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Kittens! Inspired by Kittens! Undergraduate Theorists Inspired by YouTube

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Diane Downer Anderson, Mark Lewis, Sarah Peterson, Samantha Griggs, Gina Grubb, Nicole Singer, Simone Fried, Elizabeth Krone, Leigh Elko, Jasmine Narang

Kittens! Inspired by Kittens! Undergraduate Theorists Inspired by YouTube

A professor and her students in an undergraduate research seminar were inspired to playfully link old and contemporary literacy theories to a 2.0 media artifact, the popular YouTube video Kittens! Inspired by Kittens! Participants were able to think of complex theory and new media in unexpected, entertaining, yet rigorous ways. In doing this work together, students and professor were repositioned as technology users, research analysts, and academic writers.

How can theory become valuable for teachers and literacy educators? The authors, ages 20–58, discovered one way when we came across *Kittens! Inspired by Kittens! (KIbK)*, a viral YouTube video that led us into and through literacy theories. As we learned together in a semester-long, senior-level research seminar, we were acutely aware that YouTube is barely four years old, while for Maddie, the star of the video, digital media may be as much a part of her life and experiences with literacy as picturebooks. Indeed, Maddie's enthusiastic performance is inspired by a photojournalistic picturebook called *Kittens* (Gibbon, 1979).

Bringing together our disparate experiences with books and media in an education course enabled us to explain theory to ourselves while we also learned to value *KIbK* as not only a creative, engaging literacy artifact (see Figure 1 for an overview and url), but also as an exemplar of the literacies at the vanguard of new digital media. Through our work in a seminar that included digital media and laughter, theories of language, literacy, and society, we delved into theories that had been developed before the explosion of 2.0 media and yet still had profound relevance for understanding the literacies represented in a single YouTube video. These theoretical sources included Marie Clay's (1993) analysis regarding learning to read print; Lave and Wenger's (1991) concepts of community of practice; Bourdieu's (1977, 1999) explanations of habitus, and Bakhtinian (1981, 1984, 1996) interpretations of intertextuality and identity. The course also included readings in new literacy studies (Knobel & Lankshear, 2005; Collins, 1995; Gee, 2000; Street, 1995; Clough, 2002), sociocultural theory (Heath, 1983; Dyson, 1997; Heath & Street, 2008; Enciso, 2003; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1998), and other topics, including space, discourse analysis, and agency (Anyon, 2008; Rowe & Leander, 2005; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Turner, 1997; Alim & Baugh, 2007; Moje & Lewis, 2007; Burns & Morrell, 2005; Rogers, 2004; Fairclough, 2004; Vasquez, 2004; Wortham, 2006; McCarthey, 1998; Egan-Robertson, 1998; Anderson, 2006; Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Despite our pleasure in *KIbK*, we were often divided by our love-hate relationship with theory. On the one hand, Diane, our professor, believes

***Kittens! Inspired by Kittens!*: Directions & Description**

The video discussed in this article can be found online at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtX8nswnUKU. If you do not have your computer handy, *KIbK* is a YouTube video. The first shot is of a young girl standing in what appears to be a living room, holding a book in front of her that says KITTENS on the cover. "Kittens, inspired by kittens!" she announces. What follows is a series of shots of the actual pages of the book, which feature some text but mostly color photographs of kittens engaged in various activities or poses. For each page, the young girl (off-camera) provides a voiceover for the kittens depicted, as if they are talking to each other or explaining what they are doing. The narration is broken down into vignettes; there is no congruous narrative as the pages turn, just characterizations of the photos on each page. The video mostly jumps from picture to picture, although at times a hand can be seen turning the pages. In the final shot, the KITTENS book is resting on a black background, closed with the title showing, until two small hands remove it from view.

Figure 1. *Synopsis of* Kittens! Inspired by Kittens!

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that teachers benefit from knowing the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of literacy practices and classroom instruction. She has found that theory helps researchers and teachers to be more facile with methods that must be crafted context to context. Although unwilling to accept the mantle of Luddite, her use of computers was limited to writing, searching the Web, e-mail, and Skype. Until recently, she did not own a cell phone, and she rarely looked at YouTube. On the other hand, as undergraduates, with inclinations toward practice over theory, and despite our varied disciplinary backgrounds—from linguistics, psychology, studio art, literature, public policy, and sociology/anthropology to education—our commitments to theory ranged from enthusiasts to "haters." All of us, however, were avid users of new technologies.

