

Critical Questioning in and beyond the Margins: Teacher Preparation Students' Multimodal Inquiries into Literacy Assessment

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This article explores the potential of using multimodal texts—particularly comics—as a way of engaging teacher education students in critical inquiry around literacy and ELA assessments. We describe a qualitative study into the use of a multimodal comics-form article within an ELA/literacy assessment course in an MEd program. Our findings suggest that teacher preparation students were able to effectively remix and play with both comics tropes and more traditional “academic” writerly discourses. The use of multimodal texts in teacher preparation helped students engage in dialogic and critical forms of inquiry around issues related to classroom practices and policies. We end by suggesting ways that English teacher educators can include similar texts and activities in their courses and teacher preparation programs.

It is a Monday evening and classrooms throughout our school of education are filled with group discussions, lectures, notetaking, and presentations. In one room, 25 graduate students and their instructor sit silently around a conference table, part of a master’s-level course on reading and writing assessment. The students are not reading a traditional academic article or taking a midterm; they are reading and responding to a piece of comics scholarship—that is, scholarship composed in the medium of comics. They do so with their own speech and thought balloons, visual icons, words, and tentative illustrations. After students spend half an hour on their multimodal responses, Katrina, the course instructor, asks every student to choose one page of text, complete with visual and textual embellishments, to share with their classmates. The class does a museum walk of these artifacts, slowly and silently circling the table, and taking in each other’s perspectives and reactions to the piece. Forty-five minutes into the two-hour seminar, the conversation begins in earnest.

While this scenario was not a typical graduate-level literacy education activity, it was also not centered around a conventional comic. Students, most of them preservice teachers, were responding to Stephanie Jones and James F. Woglom's (2014) article from *Phi Delta Kappan*. In their piece, titled "Dangerous Conversations: Persistent Tensions in Teacher Education," Jones and Woglom survey the history of teacher education in order to situate an unsettling experience Jones and her graduate students faced during their fieldwork at a local elementary school. According to the graphic narrative, Jones and her students intended to use an after-school space as a site to expand on children's educational opportunities and experiences, drawing from the children's lives and their local contexts. The school's administration, under increasing pressure to raise test scores on standardized assessments, felt that the after-school space should function as a site for test preparation. Unable to reach common ground, Jones and her students were ultimately asked to leave the school. In Jones and Woglom's piece, *dangerous* is a word used to signify both the professional and personal risks that come with teaching from a critical perspective, such as one that asks teacher learners¹ to think about issues of equity and sociopolitical history more explicitly. Katrina drew on this perspective as she tried to think of ways to make her course more "dangerous," asking her students (and herself) not only to learn methods of literacy assessment but also to question assumptions and histories undergirding current assessment practices in K-12 schools.

Katrina chose to include Jones and Woglom's article in her course after David—a scholar of comics and identity in literacy education—shared it with her, knowing her commitment to bringing pressing political and social issues related to assessment into her teaching. David and Katrina were colleagues in a PhD program and had developed over several years a strong interest in supporting each other's commitments to equity-focused education in both their research and teaching. Yet they each brought a number of different strengths, perspectives, and experiences as well. In many ways, the "dangerous" topics covered in Jones and Woglom's article were more comfortable for Katrina than the style of the article itself. While accustomed to discussing the political ramifications of assessment practices, such as high-stakes testing and Race to the Top, Katrina did not regularly use multimodal texts in her teaching practice, particularly at the graduate level. In part, this was due to her own uncertainty about how to read—and therefore teach—such texts. In addition, as an emerging scholar, Katrina had concerns about her teaching being seen as less academic or too "personal" to students and colleagues alike. David, on the other hand, focused on multimodal literacy engagement in his

research, particularly on the cross-discursive possibilities that comics offer meaning-making. As the comics journalist Joe Sacco (2012) writes, “For good or for ill, the comics medium is *adamant*” (p. xiv, emphasis added) for its ability to make starkly visible topics that, in other media, are often dulled by language (e.g., Chute, 2010). Sacco argues that the “blessing of an inherently interpretive medium like comics” is that it does not allow him to “make a virtue of dispassion” (p. xiv), but forces him to contend with the motivations and partialities driving his representational choices. It is precisely this subjective, in-your-face quality that drew David’s scholarly attention to the medium and to examining how readers and authors blend modes to confront topics that are obscured by traditional discourses (Low, 2015). By focusing on the adamancy of this medium, we also wanted to draw out the role that emotional responses can have on teachers’ developing ideas of practice that are often disregarded or marginalized in traditional approaches.

Katrina’s and David’s visceral responses to Jones and Woglom’s (2014) article lends some credence to the medium’s adamancy. For both of us, the sense of urgency linked closely to the authors’ use of “dangerous” as a framework from which to consider the historical, personal, and political aspects of teaching. We wanted to honor the difficult stories that the article shared and work with preservice teachers to help them see Jones and Woglom’s choices and questions as central to their own practice. Inspired to initiate “dangerous” conversations, and curious to see how her students would themselves respond to such a visually provocative text, Katrina decided not only to bring the piece into class but also to create a long-form activity around it. She intended to highlight the content of Jones and Woglom’s article while emphasizing its multimodal design and asking students to engage in such “adamant” composing themselves. Katrina asked David to help her design the activity and to collaborate in analyzing students’ responses to a multimodal, comics-based text.

In previous sessions, although many students in the class were eager to discuss the positive and negative aspects of various literacy assessments, and even some larger implications of testing and evaluation, there was a persistent idealism-vs.-realism polarity that underpinned these discussions. In some ways, this tension was hardly surprising. Negotiating contradictions among “best” or “high-leverage practices” and issues of professional identity is complicated, often causing anxiety in teacher education students (Jacobs, 2014). Students brought a range of teaching experiences to this master’s-level class: some had up to five years in the classroom; others had just completed student teaching; and several had never worked in a formal teaching environment but were considering it as a career. Literacy assessment, in particular,

is an area of practice that confounds many teacher learners across their careers, as they hear critiques of high-stakes assessments while observing firsthand the serious ramifications for students, schools, and communities that struggle to “achieve” according to standardized metrics. The perspectives are indeed difficult to reconcile.

In this article, we explore how a piece of comics-based scholarship offered new ways of engaging “dangerous” educational topics while still remaining an academic experience appropriate for master’s-level work. Starting with the following research questions,

- › How might “dangerous conversations,” composed multimodally, invite teacher learners into iterative processes of learning and unlearning, and of uncertainty and reflection, in their inquiries into literacy assessment and professional identity?
- › How might comics tropes, when meaningfully brought into teacher preparation coursework, contribute to teacher learners’ critical consciousness?

we ultimately argue that employing graphic narrative (i.e., comics) to engage teacher learners in collaborative inquiry affords a means for entering contested domains from an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) and for reimagining professional identities. By analyzing students’ reactions to Jones and Woglom’s graphic narrative, as well as students’ multimodal compositions, we identify possibilities for inviting teacher learners to rethink the purposes and tensions of assessment in ELA classrooms. In the process of participating, students posed a number of vital questions central to assessment, exploring some of their taken-for-granted assumptions about what counts as the “real world” of schools, which often stood in direct opposition to the space of teacher education (Jacobs, 2014; Petrone, 2013).

Review of Literature

As we designed the activity and engaged in both the development and analysis of the research, we wanted to think closely about what issues or topics within the field of literacy research and ELA teaching were at the forefront of what we were trying to better understand. First, we offer an overview of how practice and research into issues of assessment have been taken up in literacy teacher preparation. Here we focus both on the current sociopolitical climate and on research into how teacher educators can prepare students to use assessment tools in the classroom with an equity mindset. We then more

closely explore the nature and use of graphica within the field of literacy teacher education.

Literacy Teacher Preparation around Issues of Assessment

Over the past several decades, public schools in the United States have faced, and continue to face, increasing pressures to measure their success—and the achievements of the students they serve—on standardized, large-scale evaluations. In a mounting response to these pressures, recent research has focused on ways that the country’s assessment-heavy educational infrastructure narrows English language arts curricula and fails to provide holistic and contextualized assessments of ELA students (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Horn, 2005). Offering further evidence of the failings of an assessment culture, many scholars, educators, parents, students, and community activists have argued that high-stakes tests do not take students’ race, class, and home language sufficiently into account, leading to a lack of educational equity for nonmainstream students (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2010; Lee, 2007).

