a mainstream British Literature class, with a focus on one of the students, Rita. The data consist of a retrospective verbal protocol during which the students recounted their process of composition as they interpreted the poem through an artistic medium, and a reconstructed transcript of a presentation of this drawing to their classmates. The data were analyzed with a coding system that focused on the setting of the students' composition, their goals for composing their interpretive text, and the tools through which they produced their interpretation. The data suggest that two factors were prominent in Rita's interpretation of the poem: her connection of a recent personal experience (the death of a friend) to the themes of the poem and the possibilities afforded by the artistic medium. The study concludes with a consideration of how students with attentional difficulties stay focused on their school tasks, particularly in relation to the ways in which their environments are structured.

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Address correspondence to Peter Smagorinsky, Department of Language and Literacy Education, University of Georgia, 125 Aderhold Hall, Athens, GA 30602. E-mail: smago@uga.edu

A number of researchers have concluded that even under the best of circumstances, students have a difficult time paying attention in school. Goodlad (1984) characterized “the ambience of the classroom” as “neither harsh and punitive nor warm and joyful”; “the emotional tone,” he found, is “flat” (p. 108). As a consequence, students tend to take little initiative with their learning, instead acquiescing to the routines and rhythms of schooling as usual. Bloom (1954), studying students’ levels of attention during lectures in a competitive university environment, found that only about 40% of students were paying attention to the instructor at any given point. Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) learned that among the students they studied in a comprehensive high school, schoolwork was “their topic of thought for only 40 percent of all occasions in class” (pp. 203–204); listening to the teacher talk was among the least engaging experiences they had in classrooms. More dramatically, in studying an honors history class in the same high school, Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen (1993) found that during a teacher’s lecture on Ghengis Khan’s invasion of China, only two students were thinking about anything remotely Chinese: one student was thinking about Chinese food, and one was wondering why Chinese men wear their hair in ponytails.

The students described by these researchers were, on the whole, successful and attentive students. All were volunteer participants, whom Rosenthal and Rosnow (1975) found to be more invested in the institutional site of the research than non-participants. Bloom (1954) studied students at the University of Chicago, home to more Nobel laureates than any other U.S. university. Csikszentmihalyi and colleagues (1984, 1993) studied students across the achievement spectrum, including the talented teenagers whose thoughts were adrift during their teacher’s well-planned, well-wrought account of the Mongolian invasion. Given this seemingly pervasive difficulty that students, including those with records of achievement, have with paying attention in school, students with attentional difficulties must find schools to be foggy terrain indeed.

In this study, we focus on one high school senior, Rita, who had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). Students with attention difficulties comprise a population typified by low rates of learning and behavior problems at home and school. ADD and ADHD generally refer to a persistent pattern of inattention occurring more frequently and severely than is typical in individuals at a comparable level of development, resulting in a reduced ability to focus on a specific task, an increased chance of distraction, and a reduction in memory capacity.

We analyzed Rita's interpretation of the John Keats poem, "When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be," as she worked with her classmate, Dirk, on a collaborative interpretation in their mainstream, middle-track British Literature class. (All student names are pseudonyms.) Rather than lecturing the class on the meaning of the poem, or leading a discussion on it, their teacher, co-author Cindy O'Donnell-Allen, had the students interpret the poem through an artistic medium. We frame our study of Rita's interpretation by taking an environmental perspective; that is, we focus on the setting of her production (including her collaboration with Dirk) and how it contributed to her interpretive performance. Our study is guided by the research question, Given the context provided for her literary interpretation, what factors appear to contribute to Rita's efforts to attend to the text and task assigned by her teacher?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Wertsch (1991) argues that from a Vygotskian perspective, the appropriate unit of analysis for studying human development is volitional, goal-directed, tool-mediated action in social context. This axiom suggests the importance of considering the social and cultural setting of activity, the goals toward which activity is directed, and the tools through which activity is carried out. While the field of psychiatry has often looked to biological factors to understand attentional difficulties, Volkmar (2003) notes that for more than 100 years, beginning with the work of Still (1902), researchers have also been concerned with "the relative importance of environmental over 'organic' factors" in attentional difficulties (p. 1025). Accordingly, even for conditions that are typically understood from a biological perspective—e.g., attentional difficulties—consideration of the context of learning can be illuminating.

The attribution of ADHD to biological origins is well-established (Castellanos et al., 2001; Faraone & Biederman, 1994; Faraone, Doyle, Mick, & Biederman, 2001; McGuffin, Riley, & Plomin, 2001; Zametkin & Liotta, 1998). While nonpharmacological therapies such as behavioral modification are used to treat ADHD, most treatments involve medication as the key therapy (Greenhill & Osman, 1999; The MTA Cooperative Group, 1999). Cook (2004) argues, however, that relying simply on medication and counseling for students with non-normative makeups is inadequate, that a broader environmental change is essential in helping neuroatypical young people construct positive lives for themselves. From an educational standpoint, this change in the setting may refer to a host of factors,

including variations in instruction and other efforts to provide a more inclusive and equitable learning environment.