Our group, novice and expert educators and researchers with mixed stances toward theory, presents a model that was useful for us as we discovered the value of engaging new media as a central, shared experience for theorizing literacy practices. We do not intend our analyses of *KIbK* to be a definitive or complete representation of the theories we employ. Rather, we are interested in showing how social, linguistic, and learning theories became tools for playing with a complex literacy event represented in a new media format.

We claim, based on our overall experience in learning together, writing, and eventually presenting our analyses in conferences, that making theory work for us required, in part, the humor and novelty of a wildly intertextual literacy artifact like *KIbK*. After the course ended, one "hater of theory" among us claimed, "*KIbK* [was] useful because it allowed me to briefly feel that theory was real and applicable to life. It made me feel like the theory was finally *doing* something concrete. I still hate theory, I don't think it's useful, but it was a good exercise. I don't think I changed." Yet this same class member also said, "The kind of analysis of visual literacy I did with *KIbK*, this is the kind of thing I think about all the time."

Theory *and* Practice

We are a professor and nine students who took part in the 2009 Literacies & Numeracies Research Seminar, which prepares seniors for Honors study and research that includes our theoretical understanding of literacy practices. The seminar met for four hours each week for 14 weeks. The professor arranged the syllabus topically for 11 of the weeks, leaving the remaining 3 weeks for students' construction of topics and questions. During the semester, students produced traditional seminar papers, collaborated on research projects, and began individual literacy inquiries, all drawing on theories that applied to their current work in secondary English classrooms, digital literacies adult education programs, and their own reading. These experiences, along with *KIbK,* were also resources for our weekly discussions of theory.

***Kittens! Inspired by Kittens!:* The Phenomenon**

The Star: **Maddie Kelly, age 6, from Edina, MN**[1]

The Book: ***Kittens* by David Gibbon, published in 1979**

The Cameraman: **Albert Kelly, Maddie's father**[2]

YouTube Premiere Date: **September 01, 2008**

First referral from a Google.com search for "Kittens Inspired by Kittens": **February 11, 2009**[3]

Views on YouTube (as of 11/24/09): **6,237,762**

Comments on YouTube (as of 11/24/09): **11,493**

Video Responses on YouTube (as of 11/24/09): **58**

[1]"Maddie Kelly." TwinCitiesLive.com, published February 26, 2009. http://twincitieslive.com/article/stories/S807316.shtml?cat=111215. Accessed Tuesday, November 24, 2009.

[2]http://weirdkellys.blogspot.com/2009/02/kittens-kittens-kittens.html.

[3]"kittens inspired by kittens." YouTube.com (under Statistics & Data).

Figure 2. *The history of* Kittens! Inspired by Kittens! *video*

Prior to week three of the course, one student sent all of us an email with a link to *Kittens! Inspired by Kittens!* (see video history in Figure 2). This wasn't the first YouTube video that we'd discussed in class, but *KIbK* was especially amusing to us; and the centrality of the reading in the video signaled a strong connection to our academic interests. *KIbK* became a touchstone for the theory in the course that some students found most confounding. We also enjoyed the thrill of participating in a broader social phenomenon—*KIbK* came to us in the midst of its growing popularity.

Framing *Kittens! Inspired by Kittens!*

School policies and curricular goals often situate digital media as peripheral or completely irrelevant to literacy education. And even though

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innovative literacy work abounds in the context of online videos, gaming, and hip-hop music videos (Alim, 2006; Gee, 2008; Knobel & Lankshear; 2005), they are far from being integrated into language arts and English education as equivalent in value to print and paper-based reading and composition. Our work with *KIbK* contributes to an effort to claim legitimacy for 2.0 and other media in literacy research, theory, and practice. We see, like other researchers, the creative composing value and energy as children shape meaning, literacies, and their identities in the world. Through both lenses, we situate our work as an important path to social justice in education. In learning how to talk together, as a theory-loving professor and theory-skeptical undergraduates, we found ourselves more able to see the complexity, sophistication, and conscious (though emergent) literacies that one child—with adult support—exhibits in a new media platform. *KIbK* can represent the impressive speed and visual power of online video production, but in a broader sense, it is also an example of the brilliant cultural work that people engage in as we cross and complicate the boundaries that separate mainstream spaces and marginal genres.

Our theoretical work shifted toward the possibility of writing for a larger audience of literacy educators and researchers when Diane saw the powerful ways we were using *KIbK* week after week to explore theory; she also noted the social effects of this common touchstone on the group's sense of cohesion and shared ownership of our ideas. Thus, she proposed a group paper as an additional assignment at the end of the term. Each student was invited to use "their" theory week to explicitly interpret *KIbK*; each responded enthusiastically with a three- to five-page analysis. A smaller group met to read and synthesize the analyses, conflating some analyses and discarding what seemed to cohere less strongly.

