
Remixing the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT)

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ABSTRACT: The Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) is a high-stakes, standardized literacy test that high school students in Ontario must pass before graduating with a high school diploma. However, each year, approximately 35,000 students do not pass the OSSLT, jeopardizing their chances to graduate. Critical literacies encourage readers to act upon what they are reading by responding to, evaluating, and/or rewriting what they are reading. Throughout this paper, I will be applying these theories by proposing an unsettling, a deterritorialization, and a potential hybridization, or remixing of the OSSLT to better meet the needs of the diverse group of students writing the test. Such a remix could also create a generative and open space for reflection and reconsideration of what we are trying to achieve with this literacy test. This paper focuses on issues of equity and social justice in the context of standardized assessments, specifically the OSSLT, because this literacy test has the potential to significantly impact the lives of youth in Ontario.

The Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) is a high-stakes, standardized literacy test that high school students in Ontario must pass before graduating with a high school diploma. Each year, approximately 35,000 students do not pass the OSSLT, jeopardizing their chances to graduate (EQAO, 2009c, 2010b). Since, as Kane (2006) writes, “In education, as in medicine, there is an obligation to avoid doing harm if it can be avoided” (p. 56), how can we bring an end to this disastrous trend of having 30,000+ students failing this mandatory literacy test? Scholars and educators have already raised concerns over the potential harms that are associated with this standardized testing practice. For example, test preparation frequently infiltrates classroom instruction narrowing the curriculum (Brand, 2010; Luce-Kapler & Klinger, 2005), tests are improperly constructed and inadequately represent the literacies that youth are engaging with everyday (Lotherington, 2004), there are issues of language and cultural bias (Cheng, Fox, & Zheng, 2007; Cheng, Klinger, & Zheng, 2007; Fox & Cheng, 2007), results are acontextualized and can easily be misused, and financing the whole process, including future remediation and programming aimed at raising test scores, is costly (Hammond, 2010). Critical literacies encourage readers to act upon what they are reading by responding to, evaluating, and/or rewriting what they are reading. Throughout this paper, I will be applying these theories by proposing an unsettling, a deterritorialization, and a potential hybridization, or remixing of the OSSLT to better meet the needs of the diverse group of students writing the test while reducing the harm caused by the OSSLT. Such a remix could potentially create a generative and open space for reflection and reconsideration of what we are trying to achieve with this literacy test. This paper focuses on issues of equity and social justice

in the context of standardized assessments, specifically the OSSLT, because this literacy test has the potential to significantly impact the lives of youth in Ontario.

About the OSSLT

The Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) is a high-stakes, standardized literacy test. As an accountability agent, the OSSLT is intended to inform the public about the rates of students' achievement, and to monitor the productivity and effectiveness of literacy education. As stated by EQAO (2010a):

The publicly funded education system is accountable to the public. It has a responsibility to demonstrate the achievement of its students and meet the legitimate information needs of parents, guardians and the Ontario public with regard to education outcomes. Ontario's provincial testing program, which measures the achievement of every student across the province in key grades, was created in part because parents called for an independent gauge of how their children are achieving in relation to a provincial standard. (p. 1)

The purpose of the OSSLT is to determine whether or not students have acquired an established level of proficiency in literacy before graduating from an Ontario high school. The test is high-stakes, because in order to obtain a high school diploma in Ontario, students must pass this test, which is administered once a year. Students are given two chances to write the OSSLT, beginning in Grade 10, before they are required to successfully complete the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course (OSSLC) as an equivalent requirement. The final opportunity students have for satisfying this literacy requirement is through "portfolio adjudication" (Kozlow, 2010, p. 1). The purpose of administering the test for the first time in Grade 10 is to monitor and provide further assistance to students who are not achieving the desired results at an early enough stage to be able to intervene.

The OSSLT assesses students' reading comprehension and writing skills. It "measures whether or not students have acquired the basic cross-curricular literacy (reading and writing) skills expected by the end of Grade 9, as described in The Ontario Curriculum for all subject areas" (EQAO, 2010f, p. 95). The OSSLT values a student's ability to 'understand ideas and information that is both explicitly and implicitly stated' in a variety of texts (EQAO, 2010g, p. 3). The test also claims to value a student's ability to be able to make connections "between information and ideas in a reading selection and personal knowledge and experience" (p. 3). In addition to these three reading comprehension skills, the OSSLT values "developing a main idea with sufficient supporting details, organizing information and ideas in a coherent manner, and using conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) in a manner that does not distract from clear communication" (p. 13). In order to measure these literacy skills, the test includes five reading sections with the following types of texts: an informational paragraph, a news report, a dialogue, a real-life narrative, and a graphic text (p. 2). On the 2010 OSSLT, in response to these texts, students were required to complete thirty-one multiple choice questions and four short open-response questions (six lines each). The OSSLT also includes the following writing tasks: a one page news report, a two page opinion piece, two short writing tasks (six lines each), and eight multiple choice questions (EQAO, 2010d, 2010e). Students have two and a half hours to complete the test (EQAO, 2010g, p. 2).

The Problem with the OSSLT: What literacies are we assessing, how, and why?

