

What Is After-School Worth? Developing Literacy and Identity Out of School

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Today's visual age demands a broadened view of literacy that encompasses understanding and using new technologies. After-school programs can provide venues where young people can develop this form of literacy and express their newly created identities.

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“**H**ow much is a life worth?” asked Asia Washington, a fifteen-year-old resident of Oakland, California, in her digital movie about current threats to life – wars, terrorism, drugs, violence, a lack of belief in self – and about the universal need for love, acceptance, and understanding.¹ Articulate and confident, a budding filmmaker, and a participant in an evening multimedia and literacy program called DUSTY (Digital Underground Storytelling for Youth),

¹ We thank Asia Washington and her mother, Sonja Stewart, for sharing their insights about multimedia composing and about Asia's creative work with VUE's larger audience. We would like to acknowledge the pivotal role of Michael James, director of the DUSTY programs, in making DUSTY a safe, creative, and innovative learning space for children, youth, and adults. Alberto (Beto) Palomar was the instructor for Asia's Digital Visual (DV) poetry class; his skill and care as an instructor are well known and much appreciated. Korina Jocson was instrumental in beginning and sustaining DV poetry and is a fine poet and multimedia composer in her own right, as well as a literacy researcher. We thank each of these individuals, as well as the larger DUSTY staff and community. DUSTY development, operation, and research have been supported by a range of institutions and grants, all gratefully acknowledged. These include the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley; the University of California's UC [University-Community] Links project; the U.S. Department of Education; the Community Technology Foundation of California; the Oakland Fund for Children and Youth; the Robert Bowne Foundation; the Allen Temple Baptist Church; and the Prescott-Joseph Center for Community Enhancement.

Asia began her movie by querying the worth of a life, and ended it with the answer: “Priceless.” With this choice of words, she smartly appropriated the language of a recent credit card commercial to serve her own ends. We, in turn, borrow from Asia and ask, What is the value of after-school programs? What is their worth, especially as spaces in which we might foster powerful literacy practices among young people?

In this essay we draw on Asia's digital movie, along with our experiences in conceptualizing, participating in, and documenting after-school programs, to discuss new kinds of literacy.² We advocate recognizing new communications strategies arising from multimodal and multimedia composing, including the juxtaposition of visuals with print, audio, and music, as well as the appropriation of words, compositional techniques, and images from popular culture, as illustrated by Asia's movie. We believe that such communicative channels are pervasive, potentially effective, and, most important, satisfying aspects of literacy,

² In keeping with our interest in exploring and promoting new forms of communication such as multimedia, multimodal composing, Asia's movie, “How Much Is a Life Worth,” and audio tapes of interviews with Asia and her mother are available on line at <www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE/spring04/video.html>.

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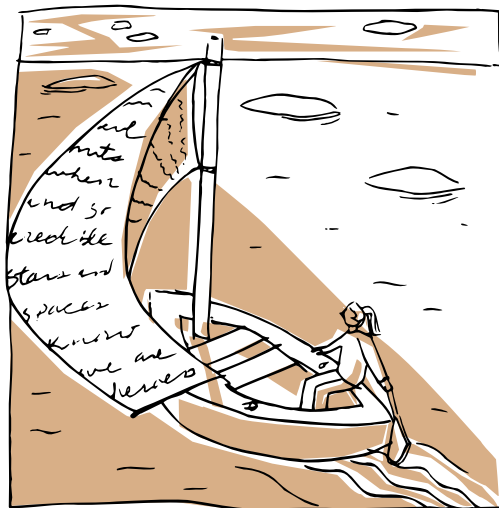
especially for youth (Buckingham 2000). And we believe that many out-of-school programs are well suited to foster these new forms of literacy.

We begin with an overview of the historical origins of after-school programs in the United States and a sketch of the current after-school landscape. We include a discussion of some of the debates that have arisen around literacy within and outside of school and some of the theories that we have found helpful in thinking about literacy, out-of-school spaces, and the design of after-school programs for Asia and other children and youth. We then return to Asia's digital movie and the question of worth.

A History of After-School Programs in the United States

After-school programs have existed in the U.S. since at least the late 1800s. They came about when the need for child labor decreased, and, at the same time, societal expectations that schooling should be compulsory grew. These shifts created a new temporal zone: the out-of-school hours. Youths must have found this freedom to play in the streets, escape crowded housing, and mix with a range of people greatly appealing; but adults came to regard unsupervised after-school time as worrisome – drawing children into potentially unsafe activities or making them vulnerable to new dangers such as street traffic (Halpern 2002).

