USING FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE AND LITERACIES TO SCAFFOLD FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE WRITING

A Thesis

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by

William Joseph Sewell

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Department of English
Abstract

of

USING FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE AND LITERACIES TO SCAFFOLD FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE WRITING

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William Joseph Sewell

This thesis examines the effects of an assignment where students write about a literacy of their choice. The assignment was constructed around James Paul Gee’s concept of semiotic domains, an expansive theory that offers a wide definition literacies and which allows students a breadth of writing topics. In response to the assignment’s liberal parameters, students often choose literacies of deep knowledge and interest. The study was conducted at California State University, Sacramento over two successive semesters in English 1A (first-year composition), one class per semester. Forty-two students completed the study, 22 for the first semester, 20 for the second. The assignment, successful and popular with students, is essentially a funds of knowledge assignment, where students’ outside-of-school knowledge skills are validated and then employed to scaffold the learning of in-school knowledge and skills. The assignment’s effectiveness was measured using a variety of research methods: grades, questionnaires, discourse analysis of essays and reflective essays. Among the more interesting results are students’ reports of writing fluency. These and other results suggest that using a funds of knowledge approach at the outset of first-year college composition courses enables
students to attend to the rhetorical qualities of their compositions sooner into the writing process, thus facilitating the learning and development of college-level writing skills.

_______________________, Committee Chair
Daniel Melzer, Ph.D.

_______________________
Date
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Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Carol, whose unending support and enduring patience has made this journey much easier than it would have been otherwise.
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Chapter 1

USING FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE AND LITERACIES TO SCAFFOLD FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE YEAR WRITING

One of my greatest challenges as a freshman writer was development. For years, I attributed my problem to being a high school dropout, to missing two and a half years of high school English. Now, as one who teaches freshman composition, I find that my problems were not necessarily due to the lack of high school English. Many college students struggle with development. As a result, I find that my main duty—and challenge—as a facilitator of students’ writing is teasing out thoughts; getting students to explain and support their ideas.

This lack of development is likely due to a greater problem. When students struggle with college writing, it is possible that they are overwhelmed. Many are struggling with several new things—or at least slightly familiar subjects at a more demanding level. For instance, when I conduct informal polls of my students, I discover that 75% of them have never ventured beyond the five-paragraph essay. For this and other reasons, they discover that the rhetorical demands of college are much greater than those they are accustomed to in high school. In addition, they frequently find themselves reading articles that place new demands on their reading skills, often having to read and to negotiate several of these articles per writing assignment. These readings are meant to challenge students’ thinking, and for that reason place new demands on their cognitive skills. It is not unusual for students to face this trio of new demands—ideational,
readerly, rhetorical—immediately in the first semester of college composition. While some students survive and even thrive in this environment, many struggle.

One solution is to scaffold students’ entry into college-level writing, and one way to do this is to encourage students to write about what they know, what many scholars term as funds of knowledge. Noting several other scholars’ calls for bringing more literacies into the composition classroom, I have developed a writing assignment where students write about a personal literacy, the definition of literacy based upon James Paul Gee’s concept of semiotic domains. Because semiotic domains offers an expansive definition of literacies, the assignment offers students plenty of latitude to write about a topic of deep interest and knowledge, allowing them to use their funds of knowledge for content generation.

Theoretical Frameworks: Funds of Knowledge and Semiotic Domains

Funds of Knowledge (FoK), a pedagogical approach developed by Tucson scholars to link the school and the home lives of Mexican-American students near the U.S.-Mexico border, is commonly defined as “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household functioning and well being” (Moll et al. 72). The Tucson scholars developed FoK for several reasons. One was to counter deficit models, where educators tend to view students by the skills that they lack rather than by ones that they possess. For instance, while students may seem to be lacking in literacy skills, they may be actually highly literate in Spanish (de la Piedra 578), or students who are passive in the classroom may actually be quite active in the running of their families (Moll et al. 74). Linking students’ home lives with their school
lives has two primary benefits: it shows school validation for the knowledge students possess, and it provides scaffolding, a means of using students’ knowledge to teach academic content (Gonzalez 43). A classroom, for instance, might use FoK to show the practical extensions of math; how it is used in everyday practices such as carpentry and sewing.

