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Cynthia Morawski et Jessica Sokolowski

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Résumé de l'article

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# The Experiences of Three Teachers Using Body Biographies for Multimodal Literature Study

Cynthia Morawski; Jessica Sokolowski  
University of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

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## Abstract

The body biography, a visual and written life-size composition to study characterization, makes use of a variety of materials such as markers, crayons, and found material from wrapping paper to remnants of string and yarn. In this study, three teachers were invited to implement the body biography practice as part of their delivery of the English curriculum to answer the question, “What are the experiences of three teachers who applied the body biography practice to teach literature in their English classrooms in a secondary school?” The teachers and students appreciated the opportunity for multiple means of expression, inviting the rich literacy experience. As a result of the study, the three participating teachers came to reconsider their instructional agendas to include more multimodal options.

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**Keywords:** Multimodal learning; teacher education; literature study.

## The experiences of three teachers using body biographies for multimodal literature study

*Lugging bags of found materials and art supplies up the front steps of the beige brick school building, a swarm of thoughts and emotions swirl around me. With anticipation and many expectations, I move down the right corridor where classrooms of students and their teachers wait for the day to begin. After hanging up my coat in the narrow closet lodged between a built-in bookcase and the chalkboard, the bell rings, signalling the beginning of our study.*

People express themselves in numerous ways, from the rhymes of children’s poetry, to the landscapes of painted scenes, to hand-drawn sketches that represent visual stories. According to Rosenblatt (1986), “The artefact... painted canvas or shaped marble, can become part of the whole spectrum of transactions” (p. 127). Furthermore, Harste (2014) asserts that the use of multimodal systems of expression has been shown to generate new ideas and insights in classroom learning. Furthermore, teachers, whose pedagogical repertoires include multiple modes of meaning making, are in an advantageous position to make the curriculum more accessible to their students who represent a broad range of learning styles and related needs (Boche & Henning, 2019; Griffith, 2018; Wissman, Costello and Hamilton, 2012). To further explore teachers’ use of multimodalities in their classrooms, I (the first author) collaborated with three secondary school English teachers who applied the body biography, a life-size written and visual composition, to the study of literature. Methodologically supported by action research and multimodal learning, in this paper, I asked: What are the experiences of three teachers who applied multimodalities via the body biography practice to literature study in their English classrooms in a local secondary school?

## Multimodal communication and learning

Multimodal learning is a social practice of making meaning using a variety of semiotic modes of communication (Siegel, 2012; Olshansky, 2008). Paintings, musical scores, a written essay, digital stories, and a poster advertising a coming event are just some examples of multimodal texts that people use every day. Jewitt (2008) maintains, “Multimodal texts may be used by teachers in the classroom as the basis for critical engagement, redesign, or the explicit teaching of how modes construct meaning in

specific genres” (p. 262). For example, when Reid and Moses (2019) studied the implementation of a comic writers’ workshop with fourth graders, they found that the students became more aware of what might count as texts in school, while identifying design features that could play a role in reading and composing such texts. Kiramba (2017) carried out a case study of a twelve-year-old student labeled an underachiever, who was detached and silent during classroom instruction. When allowed to use singing and visual art to express himself both socially and academically, he came to document and represent....“his knowledge of the world as a way to transform the otherwise unmeaningful experiences of the classroom into meaningful ones” (p. 272). At the time Chisholm, Whitmore, Shelton and McGrath (2016) studied the application of drama arts to teaching Anne Frank’s diary to several classes of eighth grade students, they found that the students were able to make connections to Anne’s story in ways that language alone would not allow. In their research on multimodal essays, Jensen and Nelson (2022) noted that secondary students who were given the opportunity to express language outside of traditional writing methods “enjoyed the freedom to write about their own experiences, to speak with authentic voices, and to use image and sound to articular nuances of meaning” (pp. 64-65). The body biography, the focus of this paper, is another multimodal practice that encourages learners and teachers to engage in the study of literary works from various perspectives using different modes of expressions.