Eventually, in response to these concerns and to those of educators and reformers who wanted to “improve” working-class children, outdoor or playground programs were developed, and those programs expanded to include indoor activities (Gagen 2000). The historical research of Robert Halpern (2002) provides an example of the



sorts of activities and programs available at a boys' club that first opened in Manhattan in 1876. Staffed by middle-class volunteers, the club included a fife, drum, and bugle corps; singing classes; wrestling; natural history studies; bookkeeping; writing instruction; and a reading room.

The long-term perspective on the after-school movement in the United States reveals several tensions that remain unresolved. First, after-school programs (particularly those serving low-income children) have always been underfunded and overly dependent upon volunteers. Yet they are regularly asked to assume more and more responsibilities, to take up the slack for overworked families, and to assist students whose schools struggle to help them.

Second, as the Manhattan example suggests, after-school programs have typically had a range of emphases – academic, athletic, artistic, social – and have used their flexibility in programming to distinguish their offerings from those of schools. But they face continued and increasing pressures to serve as academic, test-heavy extensions of the school day (California Dept. of Education 2002; U.S. Dept. of Education 2000). Finally, there have long been

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conflicts between their regulatory functions and their commitment to youth development. On the one hand, for example, they are expected to ensure safety and socialization through the control of children's and youths' time and movement. On the other, program officials see their mission as enabling youths to grow toward adulthood by giving them the freedom to take ownership of their activities and products and placing their interests and desires in the foreground.

Interest in after-school programs has grown many-fold in the last decade. Driven by the much-publicized worry over "latchkey" kids forced to stay home alone in the afternoons while their parents work, along with concerns over youths' safety in those hours, more and more public and community agencies have created after-school programs to provide safe and productive activities for adolescents (Fight Crime: Invest in Kids 2000). These programs have also been aimed at improving students' academic achievement and reducing the fiscal and societal costs associated with poor school performance (University of California 2002), although there is some debate over how effective after-school programs are in improving academic knowledge and skills.

For whatever reasons, some three million to four million low-income and moderate-income children currently attend after-school programs (Halpern

2002), including large-scale efforts such as the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (U.S. Dept. of Education 2000) and New York City's After School Corporation (After School Corporation 1999), as well as thousands of independent local efforts. And the need for these programs is expected to continue growing, regardless of whether funding is available (University of California 2002).

Literacy in the Visual Age

The predominant push in after-school programming in the United States today is literacy development. To be sure, literacy activities have always been staples in after-school programs. But now, with federal legislation such as No Child Left Behind and accompanying funding requirements and instructional mandates to measure reading (as well as a school's worth) through student performance on standardized tests, the pressure is on for after-school programs to redouble their focus on literacy.

Some research has shown that literacy improvement – or rather, school-based conceptions of literacy improvement – is not the forte of most after-school programs, whose personnel usually do not have specialized training in such areas (Halpern 2003). Yet, while academic literacy – the ability to write academic essays and read school-based texts – remains critically important, we believe that after-school programs can play a unique role in developing a different form of literacy, one that we think is especially important today.

It has become commonplace to acknowledge that we live in a visual age. Pictures are pushing words off the page or the screen. The lives of young people, especially, are increasingly dominated by television, music, movies, images, and popular culture, often via the Internet and companion technolo-

gies like MP3 players and video games. Those of us who are interested in adolescent literacy must understand forms of communication other than writing and learn how youths value and use them. We must also learn to recognize the value and place of these new means of communication in our own lives.

Typically, American adults, especially overburdened teachers and other school staff, dismiss or fear these new forms of communication, believing that they will corrupt or deaden youth. Others, meanwhile, romanticize new technologies as educational and societal panaceas. Neither position is adopted here. In the words of David Buckingham (2000, p. 206), an observer and researcher of media and their uses by youth, “The new forms of cultural expression envisaged by enthusiasts for digital media will not simply arise of their own accord, or as a guaranteed consequence of technological change: we will need to devise imaginative forms of cultural policy that will foster and support them, and ensure that their benefits are not confined to a narrow elite.”

New technologies, including new forms of communicating via multiple modalities, do not determine uses, although they facilitate and influence them. It is up to people and institutions to imagine and foster supportive social practices and to create equitable ways to meaningfully use new technologies and communication channels. As will be illustrated below, this is where we see a possible important role for after-school programs.

