Multimodal Instruction as a Bridge to Required Reading in Today's Secondary Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

A series of groans ring out through a high school English classroom. On desks lie copies of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960), *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne, 1878), or *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1925)—insert any canonical text and let the sighing commence. For both student and teacher, this is a far-too-familiar situation. Why do required readings elicit such negativity? Is there a way to turn these tides of student opinion?

As a recently graduated college student (first author) preparing to become a secondary English teacher, there is much about my K-12 education that is still fresh in my memory. From personal experiences, as well as those of family and friends, I have witnessed what I would term an ongoing issue of students exhibiting disinterest in the required reading of canonical literature.

One such instance comes to mind from my freshman year of high school, the reading of *Romeo & Juliet* (Shakespeare, 1597). The text was treated, by both teacher and student, as an obligation to be pushed through rather than a rich learning experience. Why would we, as students, care about what we were reading when there was no engagement with real-world issues and no application of the text to the contexts we lived in? How are students expected to engage with required reading if instructors place such emphasis on the "required" that the joy of the "reading" is lost?

Because of these observations, I inquired if there was a way to resolve these negative perceptions of required reading. Had teachers found ways to create student engagement with required texts, and, if so, how? These factors led me to create a multi-level inquiry: "How are teachers engaging today's secondary English classroom with required reading? Are there strategies to be found that can be applied as an intervention for struggling and disinterested readers? What can these findings tell us about the future of English education?"

In the process of this investigation, the scholarly work overwhelmingly screamed one answer: "MULTIMODALITY!!!!!" I was taken aback—what even was multimodality, and what did it have to do with an English classroom? Though delved into further in this article, the short answer is that *multimodality* is the use of multiple modes in one piece of literature, in which literature itself holds a multifaceted definition (Benians & Brian, 2024; Kalantzis & Cope, 2025; Jewitt, 2008; Walsh, 2010).

There is a deep theoretical basis for why multimodal instruction yields not only positive student engagement, but also genuine, real-world-preparation for students. From these findings, the conclusion was drawn that small changes in classroom instruction aligned with multimodality theory can create big changes in student engagement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Engaging Multiple Literacies Through Multiple Modes

In order to understand the importance of engaging with literature through multiple modes, it is pertinent to understand that literature itself holds multiple facets. Like a diamond that can shift in appearance based on how you turn it, literacy and the making of meaning vary greatly according to the lenses through which you are viewing it.

Multiple Literacies

In a recent revision of their work on multiliteracies, Kalantzis and Cope posit an approach informed by the new literacy worlds of today's students. Specifically, they investigate the ways in which digital media has altered the landscape of literacy (Kalantzis & Cope, 2023). In their view, multiple literacies are interconnected pieces of discourse emerging from the *situation* and *form* the literacy has been created in (Kalantzis & Cope, 2023).

For example, when you read a magazine, you do not just interpret or read the words. You interact with the images, analyzing the choices behind the photographed individual's clothing and poses. You decipher the use of color in the magazine, wondering why they used red for that title instead of blue. You may even think about the thickness of the paper and what it has to say about the quality of the magazine. Without even realizing it, you have employed multiple literacies by just looking at a magazine spread. You have used the *situation* of the culture and time this magazine was made in, while also analyzing multiple aspects of the *form* that the magazine is produced in (Kalantzis & Cope, 2023).

Imagine, then, how complicated multiliteracies can become when introducing digital components. In a digital landscape, the reader must now engage with video and audio in addition to other categories of literacy. Digital literacy requires the reader to analyze the *situation* in which a video, article, or social media post was created, while engaging with multiple *forms* of literacy all in ready-made, in-your-face deliverable, one after another after another. The students of today's secondary classroom are navigating through thousands of these complex situations daily, wherein they must be multiliterate to be a cognizant member of our increasingly interconnected society (Kalantzis & Cope, 2025; Jewitt, 2008).

Multiple Modes

How, then, do we engage with these multiple literacies? We do so through multiple modes, a process more commonly referred to as multimodality (Benians & Brian, 2024; Jewitt,

2008). Multiple modes can be defined as "organized sets of semiotic resources for meaning making" (Jewitt, 2008, p. 246).

Modes can, as the term multimodal suggests, take a myriad of forms. These include but are not limited to traditional written text, images, objects, kinesthetic movement, sound, speech or audio, and even the three-dimensional space a medium inhabits (Kalantzis & Cope, 2025). It is important to note that the modes themselves do not alter the meaning of a concept, but rather simply offer a new construct through which to interact with the concept. For example, a person can read a poem about a daisy, or look at an image of a daisy, or hold a daisy in their hand and understand that the concept of "daisy" does not shift based on the mode—merely their experience and understanding of the concept "daisy" shifts (Kalantzis & Cope, 2025).