This interest in the setting of activity is central to researchers working in the Vygotskian tradition (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987). Cole (1996), for instance, in accounting for research participants' performance on research tasks, says that

we were *not* assuming that poor performance on our experimental tasks reflected deep and pervasive cognitive differences...; rather, when people performed poorly in one of our tasks, we assumed that it was the task and our understanding of its relationship to locally organized activities, not the people's minds, that were deficient. (p. 80; emphasis in original)

Like Cole (1996), we believe that falling short of someone else's expectations on a task does not necessarily reveal a cognitive shortcoming. We see particular tasks as more and less appropriate to the cultural knowledge that participants bring to the activity. The task assigned by the teacher, in other words, may be the problem, and not the student.

In this investigation, we study our focal student, Rita, as she works on an unconventional task: interpreting literature through art. In the setting of school, art is rarely viewed as an appropriate tool for interpreting literature. Rather, as Applebee (1993) has found, literary response is almost exclusively verbal and reliant on the rational principles of New Criticism—an approach designed to bring scientific rigor and stature to the heretofore capricious field of literary criticism (Marshall, 1993) but one that excludes the reader's experiences in formulating an interpretation. According to Applebee, the most common tasks through which students interpret literature are tests assessing memory of significant events, or essays that provide an *explication de texte* without readerly introspection or connection. Educators assume that these tasks yield valid information about the degree to which a student has effectively engaged with the literature. Those students who perform poorly on such assessments are presumed to be deficient in their reading.

In prior work (e.g., O'Donnell-Allen & Smagorinsky, 1999; Smagorinsky, 1995, 2001; Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1994, 1995a, 1995b; Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 1998a, 1998b, 2000; Smagorinsky, Zoss, & O'Donnell-Allen, 2005; cf. Wertsch, 1991), we have found that one way to change the task is to open students' interpretive tool kits and allow them to employ various artistic means

as part of their literary studies. Further, to get beyond the limitations of the analytic emphasis that Applebee (1993, 1999; Applebee, Burroughs, & Stevens, 2000) finds central, if not exclusive, to literature instruction in the pervasive New Critical tradition, we and many others have taken a more transactional view of literary reading and instruction that positions readers as constructive agents in making meaning in relation to reading (e.g., Beach, Appleman, Hynds, & Wilhelm, 2005; Smagorinsky, 2001). This emphasis opens up interpretive possibilities by enabling readers to read their worlds into the words of the text. While this change in perspective is not conducive to helping students answer multiple choice items with single correct answers, it does allow a greater range of students a broader set of interpretive possibilities to engage them as readers and enable them personal transformations through their reading.

Beyond changing the task, educators may modify the arrangements through which learners approach the task (Gallas & Smagorinsky, 2002), especially when a particular population may have cultural (Moll, 2000) or biological makeups that are ill-matched with the routines and expectations of school. Students with attention difficulties are regarded and treated as a distinct group with specific needs. These needs can amplify their marginalization in school, suggesting that by reconsidering the pedagogical possibilities in classrooms, teachers may better serve students with attentional difficulties.

CONTEXT OF THE INVESTIGATION

The School

The research took place in a large (1,662 students) two-year senior high school in the U.S. Southwest. 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 block schedule with 84-minute classes. Each class met every other day and lasted the full academic year.

The Teacher

At the time of the data collection, Cindy was in her ninth year of teaching in public high schools. During that time, she was involved in a number of professional development activities, including one

of her state's National Writing Project affiliate, the state affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English, and a university master's degree program. This level of professional activity distinguished her from many of her colleagues in both the degree of involvement in a broader community and in the pedagogical approaches she adopted through her participation in them. Cindy 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.

The Class

Course Content

The first day of school was August 21. The first six weeks of Cindy's British Literature class were taken up by a unit on Identity in which the students read a variety of literary texts in which the speakers explored some aspect of their identities (e.g., work by Ralph Ellison, Anne Frank, Robert Frost, Paulette Jiles, Alice Walker, Thornton Wilder, and Richard Wright), whether the authors were British or not. Her departure from the norm of teaching British Literature—i.e., teaching exclusively British authors in chronological order—was typical of her audacity in relying on her own pedagogical compass instead of following the curriculum as traditionally taught. Students complemented their reading with personal explorations of their own in journals, on life maps (Kirby, Liner, & Vinz, 1988), and through group activities such as an "I remember" activity in which the class generated memories of their childhood and created a class poem out of their collective remembrances. They also studied self-portraits by the artists Norval Morrisseau, Pablo Picasso, and Vincent van Gogh, following which they created their own masks on which they represented their own understandings of themselves with painted images (Smagorinsky et al., 2005). In addition to these personal reflections, the students worked on argumentation, learning the claim-data-warrant argumentative scheme described by Toulmin (1958) and using lessons from Kahn, Walter, and Johannessen (1984).