In our discussions of what to include in an analysis of *KIbK*, we were distinctly wary of treating digital work like Maddie's as something apart from nondigital literacy because, as we worked our way through the course syllabus and theoretical positions, we saw similarities between new and old media, despite the obvious differences. For example, the possibilities of digital virality are impressive, but they are not new. Turns of phrase, jokes, word games, textual references, and stories also have viral properties. Scholarship in the folklore of young people (Sherman & Weisskopf, 1995) specifically documents how oral texts spread across time and space are changed through their encounters with new users, but the same phenomenon has been previously theorized, most notably for us by Bakhtin (1981). We worried that a heavy reliance on new media theory might have the dangerous effect of framing the digital as more advanced or more sophisticated, in much the same way that a (now discredited) line of research seemed to assign a greater value to literate over oral cultures. We argue, instead, for always understanding literacy from the standpoints of the people and conditions in which it is produced (Gee, 1990). Additionally, applying predigital theory to texts unimagined by predigital theorists became a way for us to see if these theories were robust for 21st century literacies.

Through these reviews, the central theme emerged to describe foundational literacy and learning theories in light of new media texts in a 2.0 platform. The five theoretical frames organizing our final analysis of *KIbK* are outlined in Figure 3. We begin with a traditional, school-based explanation of Maddie as a novice reader and then extend that view with frames that include: identities and representations; apprenticeship/participation theory; Bakhtinian concepts of intertextuality and dialogism, including subversiveness in children's literature; and Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction known as *habitus*. Across our use of theory, we sought to value Maddie's and other children's cultural work (Dyson, 2003) as they engage with others in their everyday lives. In the words of one class member, "If a theory can't help me see what learners are doing well and see the sophistication in young people's work, then I don't

Analysis Section	Theoretical Orientation
Kittens! Inspired by Kittens!: Maddie as novice reader	School-based reading instruction
"We are wine bottles!" [0:10]: Identities at play	Social identities and theories of selfhood
"I'm at work" [:12]: Maddie's apprenticeship	Identity formation in communities of practice
"Bow wow chicka bow wow chicka bow wow" [1:06]: The Intertexual *KIbK*	Bakhtin's theory of intertextuality
Kittens inspired by habitus	Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction

Figure 3. *Theoretical frames*

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think it's useful. My favorite theories are ones I feel like I can use to see how clever people are."

Kittens! Inspired by Kittens!: Maddie as Novice Reader

We begin our analysis of *KIbK* by interpreting Maddie as a novice reader who is starting to learn basic reading skills. Unlike other analyses we used, a reading perspective cannot be located in a single "theory," but consists, instead, of a whole set of what we think of as school-based orientations toward literacy. We take up this perspective on reading, even though Maddie does not actually read any of the words in the book aloud. She nevertheless "reads" the book to her audience in a meaningful oral presentation of its form and images.

Maddie's interaction with the picturebook shows signs of what Holdaway (1979) calls reading-like behaviors (p. 40). She establishes one-to-one correspondence (Heath, 1983) by linking particular pictures with meaningful interpretations of those pictures. Further, Maddie re-voices or inscribes new meaning in the photos, assigning monologues and dialogues to each photo she reads aloud (see Figure 4 for transcript). Her performance gives the viewer insight into her skill set for school reading, insofar as it is visually cued by the *Kittens* book. For example, based on how the camera pans certain pages, we see evidence that she has a conceptual grasp of how a book can be used; she demonstrates this by how she holds a book for her audience and "reads" from left to right and from top to bottom.

Like other analyses, our understanding of Maddie's specific early reading knowledge can only extend as far as a single video sequence will allow. We don't know, for instance, what discussions, readings, rereadings, and scripting might have preceded her decisions about the reading sequence. After obtaining a copy of *Kittens* (Gibbon, 1979), we realized that the order of photos Maddie uses is not the same as the order found in the book. For Maddie, and perhaps for other adults involved in making the video, entertainment value seems to have trumped a strict performance of reading skills.