In regard to ELA teacher education, specifically, further research is needed to investigate the evolving culture of standardized assessment itself, as well as its impact on what counts as knowledge, progress, and school success for students and teachers. To provide equitable educational opportunities for students, assessment must be viewed as deeply entwined with other issues of power and social reproduction that affect the daily lives of students and teachers. One of the effects of the overemphasis on narrow and culturally biased forms of assessment is the theoretical construction of “at-risk” students and communities. The over-referencing of risk frequently places the area of deficit within students and communities, rather than within the systems that create these “risky” spaces in the first place (e.g., Gadsden, Davis, & Artiles, 2009; Valencia, 2010; Vasudevan & Campano, 2009). We include four panels from Jones and Woglom’s graphic narrative (2014, p. 55) to demonstrate how the authors situate high-stakes assessment and issues of risk within their pedagogic context. (See Figure 1 below.)

While some researchers consider ways to reframe assessment practices more equitably (e.g., Au & Tempel, 2012; Goodwin, 1997), one aspect of the education system that has been underresearched is teacher preparation’s considerable impact on how educators approach assessment vis-à-vis equity in the classroom. As numerous scholars have highlighted, conflicting visions and ideologies of teaching—even among those who believe they are teaching for social justice—complicate the question of what is and can be learned within teacher education programs (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 2004;



Figure 1.

Ladson-Billings, 2001; Zeichner, Payne, & Brayko, 2015). During their field placements, students in teacher education programs often feel the pressure for their assigned students to succeed on standardized assessments. At the same time, many of these teacher learners are enrolled in programs that offer critiques of narrow measures of literacy learning (e.g., Simon & Campano, 2015). These tensions—or even disconnects—may lead teacher learners to feel that what they are learning in their teacher preparation coursework is “impractical” (often a code word for idealistic or ideological). This perspective can lead teacher learners to feel frustrated and uncertain about how to develop their own perspectives and professional practices around assessment in their classrooms (Jacobs, 2014).

Within courses centered on literacy assessment, research demonstrates that teacher learners must have time and space to engage in inquiries related to these issues, developing what Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) refer to as “knowledge-of-practice,” even—and perhaps especially—while they are still in preparation programs. “Knowledge-of-practice” frames practitioner knowledge as a symbiotic and iterative relationship between theory and practice, wherein through a deep, systematic inquiry into their practice, teachers develop and define theories of teaching and learning that differ from those developed by researchers outside of classrooms. Our belief is that embedding this view of teachers and research within teacher preparation programs can substantively change how ELA educators broadly view themselves as professionals, seeing themselves as having an active and critically conscious role in determining curriculum and assessment practices.

Literacy Teacher Education and Graphica

A number of scholars have written in recent years on the teaching and learning affordances of multimodal texts, specifically comics and graphic novels, in K–12 settings (e.g., Bitz, 2009; Connors, 2010; Frey & Fisher, 2004; Low, 2012; Rice, 2012; Schwarz, 2006). Less scholarly attention, however, has been given to the educative potential of graphica in postsecondary education and in teacher preparation, specifically. When comics and graphic narratives *have* been examined in reference to higher education, the texts are typically positioned as “how-to” mechanisms for delivering traditional content and disciplinary knowledge—from business and legal concepts (e.g., Short, Randolph-Seng, & McKenny, 2013) to math, science, and history (e.g., Brozo, 2015; Cheesman, 2006; Cromer & Clark, 2007; Hosler & Boomer, 2011)—rather than as a means for university students to engage in alternative forms of response, analysis, reflection, and critique. Within teacher education, the majority of scholarship pertaining to graphica serves to question whether and how preservice teachers think about using comics and/or graphic novels in their future classrooms, and/or to encourage them to do so (e.g., Carter, 2013; Clark, 2013; Lapp, Wolsey, Fisher, & Frey, 2011). Several studies provide overviews of the teaching and learning possibilities of comics with teacher education students (e.g., Cap & Black, 2012; Herbst, Chazan, Chen, Chieu, & Weiss, 2011; Marrall, 2013), but we have seen few that examine the use of graphic narrative to invite teacher learners—at any stage of their professional development—to explore sensitive or disputed topics pertinent to their school contexts. The underrepresentation of graphica in teacher education scholarship is unfortunate, for the “considerable impact” of comics resides largely in the medium’s “tolerance for visual fragmentation and radical text/image interplay” (Hatfield, 2005, p. 97), that is, its tolerance for competing meanings.

The comics theorist Kai Mikkonen (2012) describes the visual and verbal elements that come together on a comics page—that is, written language, speech balloons, illustrated characters, frames and gutters, etc.—as symbols that “interpenetrate each other and thus allow a multiplication of perspectives” (p. 71). As teacher educators who stress the value of engaging multiple perspectives toward literacy, learning, and assessment, multiperspectivity as a salient aspect of the comics medium aligns strongly with our broader conceptual frameworks and practices. Literary scholar Hillary Chute (2010) further explains: “Comics conveys several productive tensions in its basic structure. The words and images entwine, but never synthesize [Thus,] through its hybrid and spatial form, comics lends itself to express-

ing stories . . . that present and underscore hybrid subjectivities” (p. 5). The hybrid teaching subjectivities of Jones and her graduate research assistants, as rendered visually by Woglom, present tensions that are in some ways not dissimilar from the medium they have selected to represent them. Jones and her students’ pain and frustration—so viscerally felt for us—“push on the conceptions of the unrepresentable” (Chute, 2010, pp. 2–3) that typify both the comics medium and teaching in the twenty-first century. As teacher educators interested in addressing dialectical tensions ourselves, we wondered how Jones and Woglom’s (2014) graphic narrative and its “multiplication of perspectives” might offer the potential to destabilize common tropes, ideologies, and narratives related to the teaching profession.

Conceptual Frameworks

While in the preceding paragraphs we outlined some of the specific lines of inquiry related to our project, in this section we describe our shared overall commitments and perspectives as researchers and teacher educators. We begin by addressing more clearly the role of inquiry in our work: how we define it, and how we see ourselves as practitioners and teachers of K–12 practitioners engaged in the work of critical inquiry. We then flesh out our understanding of critical consciousness, detailing how it relates to sociocultural perspectives on literacy and the work of teacher educators more broadly.

Inquiry in Literacy Teacher Preparation

Our commitment to disrupting the presumed divide between practice and theory stems from our mutual grounding within paradigms of practitioner inquiry. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) argue that practitioner research provides “a valuable mode of critique of the inequities in schools and society and of knowledge hierarchies, which have implications within as well as beyond the local context” (p. ix). Situating professionalization within openly ideological threads of practitioner research recalls our own histories as teachers and organizers. In addition, practitioner research focuses on the day-to-day actions and changes of communities, constructing research as embedded in the shifts of the local community rather than as a distal description of it. In these ways, we believe that teachers may be positioned as activists with an ability to shift discussions of policy and practice. Simon, Campano, Broderick, and Pantoja (2012) highlight the dialogic nature of practitioner research and literacy theories, noting how educators and activists develop theories of literacy in ways that are responsive to their local contexts that in turn shift practices within ELA classrooms.

Professional Learning as Engaging Critical Consciousness

Paulo Freire (1970/2000) refers to the development of critical consciousness as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 35). Several years later, in *Education for Critical Consciousness*, Freire (1974) writes that a curriculum “disconnected from life, centered on words emptied of the reality that they are meant to represent, [and] lacking in concrete activity, could never develop a critical consciousness” (p. 35). A central goal of developing critical consciousness, for both teachers and students, is to decenter that which is taken for granted and reexamine it within a contextualized, power-aware framework—what Sernak (2008) characterizes as the “need to question the answers, not answer the questions” (p. 120). These goals are particularly salient to teacher preparation programs, where the iterative development of teacher learners’ professional identities and critical stances is central.