The development of a broadly conceived form of literacy is important for all young people. But we have been especially concerned, as has much of the after-school movement, with youth who face the greatest challenges in construct-

ing positive life pathways. Most of these youth live in neighborhoods described as “low income,” most are people of color, and many are first- or second-generation immigrants. For some, English is a second or other language.

The achievement gap separating youth along income, ethnic, and linguistic lines in the United States is well known, as is the failure of many schools to engage increasing numbers of these youth (Thernstrom & Thernstrom 2004). And many adults tend to demonize certain groups of young people, particularly African American males, for their preferences and creations in music, dress, language, and style. Of all the difficult questions that face educators, surely the most critical is how to transform schooling and its principle activity and means – literacy – so as to engage young people and sustain their participation. After-school programs can provide at least a partial answer by offering youth the opportunity to communicate via multiple modalities.

Asia's Digital Poem

Asia Washington came to DUSTY because her mother, Sonja, made the arrangements, accompanied Asia to



classes, and even created her own digital poem. “Young people sometimes don’t stick with things,” Sonja noted; she was determined that this would not be the case with Asia. Once the classes were under way, however, and Asia understood and became invested in what she was working toward, attendance and follow-through were no longer an issue.

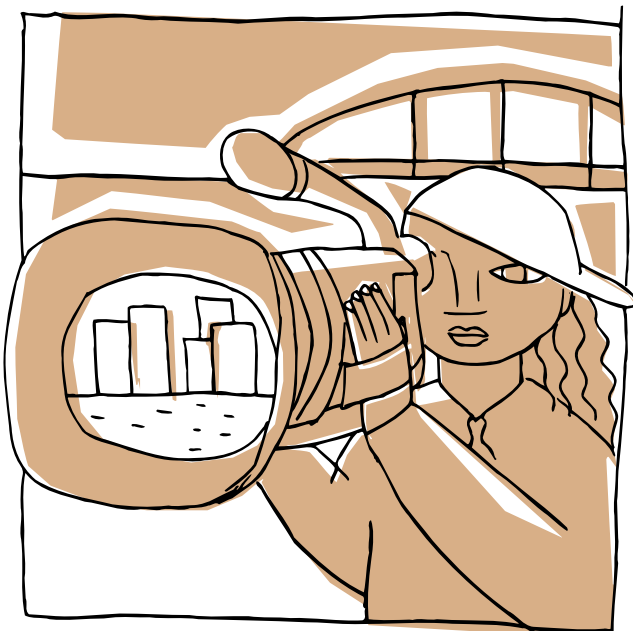
The Digital Visual Poetry program (DV Poetry) met during weekday evenings for eight- to ten-week cycles; it began with writing workshops and proceeded to multimodal composing via computers. Participants recorded and digitized their voices as they read or recited their poems; searched for images to illustrate their words and ideas; selected or composed a sound track as background music; and then assembled the whole digitally, adding transitions to connect images, adjusting pace and timing, and sometimes adding special effects. The result was a three-

to five-minute movie later shown to a wider audience of friends and family.

Asia, Sonja, and other DUSTY participants premiered their digital poems on a big screen at a special celebration held in Oakland. Afterwards the artists came up on stage to answer questions from an attentive and appreciative crowd. Sonja especially enjoyed a question from a young boy about the sibling relationships that she had humorously depicted in her digital poem. Later Asia premiered her movie before a different group, taking it to her high school and showing it to her English teacher and classmates. She noted that she saw her teacher wiping tears from her eyes as the lights in the darkened classroom were turned back on. Such emotional reactions and expressions of interest and pride during showings are not rare.

Asia’s digital visual poem, which we describe and analyze below, is three minutes long and contains fifty-one images. Narrated in her voice, the piece compels viewers to reflect on the worth of a human life. “How much is a life worth?” she asks at the start of the poem and several times again at the end. When she asks this question, an image of stacks and stacks of dollar bills carefully arranged in a glass case appears on the screen; instrumental music in the background evoked both the tinkling of coins and, remarked Asia, the church bells of her childhood.

The poem continues by identifying hatred as “the reason that most lives are no longer here,” and represents the instruments and products of hatred through a set of images that are grim and visceral: a pile of bodies from a Holocaust photo; a man’s torso, shirt pulled up to reveal a the gun in the waistband of his jeans and another held between his legs; gangsta tattoos on the arms and chests of Latino and



African American men; a white girl's face, bruised and purple from a beating; a picture of crack cocaine.