Marie Clay writes that "all readers . . . need to find and use different kinds of information in print and combine the information which they find in print with what they carry in their heads

***Kittens! Inspired by Kittens!*: Shot-by-shot Transcript**

Time	[Action]/Dialogue
0:01	[Girl standing in living room holds book] Kittens, inspired by kittens!
0:05	[Cover of the book]
0:07	[Title Page of the book]
0:10	We are wine bottles . . .
0:13	I'm at work!
0:15	Brainstorm . . .
0:18	Magic . . .
0:22	I want pie/I want beef jerky!
0:25	(Three screams)
0:29	I am a secret agent.
0:32	We are in Hawaii.
0:35	Doublehead!
0:37	I am a magician/I'm a rabbit!
0:42	I'm her mom/. . . No, she's not . . .
0:48	We are eating peppers and chips!
0:51	(Singing) La, la la la la la . . .
0:59	Wrestling!
1:03	Hungry.
1:06	Bow wow chicka bow wow chicka bow wow
1:09	Yuck!
1:11	I am weird.
1:12	Cuckoo, cuckoo.
1:14	I have to go potty/(Whispers:) Move down to his feet . . ./(Sound effect:) Psssssssssss.
1:23	(One scream)
1:25	I am bored, aren't you?/I am too.
1:30	[View of book cover (*KITTENS*) on black background, then removed from view by a pair of small hands).

Figure 4. Kittens! Inspired by Kittens! *transcript*

from their past experiences with language" (1991, p. 14). By combining their knowledge of sounds, books, and the outside world with what they're reading, successful readers construct composite meanings from literary works. In *KIbK*, Maddie narrates using visual cues from the pictures of kittens and her knowledge of the human world to construct narratives. In this way, she is employing a kind of visual literacy using social semiotics (Hodge & Kress, 1988) that allows her to interpret the images and develop meanings from them. She maps human actions and roles onto the kittens in the pictures, drawing from her repertoire

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of experiences and her vocabulary. For example, in the Brainstorm frame (0:15), two similar cats meet over the back of a rocking chair, appearing to gaze away after conversing with one another; their body language mimics that used by humans in conversation. Perhaps the cats' stances resemble a situation familiar to her from the human world, inspiring her to declare "Brainstorm!"

In addition to her interpretations of everyday interactions, Maddie's reading knowledge also includes the possibility that she is an emerging text critic who is able to draw on irony and intertextual references to poke fun at a dated informational book. We wondered if her tone might be mocking the book, with its straightforward presentation of images and information about the cuteness of cats. Freebody & Luke (1990) claim that sociocritical practices include asking questions when reading, such as: "What is this text trying to do to me? In whose interests? Whose voice is at play? Whose voice is silenced?" Perhaps Maddie's departure from the written exposition of the book in favor of a playful anthropomorphic series of observations, monologues, and dialogues is evidence that she is a critical reader, whether she can decode and recognize words in print or not.

Our lens on Maddie as a novice reader is speculative and limited, both because we have no access to the context that created her performance and because a theory of reading alone is not sufficient for understanding the complex social and interpersonal work accomplished by her efforts. Specifically, we are interested in the ways Maddie assigns identities to the kittens, and how her identity may be constituted as she narrates the kittens' perspectives.

Theoretical Perspectives

"We are wine bottles!": Identities at Play

Yagelski (2000) and Anderson (2002) argue that texts can be understood as sites where social identities are evoked, created, instantiated, or silenced. Anderson (2002) defines social identities as:

> *where one stands among others and how one positions or sees others positioned either in relation to oneself or in the greater scheme of persons. . . . social identities can include conceptions of identity as personal, hierarchical, oppositional, and individual.* (p. 399)

When we examined *KIbK* for clues about Maddie's understanding of identity, we found evidence of a complex set of ideas about what selves and identities can be. Maddie seems to see identity as local, as cued by the kittens' immediate surroundings, rather than as a static, unchanging representation of self to others. The interpretive work done by Maddie in *KIbK* illustrates particular discourses and understandings of identity. Through the video's repeated narrative framework, she is able to voice a different identity for each kitten. Some positionings are playful: "We are wine bottles!"(0:10); some are more expressive: "Yuck!" (1:09). These statements, inspired as it were by visual cues in the pictures, include self-expression as well as self-description: "I am weird" (1:11); "We are in Hawaii!" (0:39). Some are less overtly self-referential—"Brainstorm" (0:15); "Hungry" (1:03)—but are still narrative interpretations of self, although that self might be Maddie or her sense of the kittens' identities.

The first scenario, "We are wine bottles" (0:10), is perhaps the most difficult of the statements to understand from a perspective of selfhood. Many of the kittens express human-like identities, but neither kittens nor people can actually be wine bottles. Of course, like many of Maddie's narrations, this is meant to be a playful statement, but the image and description belies an intriguing theory of selfhood. The kittens are wedged into what is indeed a wine rack, taking up three empty spaces not occupied by bottles—although some spaces are filled by bottles, making it seem that to occupy such a space is to be such an object. While some mainstream discourses see identity as a natural, inherited feature—that people are, for example, naturally shy or naturally aggressive, natural leaders or natural followers—Maddie's narration suggests that identity can be situationally prompted, whether by wine racks or by other spaces.