Throughout our work as educators and researchers, we have mobilized a range of perspectives toward literacy and practitioner research within our own teacher preparation classes. One shared goal of our pedagogies is to encourage our students to develop an understanding of teaching as a critical act, one that involves both learning and unlearning, as well as an appreciation for the possibilities of uncertainty and reflection, particularly within the narrowing views of what counts as ELA learning, and literacy more broadly (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Hesford, 1999). In the concluding chapter to their edited volume on literacy teacher education, Kosnik and Rowsell (2015) write:

There is an urgency to address literacy education at both the school level and in teacher education because so many children and youth are either disengaged from the literacy programs in their classes or feel alienated from current schooling. . . . Most literacy educators are living in a state of accountability narrowed to raising test scores. (pp. 192–193)

The authors go on to describe the need for a rich pedagogy of literacy teacher education, one centered on taking an inquiry stance toward our practices as university-based teacher educators, while also making clear and explicit links to students’ field experiences (p. 198). Zeichner (2012) echoes these sentiments as he argues for a vision of “practice-based teacher education” that is “complemented by participation in teacher inquiry communities . . . from the very beginning of teachers’ preparation programs so that novice teachers can begin to acquire the habits and skills to learn in and from their practice in the company of colleagues” (p. 379).

To better conceptualize the work of critical inquiry within community, we also draw on Gee's work related to the nature of Discourse. Gee's (1990/2015) definition of Discourse as "composed of distinctive ways of speaking/listening and often, too, writing/reading *coupled* with distinctive ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, believing . . . so as to enact specific socially recognisable identities engaged in specific socially recognisable activities" (p. 171) helps us to better understand both the literacy practices and the habits of mind and body that guide inquiry into both schools and self. Together, these perspectives speak to the importance of integrating practice, professional identity, and critical engagement with inquiry across literacy teacher education.

Context and Methodology

The activity we describe in this study occurred in a master's-level course on literacy assessment at a graduate school of education in a large city in the northeast United States. The course was (and is) offered through a literacy MEd program that also provides state certification for K–12 reading specialists, an additional certification in a state that requires teachers to gain initial certification either in elementary education or in secondary ELA education if they plan to work in public schools. While framed broadly as a literacy master's program, the majority of students go on to work as ELA teachers in K–12 schools, although some do become reading specialists, curriculum coordinators, or educators in out-of-school environments. The course on literacy assessment is one of the program's core offerings, required for all students in the program. As with the overall program, the course takes a critical stance toward literacy assessment, asking teacher learners to think through issues of power and agency insofar as these issues relate to forms of evaluation. Katrina, as course instructor, was simultaneously aware of the need to prepare students for the daily realities of high-stakes assessment in post-NCLB schools and the impact that accountability culture would have on students' teaching. Thus, Katrina's goal, and a central tension of the course, was to balance a critical stance with a focus on the specific practices and approaches developed through students' teaching experiences and fieldwork contexts in ways that furthered our collaborative inquiry into ELA classroom assessment. All students participate in 120 hours of fieldwork each semester, spending one term each in an elementary and secondary setting, as well as some school-based observations and experiences tied to other courses.

Prior to the semester in which we collected data, Katrina, a former elementary school teacher whose research focuses on literacy teacher

preparation in urban contexts, had been a TA for the course multiple times and had served as instructor of record the year prior. David, a former high school teacher whose research focuses on multimodality and critical literacy, was not actively involved in the course during the data-collection semester but had twice served as its TA in previous years. Katrina designed course assignments with the intention of deepening the class's inquiries into numerous issues pertinent to contemporary literacy assessment. For example, one of the central assignments of the course was for small groups to identify an assessment used in their school sites, to research the assessment, and to present their findings to the class, highlighting both the potential of these assessments for generating usable pedagogic knowledge and the assessments' limitations. Thus, while the multimodal activity foregrounded in this article represents a single two-hour class session, the themes and issues that emerged are emblematic of larger questions and approaches that anchored the course.

There were 26 master's students enrolled in the course, 25 of whom were present during the class session in which the focal activity took place, and 24 of whom consented to be included in the study. To avoid coercion, given that Katrina was the course instructor, students were handed consent forms and a description of the research project. Katrina left the classroom and all students put their consent forms in a sealed envelope, indicating whether they had elected to participate or not. Only after final grades were submitted did we open the envelope to determine who had opted into or out of the study.

On the day of the activity, occurring midway into the course, students arrived and were provided copies of Jones and Woglom's (2014) article. As described in our article's opening vignette, students were asked to silently read the graphic narrative while adding their own thoughts and questions to the margins. Katrina, after acknowledging her uneasiness about her limited drawing capabilities, participated along with the class in the silent 30-minute activity. The purpose of invoking her anxiety was to invite students to view the activity as part of the ongoing development of their creative and critical practice, rather than as a performance of artistic skill (e.g., Barry, 2014). Mastery was subordinate to inquiry, and product to process.

Each student selected one embellished page to share with her or his classmates. We then engaged in a museum walk of the classroom, examining the various illustrations and questions scrawled across the collected pages. Finally, the class participated in a seminar discussion of Jones and Woglom's (2014) article, drawing on our readings of the text as well as what we had noticed in each other's annotations. All participants were encouraged to link the article to larger class themes. Following the group discussion,

each student was given five minutes to illustrate her or his “real world of literacy assessment” on the back of the article. Again, the short amount of time students were allotted stressed the content of drawings over their craft.

Data Sources and Analysis

Data sources include students’ multimodal annotations of Jones and Woglom’s (2014) article (on copies of the article itself); the compositions students created in response to a prompt asking them to depict their “real worlds of literacy assessment”; fieldnotes, in the form of detailed teaching journals and practitioner memos,² from the class discussion (as well as other classes where the activity was referenced); follow-up conversations and emails with students in the class; and additional class artifacts, including assignments, online discussions, and personal communications. Because IRB approval had not been granted until partway into the semester, it was not possible to audio or video record whole-class sessions.

Data were coded using a constant comparative method to identify themes and questions that students addressed in their multimodal responses and class conversations (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During all phases of data analysis, we met to discuss emergent codes and themes after reviewing data sources independently. We then individually analyzed data, coming together to validate our shared understandings, as well as corroborating the analytical approaches we had decided to take. In the first phase, while tracing participants’ D/discursive moves (Gee, 1990), we focused on more traditional textual analysis to surface the questions and themes that emerged from students’ responses to Jones and Woglom’s text. Katrina took the lead in this area, focusing particularly on how students’ engaged different voices and/or social positions—drawing on Bakhtin’s (1981) theory of heteroglossia—as students described their positions as teachers and students and explored the perspectives within the article itself. In the second phase, we attended more closely to the multimodal aspects of students’ responses, where David took the lead. We also compared our findings from this activity to the larger corpus of class work (online discussions and assignments) to explore potential differences among and/or similarities to monomodal/print-text work. Specifically, referencing the emic themes from the Jones and Woglom engagement, we looked for evidence of counter-patterns and convergences in other class discussions and assignments (Lather, 1986). Finally, the themes and codes from both rounds of analysis were cross-categorized to better understand the affordances of using graphic narrative to stimulate “dangerous” conversations in a teacher preparation setting. We also considered how students’

multimodal compositions linked to other topics from the assessment course, using Katrina’s fieldnotes and the course syllabus. We created a table of our findings as a way to help make sense of and organize our analysis as a whole, and we share examples of our coding matrix in Table 1.