The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), which is responsible for the OSSLT, claims to be attentive to the “skills that young people need to develop [. . .] in order to participate effectively and successfully in the world and workplace of the 21st century” (EQAO, 2010f, p. 95). These skills are characterized by EQAO as “employability skills, essential skills or basic literacy skills” (p. 95). Even though the OSSLT claims to align with 21st century workplace, it falls short in its simplification of literacy skills in comparison to current research in the field of literacy education, which does recognize the changing “communicational landscape of the 21st century” (Jewitt, 2008, p. 241). According to Chun (2009), “Because meaning making has become increasingly multimodal, our definition of literacy needs to encompass not only the textual, but also the visual, the spatial, and the aural” (p. 145). As Slomp (2005) remarks, “Though one would expect a clear alignment between what is valued in the educational community as a whole and what is valued by a government mandated test, this desired alignment is not always realized” (p. 142). Experts in the field of literacy would agree that the test does not accurately reflect a complex enough understanding of literacy because the OSSLT does not assert a global understanding of literacy. Many literacies are either undervalued or excluded from EQAO’s conception of literacy.

Both the content and the form of the OSSLTs from the past three years highlight evidence of a limited conception of literacy education and evaluation. The OSSLT is intended to address curricular expectations of literacy across all subjects areas up until the end of Grade 9 and the test has addressed a range of topics over the past three years, including texts that relate to history, geography, chemistry, environmental science, architecture and graphic design, tourism and attractions, technology, and engineering. To be more specific, the OSSLT has presented texts that are about dinosaurs and archaeology (EQAO, 2008a, p. 2), solar heat and green roofs (p. 9), the invention of a long-distance pen (EQAO, 2008b, p. 6), the chemistry behind ice cream (p. 14), the origin of pasta noodles (EQAO, 2009a, p. 2), the Museum of Civilization (p. 9), the endangered white Kermode or spirit bear (EQAO, 2009b, p. 6), eco-friendly fish farms (p. 13), tourism and a ritual in Rome (EQAO, 2010d, p. 2), the railway car classrooms in Northern Ontario (p. 9), and design plans for a sports stadium (EQAO, 2010e, p. 14). However, despite the range of texts, the OSSLT presents a limited understanding of the interdisciplinary nature of literacy skills. While exposing students to a range of texts seems promising, the questions that go with these texts do not extend beyond basic literacy skills that could be paired with any texts, regardless of the content of the texts. The skills required to answer the questions do not reflect any specialized literacy skills that interact with these disciplines in unique ways. For instance, the OSSLT questions are not designed to measure scientific knowledge, or to engage literacies that deal with research, statistics, chemical formulas, or physics equations. Students are not required to design any proposals, create any graphics, assess the credibility of sources, suggest alternative sources of information, or implement any of their learning in practice, nor are they expected to transfer their learning amongst a variety of contexts. Instead, the sets of questions presented on the OSSLT tests are designed to collect specific pieces of information, such as a student’s ability to demonstrate an understanding of explicitly and implicitly stated ideas, to be able to dissect texts, including the vocabulary, the conventions, and the text features, in order to support and/or develop statements about the texts. Although these selected skills are applicable to decoding and writing texts of different genres in a structural sense, the ability to critically interact with the

information presented in these texts and respond would require specialized knowledge and a range of literacy skills which are hardly being acknowledged. Moreover, although many of the texts are accompanied by images, students are not asked any questions about these images, with the exception of the graphic text which does target visual literacy skills. Even if the test does attempt at the very least to incorporate a range of content areas, the ways in which students are preparing for the OSSLT in various courses reveals that many teachers and students believe that the literacy skills addressed on the OSSLT belong in the English classroom (Luce-Kapler & Klinger, 2005). These individuals are not making the interdisciplinary connections.

In addition to problems with the content of the text and the relationship between the texts and the questions, Volante (2007) has also pointed out that the format of the test is restricting what can be tested. He criticizes EQAO assessments' "inability to assess many performance-based skills such as speaking clearly, designing a class project, or working effectively in a group" (p. 10). In an effort to render the marking experience more time-efficient and consistent, multiple choice questions and short six line answers are being used to assess reading comprehension. Students' ability to demonstrate a comprehensive account of their experience reading a text is severely restricted, not only by the available space on the page, but also by the assessment criteria which are only interested in evidence that parts of the text can be explicitly tied into a student's response. As long as ideas are coherent and supported, the content being communicated is valueless. As a result, students can employ test-taking skills to answer many of the test questions. In many cases, students do not even have to read the entire texts since they simply must locate a word or expression and decide upon an appropriate synonym or intended meaning. In other cases, the chronological placement of a detail in the text is requested. For the writing tasks on the OSSLT, students are expected to produce polished first draft writing (Slomp, 2005). The OSSLT is a timed test, and students have limited space and no resources to consult, in order to help enhance their writing. Any draft or process work that is recorded in the space for 'rough notes,' is not marked. Thus, process knowledge and the ability to work through a writing process is highly undervalued. Because the markers are looking for general criteria and text features, they are unable to interact with unique literacies. The OSSLT is asserting a one-size-fits-all model of literacy that must be easily identified and quantified through degrees of achievement in terms of students' commitment to the expectations of the form. It would be more challenging and time-consuming for the markers to evaluate multimodal texts that do not all conform to the same expectations of what makes a text effective. Perhaps more students would have a chance at success if their literacy skills were valued, and if they had choices about how they believe they can communicate most effectively.

The OSSLT is targeting a specific set of three reading comprehension skills and three writing skills that by no means encapsulate what is demanded of youth today who are facing ever-changing technologies, media bombardment, and a range of learning and employment opportunities that can only partially be predicted. If the purpose of the OSSLT is to prepare students for the world after high school, as noted by its emphasis on basic or functional literacies, and employability skills, the test is far too narrow. Luce-Kapler & Klinger (2005) have also concluded that the OSSLT "has conceived [of] literacy narrowly" (p. 169). Standardized tests and 'prescriptive' instruction "restrict the notion of literacy to decoding texts and symbols" (Nelson, 2010, p. 98). However, "as the linguist James Paul Gee argues, literacy involves more than merely possessing the skills associated with decoding text" (Nelsen, 2010, p. 98).