Classroom Practices

Cindy's teaching approach emphasized open-ended explorations of literature through discussion, writing, drama, art, and other media that enabled each student an opportunity for interpretation that was both personal and a function of social interaction. Her mother, a kindergarten teacher, had impressed upon her the importance of

play-oriented learning, and for her first teaching job she taught speech, both of which influenced her to see her work differently than did many of her colleagues. Field notes found students frequently involved in group work and other collaborative activities, such as the pen pal relationship that they developed with a local fourth-grade class and the whole-class planning and execution of a school tour and pizza party they hosted for these “writing buddies.” Students were further required to keep writer’s notebooks in which they explored their ideas in relation to their reading before producing formal writing for assessment.

Many researchers (e.g., Cohen, 1998) argue that such open-ended environments are counterproductive for learners with attentional difficulties because the setting becomes overstimulating. Indeed, our focal student Rita stated a preference for highly structured activities, a characteristic common among those with ADHD (Wilens, Biederman, & Spencer, 2002). At the same time, she asserted that she liked having class in the school’s media center—which often was a relatively chaotic setting in which to conduct class—while Cindy’s classroom was dislocated due to school construction. The media center was the site for the artistic composition that we analyze in this study. Rita’s interpretation of the Keats poem with Dirk, her collaborator, thus took place in a physical setting that, at least according to many experts on attentional difficulties, would theoretically work against their engagement in the task.

Participant

Our study is focused on Rita because she was by far the more assertive of the two students as they collaborated in their interpretive drawing during the data collection. We consider Dirk to be part of the context of her interpretation as her primary discussant as she produced the interpretation and talked about it for the research.

Rita was a European American female who had moved back and forth between public and Catholic schools, experiencing difficulty with her academic learning in both settings. Rita’s school performance had improved dramatically during her junior year of high school when she was tested for learning disabilities and was found to have Attention Deficit Disorder, for which she was prescribed Ritalin. Because of this condition, Rita preferred shorter, more focused classes, and had difficulty adjusting to the block schedule. She described herself as

really hyperactive, and I am on the go all the time, and it was real easy for me to just go to 7 different classes a day . . . I would pay attention

in those classes, well, not really, but it would be just a shorter time for me to have to pay attention. Block schedules are so hard.

Concurrent with her medication, she began seeing Ms. Jackson, a special education teacher in the school, for personal help with her school assignments and individualized instruction in study skills. Through Ms. Jackson's tutelage, Rita learned to ask teachers for clarification in areas she misunderstood, a strategy she frequently employed in Cindy's class. Cindy's process-oriented classroom was often confusing to Rita because Cindy, in her efforts to allow students to take individual directions within the classroom framework, did not explicate her expectations to the degree that Rita felt she needed. As a result, Rita often did not understand Cindy's assessment criteria, a clarification that Ms. Jackson recommended she receive with all assignments. Rita stated a strong preference for more authoritarian teachers who provided a clearer direction and more explicit articulation of expectations. She said of Cindy's open-ended writing workshops that

I would rather have a piece of paper that says I have to have a page introduction, and a conclusion. I like real structure. I learn so much better by structured material. And that is why it is going to be so difficult for me. Even though she does give us what we need to write about, and the topics that we need to talk about, it is still, it just blows my mind, because I have got so many choices.... So that is why I think it is going to be real hard for me.

In spite of her feeling of being at odds with Cindy's unorthodox teaching approach, Rita received Bs both semesters of her senior year. Even with this success, she did not reveal confidence in herself as a student. She said, "I am not a real good writer, at least expressing what I feel. I mean, I could do a wonderful essay or report on some person or something. I am not a great writer [or] a good artist." Like other students with ADD or ADHD, Rita preferred increased structure and predictable routines (Wilens et al., 2002) over the open-ended assignments that were the focus of Cindy's instruction. Her stated preference for structure, however, did not prevent her from being a successful student in the open-ended setting of Cindy's class.

Collaborator

Dirk was a very personable, soft-spoken, and friendly African American male. Dirk passed the first semester with a low D and

was the only student in all of Cindy's five senior English classes who failed the second semester because of his grades (other students failed because of excessive absences). Because he failed English, Dirk did not graduate with his class.

Like Rita, Dirk experienced problems with concentration. He described his inability to focus, saying

Sometimes my mind wanders off. And then I forget all about what I have just done. And then it takes it a while for it to come back to me. . . . And when it comes back, I mean, I could write it down just like that. But then my mind starts to wander off again. I don't know why. It just does. Some day I will be doing a paper in a class. I mean, I am just writing, and then my mind starts to wander off, and I am writing down what I am wandering. . . . I turn it in, and my teacher says, "Dirk, what is this?" I am like, "Uh-oh." And she says, "Well, your mind is wandering off." I go, "Yeah, about some crazy things." . . . [In basketball practice] I can stand there, and 10 minutes later I am not with the team. I am like on the side line. The team is like on the baseline, I am on the other side. I am sitting there, I am just wandering off. But then the coach will call me. Sometimes I forget what he says. I go ask him, and he gets real mad.