FoK has been expanded from its original uses. It initially focused on knowledge used in the household, but the concept was eventually expanded to include knowledge gained from three additional areas: community, peers, and popular culture. Initially, FoK was used in K-6 and then K-12. Now scholars are finding it useful for educating adults. At this point, as Larrotta and Serrano note, there is very little literature to document FoK’s use in adult education (318). There is even less on its uses in higher education. British scholars, such as Helen Oughton, advocate the use of FoK in adult education. While Oughton demonstrates a healthy skepticism for many claims and aspects of FoK, she nevertheless argues that adults’ individual experiences—in addition to the knowledge they gain from households, community, peers, and popular culture—are valid forms of FoK (pars. 3 – 13).

By its nature, FoK is hybrid, and this hybridity presents opportunities for teaching literacies. Barton and Tan, for instance, see FoK as a way of connecting “traditionally marginalized funds of knowledge and Discourses to academic funds and Discourses” (52). Similarly, de la Piedra, who conducted a study where she applied FoK to literacy learning, concludes that teachers can incorporate students’ vernacular literacies through FoK and that this can enhance literacy development (582). Others see FoK as a way of
teaching students to navigate and succeed in various discourse communities (Moje et al. 44). This concept of navigational space strongly resembles approaches advocated by various composition scholars, such as Alexander’s “trans-literacy,” Carter’s “rhetorical dexterity,” or Adler-Kassner’s and Harrington’s “traveling literacy skills.” What all of these have in common is that students learn to take the literacies skills they possess and use them to adapt to various literacies contexts. Students can adapt to various writing demands across the curriculum.

Along with seeing a need to scaffold the writing assignments of first-year students, I see a need to incorporate literacies into the composition classroom. A classroom focus on literacies in their various forms is advocated by many scholars. Linda-Adler Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington, for instance, claim that teaching students the ability to compose under a variety of contexts will empower them, countering the negative political effects of basic writing and standardized literacies. Shannon Carter has developed an entire curriculum meant to develop students’ rhetorical dexterity. (One assignment in her curriculum, where students write about a vernacular literacy, shares many traits with my own unit.) Other scholars claim that it is becoming increasingly important to teach our students how to compose in ways other than print on paper. Gunther Kress and Elizabeth Daley, for instance, claim that our culture has gone from text and book to image and screen dominated. Noting this trend, composition scholars such as Kathleen Blake Yancey and Cynthia Selfe argue that composition must embrace multimodal composition in order to remain relevant. In these and other ways, focusing the composition classroom on literacies is beneficial, if not vital.
In response to scholars’ concerns, I developed a unit where students would write about a literacy of their choice. The idea was to create an assignment that would both familiarize students with the concept of literacies and provide a curricular base which could be extended in a number of directions. To introduce the students to the idea of literacies, I expose them to James Paul Gee’s theory of semiotic domains, what Gee defines as “any set of practices that recruit one or more modalities to communicate distinctive types of meanings” (18). According to Gee, how literate one is in any domain depends upon understanding and mastery of a domain’s system of signs. As he explains, if we think first in terms of semiotic domains and not in terms of reading and writing as traditionally conceived . . . we can say that people are (or are not) literate (partially or fully) in a domain if they can recognize (the equivalent of “reading”) and/or produce (the equivalent of “writing”) meanings in the domain. (20)

While we typically think of signs as operating in the visual realm, this is not necessarily so. A sign can be in any mode, “oral or written language, images, equations, symbols, sounds, gestures, graphs artifacts, etc.” (19). Examples of literacies, according to Gee, include “cellular biology, postmodern literacy criticism, first-person shooter games, high fashion advertisements, Roman Catholic theology” (19). The range is expansive and intriguing, allowing for a wide variety of literacies, many not traditionally viewed as such. The concept of semiotic domains, besides helping us understand human activities more fully, helps explain why scholars often refer to using a computer or surfing the web as a literacy.
Various scholars frame their own discussions of literacies in terms of semiotic domains. Constance Steinkuehler, for instance, uses it when discussing the Massively Multiple Online Player Game (MMOG) as a “complex semiotic domain” (6) and the game interface as a “completely transparent (albeit dense) semiotic system” (5). Shannon Carter recognizes semiotic domains when she discusses students’ reflections on football and soccer literacies, describing how during play football and soccer players “read” their opponents’ formations and, in response, change their own formations, thus “writing” new ones (117 – 18). Because of its breadth, semiotic domains theory is especially useful when prompting students to write about their own literacies, giving them a wide choice of topics. This breadth makes it ultimately useful when students consider their own literacies as a fund of knowledge.