Since a high-stakes test asserts quite a bit of authority over defining what are the essential literacy skills youth require, it is troubling that students are being evaluated through the means of a standardized test which itself restricts how literacies can be conceptualized. I

agree with Nelsen (2010) who points out that “standardized exams *are* literary practices, powerful ones that regulate and promote certain types of literacy, and through their juridical functioning, they promote certain types of students” (p. 104). As Williams (2005) asks, “What effect does the unrelenting emphasis on standardized literacy testing have on students’ perception of the purposes and possibilities of literacy? By extension, what effect does such testing have on their perception of the possibilities for themselves as readers and writers?” (p. 153). EQAO values specific literacies, and they are impacting the education system by making the OSSLT a high-stakes test. They are determining the benchmark and establishing the criteria by which students are deemed competent as literate beings. Having the skills to conduct research or to be critical of both ‘the word and the world’ (Freire, 1970/2010; Freire & Macedo, 1987/2004), is not included in their literacy construct, which can potentially limit students’ opportunities and access to knowledge if they do not develop, or come to value, these skills elsewhere. Yoon’s (2001) discussion of his experiences with censorship as a college student in an ‘underground reading club’ in South Korea arguably parallels the structure being imposed by the OSSLT. Yoon (2001) explains, “I came to accept the fact that my knowledge of the world and myself, stored piece by piece, was implanted in my mind by a privileged few with greater social capital and political power in order to maintain a status quo that favored them” (p. 291). According to Williams (2005), “standardized testing works [. . .] from a set of cultural conceptions about literacy that are neither objective nor static. Students whose race or social class is not part of the dominant culture often face more complex challenges in meeting the standards of that dominant culture” (p. 152). Joel Westheimer (as cited in Brand, 2010) argues that:

large-scale testing [. . .] foster[s] an education system where creativity and critical thinking are devalued and students are rewarded for not questioning authority. While this may be appropriate for totalitarian states where there is “one true story, not open to question,” it is a threat to democracy and democratic values, which depend on a citizenry that analyzes, questions, and debates to shape public policy and the political agenda. He calls the system that emphasizes standardized testing one that ensures “no child is left thinking.” (p. 8)

Discussing “the violence of high-stakes standardized testing” (Janesick, 2007, p. 239), Janesick (2007) has also criticized “politicians who act like bullies” (p. 240). Is the OSSLT having any positive impact on students, or is it limiting their learning experiences, funneling their skills, and restricting their ability to question the texts they read in any environment, whether it be a test or not? Yoon (2001) argues, “My knowledge was designed to stop me from changing the world” (p. 291). Is the OSSLT limiting students’ capacity to be critical?

In her deconstruction and deterritorialization of language practices, Waterhouse (2008) explains the effects language, once internalized, can have upon us. She writes, “If we return to the question of language monsters with a poststructural lens we see that language is up to something [. . .] It is not innocent. Language *itself* can inscribe and produce particular bodies (Gunew, 2004)” (Waterhouse, 2008, p. 5). This same poststructuralist argument can be applied to the OSSLT. The OSSLT is a test that “is not innocent,” to use the words of Waterhouse (p. 5). The OSSLT is trying to “inscribe and produce particular bodies” (p. 5) that are in accordance with the prescribed standards of what it means to have a sufficient level of literacy skills and for what purpose. Explaining the effects of the internalization of language, Waterhouse (2008) continues:

Language monsters gobble up bodies too! Nabokov evocatively describes the violent linguistic deterritorializations he suffered in-between languages: “My complete switch from Russian prose to English prose was exceedingly painful—like learning to handle things after losing seven or eight fingers in an explosion” (as cited in Ch’ien, 2004, 68). (Waterhouse, 2008, p. 5)

Waterhouse’s (2008) examples of still thinking to say ‘Aiya!’ before ‘Ouch!’ or ‘Xie xie!’ before ‘Merci!’ in a French class (pp. 4-5) also demonstrate the challenge of having to deny one’s own literacy or language practices. These skills are a part of who we are; they are a part of our ways of thinking and being. So, what is the OSSLT doing to students? I think it is putting students in a box by making them read and write in specific ways. It is perhaps, to use Nabokov’s analogy, cutting off parts of the body, whether it be the mind, the eye, the hand, the tongue, the spine, or the feet. Thus, as Yoon (2001) would ask, are we going to be ‘activists or bystanders’ (p. 292)? What can we do to stop the potentially debilitating effects of the OSSLT? Let’s take a critical look at the OSSLT and ask ourselves what effect this test is having upon students. Let’s not let the OSSLT dismember us any longer.

If the OSSLT is trying to keep teachers accountable, this test is further funnelling the education that students can receive in the classroom. Literacy education is being directed towards a target that does not align with the literacy demands of today, let alone how we can imagine tomorrow will be. If standardized testing practices came about as a way of informing the public about education and what, or whether, children and youth are achieving or not, as suggested by Hoffman et al. (2003), “it is now up to [educators] to demonstrate ways that they can fulfill their responsibility to the public without compromising the quality of teaching and schooling” (p. 628). We need a new way, a new marker, a new source of information that can replace the results that are obtained and disseminated from standardized tests, including the OSSLT. Sam Hammond (2010), President of the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO), argues:

Originally conceived as a way to ensure accountability in the system and ostensibly improve education, EQAO tests are in fact an obstacle to quality education. EQAO tests are based on a very narrow definition of accountability: student achievement on one day on one written test. Today this narrow and limited assessment is used to rank individual schools, students, and ultimately teachers. (p. 4)

After polling ETFO members for their opinions on province-wide testing, Hammond (2010) reports, “Overwhelmingly you told us that it’s time for the government to take action and eliminate or at least modify the EQAO and the testing it administers” (p. 4).