## Body biography

The body biography, a visual and written life-size composition to study characterization, makes use of a variety of materials such as markers, crayons, and found material from wrapping paper to remnants of string and yarn. After drawing a life-size outline of a body shape, students have many possibilities for filling up their sheet of paper. For example, to express a character’s most admirable qualities, students could select specific colors, symbols, and quotes such as those mentioned in the story, and place them on various locations, such as the mind and heart. To track the transformation of a character during a story, students could divide the sheet of paper in half, with their initial impression of the character expressed on one side and the changes seen in the character on the second half. In addition to concentrating on the area within the body outline, the area surrounding the outline could serve as a place where students express the external factors that have influenced the character’s development. The students’ selection and application of materials would be used to emphasize the contrast from one side to the other. For instance, a fence made from cardboard and graffitied with passages from the novel, could represent a central roadblock placed in the character’s path at the outset of the story. Waves fashioned from the remnants of dark blue corduroy could express challenges caused by the natural world which the character faced and survived. The possibilities for portraying both internal and external factors that shape the ongoing emergence of characterization in a work are endless.

Underwood (1987) devised the body biography as a writing activity to encourage his eighth-grade students to examine their pasts in relation to their current adolescent experiences. After engaging in a selection of autobiographical writing exercises regarding such issues as their first memories and personal descriptive poems, the students then arranged their finished products, along with collected memorabilia, on life-size tracings of their bodies drawn on large sheets of paper. The memorabilia, consisting mostly of visuals, enhanced the autobiographical information contained in their writing, while incorporating an aesthetic sense. To celebrate their work, the students had opportunities to first share their work with their classmates, and then transform the library into an art gallery where they hosted a viewing of their work as a community event. Underwood observed that “the body biographies, provided students with a second outlet for self-expression, achieved...a vibrant visual and written metaphor for a life” (p. 48). First sharing the content of their body biographies with classmates and eventually family and friends was an important aspect of the expressive process.

To create a learning environment to promote both intrapersonal and interpersonal learning, O’Donnell-Allen and Smagorinsky (1999) applied Underwood’s (1987) work on body biography to character analysis in a senior English class. More specifically, they reported on several students’ embodied compositions of the character Ophelia featured in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. O’Donnell and

Smagorinsky discovered that the students had established supportive means of working together as a team, while making generous use of both literal and symbolic representations of Ophelia's character. In particular, the researchers observed that the students' collective representations of Ophelia by the color and placement of related images in concert with written text nurtured mutual respect, collaboration, and a fuller range of expression for them in the English classroom. In the end O'Donnell and Smagorinsky concluded, "...This group appears to have achieved an unusual power in their ability to interpret the play through their original use of the artistic medium" (p. 40).

In order to provide teacher candidates with multimodal means to engage their students in the study of English, the first author carried out a study in which the body biography practice was implemented in two teacher education methods classes. Coming together in groups of five, the teacher candidates used life-size body outlines drawn on oversized paper, along with a collection of found and stocked materials to experience and express the transformation of the main character in the young adult novel. An analysis of the candidates' responses to an open-ended questionnaire indicated that they had come to reach a more holistic picture of the character. For example, one candidate stated, "I made many connections and discoveries I may not have before" (p.9). Other candidates found that working together in groups encouraged the sharing of ideas which contributed to a broad range of expertise and mutual support. Still another candidate claimed that the body biography promoted learning in all areas of the English curriculum as well as other subject areas such as art and design. In sum, the teacher candidates felt that they had reached a more holistic picture of the main character as a result of their participation in the implementation of body biography. As one candidate expressed, "Body bio allows for uncovering what is not said/written AND/OR reading between the lines (making inferences) of what is written" (p. 16).