Students on the secondary level understand this concept of multimodal engagement better, perhaps, than any other age group. The upcoming generation of secondary students were born well into the 21st century and have thus, on a generalized level, had some sort of interaction with multiple levels of technology since a very early age. As such, they are well-versed in the multiple modes present in digital media platforms. Due to this reality, educators must understand that maintaining student engagement is becoming an increasingly multimodal endeavor.

Why This Is Important in Practice

Educators can engage students and content in more meaningful ways by regarding multimodality as a valuable deliverable for instruction in the secondary English classroom. Multimodal resources can be used as tools to confront student disengagement in everyday practice. Before accessing this multimodal "toolbox," though, it is important to understand *why* students are disengaged from traditional methods of literature instruction.

Why Students Read (or Don't Read)

In assessing how to improve student engagement with reading in English classrooms, it is important to understand the students' motivations for reading in the first place. In a qualitative study of adolescents aged 15-16, researchers found that students chose to read mostly from intrinsic motivators—including reading to learn, to empathize, to be entertained, or to relax. Extrinsic motivators like family or teacher encouragement, however, were found to have very little effect on the students' choice to read (Wilkinson et. al., 2020). Students who did not read cited many factors for their disinterest, a combination of both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. These included a lack of free time, perception of reading as too effortful, a potential loss

of social capital, inability to find books of interest, and a sense they had grown out of reading for pleasure (Wilkinson et. al., 2020). Furthermore, students felt they were not being encouraged to read on their own as much as they had been in lower grades. One student said, "In primary, there used to be reading groups…but I don't think there's such an emphasis on reading once you get into high school, which I think also stops people from reading in their free time" (Wilkinson et. al, 2020, p. 162). If students are already teetering on the edge of "to read or not to read," our methods of instruction are then, clearly, of much importance in bringing students back from the brink of disengagement.

Make Reading Relatable Again (or Maybe for the First Time)

Especially for high school students, the value of literature and its instruction is solely another box to check before graduation. Secondary students are constantly—implicitly or explicitly—asking instructors to provide reasoning as to the value of literature beyond the box-check. It is part of the English educator's job to attempt to deliver to them the reason they seek.

Students often see little relatability in required readings and are less likely to devote the time necessary to engage with the literature. In a study of 7th-12th graders, students voiced what engaged them in literature instruction. The school in the study—filled to the brim with students who had been bureaucratically deemed as struggling readers—had decreased the number of students measuring far below grade level from 30% to 2.9% over only six years. Students saw changes in their attitudes towards reading as mostly from the results of instructor modeling (Francois, 2013).

Students highly valued a teacher who modeled not just reading to learn but also reading for pure enjoyment. Educators at this school provided students with individually curated book selections for independent reading time, based on the students' interests, backgrounds, and other factors. Individualized reading supplemented whole-class literature instruction instead of substituting it. This strategy paved the way for students to deeply engage with required readings. When teachers modeled having their own "why" for reading, students were more likely to be interested in discovering their "whys" as well (Francois, 2013). This principle applies to reading itself, but also to the instruction of reading and further English content.

Value of Multimodality as a Deliverable

Using multimodal instruction over other avenues is ideal because of its unique opportunities to scaffold. Secondary learners come into classrooms with years of experience engaging with multiple digital literacies (Baize, 2019; Jewitt, 2008; Walsh, 2010). Access to this

knowledge base can be found in classrooms by engaging the modes most students are already using daily. Students can feel more deeply valued as complex individuals if we create spaces where the complexities of their multiliterate lives are celebrated.

Furthermore, it is psychologically more conducive to learning to employ multiple modes instead of one in isolation (Benians & Brian, 2024). In an attempt to suggest multimodality as a viable alternative to the "learning styles" theory, researchers Amy Benians and Terri Brian cite a cognitive theory called "dual coding" to advocate for multiple mediums of learning. Dual coding suggests that "better learning will occur if visual information is overlaid with auditory information" since learning will be "processed separately by visual and auditory processing [centers], each of which is presumed to have a separate working memory compartment" (Benians & Brian, 2024, p. 55). Understanding both sociological and psychological implications of multimodal instruction is essential if instructors are to employ these strategies with intentionality.