Assignment and Project: A Unit on Literacies

My dual concerns of transitioning students into college-level writing and of preparing them for various writing situations led to a literacies unit where students would write about a literacy of strong interest and/or deep knowledge. While designing this unit, I relied extensively on the concept of semiotic domains, feeling that it offered the widest latitude for literacy definitions and an expanded chance of students’ writing about their own knowledge. This latitude gives students more choice; more of a chance that they will choose a writing topic personally meaningful. In addition, recognizing activities not traditionally thought of as literacies is in the spirit of FoK pedagogy in that it validates activities typically outside of school.
Once exposed to the theory of semiotic domains, students choose a literacy to analyze and write about. For this unit, I tell them to find one of strong interest and/or deep knowledge, hoping that they will choose one that fits both criteria. As part of the assignment, students have to discuss the encoding and decoding activities of the literacy and describe a scenario of that literacy. This presents opportunities to analyze the literacy and to show it in action. The literacies paper is the second of three formal essays, the first a rhetorical analysis, the third an argument about dialect and “Students’ Rights to Their Own Language.” I see the dialect essay as a natural extension of the literacies paper in that both share not only similar attributes but also the same concern with the privileging of dominant Discourses and the subsequent marginalization of others. When I designed the study, I thought that a rhetorical analysis would help students learn the types of strategies that academic writers and other skilled rhetoricians use to move their audiences.

When I designed this unit, I had several questions: First of all, would students accept the idea of literacies? Would the writing assignment resonate with students? Would writing about topics of extensive knowledge and/or strong interest lead to more effective writing? Would the writing be more developed? Another concern I had is whether students would become overwhelmed with the flow of ideas to the point that they would have difficulty limiting and organizing the information. I was of the opinion that the students, being of the digital age, would not find the concept of literacies new. I also believed that they would like the project in that they could write about a topic of their choosing. I had really no hypotheses about the other questions.
The project took place over two consecutive semesters, in two first-year composition classes—one per semester. The first semester was in the spring, the second in the fall. The institution at which I was teaching is a state university with about 24,000 undergraduate and 3,000 graduate students. Both of my classes started out with 25 students, but because attrition a total of 42 students participated in the study, 22 the first semester, 20 the second. The population is diverse, the major ethnic populations breaking into the following approximate percentages for first-year students: 8% African American, 25% Asian, 1% Pacific Islander, 26% Latino, 29% Caucasian, and 6% multiracial. About 64% of the first-year population was listed as minority, 37% of the total population listed as underrepresented. Each of my classes had one junior; all of the other students were in their first year.

I employed several methods to determine the literacies unit’s effectiveness. The first method was grades—how they would compare to those of the other two formal essays of the semester. I also relied on feedback from students in the form of reflection papers, which they did after their final draft but before receiving a grade. At the end of the semester, I also administered a questionnaire that asked students such things as their favorite writing assignment and the one that they felt they did their best writing on. I felt that four methods—grades, students’ essay writing, reflections, and questionnaire responses—would provide a good indication of how much the assignment resonates with the students and encourages effective writing.
Results: Students’ Writing and Scores

The first indication of success is grades. As can be seen from Table 1, the students’ scores were consistent across both semesters. For both classes, the average score jumped four points from the first to the second essay. From the second to third essay, the third essay the average score dropped slightly the first semester but stayed the same for the second semester. As can be seen from the next row, 59% of the first semester and 30% of the second semester students achieved their highest essay score on the literacies assignment. While the literacies essay was by far the most successful essay of the first semester, it was perhaps more successful as scaffolding for the second semester, in that students maintained their level of performance for the essay following it. While these results do suggest that the literacies essay elicits good results, the rise in scores from the first to the second essay could also be due to factors such as students’ increased writing experience and adapting to the writing environment, namely, to my expectations.

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The final two rows contain results from the end-of-semester questionnaire and provide some intriguing insight. No matter how well students performed on the literacies essay, around 45% perceived it their best writing and around 55% identified it as their favorite essay. It is intriguing that these results are so consistent across both semesters when only 30% of the second semester students received their highest score on the literacies essay. The discrepancy may lie in the fact that for 60% of the second semester students, the difference in grades between essays 2 and 3 was three points or less, a negligible difference. The grade statistics and the responses do show two trends. Student performance noticeably improves from the first essay to the literacies essay, and no matter how successful the students were or thought they were on it, the literacies essay is popular.