## Methodology and related considerations

I (first author) invited three teachers to implement the body biography practice as part of their delivery of the English curriculum to answer the question, "What are the experiences of three teachers who applied the body biography practice to teach literature in their English classrooms in a secondary school?" The teachers, who each had considerable experience teaching English, taught in a composite secondary school located in the center of a sizable city in southern Ontario. Students who attended the school came from different regions in the city. The first teacher was teaching the *Chrysalids* to grade 9 students, the second one was teaching *Macbeth* to grade 11 students, and the third one was teaching *Othello* to grade 10 students, with each class having approximately 25 to 30 students, all enrolled in the academic stream. The teachers welcomed the opportunity to extend their knowledge of multimodal learning, especially the application of the body biography to the study of literature in their classrooms.

For the duration of each of the body biography implementations, I was present in the classroom providing support in such ways as bringing supplies to groups and helping with the clean-up. As the teachers had limited access to supplies, I provided most of the office materials such as markers, glue sticks, large sheets of paper, and scissors. Upcycling, the process of converting a material into something of similar or greater value in its second life (Emgin, 2012; Sung, 2015), played an important role. The students, teachers, and I gathered found materials, which we collected from our homes, nature, and the school. That is, pine cones, ribbon, yarn, paper bags, the tape from audio cassettes, and much more, which would have otherwise gone to the land fill, furnished the working material for creating the body biographies.

## Action Research

Action research, a form of inquiry into the continual understanding and improvement of one's own practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 2006), was the methodology used to facilitate the investigation of the three teachers' use of the body biography practice in their English classrooms. More specifically, action research denotes research that is conducted by teachers for themselves regarding the ongoing awareness and development of their own practice. That is, according to Mertler (2009), action research allows teachers to study their own classrooms—for example, their own instructional methods...in order to better understand them and be able to improve their quality or

effectiveness (p. 4). Furthermore, Reason and Bradbury (2004) contend that action research, “seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to...individual persons and their communities” (p. 1).

For example, Sowa (2009) carried out an investigation on promoting professional development of teachers by having them conduct action research projects, including writing reflective papers and composing their own professional working theory in relation to teaching linguistically diverse students. For example, one teacher studied the strategies she used to improve her students’ phonemic awareness concerning rhyming words, and met with initial success. Another teacher explored the successful application of language code-switching and multimodal learning to help a student develop her math problem-solving skills. The teachers found that their experiences with action research allowed them to reach a better understanding of English language learners, while enriching their classroom practice including the benefit of using research-based instructional strategies.

Using action research, Trent and Riley (2009) carried out a study on arts integrated lessons designed to meet district benchmarks in relation to social studies, visual art, and language arts for fourth-grade students. For example, in one lesson, students illustrated their understanding of privacy rights by creating artistic representations using cut and torn paper, along with written artists’ statements. For another lesson, teachers gave students the opportunity to compose different forms of poetry to express concepts of privacy and pertinent issues that they had addressed in a teaching unit on democracy. Analysis of data such as field notes, samples of student work, and focus group interviews, indicated that the teachers derived knowledge and confidence for future arts-based teaching. In turn, their students’ exposure to arts-based learning allowed most of them to reach or exceed instructional benchmarks and transfer their recent experiences to other subject areas as well as their own personal lives.

In another action research study, Nolan and Patterson (2000) examined the perceptions and behaviors of adolescent and adult English language learners who participated in skits used to help their pronunciation and intonation. In particular, students had opportunities to perform both individual and choral roles as well as supportive ones such as prompter and stage hand. An analysis of data collection via observation and researcher-teacher journaling revealed that the students’ participation in the skits, especially the teamwork, encouraged them to speak English with more confidence and articulation of expression. Suggestions for future implementations focused on addressing stage fright, overuse of repetition related to rehearsals, and the need to edit skits to fit the local community. In sum, the researchers recommended pursuing the application of the skits which provided “...a method of giving equal attention to form and meaning” (p. 13).