Because our study focuses on the affordances of graphic narrative in teacher preparation coursework, we were obliged to attend to the design elements of students’ responses, analyzing how the visual and verbal aspects of their compositions mirrored the themes surfaced in our coding of whole-group classroom discussions and individual communications with students. Though quickly executed, we felt that there was a great deal of nonverbal meaning in the students’ drawings and needed to employ techniques of visual analysis to help us understand these meanings. Siegel and Panofsky

Table 1. Codes and Examples across Data Sources

Code	Brief Description	Examples from Data Sources
Engaging/ Remixing Multiple Discursive Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using multimodal forms of response and remixing various forms/discursive practices Engaging in traditional “academic” discursive moves and traditional “comics” tropes in their responses Thinking intertextually and across contexts about developing ideas of practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students’ use of asterisks and highlighting Referencing Vasquez’s and hooks’s works References to field experiences in responses Frequent use of speech bubbles, thought bubbles, and other common forms from comics to display thoughts and questions Adding illustrations (Pie in the Sky, Sad Face, Smiling Emoji drawing)
Critical Inquiry into Literacy Assessment Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students’ verbal and written questioning and re-questioning of common literacy assessment practices Evidence of how teacher learners began to reimagine the histories of assessment practices and their role in the classroom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Email about sharing this article with high school students to think together about these issues after the activity itself Drawing and labeling themselves as the teacher within the “real world of assessment” illustrations Questioning of authors’ perspectives in article annotations
Polyvocalizing/ Ventriloquizing of Multiple Perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstration of taking up multiple viewpoints/perspectives within activity Voicing groups/audiences often silent in the article itself 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Writing elementary students’ thoughts and feelings into illustrations Writing “Don’t Give Up!” in margins to authors Adding questions that are in tension with written text from characters’ mouths in article
Comic Comics and Playful Critique of As- sessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher learner’s use of humorous style or tone to convey complex critical issues Satire and sarcasm as modes to demonstrate critical consciousness of equity issues within school contexts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Smiley face drawing next to “critical literacies” in article “Binary=Bad” as a send-up to authors’ depiction of school purposes “I am self-actualizing” drawn coming from character’s mouth

(2009) write that “there is no ready-made tool-kit for analyzing multimodality in literacy studies, but researchers have turned to a range of theories in search of analytic guidance” that can be “productively blended” (p. 101). Lacking a single codified system for analyzing students’ multimodal compositions, we opted for a mash-up approach to analysis, bringing together several techniques, including visual grammars (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Serafini, 2014), as well as picture-book and comics analysis (e.g., Anderson, 1995; Martens, Martens, Doyle, Loomis, & Aghalarov, 2012; Mikkonen, 2012), which is informed by both art and literary theories and speaks specifically of the semiotic relationship of text and image in two-dimensional compositions. Such techniques surfaced issues of visual-spatial design, including layout, point-of-view and perspective, the variety and number of lines and shapes used, facial features and body language, typography, and symbolic representations (i.e., visual symbols, visual metaphors, and recurring visual tropes).

In our visual analysis, we attended not only to the inquiries and perspectives that emerged during the discussion of the focal classroom activity but also to the ways in which teacher learners chose to represent their developing questions, concerns, and critical perspectives. It is worth mentioning that, as in all forms of communication, certain elements in the students’ compositions may have been more or less deliberate than others. It is significant that students did not have much time to design, execute, or revise their compositions. Because of the time constraint, the compositions are not overproduced and remain relatively organic (we hesitate to say “honest”) examples of how teacher learners used a visual medium to represent their thinking in that moment. Multimodal analysis provided us a tool for uncovering potentially buried layers of meaning. We go into further detail describing our multimodal analysis in the next section, demonstrating actual analysis alongside our actual findings.

Findings

As we discussed briefly above, we created a matrix of our codes and themes as a final stage of analysis that helped us see how various codes related to one another, creating a more holistic understanding of students’ engagement with the text. Table 1 also serves as a roadmap for the themes we found to be central and/or particularly provocative, in relation to using a comics-based text as a way to inquire critically into the nature of assessment practices. Here we unpack these findings further, offering examples of how themes emerged across the activity and the class.

Engaging/Remixing Multiple Discursive Practices

While our analysis focused on students' written, visual, and verbal communication, we saw these forms of production as directly linked to their social positions as both graduate students *and* as teacher learners and literacy specialists (Gee, 1990/2015). Although this interplay is most likely always at work within teacher education, we feel that the interplay specifically relates to the sorts of multimodal moves our students were making. By bringing multimodal texts into the course through a meaningful activity, Katrina hoped to use the possibilities of these forms of communication to deepen students' critical questioning of some of the status quo assumptions around literacy assessment practice they had previously stated in the course.

While not required, many students—more than 85 percent—drew pictures or used comics elements such as word balloons and gutters (dividers between panels) to respond to Jones and Woglom's (2014) article. Often, students used these elements to relay thoughts and questions from characters whose perspectives were not explicitly included in the original article, such as the elementary school students and their teachers.

The impulse to appropriate elements from the medium of comics was also apparent in the ways that students used illustrations to augment and support their written additions to the article. One example is the inclusion of a “pie in the sky” to playfully respond to Stephanie Jones's pedagogical moves.

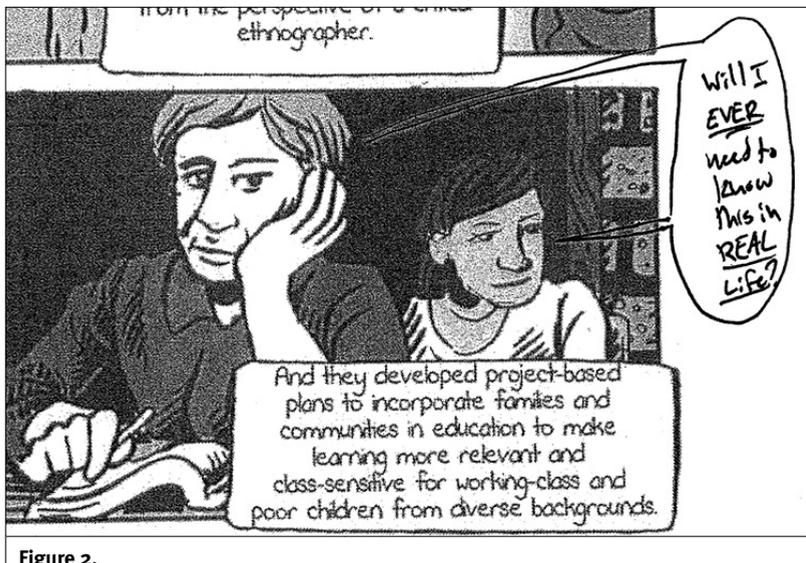


Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.

These examples demonstrate how teacher learners made use of the wide range of verbal-visual tools that were in the text to annotate it. What is interesting is both the participants' facility with using these multimodal tools and the ways that they specifically used these tools to highlight the polyvocal and, at times, conflicting perspectives found within Jones and Woglom's (2014) text itself. Students literally filled in the margins by ventriloquizing the voices, thoughts, questions, and concerns of the students, teachers, and researchers depicted, but often left silent, in Jones and Woglom's article (see Figures 2 and 3). In situating these responses within the larger corpus of work across the class, this active taking up of multiple perspectives was unique. Particularly in comparison to students' responses to other assigned

readings, the multimodal nature of Jones and Woglom's article seemed to incite students to not only ask questions of the text but also to appreciate the multitude of voices and perspectives within the text itself. In other

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text responses—during class discussions, in students' annotations of other articles, and when students responded to online prompts about other readings—students almost always positioned the narrative as an authoritative, monolithic text, one that they either wholly agreed with or critiqued. Here, the visual presence of other stakeholders seemed to invite the

students more explicitly to both address their perspectives and to recognize the inherent subjectivity of the author/text, thus deepening their critical consciousness around issues of assessment practices through an active inquiry stance toward the text itself.

At the same time that students employed comics tropes, they continued to use and draw on discursive moves more typically thought of as “academic” or “scholarly”—in other words, literacy practices that were more typical of “reading in graduate school.” In many examples, students underlined, highlighted, and added asterisks to passages that stood out to them, as well as making intertextual connections to other course readings (e.g., “[Vivian] Vasquez would be proud”) and linking Jones and Woglom's article to their own teaching experiences. In these transactions, students asked questions of the text, made connections between various (con)texts, and summarized what they felt Jones and Woglom were saying in the original article.

During the whole-class conversation and in follow-up discussions, several students expressed surprise that traditional “school practices” could also work with multimodal texts. Two students engaged in an extended back-and-forth about defining “academic writing,” citing the opportunities and expectations for students in their field sites. Other members of the class discussed not only the nature of assessment politics in schools but also issues related to assessing multimodal texts (one student asked, “So, how would we grade this thing we just did?”). In this discussion and in their textual examples, teacher learners were making the most of the opportunities afforded by graphic narrative, highlighting the particular affordances of including a wider range of texts in teacher education, and also the challenges inherent in assessing them. Throughout the discussion, students examined and questioned their emerging “knowledge-of-practice” around texts, assessment, and literacy education more broadly, responding not only to the tropes and design choices they made, but also their purposes for engaging in these practices.