How Teachers Traditionally Apply Multimodality

Many instructors are multimodally instructing required readings in a practical manner. Anecdotal sources showed students excelling in understanding of required readings through the use of multimodal instruction (Baize, 2019; Dallacqua & Sheahan, 2020; Visco, 2019).

Cultural Artifacts

Pop culture appears to be effective in engaging secondary students with literature (Baize, 2019; McConnell, 2019; Visco, 2019). When students made connections to cultural artifacts they were familiar with, previously missed connections to literary themes were made with greater ease (Visco, 2019).

Utilizing cultural artifacts allowed the "daunting" nature of required texts to be diminished when students connected what they knew to what they did not yet understand (Visco, 2019). Building this familiarity allowed students to comprehend the themes of increasingly challenging texts with greater confidence. Factoring student interest into facilitation of these familiar connections was also helpful to increase engagement (Visco, 2019). One educator connected with students' shared interest in "fandom" and the creation of "fan-fiction" (McConnell, 2019). Another teacher had students create "analytical remixes" of canonical texts as opposed to the traditional formal essay—using multimedia presentations, transitions, and intentional music choices for theme analysis (Baize, 2019). These cultural and creative connections do not replace the instruction of required readings but rather supplement

them with multimodal contexts that are more relatable and navigable for today's secondary students.

Multimodality in Conjunction with Traditional Literacies

Instruction of required readings will lack engagement and content understanding if they are taught in isolation (Dallacqua & Sheahan, 2020; Heller, 2020). When students engage with multiple sources regarding similar concepts, they gain a deeper understanding of themes in required readings (Dallacqua & Sheahan, 2020).

One instructor taught Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Shakespeare, 1601) alongside a graphic novel about teens navigating gangster-culture in Chicago. The instructor included these texts and others in a thematic unit about "Power and Privilege". The required reading was not elevated over the supplemental. Rather, both pieces were held as equally important to understanding the theme across different contexts. Students reported linking the texts as being more *relatable* for them than the traditionally challenging literature. This allowed them to make deeper connections to the theme of "Power and Privilege" (Dallacqua & Sheahan, 2020). Another researcher compared the teaching of both canonical and young-adult literature in secondary classrooms, finding that neither type was as effective in promoting engagement as they were in conjunction (Yang, 2022).

Multimodal Assessment

Formative and summative assessments, including multiple modes, are especially important. Multimodal assessments were found to increase student engagement and deepen understanding of concepts (Baize, 2019; Dallacqua & Sheahan, 2020; Visco, 2019). Students could construct displays of mastery that engaged multiple literacies. Students had a chance to showcase learning in a familiar manner that activates multiple levels of cognition (Baize, 2019; Visco, 2019; Walsh, 2010).

Too often, the label of "literature" or "classic" or "required" translates as "old" or "not relatable" or "too hard"—not just to our students, but educators as well. If multimodal assessments can bridge the gap between what students *do* know and what we want them to continue to learn, perhaps some of these negative connotations of required reading can be torn down for both learner and educator.

Theoretical Model

In understanding the basis of what multimodality is, why educators should implement it, and how educators are using it, a need for a framework emerges. Implementing a multimodal pedagogy in practice requires more than theories or anecdotes—it requires actionable steps.

From some of the foremost scholars on multiliteracies and multimodality comes such a framework. Kalantzis and Cope, along with other members of the New London Group, have been conducting research on how to implement these concepts in the classroom since the 1990s (Kalantzis & Cope, 2025). As Kalantzis and Cope first observed over 30 years ago, the increased frequency of student interactions with multiple literacies necessitates change to our educational system. Increased multimodal instruction should be implemented to accurately and robustly prepare students for real-world situations. Kalantzis' and Cope's pedagogical model for the instruction of multiliteracies is fourfold: *experiencing, conceptualizing, analyzing,* and *applying*. (Kalantzis & Cope, 2025).

Experiencing entails educators immersing students in processes that connect meaning from their real-world experiences, or what is known, to the concept being taught, or what is unknown. *Conceptualizing* occurs when students become active participants in the knowledge-gathering process. *Analyzing* frames the students' learning thus far in the contexts of the sociocultural world they inhabit. For example, today's schools cannot ignore the developments in artificial intelligence (AI), but students can be taught how to critically evaluate and apply AI tools in their work. Finally, *applying* allows students to display their knowledge of a concept by displaying mastery through a series of multiliterate practices (Kalantzis & Cope, 2025).