### ***Response journals***

As part of the recurring cycle of reflection, action and evaluation proposed by Hendricks (2009), the three teachers’ responses to implementing the body biography in their English classrooms were captured by two semi-structured methods—response journals and audio recorded conversations. Teachers maintained journals in which they recorded responses to their daily involvement in the body biography practice. They kept notes on anything that they deemed significant such as reactions to managing supplies, responses to teaching characterization in a three-dimensional mode, and feelings encountered while implementing the body biography practice. As reported by Borg (2001), the journal furnishes a permanent account of specific aspects of the research process which can be referred to at any time. Smith (2001) maintains that response journaling is a way to think about new concepts and acquiring new self-knowledge to assist in processing new information. Concurring with Smith, Lee (2008) asserts that reflective writing encourages individuals to actively build knowledge, while making learning a more personal interaction.

### ***Audio-recorded conversations***

The audio recorded conversations provided an opportunity for the teachers to collaboratively reflect on their use of the body biography activity. Starting points for conversations included such questions as: What did you learn about yourself as a teacher by using this activity in your class? What

would you do differently next time? Did your engagement in the activity cause you to change anything in your teaching? Sharples and Cobb (2015), state that the value of such conversations "...is in the ideas that an individual respondent might prompt and the immediate feedback given by the group on this idea, or other ideas or thoughts it might propagate" (p. 89). Furthermore, Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) claim that conversations allow for the expression of multiple meanings and perspectives, while generating interactions between and among them. Rosenblatt (1968) refers to conversations as communities of transactions offering different responses and alternative interpretations.

### ***Data analysis***

Using an inductive approach (Hendricks, 2009, Mertler, 2009) for data analysis, the second author and I carried out an adaptation of Saldaña's (2016) coding and categorizing process keeping in mind that once a code is applied to an initial cycle of analysis, it is not a fixed representation. Rather it is pliable, and coarse-grained, requiring further consideration of ideas and observations for a more fine-grained presentation of findings (Butler-Kisber, 2010). Instead of turning to a software program to determine the outcome of my findings, we opted for a more organic and multimodal approach, which would allow us to more closely access the nuances found in the data. More specifically, we printed notes from the transcripts on post-it notes, which we moved through several iterations of arranging and rearranging into an affinity diagram (Holtzblatt & Beyer, 2017), always keeping in mind the research question, while periodically stepping back from the emerging themes to remain as objective and open-minded as possible (Mertler, 2009). Through this meaning-making process, we identified 3 themes with categories of post-its arranged under each one as follows: (i) preparation, (ii) teachers' general responses, and (iii) found materials used for implementation. It is important to note that for ethical reasons, it was not possible to include photos of the students' actual body biographies. The two examples included in subsequent pages are composite representations made by the first author to help the reader visualize what the students had created.

## **Preparation**

### ***Building background knowledge***

In her article on engaging students in the reading process, Ambe (2007) emphasizes the need to build students prior knowledge to provide a meaningful interaction with the printed word. She also recommends incorporating creative activities to reinforce comprehension of what has been read. In preparation for the implementation of the body biography in their English classrooms, the teachers had spent many classes teaching the literary works—*Macbeth*, *The Chrysalids*, and *Othello*. One teacher wanted to provide her students with ample time to read *Othello* to prepare them for future assignments, including the body biography. In particular, she used various dramatic arts activities to help her students "really get to the bottom of the characters". She also reviewed the meaning of symbols by showing many examples from the play. As she taught *The Chrysalids*, another teacher referred to the body biography in anticipation of its implementation with her students, while her colleague did the same with *Macbeth*. In both of these latter two cases, the teachers led students through small group and whole class discussions, written work regarding the plot and characters, as well as daily reading. The teachers seemed to be paving the way for their students to experience the reading of the works of literature as lived-through events both aesthetically and efferently (Rosenblatt, 2005).