Creating Opportunities for Change: Remixing the Test

With these potential, and in many cases documented, risks in mind about the negative consequences of standardized testing, I think it is only ethical that we revisit the purpose of such a test, the method in which it is constructed, and how it could be otherwise, in order to better serve both teachers and students. I think it is highly troublesome that each year approximately 35,000 students are failing this high-stakes literacy test in Ontario. How changes come about in education is an intriguing process though. Hoffman et al. (2003) believe that the “spread of educational innovations often reflects a kind of ‘snowball’ effect. They start slowly but gain momentum after the initial wave of ‘risk takers’ and ‘early adopters’ have broken into

new territory. These innovators become the models for others to follow” (p. 622). People, generally, are afraid of change and they are often hesitant to take risks. To encourage educators to become stronger leaders and advocates for student learning, the education system itself needs to be reconceptualized to be understood as something that is flexible, malleable, experimental, experiential, and open to change through learning and improvement. Simply admitting that a critical re-examination of this testing practice is required would be a huge step for the accountability offices. As Janesick (2007) says, “to paraphrase the words of the great philosopher-teacher Lao Tzu, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step” (p. 247). Thus, I am proposing that an unsettling, a deterritorialization, and a potential hybridization, or *remixing* of the OSSLT is needed to create a generative and open space for reflection and reconsideration of what we are trying to achieve with this literacy test. Remixing “means to take cultural artifacts and combine and manipulate them into new kinds of creative blends” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008, p. 22). In this case, the OSSLT is our ‘cultural artifact’ that we will manipulate and transform in conjunction with other pedagogical practices and new innovations to create a sort of hybrid, or OSSLT version 2.0. Knobel & Lankshear (2008) cite Lessig (2005) to explain that “culture as a whole can be construed as remix. Whenever we comment on [. . .] a film or a book and discuss it with others, we take the original author’s creativity and remix it in our own lives, using it to extend our own ideas or to produce an evaluation” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008, p. 22). These commentaries, criticisms, and/or retellings are all examples of remixes. According to Gee (2007) (as cited in Knobel & Lankshear, 2008, pp. 29-30), “humans feel ‘expanded and empowered when they can manipulate powerful tools in intricate ways that extend their area of effectiveness.’” So, I propose that we ‘extend’ the OSSLT’s ‘effectiveness’ by remixing it.

I am interested in how the OSSLT, as a text, can be rewritten, redesigned, recreated, and reconceptualized as a space where youth can position their own thoughts and views on literacy, education, testing, and student assessments. Critical literacies argue that such a project is possible, and that individuals have the capacity to enact positive social change by critically deconstructing and reconstructing their worlds. Critical literacies encourage readers to act upon what they are reading by responding to, evaluating, and/or rewriting what they are reading. As Franzak (2006) observes, “Educators committed to social change and equitable social arrangements are drawn to critical literacy for its transformative potential” (p. 220). Beginning the transformative process through remixing has the potential to offer up a number of possibilities. Settling on a product immediately is neither desirable nor is it responsible at the moment and the redesign of the OSSLT is not a task for an individual. Instead, I am arguing that such a remixing of the OSSLT is required, and I would suggest that all stakeholders, including students, be involved in this process. Nevertheless, in order to illustrate how this process can begin unravelling, I will offer a few suggestions that respond to significant flaws with both the form and content of the OSSLT.

Remix, Part 1: Remove something from the test

What changes and transformations must occur for the OSSLT to become a more equitable and productive learning experience for students? I suggest that we begin by eliminating the elements of *standardization*. When writing the OSSLT, students are all reading the same texts, answering the same questions, and being marked according to a set of rubrics which address specific criteria, such as “providing accurate, specific and relevant ideas and information from the reading selection” and a “clear explanation” that “indicates considerable reading comprehension” (EQAO, 2010c, p. 2). In other cases, students are evaluated based on

their use of conventions, their organization of texts, the ‘progression of their ideas,’ and/or their development of “a clear and consistent opinion” (p. 29) supported with details. These criteria are generalized to cover all pieces of writing of a specific form. Even when students are given the chance to respond to open-response questions, the markers are not looking for creativity, ingenuity, or innovation of any sort. Students are simply expected to demonstrate that they can follow instructions and that they are aware of this standard form of writing. There is no engagement with students’ ideas or personal experiences with which students are expected to make connections, as noted in the framework of the six target skills, three for reading and three for writing. For the markers, there is a static, singular correct answer that addresses the criteria explicitly. Anything that deviates from this is either seen as an error or at the very least dismissed as not being of value. For instance, students are warned that they are to fill in no more than the six lines provided for the short answer questions. The unwritten rule which students with effective test-taking skills would know is that if you are given six lines, your response should probably have sufficient detail and/or elaboration to consume all six lines.