These graphic images are occasionally juxtaposed – to lighten the mood, and for humor, Asia explained – with cartoonish figures and line drawings: a small child sits, legs crossed, and sadly stares; a pink fox flashes on the screen, too quickly for most viewers to see his defiant hand gesture; two oblong potato heads with arms attached punch toward each other. Other sets of images depict recognizable people, places, and icons from history and contemporary pop culture – Frederick Douglass, Alicia Keys, Tupac, the Twin Towers, a Power-puff Girl – in service to Asia's points about human emotions and desires.

In the second part of her digital poem, Asia considers hate's opposite: the need, desire, and lack of love. She points to community as "a form of love" that some people don't even know they have. Using a satellite image of the earth, a portrait of the cartoon Simpson family, and a photograph of a sorority group gathering, Asia writes, in some of her most striking lines, "Communities are worldwide/It's like an ocean with no tide."

In the last part of her digital poem, Asia returns to her first line, using three distinctive images of question marks to signal her repetition of the question at hand. The poem crescendos with the images of question marks and the money encased in glass, the repetitive (but not soothing) instrumental music, and lines questioning the value of the lives of those involved in "black-on-black crime," of "people getting killed in the army every day," of "girls and boys getting raped and molested every day," and, ultimately, of the "people on this earth who don't know why." Asia's penultimate image, the last question

mark, is half black and half white; she told us she chose it because, as with the question at the heart of the poem, "you can have either/or opinions about it, you could argue about it all day." Asia ended by posing the question to herself: "How much is a life worth to me?" Her answer, "It's priceless," is accompanied by the initial photo of stacks of money, but this time covered with a large red "X."

The first point we want to make about Asia's poem is that it exploits to wonderful advantage many aspects of the multimedia composing environment. One power of the piece is its

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combination of an individual's voice and message amplified by images, movement across the images, and sound. This innovative combination of modalities is made possible and practical by digital technologies.

But its appeal goes beyond the juxtaposition of modalities. Asia's digital poem represents a new kind of text – a new approach to composition – that some have called *postmodern* (Buckingham 2000). One feature of these new texts is *intertextuality* – a semiotics concept that considers a single text to be embedded in a larger system of interrelated texts. In Buckingham's words, these texts tend to be "highly allusive, self-referential and ironic. They self-consciously draw on other texts in the form of pastiche, homage or parody; they juxtapose incongruous elements from different historical periods, genres

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or cultural contexts; and they play with established conventions of form and representation” (p. 88).

Today’s writers, artists, and musicians are in a stage of experimentation with such texts, and we should expect in the near future more and more examples of them, as well as new theories of texts that account for their aesthetic as well as their intellectual value. (See, for instance, the new on-line journal, *Born Magazine*, at www.bornmagazine.com, which publishes literary collaborations between poets and visual artists.) What counts as literacy – and how literacy is practiced – are now in historical transition, and young people like Asia are at the vanguard of the creation of new cultural forms.

A second striking aspect of Asia’s digital poem is the way in which it is a vehicle for enacting a socially conscious self. A large body of work on identity formation has for many years theorized and illustrated the ways in which individuals enact, through language and other forms of representation, a sense of self – a version of who they are, have been, or want to become (Appiah 1994; Giddens 1991; Hall 1996). Although we are always enacting a self, there are certain periods, like adolescence, when a concern with identity comes to the fore. We argue that the genre of multimodal digital poetry such as Asia’s allows the expression of emotion as well as reason, making it particularly well

suited to examining and representing versions of oneself.

Asia represents herself in “How Much is a Life Worth” as a mature social critic but also as a compassionate person with a sense of humor. As the poem’s narrator, she comes across as someone engaged with big ideas who is unafraid to name the world’s ugliness but who nonetheless holds onto a sense of idealism and a belief in the power of human beings’ ability to love. What an impressive identity to enact and strive for! Interestingly, Asia had to fend off attempts from her writing group and her mother to persuade her to choose a different topic. Here is how she described that pressure and her decision:

Everyone said, “I think you should stick to the other poem. . . . The “how-much-is-a-life-worth” poem – it’s too complicated, too deep!” They were thinking “It’s too deep for a teenager – a fifteen-year-old. What’s she going to do with this deep poem?”