Dirk's inability to concentrate affected his life in many ways. Without the sort of medical and therapeutic support that helped Rita succeed in school, he performed poorly in classes and in basketball, which he counted among his great passions in life.

Rita and Dirk had not known each other before their senior year English class with Cindy. They had worked together on a few previous occasions in Cindy's class on the many collaborative activities that she designed. For their interpretation of the Keats poem, they chose one another because, as Rita said, "We just have a lot of the same ideas. Well, we just have the same sense of humor, and we pick the same things out in a poem." Their affinity was based on similar dispositions (although not their shared attentional difficulties, which neither knew about the other) and a high comfort level in working together.

The Assignment

On October 11, Cindy assigned the students a set of readings; on October 13, the students interpreted the readings artistically. Their task was to use butcher paper and colored markers that Cindy provided to interpret the readings through a drawing abetted by a quote that they felt was central to the text's meaning. On October 17, each

group then presented their interpretation to the class and led a brief discussion on the meaning of the text.

METHOD

Data Collection

Observations and Field Notes

Each class during the year (with only a few exceptions) was observed by the study's first author, who took field notes on a laptop computer. For many classes, a second observer seated at a different vantage point also took field notes. The first author collated both sets of notes each day and sent them via email to Cindy, who had the opportunity to verify or revise the notes according to her own perspective. The field notes described the instruction that led up to their artistic interpretation of the poem, the artistic interpretation itself, and the two students' presentation to the class as they explained and reconsidered their artistic literary interpretations during a later class period.

Retrospective Protocol

Rita and Dirk produced their artistic interpretation of the Keats poem on Friday, October 13. The students' presentations of their interpretations to the class took place during the next class meeting, which fell on Tuesday, October 17. On Thursday, October 19, Rita and Dirk provided a retrospective verbal account of their composing process for the first author, during which they used their completed drawing to stimulate their reconstruction of their composing process. This retrospective account of their composing process was tape recorded and subjected to analysis.

Data Analysis

The verbal accounts of the students' process of composition served as the primary texts analyzed for this study. Rather than using reliability measures adopted from cognitive science (i.e., separate coding by each rater, with agreement on at least 80% of the codes producing reliable coding), the transcript was collaboratively analyzed by the first two authors, who discussed each segment of the transcript until they agreed on a code. Their analysis was reviewed and verified by the third author, who by now had completed her doctorate and was teaching at the university level.

The coding system originated with broad, prototypical categories derived from prior studies conducted in this line of inquiry (O'Donnell-Allen & Smagorinsky, 1999; Smagorinsky, 1995, 2001; Smagorinsky

Table 1. Codes and frequencies

Code	Frequency
Goal: construct meaning	12
Goal: represent understanding	8
Setting: prior discussions	2
Setting: prior strategies	3
Setting: personal experience	5
Tool: narrative	4
Tool: background knowledge	4
Tool: vocabulary definition	1
Tool: symbol	10

& Coppock, 1994, 1995a, 1995b; Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 1998a, 1998b, 2000; Smagorinsky et al., 2005). We modified the codes in relation to our reading of the data, creating specific categories to account for what we found in Rita's discussions of her experiences with the poem. The prototypical categories included three general types of codes to help us understand the students' situated composing process: *goal*, which provided the structure for the activity of their text production; *setting*, which served as the social context in which they learned to use the tool employed to produce the text; and *tool*, which they used to solve goal-oriented problems. The full set of codes and their frequencies is listed in Table 1.

Goal

We identified two kinds of goals in the students' artistic interpretations. *Construct meaning* is an effort to produce meaning through the transaction with the text in the context of Cindy's class and other relevant settings (e.g., a personal experience). For example, Rita said:

I think [the narrator of the poem] should think positively. But I still think he should be afraid to die. But I don't think he should bring out all this sadness and this feeling sorry for himself, and I don't think that is right. I think he should be scared of what is going to happen to him, but not to a point that he is so negative towards everything.

Represent understanding is an effort to depict events from the poem, even if the depiction might be interpretive rather than literally faithful. For example, Rita said:

In the poem it is talking about when he has fears that cease to be. I think that this guy has so much going on in his life. And he has got

so much that he wants to do and so much that he is thinking before he dies. And that is why I drew a brain. He is real confused, and he kind of has a real negative outlook.

Setting

Setting codes described the context in which the students learned information or procedures that they drew on to inform or work on their interpretations. We identified three types of settings.

Prior discussion is the drawing on of knowledge from previous class discussions to work interpretively on this task. For example: Rita said,

[Ms. O'Donnell-Allen] gave us an overall view, and she also related it back to John Keats and what he was going through in his life at that time. . . . So she kind of told us when he was writing it and what point in his life he was writing it.