Such a view of identity is potentially meaningful to a child. At any given moment, people negotiate multiple identities: our jobs or careers, our familial relationships, our racial and gendered identities—all of these in dialogue with context but also with each other. The variety of kinds of identity that Maddie applies to her characters may

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suggest a keen awareness of the complexity of social identities. For example, it is possible to be:

- Professional: "I'm at work!" (0:12); "Brainstorm" (0:15); "I am a secret agent" (0:29).
- Emotional or dispositional: "[Screams]" (0:25 and 1:23); "I'm bored, aren't you?" (1:25).
- Positioned with regard to norms: "I am weird" (1:11).
- Familial: "I'm her mom . . ." (0:42)
- Oppositional: ". . . No, she's not!" (0:42)

We point to the complexity of the identity play in *KIbK* not simply to suggest that Maddie is incredibly smart to have conceived of identity in this way, but to emphasize that this analysis provides further evidence of children's ability to draw on the understandings and discourses of their social milieu as they engage in cultural work through literacy practices. We speculate that she drew on sources that might include the popular media, schools she has attended, her peers, her parents, and certainly her father, the videographer. But this view of identity does not account for the ways that Maddie's identity is being constituted as a producer of digital text in collaboration with her father, using technologies in the context of her experience.

"I'm at work": Maddie's Apprenticeship

Lave & Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning proposes a way to understand learning by shifting from a view of learning as an individual, in-the-head phenomenon to one of newcomers participating alongside old-timers. In his introduction to Lave & Wenger (1991), Hanks describes learning as "a way of being in the social world, not a way of coming to know about it" (p. 24). A social theory highlights learning as happening through activity, in communities of practice, entailing the use of language and the construction of identities. While Lave & Wenger have addressed social learning and the notion of "becoming" in face-to-face communities, such as butcher shops and midwifery, *KIbK* presents Maddie as a participant in a new kind of community, one that is digital and multimodal.

Lave & Wenger develop the idea of "apprenticeship" to describe the social nature of learning (p. 65). In contrast to theories of emergent reading knowledge outlined above, which tend to emphasize an individual's cognitive achievements, Lave & Wenger's apprenticeship model of learning would see Maddie's early readerly practices as signs that she is entering the community of practice that digital literacy represents. *KIbK* offers a glimpse into Maddie's continued and continuing entrance into communities of readers and storytellers, although not all face-to-face.

We were also interested in what Lave & Wenger's model could tell us about how Maddie is participating in textual practices other than reading. Participation theories of learning point to ways in which YouTube is a community of practice, a place where members share ways of doing, being, and speaking that are consistent with their identities as members of that community. In the case of YouTube, it is a space entirely predicated on the production, consumption, and exchange of multimodal texts (videos, playlists, comments, ratings). But like all communities of practice, it is not made up simply of people who share common interests. YouTube members engage in their community through viewing, re-viewing, commenting, re-mixing, spreading, and responding with links to other videos. Lave & Wenger provide examples of communities involving actual physical interaction, but YouTube's virtuality and the sheer size of its community appear to be key assets in sustaining itself as a community of practice. Although interactions within this community are made through online exchanges and ratings processes, we view YouTube as one of many digitally based communities of practice.

Because the degree of Maddie's authority over the video's production cannot be ascertained from the video—nor her familiarity with YouTube prior to or even following the video's creation—it is impossible to describe ways that Maddie is being apprenticed to YouTube. Perhaps, at 7 million views and counting, she is an expert?

YouTube is not the only community of which Maddie may be an emergent member. Other memberships and associations are evident from the particular meanings that she infers from images. For example, at 0:12, she effervescently exclaims, "I'm at work!" while the camera focuses on a picture of a kitten at a typewriter. This association of a typewriter as a symbol of someone at work demonstrates what kinds of values and ideas of "work" are embedded in her social setting.

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Maddie's perception of sitting at a typewriter and creating documents as being indicative of "work" (as opposed to "writing a letter" or "working on my autobiography") may suggest the kind of work that the adults around her are engaged in and what kind of community she and her family belong to; it may even give us some leads, productive or not, about the kinds of work she expects to engage in as an adult, in situ and in virtual worlds.

In pondering through theory what is suggested in Maddie's apprenticeship, we were pushed to think about how children *become* readers, writers, and producers of digital media. Pondering Maddie's social situation and the development of her own literate identity leads us to the intertextual cultural threads that she draws on to weave her video text.