### ***Forming student groups and related concerns***

Weeks into the semester, the teachers, already acquainted with the needs of their students, began planning for the implementation of the body biography by establishing student groups. According to Resaei (2018), "For students, groupwork motivates them, provides peer instruction opportunity, give them a chance to look at the problem from multiple perspectives, and helps them to become more creative" (p. 1). "Although all three teachers felt that students feel safer in a group when proposing ideas, whether they are accepted or rejected, each teacher had different approaches to forming those student groups. For example, one teacher gave each student an option to choose a buddy, especially those students who are English language learners. Another teacher, who liked groups of no more than four or five, would count off by numbers to organize students. She explained that in

larger groups some students may pull back and not participate fully. As Burke (2011) posited, smaller groups of not more than five individuals increases each member's opportunity to actively contribute to the group's goals.

Another aspect of implementing the body biography regarded how each group would select their character of focus. While contemplating which characters would be the best ones to study, the teacher teaching *Macbeth* questioned if groups could do the same character. The teacher teaching *The Chrysalids* admitted that having two groups do the same character "would be interesting". She uses "the box of doom" where the students select their topic from a box whenever a choice had to be made. She was relieved to conclude that there were "six characters to study, enough for everyone".

### ***Materials and supplies***

For the duration of the body biography implementation, I supplied the teachers with materials such as large sheets of paper, markers, glue sticks, tape, scissors, rulers, colored pencils and crayons. All three teachers appreciated having the materials and expressed concern that they rarely had enough to carry out some of the lessons that required more than minimal supplies. One of the teachers who shared the fact that she "often pays for so much already", only had some glue sticks, while her colleague had one glue stick and a bin of sharpies. The teachers wanted to know where they could obtain the large sheets of paper for future lessons. Pertinent literature indicates that inadequate materials and supplies emerge as a main concern for teachers as they strive to meet the needs of their students in the classroom (Dagenhart, O'Connor, Petty, & Day, 2008; Kaufhold, Alvarez, & Arnold 2006).

To help to ameliorate the situation regarding the minimal budget for supplies and materials, upcycling, the process of converting a material into something of similar or greater value in its second life, played a major role (Emgin, 2012). According to Sung (2015), upcycling can be economically advantageous for consumers by fulfilling needs with fewer financial resources. In particular, both natural and manufactured found materials, from cassette tapes to soil, were used in the construction of the body biographies. In preparation, the teachers and students began collecting found materials which they sourced from home, school, and the natural environment. To supplement their collection, I contributed a variety of materials as well.

## **Findings and experiences**

### ***Implementation feedback***

Pertinent research indicates that many teachers have encountered positive outcomes in relation to the use of multimodal learning in their English classrooms (Goering & Strayhorn, 2016; Griffith, 2018; Honeyford & Boyd, 2015). In the current study, the three teachers' initial reactions to the body biography implementation were consistently favorable. For instance, one teacher, who shared that she would do the body biography again if she wasn't retiring, asserted, "The kids constantly surprise us and we limit them too much. But they came up with...things I never would have come up with myself. They go so far beyond, it constantly amazes me". The same teacher expressed surprise by a group's support for a student's detailed plan because he usually seemed to be treated as an outsider. Another teacher, who claimed that this was the best experience she had with this project, observed a high level of commitment indicated by her students' body language. She stated, "The level of enthusiasm and excitement represented different layers of symbolic meaning. Their work was off the charts and all anchored in really really solid textual references". Whenever students from other classes saw the body biographies staged on the classroom walls and in the hallway, they expressed curiosity by asking questions and making comments.

Two teachers brought up the issue of programming for the "gifted" classes versus the "mainstream" classes in relation to the body biography practice. They both questioned restricting such practice to the "gifted" commenting, "They (meaning the students in the study) got more out of this than the "gifted" kids because the "gifted" kids are used to doing this." Also, it was satisfying to see "...no kids sitting, while also being challenged." Counihan and Silcox (2014), who advocate

encouraging students to expand their repertoires of communication stated, “when given engaging, rigorous and relevant tasks, they rise to the challenge and do creative work” (p. 38-39). Esposito (2017), who studied improv-inspired exercises as a lead-in to her secondary students formal writing assignments, stated, “The objective of asking students to prewrite in unconventional ways is to expose them to new writing strategies and provide meaningful contexts for discovery that go beyond producing evidence of brainstorming for a grade” (p. 43).