Prior strategy is the drawing on strategic knowledge from previous classes as a way to approach the literature. For example, Dirk said,

We read it aloud, and then we talked about it then before we drew anything on the big poster. We talked about it, like what are we going to draw and what is going to be here and there.

Personal experience is a reference to experiences that were relevant to their interpretation. For example, Rita said,

I do see . . . my religious background in this drawing.

Tool

Tools are implements, either material or psychological, through which people act on their environments (Wertsch, 1991). Rita and Dirk used four types of tools:

Narrative is a story (however brief) that students told about their own lives in relation to the original and interpretive texts they worked with during the assignment. For example, Rita said,

My best friend's older sister shot herself. . . . She was in the army and she was stationed in [the Southeast] somewhere. And I hadn't seen her in six months.

Background knowledge is the biographical knowledge about an author. For example, Rita said,

John Keats wrote this poem because he was dying of tuberculosis, and his brother had just died.

Vocabulary definition is the word meanings that helped students to comprehend the original text. For example, Rita said,

The poem was written in what, 1819, I think, and so it is a real old poem. It has got different vocabulary than what we are used to, because a lot of these [words] we have never heard of. I had no idea what a garner was, which is a storehouse for grain.

Symbol is a depiction in the drawing (such as a body part or natural element) that represented something other than what was portrayed. For example, Rita said,

I pictured this guy as being real happy, and then clouds came, and that is his disease, and it is all raining on him, and all this stuff is happening to him.

RESULTS

Our codes suggest that Rita and Dirk's attention in interpreting Keats's "When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be" (see Figure 1 for the text of the poem, and Figure 2 for their interpretive drawing) was focused by two factors: the personal connections that they made with the central character in the poem and the artistic medium of the drawing. We next illustrate how these mediators facilitated the students' attention to the language of the poem and their concurrent production of their interpretive text.

Personal Connections to Literature

Codes that indicated personal connections to literature included *Goal: Construct meaning*, *Setting: Personal experience*, and *Tool: Narrative*. These codes, we found, were associated with recent experiences with death in the lives of both students. Dirk's pastor had died

When I have fears that I may cease to be
 Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,
 Before high-piled books, in charactery,
 Hold like rich garners the full ripen'd grain;
 When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,
 Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
 And think that I may never live to trace
 Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;
 And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,
 That I shall never look upon thee more,
 Never have relish in the faery power
 Of unreflecting love;—then on the shore
 Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
 Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

Figure 1. “When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be,” by John Keats (1818).

three years previously, an event that led to his withdrawal from church; and just before the assignment, Mary, the 24-year-old sister of Rita’s best friend, committed suicide. This latter event emerged in their discussion as the more significant influence on their interpretation and will be our focus in our analysis.

First, we recount the chronology of Mary’s death in conjunction with timing and sequence of Cindy’s instruction. Mary was a soldier in the U. S. Army, stationed at a base in the Southeastern United States. On Tuesday, October 10, Mary committed suicide during a period of clinical depression. Her body was flown back to her home in Rita’s Southwestern city for the funeral. On Wednesday, October 11, Rita was at school but did not attend Cindy’s class. In her absence, Cindy assigned a set of readings, including “When I Have Fears That I May



Figure 2. Dirk and Rita's interpretive drawing.

Cease to Be," for the next class meeting on Friday of the block schedule. On Friday, October 13, Cindy provided butcher paper and colored markers for the students to use in small group artistic interpretations of the various literary works assigned for homework. In addition to the Keats poem, the selections included three poems (Jürgen Henze's "Sometimes I Meet Myself," Julio Noboa Polanco's "Identity," and W. B. Yeats's "When You Are Old") and two short stories (Robert Cormier's "The Moustache" and Lois Lowry's "The Harrington's Daughter"), all selected by Cindy for their potential to contribute to students' considerations of their personal identities.

On Friday, Rita and Dirk interpreted the Keats poem, while each of the other small groups interpreted other stories and poems included in Wednesday's reading assignment. On Saturday, Rita attended Mary's funeral. Rita was very close with Mary's family; according to Ms. Jackson, Rita "picked the music for the funeral, Rita did. She was just with that family constantly. She spent the night over there, she was there a lot, and in fact that is probably when Rita's slide in school began." The following Tuesday, each group presented its artistic interpretation to the class. On Thursday, Rita and Dirk provided a retrospective protocol for the research in which they reconstructed their process of composition, using their completed drawing as a stimulus.

Rita's close relationship with a family that had experienced a terrible loss was a powerful influence on their reading of John Keats's "When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be," a poem employing the

early nineteenth-century archaisms of the British Lake poets' language and focusing on the mature theme of the speaker's profound fear of death. The poem reflects the Keats family's tragic affliction with tuberculosis. When Keats was 14 years old, his uncle died of consumption; his mother died of the illness the following year. Keats's brother Tom, for whom John had cared, died in 1818 of tuberculosis. At the time of his brother's decline and death, Keats wrote "When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be" in 1817 and sent it to his editor in 1818; it was eventually published in 1848. Keats believed that he himself would die within three years and indeed he did, of tuberculosis at age 25 in 1821. His contemplation of the disease's decimation of his family presumably provided the backdrop and impetus for his writing of the poem, in which he ponders both his earthly legacy and his empyrean essence following death. We next illustrate the relation between Rita's experiences with death and Rita and Dirk's collaborative reading of a poem centered on fears of death.