The recombination of traditional academic discourses with those more commonly found in comics was evident across our data, as teacher learners used various discursive modes in their engagement with Jones and Woglom’s text. Through active creation, response, and remixing—particularly through the use of humor across these discursive territories, which we expand on in a future Findings section—students engaged a greater variety of perspectives and positions toward the text than they had previous texts in the course, as well as posing difficult questions of assessment in schools. Our data demonstrate the possibilities of using multimodal texts and encouraging diverse discursive approaches to reading and writing in ELA teacher preparation. As these data show in the following sections, the comics medium provided a powerful tool for engaging teacher learners in “dangerous conversations” of classroom practice.

Critical Inquiry into Literacy Assessment Practices through Graphica

While Katrina designed her course as a critical inquiry into literacy assessment, there were certain dialectical tensions that ran throughout it. On the one hand, Katrina endeavored to construct a classroom environment in which students could collaboratively engage in critique, including critique of the course itself. On the other hand, students held a variety of expectations about the traditional power dynamics of a graduate-level course. There were times when students actively addressed this tension. For example, in an early online posting, one student wrote, “I’m excited to see and try inquiry. But I don’t know. I mean, what if I am not inquiring the right way? Will that impact my grade? How do you inquire when giving a benchmark exam?” In another class session, several students described unease around whether or not the course would prepare them well enough to take the state-mandated exam required for certification. During this class session, students linked their concerns to larger questions of how to help their K–12 students to be successful in high-stakes assessment climates. One student openly questioned, “I like learning about assessments and power, but will it really help me in the classroom?”

In these conversations, teacher learners often positioned the political climate of education—particularly around assessment practices—as fixed and outside their control. Despite a willingness to talk about their issues with assessment in class, students described themselves (and teachers in general) as powerless to make real change in the realm of assessment. These perspectives were made clear in more traditional assignments for the course. For

example, one early assignment was to interview a literacy educator about their assessment practices and philosophies. While many interviewees discussed the need for holistic assessment practices and a contextualized understanding of the child being assessed, over 80 percent of students who received this kind of answer reflected doubt or concern in their reflection papers. As an example of the responses we coded in this way, one student wrote the following:

Right now the focus of the school is on test scores, so as a young teacher I feel like that's what I need to focus on too. Maybe when I'm better at that I'll have more time to really know the kids.

It was fascinating to hear [the interviewed teacher] talk about getting to know the child as part of assessing her, but frankly I don't see how I can do that and still get the student on grade level. Right now the focus of the school is on test scores, so as a young teacher I feel like that's what I need to focus on too. Maybe when I'm better at that I'll have more time to really know the kids.

In part, the defeatist tone of class conversations and early assignments inspired Katrina to bring Jones and Woglom's (2014) article into the course, in an effort to complicate some of these narratives and more actively present a critical inquiry stance around assessment practices. The article opens with a brief but direct depiction of the history of teacher education, and some of the underlying assumptions and institutional issues that affect today's teacher educators. In their description, Jones and Woglom make clear their stances toward tensions between "teacher training" and "teacher education" models of preservice preparation (p. 49). Later, as we reviewed students' annotations of the article, we noted that this section was one that many students responded to. For instance, in a panel depicting the development of normal schools on page 48 of the article, a student wrote: "Who decides what normal means?" Another student underlined text regarding the rapid expansion of teacher education schools and responded, "Perhaps too rapidly. Was the 'professional' aspect decreased?" Across the class, more than 80 percent of students responded to pages 48 or 49, some with questions, some with agreement, and some with critiques. One student wrote "Binary=Bad" in a humorous critique of Jones and Woglom's bifurcated depiction of the history of teacher preparation on page 49. Another student, responding to the same page, wrote, "Are these the inevitable paths that would result from Jones's two different models? What are we saying about how work is valued?"

As teacher learners participated in the multimodal response activity, they took a critical stance toward assessment and teacher education that had

been rare prior to that point in the class. Across our data are rich examples of students not simply attacking contemporary assessment practices, but asking thoughtful questions about the nature of power, authority, and language in the development of the current U.S. educational climate. This topic carried into the conversation following the museum walk activity as well. One of the first topics of discussion was the historical framing of teacher education. Several students noted that they had not previously considered the importance of history in thinking about twenty-first-century schools. When asked who had heard of normal schools before, only three hands went up. Richard,³ a former Teach for America member, expressed frustration that this was the first time he had learned about the history of teacher education—in the final semester of his MEd program—despite his previous experiences in teacher preparation and in the classroom. Another student emailed after class and said that she had not thought about these issues before, but that she was now “rethinking why [her fieldwork school] cared so much about tracking. I want to ask my mentor teacher about that—before I just accepted it as the way we do English class, you know?” Across their engagement with the graphic narrative, their participation in a whole-class discussion, and beyond, students engaged deeply in reflecting on their assumptions, the questions and positions taken up by Jones and Woglom, and the points of view their classmates extended.

Polyvocalizing/Ventriloquizing of Multiple Perspectives

In both their multimodal responses to Jones and Woglom’s text and their participation in class conversations about the text, teacher learners took an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) more readily than they had done in other learning spaces within the course, particularly around the historical and political contextualization of literacy assessment in the ELA classroom. The vast majority of students’ responses to the text, in the form of speech balloons and more traditional text annotations, came in the form of questions. On the same page of the article described above, the student who questioned definitions of “normal” also circled text about teachers meeting the demands of employers, and questioned, “What about teacher choice and knowledge of their students’ needs?” Another student, Lucy, responding to the same chunk of text regarding employer expectations, wrote a longer response along the entire right margin of the page. Circling the word *rigor*, Lucy wrote:

Coldness, harsh inflexibility, severity, the quality of being unyielding or severe, austerity (paraphrased from *Merriam Webster* online . . .) Why do

we see this word so frequently used to describe the intellectual strength (value) of a work or way of thinking? When did it get its positive connotation, because the dictionary definitions all still look pretty negative. Plus, I can't help but think of *rigor mortis*. Don't we want our intellectual work to be living? I've just had that on my mind.

During the full-class conversation, Lucy apologized for her "rant" but explained that she had been thinking about the word *rigor* a lot in her graduate coursework, and this was "the first time it seemed appropriate to share." Another student told her not to apologize, that it really "got her thinking." While Lucy's comment does not take the grammatical form of a question, it represents the kind of questioning stance and political engagement that Cochran-Smith and Lytle highlight in their work.

I can't help but think of rigor mortis. Don't we want our intellectual work to be living?

Lucy's comment also demonstrates ways in which several course participants explicitly marked this activity or experience as being "different." We agree with them; it *was* different. By looking across our corpus of data, we are able to compare the types of inquiries students engaged in during their participation in the course. While students posed many questions throughout the semester, we found that critical inquiry was less central to their traditional (i.e., monomodal/verbocentric) written work than in the data we share in this article. As evidenced by their formal essay assignments and weekly online discussion posts, and even in their assessment critique project, the questions students posed in their monomodal writing (and responses to traditional articles) often had more to do with understanding a particular aspect of assessment or a lack of methodological clarity. The richer and more critical questions and questioning *stances* seen in students' engagements with Jones and Woglom's article were less visible in other classwork.

Our data additionally highlight examples of teacher learners actively critiquing the stance of the article assigned to them. In the central activity described, students evidenced more of a dialogic approach to the article than with previous ones, bringing themselves (literally and figuratively) into conversation with the authors and with the larger questions of assessment addressed. During the whole-group conversation, Katrina noted that she saw more pushback than she had in other discussions of course material. One student said he felt it was because they were "invited to add to a conversation" in this activity. Another student agreed and said that unlike typical notetaking, she "wasn't just gathering information," but "adding her voice and questions to the text." Many students agreed, saying in discussions of traditional academic articles they were more concerned with demonstrat-

ing comprehension, even though they were explicitly asked to share their perspectives and questions. This willingness to be uncertain—another aspect we see as central to the work of critical inquiry in the classroom—extended into students’ illustrations of their own “real world of literacy assessments,” the final piece of the activity.