Building upon Kalantzis and Cope's model, multimodal delivery can build up literature instruction by allowing students to experience, conceptualize, analyze, and apply knowledge through multiple modes. Levels of high engagement can become the norm in secondary classrooms rather than the rarity. Effective instruction means bringing some of their world into the microcosms of society that are classrooms. If students can see themselves in the ways we instruct literature, perhaps we can push them to see themselves in the literature we instruct.

PUTTING MULTIMODAL THEORY INTO PRACTICE

Classroom-Based Informal Investigation

After conducting extensive research on the theoretical background of multimodal integration in the secondary English curriculum, I wondered what these strategies would look like when implemented in pre-service teaching experiences.

My (first author) pre-service teaching experience was part of a course preparing college students for semester-long clinical student teaching during their final semester. The lessons described in this article were taught by me, a pre-service teacher, in the fall semester of my senior year.

These lessons were taught in a classroom of seventh grade Honors students in a required English course. The classroom was part of a large, urban, public middle school that consisted of diverse racial, social, and economic student profiles. My supervisory teacher had been teaching for three years. Students in her classroom consisted of differentiating ability levels and accommodation requirements.

In planning these lessons, I sought to implement the multimodal theories that research had elicited. However, lessons had to be aligned to the unit plan my supervisory teacher implemented in her classroom. This provided multiple factors to consider when constructing my multimodally-integrated lessons. Some factors included how digital literacy would factor into my instruction, what types of outside literacies I would engage students in, and what formats of cultural artifacts I wanted to utilize (Jewitt, 2008; Visco, 2019).

21st Century Connections to a Fourfold Model

Aligning instruction to Kalantzis and Cope's (2025) four-part instructional framework—*experiencing*, *conceptualizing*, *analyzing*, and *applying*—was a major step in this endeavor. The table below re-states the definition of each step of Kalantzis and Cope's pedagogical model, then observes how the process was utilized in both of my taught lessons.

[Table 1 Here]

Lesson 1

The first lesson addressed setting and plot development, using the example of a utopian society. The beginning of the lesson included the following journal prompt: "If you could create a perfect society, what would that look like? What would you include or not include? Why?" This prompt was meant to center students in the *experience* of utopian decision-making. After sharing answers to the journal prompt, I defined the word "utopia" through direct instruction.

Students were then invited to *conceptualize* the definition of utopia by connecting it to their prior knowledge, such as how Disney's *Zootopia* fits the definition of that term (Howard & Moore, 2016). As the teacher, I saw this as a small moment to connect students' outside literacies to the concept being taught, a tenet of multimodal instruction. Students were then asked to read individually an excerpt from *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993), containing a utopian setting that heavily influenced the main character's emotional state, thus affecting the excerpt's plot development. While annotating the excerpt, students were asked to *analyze* critically how the utopian setting influenced the plot of the excerpt. To *apply* their knowledge, students participated in discussion-based stations, which included prompts like:

- How can you tell, from the passage, that [this] society is a utopia?
- How does the setting of the [excerpt] contribute to the feelings (ex: anxious, scared, etc.) you had when you were reading the passage?
- Circle any words that tell you what [the main character] is feeling. How do you think the setting of the [excerpt] contributed to those emotions?

In stations, students were to display the knowledge gained from initial independent reading in a controlled space. While in this controlled space, students engaged in written, visual, and oral modes of communication. This forum was meant to create a scaffold of application throughout the students' growing understanding of learning objectives.

Lesson 2

The second lesson concerned informational texts. The text selected was from the educational resource site CommonLit on the topic of censorship, entitled "Censorship: For The People or For Controlling the People?" (McBirney, 2016). As the teacher, choosing this article was an intentional decision on my part in order to continue a critical discussion on the implications of a utopian society from the previous lesson. In accordance with classroom procedures, this lesson was also started with a journal prompt, which stated: "Which do you think is more important: freedom of speech or security? Why?" This journal prompt was used as a bridge to connect students' previous understandings of utopias and to center their *experience* around a new concept.

After introducing the text, the concept of censorship was clearly defined for students. In this explanation, the concept of censorship was connected to the previous discussion of *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993), focusing specifically on how the excerpt exemplified the tension between the censored (citizens) and those censoring (utopian government). Furthermore, a class discussion was held on why societies—like utopias—would utilize censorship for the promotion

of “perfection”. This discussion was a small way to help students *conceptualize* through multiple lenses and across multiple texts. Students then individually read the informational text, *analyzing* how the topic of censorship correlated with previous discussions on utopias.