In addition to the one-size-fits-all criteria and rubrics, from a postmodernist perspective, one of the greatest troubles I have with the reading comprehension portion of the OSSLT is that there are multiple choice questions being used as an indication of a students’ ability to understand a text. As Lankshear & Knobel (2000) explain, “In postmodernist times, text production and consumption can no longer be represented as enterprises concerned with promoting incontrovertible truths or with asserting and sustaining singular, fixed realities” (p. 1). I agree with Davis (2004) that we “live in a world of partial knowledge, local narratives, situated truths, and shifting selves” (p. 109). All knowledge can be “contested” and “questioned” (Merriam, 2002, p. 374). The emergence of one dominate view is not the postmodernist’s goal. For postmodernists, the focus is on “complexity, a myriad of meanings, rather than one meaning, however profound” (Coles & Hall, 2001, p. 113). In such an epistemological framework, there is a “rejection of unity, homogeneity, totality, and closure” (p. 114). Instead, “provisionality, uncertainty, and the floating of meaning, are understood as phenomena to be celebrated” (p. 113). In other words, “Postmodernists celebrate diversity among people, ideas, and institutions” (Merriam, 2002, p. 375). However, the OSSLT, as a standardized test, is an example of how “learners are required to respond with ‘correct’ responses to classroom texts, whose forms and meanings remain fixed, unyielding to new inflections or resonances” (Wallace, 2006, p. 75). There is little to no room on the OSSLT for creativity or originality of thought, as evidenced, for instance, by the use of multiple choice questions. Students are simply required to demonstrate that they can decode the words on the page. I believe that this level of expectation has been set merely because of what can be assessed on a large-scale and this does nothing to improve students’ learning or interest in reading.

When writing a standardized test, students sit in desks, which are lined up in individual rows. Students must use specific writing utensils, write within the space provided, and complete the work in silence and in the allotted time period. This environment shares no similarities with the classroom space described by Tierney, Bond, & Bresler (2006). Reporting on a group of high school students’ engagement with multiple literacies, Tierney, Bond, & Bresler (2006) explain how their classroom space “assumed the feel of a studio and think-tank” (p. 362). Students were able to “pursue multiple lines of thought” and their work was “multilayered and generative” (p. 362). These students were working collaboratively. When writing a standardized test, such as the OSSLT, ‘pursuing multiple lines of thought’ makes a student look indecisive or incoherent. When the OSSLT reports are released, a few comments from the markers are provided to ‘help’ students and teachers improve. In the 2008-2009

report, one of the comments said, “Many students try to support both sides of the issue. If they do not have the writing skills to carry this off, they give the impression that their opinion is unclear or inconsistent. I would encourage these students to take a stand—yes or no—and support that opinion.—R.W” (EQAQ, 2009d, p. 2). Rather than provide advice about how to write more effectively, students are being encouraged to modify and limit their thoughts and arguments for the sake of writing the test. Acknowledging that there may be multiple perspectives that are valid, albeit in opposition, is seen as a weakness in some cases.

Keeping all of these factors in mind, I think the ‘standardized’ elements of the OSSLT definitely need to be changed. I really appreciate Gaylie’s (2008) excitement over how students can surprise a teacher. In her discussion about students’ experiences with ecoliteracy and poetry in a “low-ranked” inner city elementary school in British Columbia, Gaylie (2008) explains, “It was typical for the students to defy expectations, challenge all assignments, in order to make it their own. These students would never try to write a poem ‘correctly’ to please the teacher, or myself, or anyone else [. . . .] The students constantly surprised me with their creative interpretations of activities. I had never, until that day, thought of an urban puddle as a ‘body of water’” (p. 6). The experience of surprise cannot be achieved through a multiple choice test.

Remix, Part 2: Change something within the test

Another issue is the selection of texts and topics of study that are being used on the OSSLT. The literacy test does not allow students to choose their own reading selections. Habib (2008) tells us that “most English teachers will recognize that necessary books are those which students tell us they want to read. Necessary books, valuable to study in school, are those which engage the students with what is happening in the world around them” (p. 41). The context in which students learn is very important and being able to relate what they do at school, in the classroom, or on a test to their own interests and experiences will enhance their learning experiences. The OSSLT does recognize this, since one of their target expectations is for students to make connections. However, they do not give students the opportunity to make those connections in the reading comprehension portions of the test, nor do they assess any connections that are made, since it is the specific references to the text selections provided that are looked for when assessing students’ responses.

The 2010 OSSLT included texts about a romantic ritual of hanging padlocks on a lamppost on a bridge in Rome, which was inspired by two books and their movie adaptations and has since been recreated in a music video (EQAQ, 2010d, p. 2), an informational text about the history of Northern Ontario’s “school on the rails” (p. 9), a narrative about being stranded overnight at a diner south of Collingwood, Ontario to wait out a snowstorm because road conditions were too treacherous to travel (EQAQ, 2010e, pp. 6-7), a dialogue between two students stopping to pick up a newspaper for a civics assignment and not being allowed to wear their backpacks through the store (p. 10), a graphic design proposal for a sports arena to be submitted to city council (p. 14). These texts could produce interesting discussions if students were able to reflect on specific parts of the texts that were of interest to them personally. However, the questions that accompany these texts are very specific. For example, for the first text about the padlocks, the five multiple choice questions require students to identify who/what the name ‘Milvio’ referred to in the text, what the ‘golden padlock’ prize recognizes, “which event occurred first in the development of the ritual,” what the description ‘off the beaten track’ means, and “which word is closest in meaning to ‘rite’ as used in paragraph 5” (EQAQ, 2010d, p. 3). The short open-response question asks: “Should city officials in Rome be

worried or pleased about the fad of putting locks on the lamppost?” (p. 4). This criteria for a correct response, as noted in the released rubric used to assess students’ answers, looks for a response that “indicates considerable reading comprehension,” and a response that “provides accurate, specific and relevant ideas and information from the reading selection” (EQAO, 2010c, p. 2). Even though the instructions following the question state, “Explain your answer using details from the selection and your own ideas” (EQAO, 2010d, p. 4), markers are only looking for evidence that the student can refer back to the text itself: “The response uses specific and relevant support from the reading selection to explain clearly whether Roman officials should be worried or pleased” (EQAO, 2010c, p. 2).