Writing, Cognition, and Topic Knowledge

Students’ responses and reflections reveal as much about the assignment’s effects as the quantitative data does. While literacies was a new concept for most students, and while many found it initially challenging in that they had to “think outside the box,” they nevertheless found it a relatively easy topic to write about. Their reflections and questionnaire responses typically cite interest and ease for preferring the literacies assignment over the others. Occasionally a student would use stronger terms to describe his or her topic: “My favorite part about writing this essay was that the topic is something I’m very passionate about, therefore writing about it came with much ease.” This student, Francine (all student names are pseudonyms), chose painting as her literacy. What is not mentioned in this passage is that it is a hobby of hers. Students often pick a hobby such as
painting, video games, or sports. Like Francine, they often mention “love” of or “passion” for the specific literacy as their reason for liking the assignment. When students use strong terms like “passion,” it is likely that they are referring to a subject that they find more than interesting; it is likely an activity in which they participate to some degree. Those who participate in an activity usually have more knowledge about the subject than those who are merely interested in it.

The ease that Francine and other students mention in their reflections and questionnaire responses is often expressed by others. These students, while not mentioning “ease,” use terms that express fluency of thought. For instance, one student states, “ideas were just coming left to right for me.” Another states, “When I started writing the paper, it was as if my paper flowed so well. I knew exactly what I was going to talk about.” The following responses, from two other students, indicate reasons for the fluency. The first student, Lisa, states,

I believe this was my best because I wrote on a topic I knew a lot about and the topic kept me interested. It was fun to write a paper about something I love to do. I write about [better?] when I feel more comfortable about a topic I know.

Similarly, Leo, the second student, states,

I think I did best on the literacy paper. I used this chance to write something I was very knowledgeable in. When I am confident in what I am writing, I will write very well.
Like most students, Lisa and Leo wrote about a subject of strong interest. Lisa wrote about soccer and Leo about strategic video games. Unlike some students, however, they both also wrote about activities in which they participate, subjects about which they were intimately familiar.

With their FoK providing content and facilitating development, some students were apparently able to attend to the other demands of college writing much sooner into the process. While this was not expressed by many students, a few did mention it. Francine, for instance, concerned that her “organization and transitions were up to par” and that her enthusiasm may have led her to “cram” too much irrelevant information into the essay, nevertheless states, “Overall, I think that the essay on Literacies has tremendously improved my sense of organization and ability to come up with rich content.” Similarly, Leo states that once he chose his subject,

the only problem I faced was narrowing down my topic and preparing to organize my paper in a manner that could be easily explained as to avoid too much writing on the subject rather than how it is a literacy... .

I believe that my analysis came out very well because of the organization that was eventually used. I used the thesis to separate my essay into a few main ideas about what it means for a game to be a literacy. This made it easy for me to make topic sentences and separate paragraphs according to what I wanted to talk about and why.

Both writers express concern for having too much irrelevant content, and both express the luxury of attending to the rhetorical strategies of their papers. With ideas coming at them
with relative ease, the main challenge for these students is eliminating irrelevant information and attending to rhetorical features like organization and topic sentences. Here the bridging of FoK and school activities seems to provide the scaffolding that many first-year college writers need in order to most effectively learn the rhetorical strategies they need for college writing. Rather than dealing with demanding readings and ideas throughout the writing process, their out-of-school knowledge provides easily accessible content that they can then shape while practicing new rhetorical skills and strategies. Once they gain some experience and skill at college writing, they can move on to more demanding assignments, ones with topics outside of their immediate realm of knowledge.

**Agency and Authority**

In their reflections, students often demonstrate an authority that is a direct result of using their own knowledge. A good example of this is Katherine, a student who struggled with the first essay. In the literacies essay, she came off as much more of an expert on her topic, video games. Her reflection reveals her comfort with and love of the subject, describing the assignment and her choice as the chance to “actually talk about something I knew about”:

> I personally liked [the] literacies essay because I could show off how nerdy I actually am. Being a girl, most people think I’m not into video games & all the nerdy things the come with it. Plus I actually like to critique video games, which I got to do in this essay.
The essay gives her an opportunity not only to show off how much she knows but also to defy stereotypes. While several students wrote about video games, she was the only female to do so (a trend that perhaps supports her point about females not being into video games). In her reflection, she shows a feistiness; she is outspoken and likes to challenge conventions. But her essay turns into more than just stating opinions; it becomes a mission, as she notes in her questionnaire response: “I could prove that my topic was something that can be looked at in a good way instead of the stereotypical ‘video games melt your brain’ way.” The literacies paper presented the opportunity to defend her controversial hobby, and she likely jumped at the chance. She even gets in a couple of digs at those critical of video games. Her use of the term “stereotypical” suggests that video game critics lack imagination and insight, while the use of scare quotes distances her from and perhaps ridicules the detractors.