Rita and Dirk discussed the poem on three occasions: when they produced their drawing, when they presented their interpretation to the class, and when they discussed their interpretive process for the research. During the retrospective protocol, Rita drew a number of parallels between Mary's outlook and that of the speaker in the poem, in particular their negativity toward life, the degree to which their actions were amenable to choice, and the possibility of an afterlife. Rita described her feelings toward the speaker, saying:

It is real negative of this guy not to think that once he dies things will be better. And he is thinking of all this bad stuff that is going on right now, and after he dies, and why he was put on the earth, and thinks of the positive things that he has done with his life. . . . But I still think he should be afraid to die. But I don't think he should bring out all this sadness and this feeling sorry for himself, and I don't think that is right. I think he should be scared of what is going to happen to him, but not to a point that he is so negative towards everything.

Her view of Mary was similar to her view of the speaker. Both, she felt, succumbed to overly pessimistic views of their lives:

She shouldn't have been so negative, and this guy [the poem's speaker] shouldn't have been so negative. This guy didn't have a choice if he would die or not. But he should not have been negative. And she did have a choice. . . . She wasn't dying of [an illness] . . . She was dying

because of depression. I guess that is an illness, but she was so negative towards everything. . . . It [the interpretation] was a way for me to say how scared I was of dying, and how I think everybody should fear death, and it hit so close to home for me that week.

Their presentation to the class repeated these themes and involved a number of students talking about how people understand and respond to death. What follows is an account of the discussion that we have reconstructed from the field notes. The discussion itself was not tape-recorded, but the field notes were detailed enough to allow for a reconstitution of the students' comments that, while undoubtedly incomplete and lacking utter fidelity to the original discussion, is representative of the exchange.

Rita: What does it mean, When I have fears that I may cease to be? Billy?

Billy: (tries to hide behind his hand)

James: (attempts answer but does not complete it)

Rita: When you cease to be, you're dead. Why should he be afraid to die?

Jenny: Because maybe he hadn't accomplished everything he wanted.

Cindy: (points students to the biographical passage that accompanied the poem explaining that both Keats and his brother died young)

Rita: This is a hard one. The guy is afraid to die because his brother has just died young. He uses a lot of metaphors. The first line is about, he's trying to take all that he has in his brain and use a pen to get it out, so he's using a pen to get all this crap out of his head. What does he want to do after he gets the ideas out of his head, into books?

Alan: Why should everyone be afraid of death?

Rita: I've never been around death till this weekend when one of my friends killed herself. I think everyone should be scared of it. Nobody knows what death is, so you should be afraid of it.

Shondell: I'm not scared, but if I knew I was dying, I'd be upset because of how young I am. But I'm not scared of what happens after that.

Lucy: A lot of people are curious, not really scared.

- Rita: I think you'd be scared. Even if you have a really strong [religious] faith like I do, you'd be scared.
- Shondell: No.
- Billy: Say if you're an old man and you've did your purpose on earth, then you're not gonna be scared.
- Alan: Maybe that's all you're meant to accomplish. What if you're 24 years old and going to die? Maybe that's all you're meant to live.
- Shondell: You might be upset but not necessarily scared.
- Rita: (addressing two students who were talking quietly about fears of death) I gave you my attention [during your presentation], now give me yours. It pisses me off when people don't look at me when I'm talking.
- Rita & Dirk: (explain the symbols in their drawing.)
- Shondell: That's a good poem, Rita.

Rita took the occasion quite seriously, snapping at students whom she believed were not paying attention. During the retrospective protocol, Rita described the gravity of this moment:

I have never had a grandparent die. I have never had anybody that I have known [die]. I have never been to a funeral in my life. And until this past—I really, I kind of got upset with the people who weren't listening to my viewpoint out there.

Rita's own personal connection to the speaker's introspection about death was explicit in her remarks as discussion leader. Both of these comments and her questions to the class prompted other students to ponder the ways in which they might face death at different life stages. The discussion that we have reconstructed reveals the students talking less about Keats's language and more about their own feelings about profound issues: the degree to which one's death is fated, the role of religion in confronting death, the purpose of human life on earth, the possibilities of an afterlife, and other questions raised in light of Keats's speaker's facing his own mortality. Such big ideas, argues Yero (2002), occur rarely in schools where the focus is more on atomistic bits of unconnected knowledge.