"Bow wow chicka bow wow chicka bow wow": The Intertextual *KIbK*

Bakhtin's theories (1981, 1984, 1996) describe how our use of language is interconnected with other users and texts across space and time. Speech and writing intertextually draw upon previous texts and will be drawn upon by future texts; words and speech are in dialogue with other voices and never actually stand alone. For Bakhtin, a single use of language includes layers of other voices; it is multi-vocal. Further, writers and speakers ventriloquate, speaking their thoughts and stances through the characters they animate in their stories. Bakhtin's theories extend the ways that we can understand how Maddie and her video are situated in a variety of communities of practice and the languages and identities they entail. Through her interpretation of *Kittens*, Maddie invokes implicit connections to the world of digital and predigital literate persons, as well as specific prior texts and dialogues.

The narrative for *KIbK* is signaled by the locations of the kittens in the photos. At 0:37 a kitten declares, "I'm a magician," and the kitten in the hat responds, "I'm a rabbit." The intertextual cue may be the hat, which evokes the cliché of the stage magician performing disappearing rabbit tricks. What prompted this particular interpretation for Maddie? She may have seen a magic show or a cartoon of a magic show or a movie with a magic show embedded in it. What matters, for us, is the opportunity to speculate on, rather than decide or predetermine, the value such a connection to other texts should have for her or others.

As we have already claimed, Maddie appropriates the images in *Kittens* (Gibbon, 1979) for her own purposes. Central to Bakhtin's theories is the concept that "language . . . exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own," a "seizure and transformation" (1981, p. 294) out of the world of previous utterances. Maddie's kittens speak for themselves, speak to one another, or are spoken about. While the words in *KIbK* are original in the sense of carrying meanings newly spoken through this video, all of their words have been spoken before and will be spoken again. Thus, Maddie's narration, monologues, and dialogues are intertextual references in dialogue with previous speech, future speech, and with one another within a text such as *KIbK*.

In this sense, Maddie's video intersects with both the words and phrases that come into her mind as she "reads" the kitten photos, as well as with cultural tropes of the self, ventriloquated through anthropomorphic kittens. In giving voice to some of the kittens, the author "serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 324). Further, small dialogues in *KIbK*, such as "I want pie" and "I want beef jerky" (0:22) or "I'm her mom" and "No, you're not" (0:42), indicate a level of multi-vocality that seems sophisticated for a child of six, but understandable when the child author is in apprenticeship (guided, at times, by her videographer) to a discourse community awash in self-referentiality, snark, and repartee.

Intertextual references can achieve what Markus & Nurius (1986) call "possible selves." In the case of *KIbK,* Maddie ventriloquates for kittens and, at the same time, authors selves not available or appropriate in daily life—selves that scream (0:25; 1:23), travel to Hawaii (0:32), wrestle (0:59), urinate (1:14), and express boredom (1:25) or deny family: "I'm her mom"/"No, she's not" (0:43).

Like the characters in children's literature—princesses, witches, adventurers, and pirates—Maddie's participation in the production of *KIbK* may be an example of the ways that children distance themselves from adult authority and express the unconventional and subversive. Characters in books typically do what human children cannot do, and Maddie's kitten pronouncements suggest

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some of those same intentions: They go where they want—Neverland (Hawaii 0:32); they eat what they want—gingerbread houses (peppers and chips 0:48); and they have special jobs and powers—superhero (magician 0:32, secret agent 0:29).

While amusing, rebellious, and perhaps "rubbishy" (Dickinson, 1970), *KIbK* may also unintentionally reference truly inappropriate discourse communities for a young child. "Bow wow chicka bow wow chicka bow wow" (1:06), a seemingly innocuous chatter for a photo of a kitten's head, references pornography, as we found when we looked up this phrase in Urban Dictionary:

1. Said when somebody unintentionally or purposely says something that has a double meaning (usually sexual in nature)
2. The onomatopoeia for stereotypical funk riff used in porn music, often used to insinuate sexual innuendo and/or activities (accessed May 13, 2009)

We believe the sexual references of the phrase to be unintentional, assuming Maddie has not directly accessed the porn community, where the phrase seems to have originated. But Maddie's use of the bow wow riff shows the distance that texts and words can travel as they are "seized and transformed" by new speakers, even six year olds (Bakhtin 1981, p. 294). We do not know how knowledgeable or complicit her father, the videographer, might be or who selected this narration for his daughter to voice.