The writing tasks on the 2010 OSSLT were perhaps more aligned with students’ everyday lives. For the two page opinion piece, students were asked: “Are cellphones necessary in teenagers’ lives?” and, for a short writing tasks of six lines, students were asked “What would be the ideal job for you?” (EQAO, 2010e, p. 6). Students were also asked to write a one page news report based on a photo of three youth washing a car in a driveway and a headline that reads, “Car wash a success” (EQAO, 2010d, p. 7). The criteria upon which students’ responses are being assessed do not engage with students’ ideas though, as previously noted. Thus, even when a topic is presented on the test with which students may be able to connect or respond to critically, this is not what is being valued or recognized as a beneficial reflective learning experience. It is the format and genre of the response that matters to EQAO. In their discussion of standardized tests, Joseph & Paul (2005) argue that “Children are being forced to read texts which have been bleached of all colour of life” (p. v). They continue, “children are being suffocated and smothered by the emptiness of the timeless present of standardized tests and standardized prose” (p. vii). The OSSLT is an example of “standardized lifelessness” (p. v). Reflecting upon her own schooling experiences, Gaylie (2008) offers a great example of how context and personal interests or experiences are often overlooked when concerned only with the ‘test.’ When looking at a photograph “of a rain-swept field with the caption ‘Precipitation,’” Gaylie (2008) recalls asking the classroom teacher where this was set (p. 2). The teacher “said the place was not important, that only the word would be on the test” (p. 2). Gaylie (2008) also offers a stark comparison between what she observed walking on her way to a school and what she observed in the classroom: “a red bench, a blue swing, a green fence; I found little going on inside the classroom that had to do with what went on outside; we faced the blackboard, set apart from one another, seated in rows. Classroom language was abstract, the language of discipline, testing, order and rules” (pp. 1-2). Not only is the description of the classroom devoid of colour, it is also regulated, as a test would be, whereas the outside world is more random, and what caught Gaylie’s eye is probably indicative of her own interests, since she could have described many other things.

Remix, Part 3: Add something to the test

I would like to see a literacy test that truly values critical literacies. When I think about literacy, I think about critical literacies. When I read, I want to hear multiple voices and multiple perspectives. I want to question the author and the text. I want to explore, examine, analyze, inquire, reject, challenge, evaluate, and scrutinize what I am reading. I want to be challenged and I want to learn something. For me, literacy is about more than just being able to decode the words on the page. As Shor (1999) explains, “Critical literacy involves questioning received knowledge and immediate experience with the goal of challenging inequality and developing activist citizenry” (p. 141). Thus, critical literacies encourage readers to question what they read, to consider how what they read relates to issues of social justice, and to take

action. Where are these skills assessed on the OSSLT? As Williams (2005) notes, “In the drive to assess and quantify, what is forgotten is why we want students to read and write in the first place” (p. 154). If you try to assess my ‘literacy’ skills, I want these skills to be acknowledged. This is where I think the OSSLT falls short.

Williams (2005) argues that “the increasing pressure of standardized testing disconnects literacy education from human concerns. Students face writing prompts and reading tests that have no connection to their lives, communities, or interests” (p. 154). According to Williams (2005), “rigid questions and answers remove the importance of context from literacy practices and allow for no independent meaning making from students” (p. 154). Even if students expand their answers in response to the text prompts, to include, for instance, critical comments about the intertextuality that permeates culture as evidenced through the two books, their film adaptations, the music video, and the contest that surrounds the padlock ritual, reflections upon why the students are not allowed to wear their backpacks through the store and the social implications and repercussions of this rule, the significance of buying a (single) newspaper to read for a civics assignment, or the environmental impacts of car washes and sports stadiums, just to name a few issues that remain unexplored on the OSSLT, that is not what is being assessed or valued on the test. When students do choose to critically discuss social issues, as noted in some of the anchor papers and sample responses, these comments are being classified as ‘supporting details’ and there is no interaction on the part of the markers with any of the ideas. Instead, the amount of details provided, the connections between the parts of the news report, and the organization of the text are being assessed (EQAO, 2010c, p. 13). Critical literacies require us to respect students’ differing experiences and unique lines of inquiry. In order to be able to assess students’ critical literacies skills, we must first acknowledge the significance of the social contexts in which students read, learn, and are assessed. How can these social contexts be valued by a standardized test that follows a one-size-fits-all approach to literacy education and testing. As Janesick (2007) writes, “teachers and learners together demonstrate on a regular basis that one size fits few, and there are multiple ways of knowing our world” (p. 243). Thus, the design of the test, as previously suggested, must change.

In an article on critical literacies and the use of multiple perspective texts, Clarke & Whitney (2009) describe a lizard activity, which highlights the importance of context when reading. This activity is also a great way of thinking about the context in which a student learns and how this can impact the results of an assessment. Clarke & Whitney (2009) explain:

Taking a picture of something recognizable and breaking it down into unrecognizable pieces can [. . .] emphasize how important it is to see things from different sides. For example, one teacher took a picture of a lizard and cut it into pieces. Then she gave each student a piece and had them create a picture from that small part. For example, one student turned the head into a ghost, while another turned the tail into a Viking ship. The students were captivated when she took each individual piece and showed them the complete lizard. (p. 533)

This lizard activity demonstrates the productive space that exists between postmodernist and poststructuralist frameworks. In deconstructing the image and trying to understand how each piece of the lizard fits within the whole and how each picture came about for each student, we are welcoming multiple voices, multiple perspectives, and highlighting the significance of context, in terms of both the lizard as a whole (or if it were a book, one incident or chapter in relation to the whole) and the drawings produced in relation to each of the students and their unique interests and experiences. This is important because these interests and experiences

inform how the students likely came about the decisions they made, whether it be to draw a ghost or a ship, for instance.