This discussion of big ideas, facilitated by Rita's connection of her recent experience with her friend's death, continued during the retrospective protocol. While reflecting on the presentation, Rita said,

All the religion that has been piled into me by my parents, and by my church, I do have a strong [Catholic] faith. But I have no idea what is

going to happen to me after I die. Nobody can say that they know what is going to happen after they die. And it is just like, one of the girls [during our presentation to the class] was not afraid to die. But I think that if it came down to it, I think she would be scared half to death, because she has no idea what is going to happen to her.

Rita and Dirk sustained their focus on the topics raised in the poem across a period of over a week. Stimulated by the speaker's ruminations and the death of a friend, they moved from a concern that both Mary and the narrator were too negative about their lives to a more complex consideration of how a person most fittingly faces death. This attention came in response to a poem that, as Rita said at the beginning of their presentation, is a "hard one," one that this study's first two authors—both with baccalaureate and master's degree literary emphases and many years of experience as high school English teachers—had to read several times during our analysis in order to construct our own interpretations of the poem, with lingering ambiguities that mirror the lack of critical consensus regarding the poem's meaning. Through their multiple iterations of the initial reading, their effort to represent the poem graphically, their presentation and discussion with the class, and their reconstruction of their interpretive process and search for meaning for the research, Rita and Dirk had the opportunity to develop their ideas across multiple interpretive discussions and experiences, particularly the intense emotions surrounding the death of Rita's friend. As Rita said, in addition to attending to the language of the poem, their graphic interpretation provided her with "a way for me to express also my feelings about this girl's death."

Artistic Medium

Codes that were associated with the artistic medium of the drawing included *Goal: Construct meaning* and *Tool: Symbol*. Through these codes, we were able to locate occasions when Rita and Dirk exhibited evidence that the process of inscribing meaning in their drawing helped them to focus on the task of interpreting the poem.

As noted, Rita and Dirk had experienced difficulty in school in the past. Both acknowledged that they neither liked nor were skilled at writing, the primary vehicle for evaluation in English classes, including Cindy's. They both stated a preference for talking about their ideas, rather than having to write them down. Rita said, "I don't like the writer's notebook. I don't like being confined to a little book [in] which we were given specific things to write about."

The act of writing confined Rita's ability to express herself, even given the latitude that Cindy provided with the writer's notebook. These notebooks were blank journals that the students could fill with informal writing in any form, sketches, or any other texts of their choice. While not appreciating the potential for writing as a mode of expression, Rita also claimed to be a poor artist, saying, "[I draw] only when I have to. . . . I am not an artist at all."

Even with these reservations, Rita and Dirk found that interpreting the Keats poem artistically provided them with avenues of expression that were absent in their efforts to write, and that had not occurred to them prior to producing their drawing. Rita said, for instance, that

It was such a hard poem to understand. And I am just basically, I am a real visual person and I have got to see something. I have got to have color. I just can't have this poem with all these real difficult words in it that I have never heard and expect to understand this. I mean, I could understand it. I had an idea before we started drawing, but then, we started thinking about, well, gosh, what should we draw and what does this phrase mean, and it helped because it just gives you a better understanding by having to understand. . . . It was better that we drew it. It helped us understand the poem better.

Rita's testimony about the value of their artistic interpretation was corroborated by the ways in which they explained the symbolism that they inscribed in the poem. As we have reviewed previously, the Keats poem and their artistic interpretation served as vehicles for Rita to come to terms with the tragic event of her friend's death. The symbols that they used in their artistic interpretation showed attention to the poem's speaker and his contemplation of his earthly existence. They depicted, for instance, the central image of the character's consciousness as his brain, replete with thoughts and other noetic paraphernalia, percolating into an expressive writing pen and from there into a book. Rita described this representation by saying

In the poem it is talking about when he has fears that [he may] cease to be. I think that this guy has so much going on in his life. And he has got so much that he wants to do and so much that he is thinking before he dies. And that is why I drew a brain. He is real confused and he kind of has a real negative outlook. But I think all of that, that is going on in his mind, and stuff, is coming out through his pen.

In addition, Dirk and Rita used facial features to represent the character's state of mind. They constructed the speaker's feelings of isolation as his taciturn demeanor, represented by their artistic figure's muted appearance. Rita said that "His mouth does have a lot of significance, because it is kind of sad and it also isn't open. So he is not talking about this to people." Further, they drew the speaker so that he lacked eyes, suggesting a deliberate effort to avoid seeing the good in the world; Rita said that "It is just coming through his mind—he doesn't have any eyes because he is so blind to all . . . He is so stressed out, and he is like blinded to all the good things."

While claiming to have limited artistic abilities, Rita and Dirk nonetheless found the graphic medium to be a useful means for representing and mediating their understanding of the Keats poem. Through the process of determining how to symbolize the speaker's feelings and perspective, they came to a better understanding of his feelings about death, particularly in relation to Rita's recent experience and the great questions she faced in trying to comprehend the loss of a friend. Their portrait did not necessarily represent the speaker's narrative literally; rather, they often created symbols to represent the emotional content of the poem instead of seeking to draw the poem's action with utter fidelity. Their depiction thus represented a new construction, a new image through which they expressed the meaning that emerged through their engagement with the poem in the setting of Cindy's class—a meaning that, as Rita said, changed through the process of producing the drawing.