Leo also asserts his authority in his reflection. He states, “videogames are something I’m very familiar with,” and in his paper he demonstrates his knowledge by a discussion of strategic video games, boldly proclaiming them a superior literacy to first-person shooter games (and perhaps not fully getting the lesson of literacies theory—that one literacy is not necessarily superior to another). In his reflection, he continues to argue that in strategic games, “literacy plays more of a role,” claiming that first-person shooter games as more physical and less of a literacy. Near the end, he takes his authority to a new level:

Since the topic was something I knew the class or yourself might have little to no knowledge about, it was easy to prove that you were illiterate in
the subject by throwing in specific examples and then later give a brief explanation to show that I am literate in the subject. This turned out to be the basis of my argument.

What is especially noteworthy about Leo’s reflection is that he directly addresses me. He takes the opportunity to turn the tables, telling me (the traditional literacy expert in the classroom) that he (the traditional literacy learner) is in this case the literacy expert and that I am “illiterate.” While the authority is not quite so frank in his essay, it is here, in this direct address to me. In other contexts, his frankness and the position he takes would be stunning, but here it is not completely unexpected. It is in moments like these that a key goal of FoK pedagogy is achieved. Because the student’s outside-of-school knowledge is validated, Leo freely expresses value for it as well. And seeing himself as a possessor of valid knowledge, he proclaims his expertise in it to the novice, here the teacher. The literacies/FoK pedagogy allows, even invites, Leo to take a position of true authority. Such authority enables the student to present his knowledge without reservation.

Identity

In many students’ reflections, their expressions of love and passion for the subject go deeper than just attraction; they go to the essence of their identities. For instance, Jessica describes the literacies essay as her favorite in that it “allowed [her] to talk/write about something personal and passionate.” She attributes her personal connection to the subject as the reason for her good grade:
My grade on this essay really reflected my interest in it. . . . I felt that I did my best writing on the second essay. I believe this was my best written paper because it was on a personal topic, I tend to do better on those rather then [sic] analyzing an article.

Whereas other students might describe the topic as interesting, a love, or a passion, Jessica describes it as “personal.” The difference between these adjectives is distance. “Personal” suggests a closer relationship, a contiguous relationship, one that is part of the body, and for good reason—her subject was tattoos. Similar to the young, African-American males in David Kirkland’s “The Skin We Ink,” who use tattooing as a form of journaling, as a way of signifying important and resonant events in their lives, Jessica uses tattooing to signify identity, important bonds, and perhaps trauma. In her essay, she describes getting her first tattoo, having the phrase “seulement les forts survivra” (“only the strong survive”) inscribed on her hip. This French phrase is a nod to her French heritage and a motto that serves as an inspiration to keep going, while hinting at a troubled past.

Jessica discusses another tattoo, an infinity sign, which she received when she and her “four best friends from middle school” went to a tattoo parlor together:

This tattoo is special to me because it reminds me of happy and hard times that they have all been there for throughout my life. After nine years, I know that like the tattoo, our friendships will never fade. My quote for the symbol is, ‘The infinity sign has no end, that’s how long I want to be your friend.’ For my friend Kayla, it reminds her of our support through her
mom fighting breast cancer. For my friend Jamie, it reminds her of who was there to comfort her during her parents’ divorce. For my friend Mary, it’s a reminder of her best friends even though we’re separated by 2 states. The symbol all has the same meaning of friendship to us, but in a sense it is deeper and different for each one of us. This shows that just because the symbol is the same for us, doesn’t mean that the personal meaning or ‘story’ is.

For Jessica, tattooing is a literacy of deep, personal meaning, one of inspiration and of love. The tattoo will likely remain a lifelong symbol of her friendship and a reminder of a moment they had together. Writing about it becomes a meaningful experience as she explains in the questionnaire: “I think I did my best writing on the second essay. Mainly because it was one that I really wanted to go into depth with.” A personally meaningful subject transforms into personally meaningful writing, one on which the writer wants to spend time. Sharing her personal literacy and experiences brings out Jessica’s most effective and passionate writing of the semester. In FoK fashion, her personal literacy and experiences are academically validated, and she freely shares them. Here, one outcome of the literacies assignment is similar to outcomes of other FoK approaches. One goal of FoK pedagogy is for teachers to know their students as whole people, not just by their performance in the classroom (Moll et al. 74). While the literacies assignment does not go to the extents that K-12 FoK pedagogy might (teacher visitations to and ethnographic research in students’ homes), it does offer opportunities for students to share personal knowledge and thus for us to know them better. This does matter. I am frequently told by
my students that they expected to hate composition but found it their favorite class, largely because of the communal aspects. They tend to love the small group and whole class discussions, and they often remark that I am the only teacher who knows their names. Feeling part of a community does motivate students. They want to attend class and they want to engage.