Building upon James Paul Gee's arguments, Nelsen (2010) argues that "when schools restrict the ranges of textual explorations to pre-packaged materials and instructional strategies limited to test-related tasks like worksheet completion and textual decoding, students are denied opportunities to explore the complex ways that texts inhabit their daily lives" (p. 98). Does the OSSLT respect the significance of the unique social contexts in which students learn, read, live? According to Nelsen (2010), "we should be careful to analyze how our classrooms match or vary from our students' home cultures and how their 'identity kits' match or differ from the ones that schools implicitly and explicitly value" (p. 99). With the OSSLT, we are telling students how to learn and what to learn, and it may not be the best, or single, way to learn.

Deterritorializations, Uncertainties, & Generative Spaces

I understand that the move to transform/eliminate the standardized elements of the OSSLT seems drastic, as does inserting elements of student choice, self-selected readings, and customized tasks that meet individual students' interests. However, these are just a few possible changes to illustrate how we can begin to conceptualize a remixing of the OSSLT. Another related element of the test that I would propose be removed from the OSSLT is the fact that it is a timed test written in 2.5 hours on one day of the year (EQAO, 2010g, p. 2). To respond to students' varied skills sets and the growing awareness about the significance of multiliteracies, I would also consider adding elements of multimodality that extend beyond print-based literacies. Imagine splicing the OSSLT with students' experiences with YouTube, film production and editing, Facebook, texting, Google searching, collaboration with peers, reading graphic novels, and a range of other literacy experiences that are currently undervalued, including those that extend into a range of content domains, such as physical literacies through sports or performance arts. Remixing the OSSLT is about targeting elements of the test that can undergo a process of transformation. The goal is to begin constructing aspects of a new product, such as a literacy assessment experience that can be completed by students gradually, with ongoing feedback and access to resources, and that incorporates critical literacies, multiliteracies, multimodal literacies, etc. In addition to the form and content of the test, it would also potentially benefit each student were they to receive personalized feedback with the intent of improving their learning. These changes are not easy to conceptualize, nor are they simple modifications.

Remixing the OSSLT is a complex proposition, but one that can result in much needed change. Reflecting upon introducing radical change texts in a classroom, Luce-Kapler (2007) explains that "what was immediately obvious [to her] was the tension that occurs whenever one introduces something that challenges reading and writing practices that have longstanding traditions" (p. 219). While the 'tensions' are not necessarily a bad thing, being able to maneuver amongst these tensions is important. According to Williams & Tanaka (2007), "Cwelelep [means] the discomfort and value of being in a place of dissonance, uncertainty, and anticipation" (p. 6). Sometimes an unsettling is all we need to prompt a re-examination of what is going on, such that we can learn something new. This is why I am proposing that we 'deterritorialize' the OSSLT, move to unstable grounds, and enter a "third space" like that imagined by Homi Bhabha where "discourses can weave together and create an alternative discourse of change" (Williams and Tanaka, 2007, p. 1). In asking that we explore a possible

pedagogical third space, I am also asking that we experiment with “rhizomatic thinking that opens up to a manifold of possibilities” (Waterhouse, 2008, p. 2).

Lankshear & Knobel’s (2000) discussion about building scenarios parallels the creation of generative spaces where multiple possibilities are welcomed. According to Lankshear & Knobel (2000), “Scenario planning is very much about challenging the kinds of mindsets that underwrite certainty and assuredness. It is about ‘reperceiving the world’ and promoting more open, flexible, proactive stances toward the future” (p. 2). Scenarios include “alternative paths” (p. 1). Perhaps this remixing of the OSSLT is an opportunity to start ‘scenario planning’ about how the OSSLT could be changed, or about how we could better serve our youth through alternative assessments that do not undervalue the importance of a great, complex, and dynamic education, since “building scenarios is a way of asking important ‘what if’ questions: a means of helping groups of people change the way they think about a problem” (p. 2). The OSSLT is our problem, so ‘what if’ it were remixed and transformed? ‘What if’ it disappeared entirely? This is an opportunity for “what Murray (1997) called ‘kaleidoscopic’ thinking” (Luce-Kapler, 2007, pp. 214-215). Fragmentation, juxtapositions, multi-layering, and a general complexity are needed to tackle the OSSLT.

Reflecting on what can emerge from such a space, I cannot help but ask myself the same questions Van de Kleut (2009) asked herself when she questioned the level of change that could transpire in her classroom when she “stepped out of the way” and encouraged her students to choose “their own books” and work on tasks that are less structured (pp. 2-3). Van de Kleut (2009) wondered, “Was I still in the way, in ways I myself could not see? [. . .] Or were there other things in the way that prevented them from taking to the open road?” (p. 3). Is my idea of remixing the OSSLT enough? What might transpire if a group of high school students were to critically discuss their experiences with the OSSLT? I really like Waterhouse’s (2008) contemplation about the impact her writing could have. She wonders, “What it will do for the reader I cannot know. Will it de/stabilize, de/territorialize? Will it be a transformative experience? Possibly. But be mindful when embarking on a nomadic journey” (p. 2). According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987) (as cited in Waterhouse, 2008, p. 2), “Voyaging smoothly is a becoming, and a difficult, uncertain becoming at that.” I’m not sure what my remixing will offer. Perhaps it will ‘de/stabilize’? Either way, the remixing process is like a ‘journey,’ and a sort of ‘becoming.’ Therefore, like Gough (2008), I too propose a momentary ‘pause,’ a sort of ‘inconclusion,’ as a way of welcoming other voices and other stories to create a conversation about the OSSLT. Perhaps a ‘divergence’ of opinions and perspectives could somehow offer up enough uncertainty to destabilize the OSSLT.