### ***Changing roles***

One teacher, who realized that she needed to change her role from teacher to facilitator, commented, “I had to watch myself because I wanted to help”. She continued “It was more of a challenge for me as an educator and we’re always trying to challenge ourselves by taking risks”. She later exclaimed that she was overwhelmed by how good the body biographies turned out. Wright (2011), who reported on the use of innovations to shift power from instructor to student in his undergraduate course, claims that students experience learning when they take part in problem-solving activities and their teachers guide them in assimilating subject matter in meaningful ways.

### ***Writing preparation***

All three teachers concurred that the challenges of expressing the character’s development in the story via the body biography prepared the students for the final essay, a major culminating assignment. The teachers concurred that it provided them with fodder for their students to write the traditional essay because they had to know the nuances of the characters and all the layers of meaning. In their article advocating using visual arts to support student writing, Press and Epstein (2007) present various ways to use visual art as a pre-writing strategy, such as pre-writing sketching and photo essays. In particular, they found that such activities, which serve as rehearsals for writing, have the potential to increase fluency and interest in writing, while providing opportunities to engage with vocabulary and background knowledge.

### ***Student resistance***

Even though the students were “...allowed to do something tactile, visual, and creative that they didn’t have a chance to do before, not all students seemed to fully participate in the body biography. One teacher mentioned that one boy was quite apprehensive and felt that the activity was below him. The same teacher also noted a detached attitude regarding two other boys, pointing out that they are not “...really engaged with anything anyway, not being able to show I love it that much cause I’m a grade eleven boy. That’s the reality of public school”. Her colleague interjected, “Whatever you do, not everyone is happy.” Short, Kauffman, and Kahn (2000) emphasize that many people are uncomfortable with using sign systems beyond paper and pen as they were not exposed to them in school. In addition, Holdren (2012) claims that some students lack confidence and familiarity in using the arts, which in turn, inhibits their use in completing assignments. Furthermore, a dismissive attitude toward the arts can arise from existing perception that they are “nice to have in school but not necessary” (Eisner, 2008, p. 24).

### ***The use of found materials***

To promote the practice of upcycling, while offsetting the lack of available funds, the teachers, students, and I (first author) all brought together a stockpile of found materials representing an array of design elements such as texture, color, and line. As one teacher commented, “It’s amazing what you’ve got around the classroom.” Another teacher exclaimed, “And I started going through my cupboards. I took out all the metals from robotics and everything else.” This same teacher commented that we were like “scavengers and foragers in the classroom.” In her article on objects that are recreated from trash through upcycling, Emgin (2012) posits that people are often eager to see objects that are no longer valuable or useful to be revitalized with new functions and meanings. Furthermore, McClanahan (2013) emphasizes that English language arts teachers can play important roles in promoting sustainability, once claimed exclusively by the sciences.



## *The chrysalids*



Figure 5: Body biography composite 1



Figure 6: Body biography composite 2

While her students were engaged in representing their characters from the novel, *The Chrysalids*, the teacher observed a variety of ways in which they made use of the found materials. One group ripped and shredded paper bags providing rich working material to express the shabby nature of Sophie's existence. Another group used the brown paper to show "impermanence and destruction" in the novel. The teacher agreed that "you can do a lot with just brown paper." The meters of tape pulled from the plastic casings of defunct cassettes along with clumps of string symbolized confusion in the brain. One of the students even taped his phone to illustrate telepaths, going from old tech to the modern world. Another group of students who already had the ladder connecting to Sophie's cave exclaimed, "We need something gold Miss, for the golden age." They used large artificial flower petals to act as butterfly wings in relation to the concept of a chrysalid stage transforming into the butterfly stage. Another character sported a zipper across his lips to signify censorship. Rosalind, an intelligent and dedicated character in the novel emerges in one of the group's representation with a magnifying glass over one eye and a bow and arrow constructed from the branch of a tree and threaded with cassette tape. Her telepathic abilities hover over her head in the form of lightning bolts emanating from a black tissue paper cloud.