Another student, James, also expresses close identification with his subject, soccer. In his reflection, he states,

I felt like I really got a chance to express myself because my choice of topic really says a lot about me. I’ve been playing soccer my whole life and its played a big role in my life. This essay opened up a really big door for my creativeness and I just feel really proud of my work on it.

He had reasons to be proud of the essay. While he struggled with the first essay, requiring a lot of prompting and facilitation from me, he immediately seemed more fluent in the literacies essay. His final score reflected the connection to the topic: while receiving a high B on the first essay, he received a high A on the second. It was a remarkable turnaround, one enabled by authority and passion. For James, soccer is not a mere interest or sport; it is a lifelong love that has “played a big role” in his life. The expressions he chooses—“express myself” and “my choice of topic really says a lot about me”—reveal that his connection to soccer is deep and personal. Similar to the role tattoos play in Jessica’s life, soccer plays a part in James’ identity—a significant part. Both have dedicated their bodies to their literacy, Jessica turning parts of her body into a canvass, James devoting his body to hundreds of hours of hard work and practice. Like
knowledges identified by FoK scholars, soccer is a skill and knowledge that James has likely learned from peers, community, and popular culture. Jessica’s is one she values and shares with peers. Both students find their literacies and FoK a catalyst for creativity. And both write their best essays of the semester; James writes an essay he identifies as earning “the highest grade I have ever received on an essay.”

**Discovery and Validation**

Another characteristic of this assignment is how the familiar nevertheless leads to discovery. Looking at a familiar subject under a new, academic lens enables students to discover new qualities about their knowledge/literacies. A good example of this is offered by Sam in his reflection:

> When deciding what topic to choose to do . . . I was first considering doing music or even paintings as a literacy. But I decided on videogames because I thought that it would be more fun and I had a what the heck attitude towards the subject, I wanted to see if I could prove that videogames could be perceived as something useful. In the beginning stages I had a defensive attitude towards videogames, I felt that I had to disprove what most people believed videogames were. As I went on I realized that videogames have a great amount of potential. I started to see that videogames were really a mixture of literacies in itself and that you needed to not only be familiar with all these literacies such as communication with people online, working a controller to make your avatar do what you want, and so on. I noticed that there are other literacies
in videogames such as reading, music, and even art, many videogames contract professional artists and even orchestras for their game. I began to see videogames as not just another literacy but perhaps the next evolution of literacies.

Sam’s reflection shows an initial skepticism followed by a developing awareness. He starts off lackadaisical (“what the heck attitude”), as if choosing the topic of video games can be a way to defend them against critics. At first, he does not seem entirely convinced himself that video games are a literacy or even a worthwhile activity. “I wanted to see if I could prove that videogames could be perceived as something useful,” he states, the passive, agentless “could be perceived” distancing him from a pronouncement and, importantly, from the idea of usefulness. His initial doubt and increasing awareness are underscored by his statement, “As I went on I realized that videogames have a great amount of potential.” In other words, it is not until he spends some time thinking about video games as literacy that he realizes their potential benefits outside of entertainment. Elsewhere in his reflection, he comes to understand and describe video games as a “new breed of literacies,” a new way of communication, and perhaps of understanding the world. Like other students, he took on the challenge of defending an activity of deep, personal interest—a skill developed outside of and unsanctioned by school. In the process, he seems to discover the many benefits of video games. He discovers that the skills and knowledge that he has developed out of school have value, that they just may be the “next evolution of literacies.” And in identifying his unsanctioned literacy as such,
he hints that it may be even more important that the dominant literacy sanctioned by the university.

**Development and Organization**

In my classes, I provide feedback on the second and third drafts of essays, and on subsequent drafts if students choose to revise further. By the time they have completed a third draft and received feedback from their peers and me, most students are ready to revise for the portfolio. Comparing these third drafts tends to confirm students’ comments about fluency. While many were still struggling with ideas and content in the third draft of essay one, they were much more ready to attend to wording at the same point in essay two. Similarly, on the first essay my comments often display a concern with content while on essay two they tend to focus more on wording and other surface features. Students were simply further ahead in the writing process for essay two.