Finally, students *applied* their learning through the creation of a multimodal product. Students worked in groups to create a poster identifying one type of censorship. The article detailed five types of censorship: moral censorship, military censorship, political censorship, religious censorship, and corporate censorship (McBirney, 2016). Groups were asked to choose one of the types and create an informational poster. Assessment criterion for this activity included an explanation of the censorship type, a quote from the article, and a visual example of that type. The goal of this lesson was for students to be at once analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing information to create products of learning.

Small Shifts for Big Impact

In both of these lessons, small shifts were made in an effort to catalyze big advances in engagement. For example, shifting the discussion of the word “utopia” to its applications in the world of *Zootopia* (Howard & Moore, 2016) allowed students to connect something they knew—an outside literacy—to a concept they had no stake in beforehand. Additionally, the extended class discussion about the connections between *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993) and the concept of censorship allowed students to engage with an informational text in a way that held meaning for them. Through small changes—the addition of a real-world example or an extension of a discussion to include multiple viewpoints—our students get to engage deeper with the English curriculum. Even more significant, however, is that these small changes provide a platform for students’ voices to be heard and included in the curriculum. These shifts create a space where students figure out what they believe about important topics, as well as how to voice those opinions through multiple avenues and modes.

INSIGHTS & LESSONS LEARNED

Realities of Multimodal Learning versus Ideal Implementation

Insights about the true nature of multimodal instruction were gained from employing these strategies. The largest lesson learned was that multimodal frameworks are in no way cookie-cutter molds. Rather, multimodal instruction requires flexibility in its conception, definition, and implementation.

In the reality of implementing multimodal strategies, there were many challenges. The time constraint of a 50-minute period was perhaps the largest inhibition for the lessons' scope of multimodality. Ideally, there would have been elements of digital literacy, creating a grander synthesis with multiple different modes. Instead, the pacing of short periods made it necessary to eliminate the supplemental material to retain the central learning objectives.

The realities of this time constraint did, however, positively foster prioritization. Instead of prioritizing the product created, the process of learning had to take precedence. When implementing multimodality in the classroom, it is crucial for educators to remember what the purpose of the multiple modes are. There must be an intention behind these multimodal activities. Otherwise, we risk the use of technology or other modes simply for their features and not because they add any value to the learning experience. Additionally, it is important to consider what the students truly need to know and what flexibility in the form can look like—without sacrificing the material or the student's engagement with it.

Another challenge was planning to ensure that students would understand multimodal delivery. I realized, when instructing these lessons, that detailed, step-by-step instructions are imperative when asking students to engage in a new type of activity. Ideally, students would already have a cohesive foundation of knowledge for the activities presented. However, the reality of education is that every student is different, and assuming that every student possesses the same level of understanding is a recipe for failure. Multimodal instruction and assessment require deeper cognitive engagement, thus eliciting deeper concept explanation.

One success was my own realization that engagement comes from understanding your students. The old adage of "know your students" held true in my experiences as a student observer. For example, I garnered from my observations that there were students in the class who may enjoy a more visual exploration of a concept. Using that information, I was able to create a multimodal form of assessment—censorship posters—that took student interest into the construction of the curriculum. In an ideal world, there would be multiple ways for students to express their knowledge, in ways that accorded to their skills and interests. Realistically,

however, we must take the wins of engagement where we can find them—creating, whenever possible, spaces for students' specialized interests and talents to shine through.

Changing & Challenging What Multimodality Means

Implementing these strategies helped change my understanding of what multimodal instruction means. Previously, my definition of multimodality consisted of only digital, high-energy, every-second engagement. After these lessons, I found true integration of multiple modes to be in the small, everyday ways.

Processing new information by utilizing daily, multiple-mode interactives is multimodal instruction. Creating synthesis in a product with multiple facets is multimodal instruction. Neither is more "multimodal" than the other. In order to truly engage students in material they perceive as unimportant, the educator must maintain flexibility in their personal conceptions of multimodality. For example, multimodality can be embedded by educators into the everyday of instruction—through formatives, group work, slide decks, and so on—and not just in large-scale assessments. By maintaining flexibility in how educators define multimodality, students can define their own learning through multiple avenues as well.

What Else Can Be Done?

There are many future directions of this inquiry. As authors, we wonder what specific best practices could be used for conducting daily multimodal instruction. We also wonder if multimodal assessment is most fruitful for improving student retention of concepts when conducted as a formative or a summative. Finally, we believe that significant consideration must be taken in order to accommodate the multimodal lessons and strategies described in this article for all students, regardless of ability level.

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