## *Macbeth*

In the classroom where multimodal images of the characters in *Macbeth* were beginning to emerge all around her, the teacher noticed a broad range of found materials being used by the students.

To bring Macbeth's character to life, the students actually brought in garden soil to show that he was not able to get the dirt off his feet, to free himself from the murders. They felt that the characteristics of the soil offset the concepts of purity and benevolence symbolized by the color white. To convey further Macbeth's characterization, another group of students selected fabrics to create "loosely-fitting robes" because, according to them, the robes do not really fit him." The same group gave Malcolm a bat to protect himself, and also made a flag from cream colored material.

A different group used cerlox binders for a number of things including a backbone, hilt, and dagger, while incorporating a mask, which their teacher thought was "really thought out." After seeing the long white textured robe made from tissue paper featuring the splatter of blood on Lady Macbeth's hands, the teacher commented, "You can do a lot with plain tissue paper." To express Lady Macbeth's evil side, a group of students extended the length of her fingernails with pieces of long white chord. To emphasize a strong character, a student glued small decorative pebbles down the character's spine.

### ***Othello***

While the students illustrated characterizations found in Othello, their teacher made notes of the imaginative ways in which they utilized found materials. For example, the "green eyed monster" associated with jealousy and hate appeared as artificial green leaves and curved vines made from emerald colored chord. To define Desdemona's submissive disposition, a group of students constructed a cage made out of green straws enclosing butterflies and a cut-out from a magazine saying "USE YOUR VOICE", which they positioned over her face. They completed the look by attaching a small brass lock to the bottom of the cage. This same group expressed Desdemona's death by taping the quill of a black feather to the middle of a bright red heart that they had drawn in the middle of her chest. To implicate Desdemona's own role in her death, they positioned her hand to make it appear that it was wrapped around the feather. To represent Iago's words, "I'll pour this pestilence into his ear", another group of students made a stick figure out of red pipe cleaners which they dangled from puppet-like strings to give the impression of manipulating Othello. Their version of the "green-eyed monster consisted of green tissue paper shaped into serpents that began in Othello's head and slithered down his body.

Still another group featured the following quote in their body biography of Othello: "Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul, but I do love thee, and when I love thee not, chaos is come again." More specifically, they crumpled a tangle of twine to address his thoughts and a black heart pasted to the top of a tin can to express his emotions. Having cut apart his body from his right shoulder to his left thigh, they took some string and stitched the opening back together to represent how he was torn apart. They also covered one side of his upper body with crumpled green tissue paper, while drawing a bright red and orange flame that ran from his toes to his knee. A discarded pair of eye glasses partly covered green eyes. A different group used a violin bow positioned over a hole in the paper and a raw-edged piece of burlap to underscore the notion of tragedy. As the teacher teaching Othello commented, "I wanted the character body biographies to be preparation work for the upcoming essay. The students were forced to think beyond opinions."

### ***Literary elements***

The three teachers also found that the body biography practice, as evidenced by the above examples, encouraged students to make effective use of such literary elements as symbolism, color, and texture to express their own interpretations of the assigned works. To represent their responses to a novel study on *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Broz's (2010) students used a variety of literary elements, from imagery to symbolism, expressed through such mediums as felting and collage. While conducting research on identity compositions in a secondary school visual arts classroom, Roswell (2020) encountered students' mixed media compositions that presented meaning in "...a panoply of ways, from blue felt to multicolored lights to written artist statements" (p. 636). In her work on using art to assess reading comprehension, Holdren (2012) discovered that incorporating visual arts allowed students to engage in critical thinking "to use metaphor and symbol to represent their interpretation of literary elements" (p. 692).