I am not sure what remixing the OSSLT will lead to, or what the new ‘product’ could look like. I am not offering an outline of the next literacy test, nor am I proposing specific questions or any prescribed template that I think is the ideal replacement. Instead, I am proposing that we shift things around, that we unsettle the ground, and that we start to explore possible hybrids by remixing the OSSLT. “Rhizomatic journeys on smooth spaces privilege the lines in-between, not the points. The transformative processes of movement and nomadic wandering are what interest us here, not endpoints. ‘Arrival at a final destination is always postponed’ (Bayne, 2004, p. 306)” (Waterhouse, 2008, p. 2). This is why I will not be offering a final OSSLT ready to go. That would be an endpoint and I am not at that ‘point,’ nor do I want to be. Like the texts and spaces the children Pahl (2002) observed occupied, we too need to sit “on the cusp of ‘mess’ and ‘tidiness’” (p. 146).

I am always suspicious when new technologies are released. For instance, Apple released the iPod and it was a huge hit, and then the 4GB, 8GB, 16GB, 32GB came out. There is also the iPod nano, the iPod mini, and the list goes on. I am always hesitant to ‘buy’ into the

hype knowing that this cannot actually be the be-it-end-all solution to media entertainment. What I realize though is that I am observing the ‘play,’ the ongoing exploration of what can be created as Apple continues to experiment with technologies. There is no endpoint. There is no final product. It is a process, a learning adventure. Why is it that the computer technology industries are so liberal with their experimentation? They release a product and then continue to make improvements or changes preparing for the next release. We see it everywhere on the internet with social networking sites too. Can we not model this type of experimentation with assessments? My curiosity is always piqued when I know that changes and transformations are truly anticipated with excitement, much like awaiting the next release by Apple.

In a discussion of new media and Web 2.0 technologies, Hoechsmann (2008) states: “We are still in relatively uncharted waters” (p. 61). When can we start saying the same thing, with confidence, about assessments? We should want to work with “multiple cartographers” and revel in the chance to see “how youth are articulating themselves in the liminal spaces between and around texts” (p. 61). Talking about technologies, Hoechsmann (2008) begins, “As we move away from the old monolithic one-way flow of mass media to the new ‘interactive’ environment of Web 2.0 platforms such as social networking sites MySpace and YouTube and knowledge sharing sites such as Wikipedia, there has clearly been a shift in the conditions in which having a voice in the public sphere is even possible” (p. 60). Now, imagine Hoechsmann was just talking about assessments. How exciting, uplifting, and refreshing would that be? This online space is “an environment where the activity of learning to play and playing to learn is supplemented by the use of cheat sheets, queries to peers, and consulting resources offered by Web 2.0 sites as well as the Web at large. Rather than a predetermined, standardized curriculum, just in time pedagogy on the Web is learning on demand, user-centred, task-driven, and immediately applicable” (Hoechsmann, 2008, p. 63). Hoechsmann (2008) argues, “It is no longer possible for education systems around the world to continue to proceed without responding to the revolution in communication taking place in the culture at large” (p. 68). The Web may be a specific culture of its own, but it does show us that the OSSLT is sitting inside of a very small bubble of its own, which is detached from this other literacy context that many youth in Ontario are experiencing in countless different ways.

Remixing the OSSLT offers a space for play and this might be a space in which we can all learn. Why not try it out? According to Nelsen (2010), “a playful approach to schooling views school policies and curricular ‘rules’ as serving the larger aim of academic inquiry, and as such, remain flexible and revisable” (p. 102). Maria Lugones (2003) (as cited in Nelsen, 2010, p. 102) “describes playfulness as entailing ‘*openness to surprise.*’” Surprise me! What does your remix of the OSSLT look like? What do you think a collective and collaborative remix of the OSSLT would look like? Play offers us “rich potential for critical exploration,” and as such, this playfulness is “not passive” (Nelsen, 2010, p. 107, 102). I think Luce-Kapler (2007) would agree that such an opportunity to remix the OSSLT may lead “to learning that we could not have anticipated” (p. 222). It is important to remember that this “cohort [. . .] is in tune and largely at ease with the dizzy pace of change” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2000, p. 8). So, let’s (drastically) change the way students experience the OSSLT. Perhaps next year’s newspaper headline will read: On March 29th, 2012, high school students were not taking the OSSLT, they were redesigning it! This would be a great example of youth’s critical engagement with their education and with literacies.

Ongoing Explorations

Although I have ideas of how the test can change, shift, be deterritorialized, and remixed, I think it is important and valuable to learn from the youth who are potentially being impacted by this test in numerous ways. Encouraging youth to speak out about issues that affect them, such as this high-stakes standardized literacy test, is one step towards promoting social action. My doctoral research project, which builds upon this discussion about the OSSLT and critical literacies, will work within a framework of equity and social justice by encouraging a range of voices to be heard and many experiences to be shared. Thus, I am resting in this messy space with no definite solutions, leaving this proposition incomplete at the moment, but noting the urgency for attention to this problem, and suggesting a methodology that begins with remixing. This proposition to remix the OSSLT is intended to open up a generative space, and to reveal the opportunities for change within a standardized system.

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