In the culminating activity, in which Katrina asked students to depict multimodally their understandings of assessment, many students featured questions in their illustrations, often from the perspective of an autobiographical teacher figure. The images students created were quite different from the more authoritative voices that they had exhibited at other times in the class, especially when analyzing assessment data on *their* K–12 students for class assignments. Examining the corpus of students’ “real world of literacy assessments,” we were struck by how many of the compositions employed paired dyads to make their points. Sixty-two percent of the students chose to juxtapose their “real worlds” against adjacent realities of literacy education, as if one vision may exist only in dialectical opposition to another. We share two examples of opposing worlds in the students’ visual-textual compositions—Figures 5 and 6—and a third student’s non-dialectical vision in Figure 7. Accompanying each visual, we include a sample of our multimodal analysis.

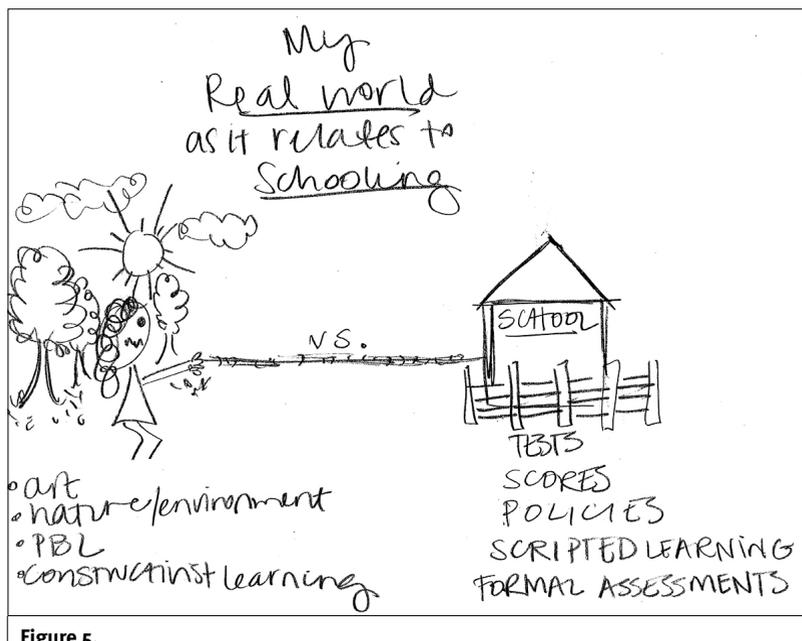


Figure 5.

In Figure 5, two conflicting visions of literacy education are embroiled in a tug-of-war, as the arts, constructivist learning, and nature are pitted against tests, policies, and scripted learning. The combatants in this tug-of-war are represented by a human stick figure on the left side of the drawing, her legs bent and straining, and a schoolhouse on the right, which shows no sign of yielding. Connecting them is a rope labeled “vs.” that serves as visual synecdoche for ideological tensions in an era of standardization. Through our framework of blended multimodal analysis, we are able to ascertain quite a bit from the lines, shapes, and other nonverbal markers that Lauren employs. Anderson (1995) writes that “lines have great expressive potential” (p. 307), and this is evident throughout Lauren’s composition. On the left side of the drawing, for example, her lines bend and are less likely to repeat or to appear in parallel to one another. The nature of lines is particularly notable in the facial features of the lone persona that Lauren includes in the drawing (i.e., herself), her mouth contorted in a jagged rictus of unease.

In the composition’s left half, there are few closed polygons, and more undefined, round, and curvy shapes. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) write that

curved forms generally are the elements we associate with an organic and natural order Angularity we associate with the inorganic Curved forms are therefore the dominant choice of people who think in terms of organic growth rather than mechanical construction. (p. 55)

Indeed, the only true polygon in the left half of the drawing is Lauren’s triangular dress, which acts as a counterweight to the schoolhouse’s roof. In addition to the roof, the right side of the composition is full of straight, parallel lines at right angles to the page borders, as well as rigid closed structures. The school building, a triangle resting atop a square, is fenced in by five rectangles and a succession of repeating lines, suggesting the monotony of a prison. “In nature,” write Kress and van Leeuwen, “squareness does not exist” (p. 55). In addition to artificiality, Martens et al. (2012) argue that rigid lines and shapes are often indicative of negative feelings and discord, which are on display in the right side of Lauren’s drawing. One final cue of salience in the composition is that all alphabetic writing on the left side appears in the lower case, while on the right side, the writing is upper case. Kostelnick (1990) writes that the visual representation of language “reinforces, and sometimes reshapes the rhetoric of the linguistic message” (p. 190). In this case, Lauren’s handwriting serves to amplify her message. In relation to other semiotic elements on the page, it is simple enough to interpret upper-case writing as the voice of authority and lower-case writing as the voice of the human resister.

In terms of the actual subject matter of Lauren's composition, it is not difficult to pick up on semiotic tensions between the two sides, and this would be true even if they were not engaged in a literal tug-of-war. The left half of the picture feels nearly pastoral (an assemblage of trees, clouds, the sun, and an actual human being), while the right side contains artificial structures that are surrounded by cold negative space. We are reminded of similar tensions between American Romanticism and Realism, two literary movements of the nineteenth century. While Romanticists tended toward matters of the natural world (including untamed emotion, inner reflection, and a near-adulation of childhood), Realists endeavored to depict a grimmer and grimmer reality, replete with the factories and rendering facilities of industrialization. In Lauren's composition, nature (and with it, art and inquiry) is similarly placed in dialectical tension with the dehumanizing scientism of schools that function as testing mills.

It is worth mentioning that the tension between Romanticism and Realism was employed by several other students as well, whose compositions we do not have space to highlight here. In one of these compositions, a map of a city is bisected by a stream, with the school and industrial buildings on one side and "woods" on the other. In another student's drawing, an "inquiry based" schoolhouse is surrounded by trees and flowers and labeled "my real world," while across the page, the portion labeled "reality" is graced with a factory and silos where teachers must "teach to the test" and are prohibited from designing their own curricula. It is both telling and troubling that a nineteenth-century literary tension is present in twenty-first-century discussions of teacher education.

As in Figure 5, Beth, the author of Figure 6, separates her composition into competing halves, using a left vs. right orientation to illustrate that her desired world exists in contrast to her "real" world. By taking a closer look at the semiotic components of Beth's composition, we are able to unpack some of its unstated meanings. As in our analysis of Figure 5, we again take note of the shapes that Beth uses to populate the two halves of her composition. In the case of Figure 6, it is the left side that feels draconian, rather than the right. The lines and shapes help to imbue it with that sense, working in tandem with the composition's layout and words. While Beth's writing on the left half of her composition tells us that we are observing an environment beholden to regulations, testing, and negation, it is the visual markers that accentuate the sense of repressive order. In terms of shapes, the left side is filled nearly entirely with quadrilaterals at right angles, creating a mood

It is both telling and troubling that a nineteenth-century literary tension is present in twenty-first-century discussions of teacher education.

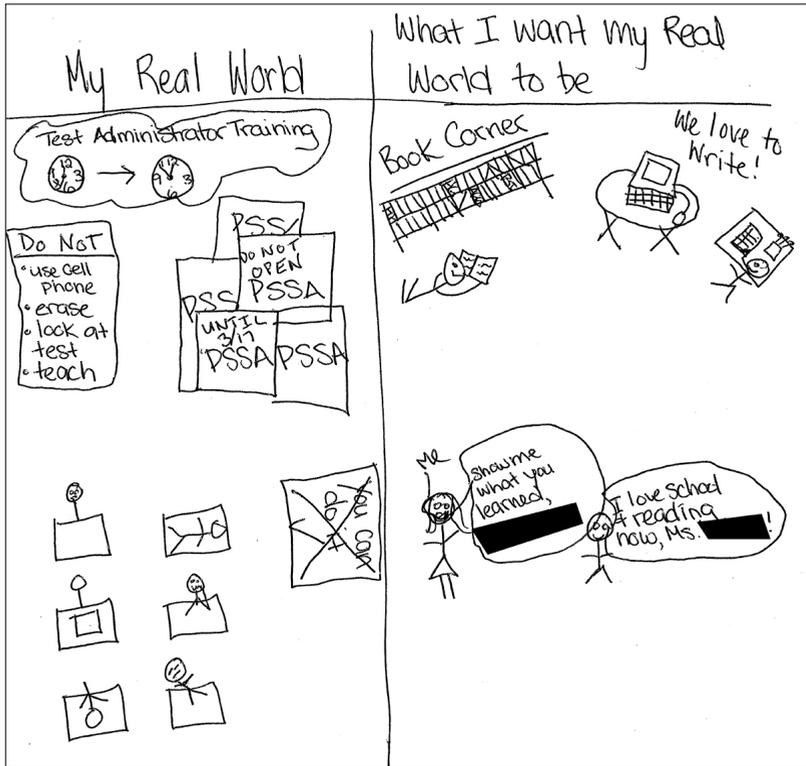


Figure 6.

of tedium. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) explain that “In contemporary Western society, squares and rectangles are the elements of the mechanical, technological order, or the world of human construction” (p. 54) and that the square connotes “a source of oppression which, literally and figuratively, ‘boxes us in’” (p. 55). This symbolic meaning is represented in Beth’s drawing. Faces and clocks are the only circular shapes to appear, and they serve more to reemphasize the sense of rigid monotony than to unsettle it. As the clocks tick, bodies lie atop desks, and the only facial expression we are able to make out is a solitary look of abject boredom.