We found that Bakhtin's work was very helpful in seeing the textual complexity of *KIbK* and the ways that any text is historically and referentially situated through layers of distancing and transformation. Although we see *KIbK*'s intertextuality and have speculated on the ways that Maddie (and quite possibly related adults) re-voice words and phrases, we needed another theory of social life to understand how a young child might reproduce old ways of reading while, at the same time, creating new versions of being literate.

Kittens Inspired by *Habitus*

Bourdieu's theory of habitus is often used to frame local processes of social reproduction, and it has widespread applicability as a way to understand why social and cultural practices persist, sometimes even in the face of direct efforts to change them. We include an application of habitus here because it can also be used to frame an individual artifact, such as *KIbK,* as a cultural product that has clear indications of being shaped by both Maddie's creative agency and by larger structures of reading and new media.

Bourdieu defines habitus as "durable, transposable sets of dispositions, structured structures inclined to function as structuring structures" (1977, p. 72). Interpreting this rather dense definition was one of the high points of struggle in our seminar. How could this have anything to do with a little girl re-narrating a book? Habitus is a far-reaching and complex theory, but most of its application to *KIbK* has already been suggested, as we have discussed the ways in which Maddie does a great deal of creative work, but also draws heavily on the tropes, words, and images of others. The mediation of this duality—individual and social—is at the core of habitus.

We began this paper by focusing on the agentic aspects of the video's creation and the "individual knowledge" required for its production, things that were the unique contributions of a unique person. This is by no means an uncommon approach. Indeed, this view characterizes most traditional kinds of assessment of literacy in schools and can be seen in accounts from the various news outlets covering the popularity of *KIbK*. Under this lens, Maddie might be seen as inventive, creative, precocious, or gifted. But there are limitations to this view. This individual-centered lens does not look for ways in which Maddie's act is shaped by patterns of social practices, and it does not find them. Again, individual forces are at play here, but the frame of habitus gives us a way to talk about how Maddie's actions are not totally independent of her social context, and never really could be.

This interdependence, rather than independence, can be seen by examining Maddie's subversive reading practices. We have previously speculated that Maddie may have a specific desire and related sense of agency to contest what is normally understood as reading text (i.e., in sequence, with attention to printed words). Certainly *KIbK* does do some work to contest these practices, even if Maddie did not specifically intend it to: she reads images, she skips the printed text in the book, and she remakes a story out of another author's intentions. But parallel to these departures from normalized reading practices, there is much about *KIbK* that is still quite conventional, because the social influences around literate practices are so pervasive.

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Despite all the oddness or absurdity associated with the narrations in *KIbK*, recall that Maddie is still telling an anthropomorphic animal narrative, still "reading" left to right, still creating a story with dialogue and narration, and so on. In Bourdieusian terms, the "structured structures" of reading practices, already firmly in place before Maddie's work in *KIbK*, functioned in the moment of *KIbK*'s creation as "structuring structures" that strongly mediated Maddie's work. This mediation is habitus. Durable dispositions towards certain reading practices have circumscribed Maddie's creative work in making *KIbK*. Maddie's practices are, even in that moment of challenging norms of reading, constrained by the structures that her project resists.

The notion of habitus is often construed as a conservative force with negative connotations. It constrains, it circumscribes, it restricts. This side of habitus is really there, and it is a vital part of the theory. But as stated previously, we also wish to employ theories such as habitus as part of a project about valuing cultural work. The possibility of this valuing lies at the intersection of habitus and dialogism. Yes, Maddie is drawing upon other sources and preestablished practices in her work, and this makes her contribution less unique than might be immediately supposed. But this process of drawing upon others' words, "textual toys" (Dyson, 2003), tropes, and ideas, also creates common cultural and social bonds. If we wish to value human community in general and communities of certain social practices in particular, then we must acknowledge the ways in which all of us, especially young people like Maddie and students in schools, participate in cultural practices that extend beyond our own milieu.

Thus, when combined with Bakhtin's theories of dialogism and intertextuality, Bourdieu's habitus helps us to see how Maddie and the content of her work are so strongly connected to a broader social context. This context includes the people directly involved in making the video, members of the YouTube community, and the broad communities of literacy practices that Maddie is growing up within. As Westernized thinkers, we are immersed in primarily individualistic ideologies, and it is natural that what many of us first see is what is most visible—a young girl giving an amusing retelling of a book about kittens. However, if we do a different kind of looking, we will also see a rich web of social practices being enacted through Maddie, by Maddie, and between Maddie and her audiences, even as some of those practices are being resisted.

"Bakhtin will always be awesome!"