A good case in point is Bridget. On her first essay, she had turned in very good first draft, one that I used in class activities as a good example of a first draft. But the essay never improved significantly after that. On her third draft, I prompted her several times for more development. In the end comments, I mention that, even though she has a great introduction and makes some great points throughout, she could develop her thoughts more. In contrast, at the same point in her literacies essay, she had written a nearly flawless paper full of detailed passages describing and explaining visual literacy. In the comment I offer suggestions on rewording but not on content. She knew enough of her subject to write a well-developed and organized essay, to the point that she could
attend to the rhetorical details; any further revision would be to tighten up the wording and to reduce clutter.

Most of the students mentioned earlier had similar experiences. Jessica, for instance, still needed plenty of development on the third draft of essay one. Several passages lacked examples and explanation. In my end commentary, I note her need to spend more time “developing and revising” her ideas. Conversely, the third draft of the literacies essay has about the same number of comments, but my comments focus on wording and other strategies. In my end comment, I advise her to “tighten up the language” and to give a more explicit definition of literacies. Other students, like Katherine, Leo, and James produced better organized papers for the literacies essay. For her first essay and against my advice, Katherine chose to analyze two ads, which resulted in underdevelopment, lack of analysis, and confusing arrangement. Similarly, the overall scheme of Leo’s first essay was good, but the organization within the paragraphs was at times loose. James, at times overly enthusiastic about the subject of the PETA ad he was analyzing, Pamela Anderson, devoted two paragraphs to her background and her affect on culture. Diversions and organizational problems such as these were nonexistent in the literacies essay, the students much more successful at staying on topic. Some of this has to do with the structure of the assignments. Rhetorical analysis is an unfamiliar and uncomfortable activity for students. It is likely that when faced with the uncomfortable, they rely on what they know and thus find themselves discussing arguments and other features of the works they analyze. In contrast, because it draws from students’ knowledge and experience, the literacies essay presents no such difficulties.
Conclusion

As I stated earlier, when designing the literacies unit and the project, I had two expectations. I suspected that the students would like it. They did. I also thought that they, as part of the digital generation, would accept the premise of literacies theory. On this, I am not certain. Whether or not students accept the premise, they understand it and use it to analyze their own literacies. The project has also answered my other questions. The students’ writing tends to be more engaged and more effective. And while the occasional student does express a concern for coherence due to the flow of ideas, they do not become overwhelmed. The assignment’s success does seem to confirm FoK scholars’ claims: creating a hybrid space where students combine their in-school with their out-of-school knowledge does provide a scaffolding that allows students to ease gradually into the demands of college writing while gaining some authority in their writing.

In calling for more research, I must acknowledge where my own could be extended. First of all, in order to fully show how well the literacies assignment or other FoK assignments can serve as a bridge into college-level writing, I need to make it the first unit of the semester. A rhetorical analysis and many other assignments seem to present too many difficulties for students, too many new skills and too much new knowledge to deal with at the outset. And while semiotic domains does seem relatively easier for students to grapple with than many other ideas, it is nevertheless a heavy concept with which to begin a semester. Here, it is beneficial to mention Shannon Carter’s curriculum. My literacies assignment strongly resembles her second assignment. (I had already designed mine before coming across her work, but seeing hers and some of
the literacies that students wrote about gave me confidence in my own.) The point is, before having students analyze their literacies, she has them write a literacy narrative, a personal essay about an early experience involving reading or writing. I am considering adopting some of Jessie Singer’s “Passion Project,” a unit she designed to keep graduating high school seniors engaged during their final semester. For Singer’s unit, students investigate and write about a subject of deep interest. In my class, having students write about a favorite activity, then having them compare their activity to reading and writing may give them time to absorb the concept before being exposed to what, for many, may be a strange and new idea. Moving the literacies/FoK assignment around should also provide a clearer indication of how much it affects students’ grades.