DISCUSSION

We see Rita and Dirk's interpretation of "When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be" as comprising a dialectic among their artistic text, the mediation of the narrative of Rita's recent personal experiences, and the tools available through the setting of Cindy's classroom and its permeable boundaries. We use the term dialectic in light of its Greek origins in the word *dialektikos*, meaning conversation, derived from *dia* (across or through) and *lect* (readings or speech). A dialectic is thus a conversation that goes across readings, a fitting term for the sort of transaction that we have described in Rita and Dirk's engagement with the Keats poem through the medium of their drawing.

This dialectic, which took place in the physical setting of the highly distracting context of the school media center during the dislocation of Cindy's class, appeared to provide a highly stimulating environment for the students' interpretive work. Such a milieu is regarded

by Cohen (1998) and other experts on ADD/ADHD as being counterproductive to helping students with this mental makeup to focus on their schoolwork. Cohen argues that a busy, stimulating classroom often exacerbates students' symptoms. He recommends instead a quiet, calm, unstimulating learning environment. Wilens et al. (2002) concur, arguing that ADHD is best managed by three interventions: "educational remediation, structure/routine, and cognitive-behavioral therapy" (p. 126). And yet this open-ended task in this distracting setting produced what we consider to be a mature, thoughtful response to a poem that Rita described as "really, really hard"—a judgment no doubt shared by many readers. We are compelled, then, to consider what it means to have a structured environment so as to explain how these two students with attentional difficulties managed to produce a meaningful text in response to this canonical work of literature in the absence of a quiet, unstimulating, and overtly structured environment.

Cindy's classroom, especially in the cacophonous environment of the school media center, appeared to be fluid, divergent, and bustling—presumably a counterproductive setting for students with ADD/ADHD, and one indeed that caused Rita consternation on many occasions during the year. Yet we found certain routines and structures to be embedded in Cindy's conduct of her classes. She regularly included artwork in students' responses to literature, which contributed to the intercontext (Floriani, 1993) of social practices that students drew on in their interpretive work. Cindy also built in reiterative ways of spiraling back to ideas, such as when they produced their interpretations and then presented them to the class. Such routines allowed for multiple considerations of the same problem, mediated by the conversations surrounding each of the students' efforts at meaning construction. Further, by organizing her instruction according to themes, Cindy helped students sustain their attention on topics. These thematic threads thus helped to focus students' attention on a sustained idea by moving students along a spectrum of engagement with a unified, bounded set of significant ideas.

These structures worked in support of Cindy's goal of engendering in her students a sense of personal and academic agency. At times, students felt uncomfortable with the idea that Cindy placed so much responsibility for their own learning in their hands. Rita, for instance, said that she preferred more structure and wished that Cindy's assignments were more constrained and scripted. Yet Cindy addressed this problem by scaffolding her students' progress through a complex set of ideas. Her support was explicit on many occasions, such as when she led students through a series of activities through which they

learned how to keep double-entry reading logs (see O'Donnell-Allen, 2006). In the artistic assignment described in this study, Rita and Dirk were provided the opportunity to cycle back to their drawing and explain it to the class, with their consideration of its language mediated and supported by several stages of discussion and occasional teacher assistance.

While structured, the artistic assignment was simultaneously open-ended, given the myriad possibilities that diverse readers have for constructing meaning in relation to Keats's language. In all of her instruction, Cindy strongly encouraged students to make personal connections to the literature, promoting idiosyncratic readings that helped her emphasize the unlimited possibilities afforded by literary reading. When students brought their wide-ranging experiences and beliefs to a common discussion, such as when Rita and Dirk presented their drawing to the class, the discussions became enriched as students engaged with one another's perspectives on such great and mystifying questions as the nature of life on earth and how one should approach and make sense of death. The very feature of the instruction that unsettled Rita, then—the absence of an immutable, official answer—allowed her to make important personal connections to her reading of a challenging canonical poem and thus produce an interpretation in which she had great conviction.

Teachers often earnestly try to provide appropriate environments for students with ADD/ADHD by limiting the stimulation around them. We also see the possibility that teachers working with ADD/ADHD students may conflate stimulation with social interaction and discourage collaboration in the name of reducing distraction. This case suggests that structure and stimulation are not mutually exclusive features of instruction and that open-ended social interaction may be stimulating in productive ways. The flexible medium of the artistic interpretation and the opportunity to draw on personal experiences to inform an academic project afforded these two students a means for taking the inchoate substance of the poem and reconstructing it into a meaningful text of their own. Those seeking structure for ADD/ADHD students, then, might benefit from interrogating the construct in ways that are enabling, rather than limiting, for students in their engagement with the school curriculum.

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