In contrast, the right half of Beth’s composition uses a different palette of shapes. Here, circular shapes abound, in the form of comics speech balloons, a table, and a beanbag chair. Circles, not incidentally, are typically understood in visual analysis to denote comfort and protection (Serafini, 2014, p. 57). When quadrilateral shapes are used in the right side of the drawing (the bookcase and the computer), Beth places them at diagonal angles to disrupt the appearance of orderly rows. In any case, we are reminded of

of a chorus of linked voices, of student aptitude. The circular table at which sit 19 children serves an additional representational function, becoming the lens of a magnifying glass that directs the viewer's gaze at the Mississippi Delta region, specifically. Throughout the semester, Richard discussed his experiences in the Delta, highlighting both the rich cultural history and community and the effects of poverty and marginalization. Richard's magnifying glass calls to mind the potency of the particular, focusing on the local within discussions of education and equity.

It is no coincidence that Richard's illustrated table is circular, as its shape serves to emphasize the democratic tone of the composition. Denoting "comfort, protection, and endlessness" (Serafini, 2014, p. 57), circular orientations in visual design place democracy above autocracy, and interdependence over individualism. Interdependence is also indicated through the manner in which Richard places dialogue in the mouths of his characters, importing the feature of speech balloons from comics (Connors, 2012; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Emphasizing polyvocality and solidarity, each speaker contributes a single word to the message: "Too long ignored. We are worth your attention. See the incredible things we can do if given the chance." By doubling down on the medium's conventions, Richard employs comics in similar ways as do Jones and Woglom but also makes the conventions his own. In attempting to unsettle dehumanizing status quos of epistemology and assessment by layering them in a palimpsest, Richard embraces multimodality with critical ends in mind.

It is important to note that the major themes we have identified in our dataset are not distinct from one another. In the example given previously, of Lucy's "rant" about the word *rigor*, Lucy also made a number of traditional moves to engage with and make sense of a complex text in an academic setting. In both her decision to draw on the *Merriam Webster* dictionary, and to cite it, including parenthetical notation, Lucy demonstrated an impulse to reference outside texts and to cite her work in a typically academic fashion. Yet she also engaged in word play, particularly emphasizing "living" in her comment.

Comic Comics and Playful Critique of Assessment

In many data examples, students used word play and humor as a central part of their responses, even though the topic of the article was decidedly grim. We reason that students' use of humor relates to the comics format of Jones and Woglom's article, and the histories of interactions our students have had with comics. In spite of the fact that the medium is often employed

to tell somber stories, comics is nevertheless associated with lighthearted humor (Low, 2015; Simonetti, 2012). What is important for our purpose here is the connotations that students brought to the medium. In examining data, we noted that although students followed traditional writerly expectations of the academy, they did so in ways that were unique from other venues, such as traditional research papers or online postings, through their use of humor. Throughout our analysis of data, it seemed that playfulness opened up ways for students to share perspectives they had not previously shared and to push back against scholars' perspectives and positions in ways they had previously seemed hesitant to do. Perhaps because comics are still frequently dismissed as a lesser literary format, even as auteurs such as Alison Bechdel and Gene Luen Yang achieve distinctions that were previously unimaginable, the medium affords ample room for questioning and subverting status quos. Comics flies under many radars as "kids' stuff" and can thus be readily repurposed as a "safe house" for critical inquiry. Perhaps because of this feeling of safety, the medium was one that graduate students latched onto quickly and then mobilized for critique, in spite of few students claiming any history as comics enthusiasts. As an example, during class discussion, Lucy directly referenced that comics opened a space where it "seemed appropriate" to write about her reading of the word *rigor*. Lucy was not alone in her response to the comics medium's modal invitation for criticality; multiple students used Jones and Woglom's graphic narrative to take traditional academic moves and remix them in ways that were more playful, transgressive, and socially conscious than in their other work across the course. We believe this to be a central affordance of bringing comics into ELA teacher education coursework.



Figure 8.

The interplay between play and traditional academic writing can be seen in a student's response to a panel where Stephanie Jones's cartoon avatar has created a list of topics being addressed after "morning meeting," which includes critical literacies, Paulo Freire, and bell hooks, among others. One student drew a smiley face next to "critical literacies" and somewhat cheekily added, "I am self-actualizing!" in a speech bubble emanating from Jones's mouth in the next panel with a line linking her comment to bell hooks on the list. This move both represents the student's knowledge of hooks's work as well as the student's ability to interweave this knowledge with the comics medium itself (i.e., ventriloquizing Jones using a speech balloon, and interpenetrating multiple panels). It is worth noting that while this level of humorous visual/verbal play continued throughout the activity, it was not at the expense of intellectual engagement. Indeed, quite the opposite is true. It was through the opportunities afforded by the multimodality of Jones and Woglom's article that students found ways to engage deeply, personally, and thoughtfully as a classroom community.

In our analyses of student responses, it became clear that teacher learners took a number of positions in relation to "Dangerous Conversations." Some positioned themselves as taking a critical stance on Jones and Woglom's contentions, pushing for more information or positing alternate perspectives. Examples of data we coded in this way include, "Why do they look bored?"; "Of course, the real world is not antithetical to test-based schooling, at least not my real world"; and "What did the *kids* want to do with this space?" Others drew on the work in relation to their experiences as teachers and as graduate students in the MEd program, using the authors' retelling of their experiences to make sense of their own. One example, as seen in Figure 9, had the student relating a tension mentioned in the article to her field site, comparing Jones's experience to "the discrepancy seen at [our graduate program] vs. in fieldwork experiences."

Finally, some students positioned themselves as colleagues or comrades of Jones in responding to the tension of what counts as literacy education in schools. In Figure 10, a student wrote a note of support to Jones, on a page where she is pictured being gut-punched, and with a close-up of her crying eye. The "adamant" nature of Woglom's images drew the teacher learner into a pact of solidarity with Jones, writing "Don't give up! There's more work to be done!" in all capital letters.

The differing perspectives and positions taken by students were also evident in the ways they depicted their "real worlds of literacy assessment," in which some offered their ideals and hopes, while others represented discomfort over their experiences in K-12 schools.

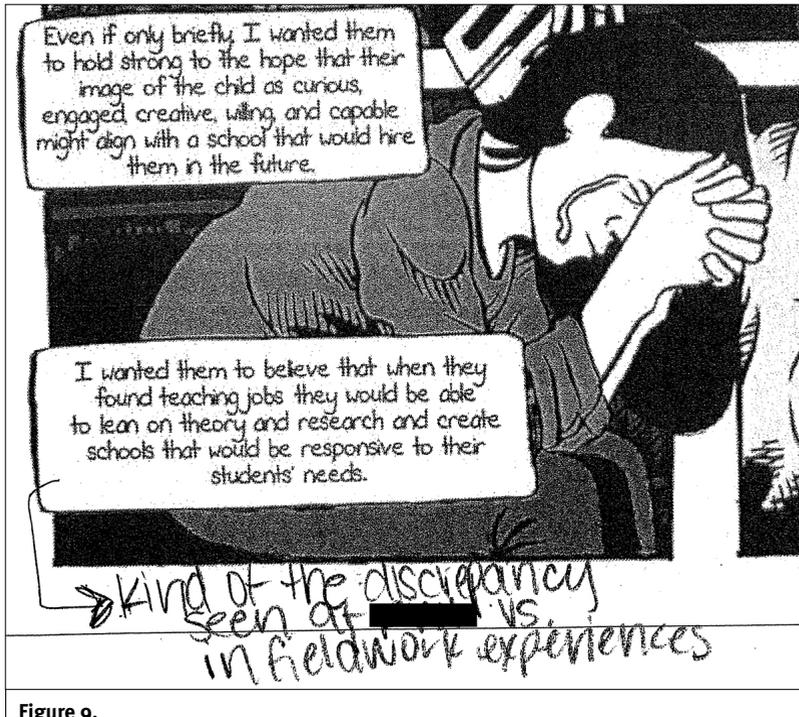


Figure 9.