As an external artifact that entered our seminar, *KIbK* ascended to a place of particular salience for us, equal to our field experiences and the ethnographies and theories we were reading. Like many other texts, we assigned meanings to it that were not intended by its authors, but this one invited multiple viewings and increasingly layered interpretations until it became something entirely new for us. We think projects like this, inspired by "curricular slippage and excess, boundary crossing and pleasure getting" (Grace & Tobin, 1998, p. 43), produced a kind of carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1984) atmosphere. Even those in the seminar who, like many teachers, find theory wanting at best and useless at worst, found *KIbK* the bridge they yearned for.

KIbK began as a humorous trifle and developed as a tool, in a Vygotskian sense (Vygotsky,1978), for understanding a variety of dense theories in the course, some of them developed by dead Russian and French men who read literature and pondered society prior to the digital age. We held theories up to *KIbK* to see if they fit and if we could make sense of them; in this way, *KIbK* was an external artifact that we could use to do work for us. Over time, just the mention of *KIbK* came to signify a whole range of meaning-making symbols, intertextual moments, and theoretical epiphanies. *KIbK*, which started as an external tool, gradually became an inner sign that permeated our conversations and thinking, changing us in a variety of ways. Using the video as a kind of text and looking at online video sites as evidence of literacy practices provided us with an accessible reference point.

Having a shared, interactive multimedia touchstone helped us learn how to talk about theory and appreciate the extensions of sociocultural and literacy theories into the world outside of our seminar room. While some of us considered our theoretical work to be "flings" (Whittaker, 2008, p. 28), others became fully smitten, perhaps forever, such as one who wrote in an email, "You know my heart belongs to Bakhtin. I've read Bakhtin like 500 times. It's right up there with *Twilight*." This sentiment highlights the value of linking theoretical work with a YouTube video for inviting some of the more hesitant students to take the theories more seriously.

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Further, *KIbK* represented our course's overarching goal of learning to see and appreciate the value of literacy practices that occurred in places where they were previously invisible to us (including in paper-based literacy practices). Using theory in this way, we found that we could see our readings as useful and applicable even beyond traditional purviews of educational studies and typical sites of educational research.

KIbK became shorthand for the deep theorizing we had done, but also for a good social time together; it was a not-so-secret handshake and an inside joke that resulted in a seminar t-shirt with cartoon kittens. This symbol of our work has been perpetuated through the technologies of email and texting a year beyond the seminar and after some students have graduated. In essence, we developed practices together via *KIbK* that constituted us as a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

While we have made the point that some students hated theory, one claimed, "I am not a fan of theory, (but) using *KIbK* at least made Bakhtin bearable. At least it made me read again and remember some of his ideas."

For another, it was lasting love:

When you tell people you're watching this in seminar, they do look at you funny. It doesn't really seem academic. But if YouTube is how we internalize Bakhtin and Bourdieu, then so be it. If it's how we come to truly understand, it's a worthwhile adventure.

Diane had introduced us to Bakhtin and Bourdieu; she thought we'd get along. And, honestly, Mikhail (Bakhtin) was a nice guy. We had some things in common. We might have hit it off. That's how it's been with teacher education; you have a lasting relationship with Dewey but not all those French and Russians with difficult to pronounce names.

For teachers to make new gains in the field of education, they must truly grasp theory. They need to sit down for coffee with Bourdieu every once in a while. YouTube is not the only answer, but who can resist KIbK? When I think of ventriloquation, I will always think DOUBLEHEAD. And, I actually do think about ventriloquation quite a bit.

As participants in the study of educational and literacy theory, we needed something to help us make sense of and internalize the big ideas. Maddie's performance in *KIbK* helped us do that. We would argue that our experience is parallel to that of teachers trying to integrate the literacy and everyday knowledge of their students into their work with school-based texts. Teachers, like all of us, need to understand what is going on with the cultural work we see around us, but it does not have to be a burdensome experience to uncover connections between theory and practice. Being "theoretical about literacy" can be a playful process of application and creation. Our process of using theory to interpret *KIbK* was so productive, in part, because we tried to be open to where theory would take us, without preconceptions of its limitations, but with recognition of those limitations when they appeared and pointed us in a new direction.

Were we changed? Did we *become* theorists or researchers or teachers or users/producers of new media? The full answer to that is yet to be known. Diane has made a digital movie. Two of us presented our research at NCTE in 2009; two presented on digital storytelling at the Urban Ethnography Conference in 2010; three have engaged in literacy thesis research; many are becoming teachers; two first-generation college students imagine that they will become professors one day; and we have, in fact, written this theoretical paper for publication, positioning all of us as authors and theorists.

Authors' Note

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