## Concluding comments and future considerations

As teachers continue to navigate learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is clear that multimodal methods of teaching and learning not only promote individual expression, but also support various educational needs of students. According to Rosenfeld and Rosenfeld (2004), “It is widely agreed that teacher sensitivity to individual differences (ILDs) is an integral component of effective teaching (p. 465). The application of the body biography by each the three teachers provided them with numerous opportunities to consider and expand the strategies and approaches they used to engage their students in the study of English, especially literature. For example, one teacher noticed a student, who usually appeared to be an outsider, create a plan that played an integral role in the creation of his group’s body biography. Another teacher, who recognized that her role as teacher had changed to facilitator during the body biography session, expressed amazement at the quality of the work her students had produced as an independent group. All three teachers appreciated the multiple means of expression which helped to expand their students’ capacity to analyze a character as well as prepare to write a formal essay.

Additional issues such as creativity, student resistance, the use of found materials, literary elements, and much more emerged from the teachers’ observations and experiences. By the end of the implementation of the body biography, the three teachers not only agreed that they would be incorporating the body biography practice into their future teaching, but also expressed interest in pursuing other multimodal options. It is important to note that the teachers recognized the benefits of the body biography for all of their students, and not just those identified as gifted. Although they mentioned that funding for supplies was still a challenge, they all concurred that the use of found materials would help to make the application of the body biography more economically feasible with both teachers and students coming together to locate materials.

Multimodal methods of teaching and learning could serve as an opportunity for reluctant readers to experience success in the language classroom, and also a means to assist both ELA and ILP students. Additional implementations of the body biography could move from the English classroom to other subject areas, and could be especially effective where schools practice an interdisciplinary approach to education. For example, in a class that addresses both history and English, the study of a significant figure could be supported by creating a body biography of that individual. As another example, the creation of a body biography could help to take a musical composition from auditory to visual. Still another possibility would involve self-study related to such issues as personal strengths, short- and long-term goals, interests, outside influences among other considerations, which would all be expressed visually, and saved for current and future reference.

The current study of the body biography practice focused exclusively on the teachers’ feedback derived from their involvement in its implementation in their own classrooms. As previously mentioned, for ethical reasons, it was not possible to include photos of their actual body biographies. Future research would benefit from obtaining students’ responses, which could take place either within their respective classes or, across classes, allowing students to learn about what other students have produced. In addition to securing student feedback, data collection could focus on bringing both teachers and students together via such means as follow-up focus groups and daily debriefing sessions in their classes.

As Lewkowich (2019) states, “In contemporary conversation, then, ways of being and becoming subjects of literacy that may have once been considered periphery and oppositional are now regarded as potential sites of individual and collective meaning making” (p. 4). The current study on the application of the body biography in three secondary school English classrooms underscores the importance of extending opportunities of learning beyond more conventional means, giving “...agency of a real kind to the text maker” (Kress, 2000, p. 340). Furthermore, multimodal learning provides a rich literacy experience, challenging linear methods of teaching by emphasizing the relationship existing among materials, methods and process. As a result of their classroom experiences related to the multimodal possibilities of the body biography, the three teachers came to reconsider their instructional agendas with the view to optimally supporting their students as they process and express what they know.

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## About the Authors:

**Dr. Cynthia Morawski** is Professor Emeritus in the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa. Her research interests include narrative inquiry, multimodal learning, learning differences, literacy, and design. She is also a visual artist specializing in mixed media.

**Jessica Sokolowski** is an LTA professor and cohort lead for the Imagination, Creativity and Innovation Cohort (ICI) in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa. Passionate about access to the arts, Jessica offers programming in the arts through her studio, CreatEd, and is a steering committee member with the Canadian Network for Imagination and Creativity (CNIC). She is committed to educating teachers on arts-based and experiential approaches to teaching and learning.

**e-Mail:** morawski@uottawa.ca