It was through the act of foregrounding critical inquiry—in an effort to develop a position in reference to Stephanie Jones and James Woglom (2014)—that we found the most striking difference between the focal activity we discuss in this article and other data sources from the course. While students frequently demonstrated their ability to speak critically about issues related to assessment in ELA classrooms, they rarely engaged so openly in critical *inquiry* when responding to traditional articles and texts assigned in the class. Of particular note was the degree of dialogic engagement between teacher learners and the text and its authors—they made great efforts to draw themselves into the conversation, rather than watching dispassionately from the margins. Whether in agreement with Jones and Woglom’s perspectives or not, it was during this activity that students most actively engaged in discussions of the political nature of literacy assessments and their roles in the ELA classroom, and the question of why they, as teachers, needed to reflect on these topics in their own professional development. During her wrap-up of class discussion, Katrina asked students what they thought of this activity. Later that night, one student emailed to say:



Figure 10.

You know, in thinking about my own work as a teacher, this [article] is something I could share with my students. It's the first time I've thought about including them in my own questions and worries about assessments. It just feels more real here, somehow.

These examples, across multiple sources and formats, demonstrate the potential of using graphic narrative in teacher preparation as a way of engaging students in the rigorous intellectual work of critical practitioner inquiry, and its implications for classroom practice.

Implications for ELA Teacher Education

The consistent presence of questioning and self-reflection in students' multimodal annotations and their "real world" illustrations make a strong case

for weaving graphic narrative and multimodal design into teacher education coursework (Holbrook & Zoss, 2009; Versaci, 2008; Wierszewski, 2014). The multiperspectivity of Jones and Woglom's graphic narrative, when paired with pedagogic activities that invite teacher learners to compose in similar ways themselves, presents a wider range of opportunities for engaging in dialogic critical inquiry than typically found in teacher education texts, including ones we have taught ourselves. Chute (2010) argues that the medium of comics is especially apt for expressing difficult registers, writing that "The force and value of graphic narrative is how it pushes on conceptions of the unrepresentable . . . [embodying] individual and collective experience [and putting] contingent selves and histories into form" (pp. 2–3). A number of scholars have attempted to articulate why this is, exactly. In so many words, by requiring readers to integrate an array of competing semiotic modes, the comics medium affords opportunities to participate in meaning-making that are more expansive, and exist in greater modal tension, than through verbal means alone (e.g., Cohn, 2014; Kuttner, Sousanis, & Weaver-Hightower, 2016; Sousanis, 2015). Graphic narratives function as cross-discursive texts that require readers and writers/artists to "marry print and visual representations in order to read in ways that are deeply meaningful" (Cromer & Clark, 2007, p. 589), while attending to "how comics constitutes meaning in a way that is different from those of other media" (Tucker, 2009, p. 28). In comics, words do not exist to buttress images, nor vice versa; the competing systems of meaning—one verbal, one imagistic, one spatial, and one imaginary/interstitial—exist in perpetual dialogic tension, imbuing one another with meaning after meaning after meaning and forcing readers to make subjective and creative sense of the fragments (e.g., Hatfield, 2005; Low, 2012; Postema, 2013). Harste (2014) refers to such sense making as "abductive"—that is, when one jumps to conclusions intuitively, without an explicit set of arguments to follow—and calls abduction "the only form of logic that allows newness into the system Because writing is linear, it highlights inductive and deductive logic . . . [but] an inquiry-based approach . . . opens up space for abduction" (p. 98). In our analysis, we found evidence that using texts that exhibit discursive tension created space for critical inquiry and abductive sense making of teaching practices.

In our analysis of data, we found that students made ample use of Jones and Woglom's abductive, multimodal invitations, ultimately engaging in multimodal authorship themselves. Returning to Sacco's (2012) declaration of the medium's "adamancy" and to Chute's (2010) notion of the "unrepresentable," we highlight the visual rendering of Stephanie Jones's professional sorrow as a physical gut punch to be an example of "an open

space for abduction” and a pedagogic invitation willingly taken. As evinced in our final example of data from the previous section, Woglom’s illustration evoked coalition building, as one teacher learner used it to unite her

In a time when the professional knowledge of teachers is so frequently marginalized, how can we not bring the abductive, the adamant, and the unrepresentable into the contested domain of assessment in ELA education? How can we not honor teacher learners’ critical knowledge, even when it appears in the form of lines, polygons, and doodled marginalia? As bell hooks reminds us, it is from the margins that subversion so often arises.

own, her peers’, her instructor’s, and Jones and Woglom’s contingent selves and histories into form (Chute, 2010, p. 3). We ask: In a time when the professional knowledge of teachers is so frequently marginalized, how can we *not* bring the abductive, the adamant, and the unrepresentable into the contested domain of assessment in ELA education? How can we *not* honor teacher learners’ critical knowledge, even when it appears in the form of lines, polygons, and doodled marginalia? As bell hooks (2000) reminds us, it is from the margins that subversion so often arises.

As our data show, transacting with graphic narrative, as part of the central curriculum of teacher education coursework, affords teacher learners a broader range of opportunities to engage in critical inquiries of classroom practice.

In that vein, we also argue that comics texts, paired with activities such as those we describe, demonstrate how teacher education programs may build upon sociocultural perspectives to engage in more polyvocal, multiperspectival (and thus interdependent and dialogical) practices as part of teacher professionalization and the development of critical consciousness. In these ways teacher learners can both question the status quos encountered in their ELA field experiences and imagine professional identities that exist within these spaces while working toward change. After all, the purpose of centering Jones and Woglom’s article was never to engage with multimodal texts simply for their own sake, but to use them as a means of rethinking and reimagining assessment practices within ELA classrooms.

When Jones and Woglom’s (2014) “Dangerous Conversations” was adopted in a course dedicated to pragmatic, practice-oriented aspects of education, students enacted approaches to literacy assessment that were more social, historical, and openly ideological than was typical of the class. Including graphic narratives that employ “adamant” communicative techniques to take up central, and perhaps otherwise “unrepresentable,” questions and aspects of ELA teaching and learning (e.g., David Lapp’s [2008] *Drop-In* and Bill Ayers and Ryan Alexander-Tanner’s [2010] *To Teach: The Journey, in Comics*) provides potent new avenues for professional learning.

Such avenues are abductive, and they may broaden the ways that teacher learners frame what counts as literacy learning. It is vital that such texts are included in courses dealing with teaching methods, assessment, classroom management, and other central practices of ELA alongside more “traditional” and “academic” monomodal sources, to highlight various affordances for teachers to engage in critical inquiries that “allow newness into the system.” By offering ways of entering into and sustaining “dangerous conversations” through a variety of modes and discourses, we as teacher educators may enable teacher learners to broaden their understandings of what counts as literacy and help to erode the theory/practice divide that confounds so many early career ELA educators.

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Notes

1. We prefer the phrase “teacher learner” to “preservice” or “early career” teacher, as it signifies a framing of professional identity as fluid and based within learning across the career span (Jacobs, 2014). The phrase both acknowledges that all teachers come with knowledge and experience and that all teachers are in the process of learning and defining their craft.

2. Katrina’s field notes reflect Van Maanen’s (1988) definition of “shorthand reconstructions of events, observations, and conversations that took place in the field. They . . . represent simply one of many levels of textualization set off by experience” (p. 225). Practitioner memos serve a more interpretive and analytic purpose in helping us make conceptual leaps between data and theory building.

3. All names are pseudonyms.

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