Asia suspected that everyone, including her mother, wanted her to choose a topic that was “kiddier,” but she stuck to her guns and, in the end, all were impressed and proud.

The importance of the power to choose – to be supported in writing about topics of interest and to be allowed and encouraged to use literacy activities to represent, analyze, and understand one’s own world – cannot be exaggerated for adolescents. Asia took great pleasure and care in illustrating her poem with just the right images; in fact, she reported that three-quarters of her work on the poem consisted of searching the Internet for photographs, drawings, and illustrations.

These images had personal relevance for Asia and were thereby loaded with an authorial significance that might not be immediately apparent to

viewers. About a photograph of three young African American men standing by a corner liquor store, she remarked that it reminded her “of a store right around the street from my Grandma’s house . . . where, you know, in the ’hood, people just stand outside all day at the liquor store. They don’t have a job or anything, [they] just stand outside the liquor store.” The importance of authorial agency for Asia was strikingly illustrated by her decision not to major in journalism, even though she loved to write; as she notes below, her journalism class at school did not allow her to write about things that interested and concerned her:

And then she’s [her teacher] talking about you gotta do all this writing, and it was writing that wasn’t that interesting to me. She said, “Write about the new principal.” Who cares about the new principal? I mean, not to be mean or anything, I’m interviewing people around the school: “What do you think about Miss Canton, the new principal?” “Who’s Miss Canton?” “Who cares?” “Who’s Miss Canton?” “That’s the new principal!” She’s talking about, write three or four pages, for homework, about Miss Canton. I said, “I don’t care about Miss Canton.” I thought I was going to be writing about things that interest me. So I decided I want to be a writer, a director, of film.

Of course, many productive activities in school and in life require doing things that do not seem to be of immediate relevance or interest. Nonetheless, it is important to note the power of connecting, wherever possible, our assignments as well as our creative work to adolescents’ lives and interests.

A final notable aspect of Asia’s digital poem is its creation at DUSTY. In composing and sharing her poem, Asia traversed school, home, and community. The idea for the poem originated

in an art class at school, where, in the wake of 9/11 and the most recent Iraq war, Asia created a collage. This artwork became the second image of Asia’s digital poem. In writing her poem she consciously drew on literary techniques that she had learned in school, including the use of alliteration and the repetition of words and ideas.

She also relied on her knowledge of and concerns about her own community – where the number of homicides has topped 100 for two years running – as she developed her themes and selected her images. At DUSTY she acquired expertise in multimedia composing, and she found a social space that allowed her to bring her own interests center stage. Sharing her poem included taking it back to school, as well as sharing it among friends and family.

After-School Programs: An Alternative Space for Literacy

For Asia, moving across social and geographic spaces appeared to be a seamless and natural activity – a kind of movement that we believe is characteristic of one way young people use after-school programs. The programs can provide material resources, social relationships, and social practices – including particular uses of multimedia technologies – that complement and extend, sometimes in dramatic ways, the kinds of educational and literate experiences available in school and other contexts.

For other youth, after-school programs play a different and in some ways more crucial role, serving as their primary public space for the development of certain kinds of expertise, for acquiring a sense of self as valued and capable, and for exercising their claim on attention, care, safety, and their right to be heard. As one young male participant

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explained, “[DUSTY] just took me off the street. . . . And it gave me a chance to use my creativity and tell my story.”

We think of literacy in this way: a familiarity with the full range of current communicative tools, modes (oral and written), and media, plus an awareness of and a sensitivity to the power and importance of representation of self and others. This literacy, we argue, can be fostered most easily in spaces that support readers and writers in their critical, aesthetic, loving, and empowered communication.

We have tried in this essay to illustrate how after-school programs can be key institutions for providing young people with opportunities to become literate, confident, and influential communicators. After-school programs can be constructed as safe but vibrant social and physical spaces that allow youth much-needed out-of-school opportunities. They can offer equal access to material and symbolic resources and relationships; chances to engage in productive activity through the creation and performance of valued popular cultural products – music, videos, poetry, and art – and places to develop identities as powerful actors able to describe and impact an unsettling, yet changing and changeable, world. A tall order, yes – but one that keeps time with an important theme in the history of after-school programs in this country and one that pushes toward a vision of after-school programs as alternative public spheres. This is the vision that drives DUSTY and its DV Poetry program.

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