In my suggestion to bring in students’ funds of knowledge, I do not advocate turning an entire curriculum over to it. Scaffolding one assignment with funds of knowledge does not mean that all assignments have to be similarly handled. The remaining assignments could and should expose students to information that does place higher demands on their thinking. What I am suggesting here is one way that writing could be scaffolded early in students’ academic careers. To be honest, I would rather focus more exclusively on rhetoric, social issues, critical thinking, critical awareness, and complex ideas. Students need these. But we should focus first on what students need most, and for many it means being able to rely on their own knowledge as they navigate the sometimes overwhelming demands of first-year composition.
APPENDIX A

END-OF-SEMESTER QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Of the formal writing assignments (the 3 major essays), which was your favorite? Why?
2. Regardless of the final grade on the assignment, on which assignment do you feel that you did your best writing? Please explain why. (If it was not the paper that received the best grade, I invite you to make an argument as to why it was, in many ways at least, your best writing.)
3. Do you feel that there is a relationship between language use and power? Please explain your answer.
4. What parts of the class do you think contributed most to your development as a writer and thinker? Why?
5. What parts of the class did you find least useful? Why?
6. Finally, what did you like most about this class? What did you like the least?
APPENDIX B

LITERACIES ASSIGNMENT AND WORKSHEETS

Literacies Assignment

For this essay you will explore and discuss a literacy of your choosing and analyze it. You will do the following:

1. Identify and/or describe your literacy.
2) Define literacies. I encourage you to use a definition from one of the articles posted on SacCT (under “Readings”> “Unit 2 Literacies”) or, if you prefer, to find your own source. But do not describe literacies as simply reading and writing!
3) Discuss why it is a literacy
   a) Describe how it has characteristics similar to reading (decoding) and writing (encoding).
   b) Describe how it is socially determined. (Optional)
4) Discuss what is at stake. In other words, what are the ramifications/implications of recognizing or not recognizing “literacies,” for not recognizing literacies other than the so-called standard literacy?

Your paper should also discuss at least some of the following topics:
2. How your literacy compares to academic or “standard” literacies.
3. Where it might be more useful or appropriate than academic literacies
4. What other literacies it might be similar to.
5. Describe additional literacy activities members do while pursuing this literacy.
   Gamers, for instance, devote websites to gaming and within these websites they post instruction manuals, blogs, forums, reviews, etc.
6. How does the topic of contact zones come into play? In other words, are there areas where certain literacies are privileged over other literacies? What does this mean for a privileged/dominant literacy? What does it mean for the subordinate literacy?

You may also want to discuss the discourse community surrounding that literacy. Here are some suggestions for doing so:

1. Define discourse communities in general, including what determines a discourse community.
2. Describe the discourse community of your chosen literacy.
3. Quote a passage from a conversation between members of this discourse community and analyze and explicate (explain/interpret) the discourse.
4. Speculate on the power and social relationships in that discourse community. In other words, how do members of that community use language to establish themselves in that community?
5. Speculate as to why members of a discourse community use a specialized language. What is at stake for establishing or not establishing specialized language? What is at stake for those who do not use the specialized language.

List of Assignments & Activities for Unit 2, Literacies

1. Semiotic Domains Presentation & Discussion
2. Freewrite about literacies topic
3. Small group discussions on literacies depicted in images
   Teacher breaks class up into small groups and hands out a series of images (tattoos, ballet dancers, manga, sports action) to groups and has them analyze the meaning of the images. Groups then report their findings to class.
4. Worksheet 1: Encoding & Decoding Activities of chosen literacy
5. Worksheet 2: Describe a scenario in the chosen literacy
6. First draft of paper peer review
7. Read “Analysis” chapter in A Sequence for Academic Writing.
   This chapter presents the concept of “analytical tool,” the narrow perspective or lens that writers use when conducting analysis
8. Show Budweiser commercial, read Robert Scholes essay, and discuss “analytical tool” and Scholes’s organization of essay.
   Besides showing students how Scholes applies his analytical tool (video as text) to analyze a commercial, this essay also presents a wonderful rhetorical structure for an analytical paper.
9. Draft 2 of essay peer review
10. Draft 3
11. Reflection.
Literacies Worksheet 1

Literacy you are writing about: ______________________________________

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Encoding Activities</th>
<th>Decoding Activities</th>
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Literacies Worksheet 2

For the following activity, you will describe a scenario of your literacy and describe how it involves encoding and decoding.

Scenario Description:

Literacies Worksheet 3

1. What is your chosen literacy (i.e., what literacy have you chosen to discuss and analyze)?
2. Why did you choose it?
3. How do participants in that literacy decode?
4. How do participants encode? How does it compare/contrast with traditional literacies?

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Similar to essay/text literacy</th>
<th>Different from essay/text literacy</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td></td>
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5. How is it socially constructed?
Works Cited


Yancey, Kathleen Blake. "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key."