What’s in Your Backpack?

Each day my friends and I haul our own personal libraries into school. In our backpacks exists an amalgam of books: science textbooks, novels from home, novels for school. We carry phones loaded with opportunities for communication and mp3 players brimming with lyrics. Some of us even squeeze in laptops. Still, we can’t carry everything. A few books lay strewn across the back seat of our cars with the occasional magazine. Sometimes, something as simple as a tattered flier, MapQuest directions, or the latest set of popular guitar chords falls between the seats to remind us of a past outing.

—Genevieve Hay, high school student, email exchange

Genevieve, who wrote her senior thesis on rock journalism as literature, is like many adolescents. The texts she uses blur across contexts. Her backpack overflows with the 21st-century and pop culture texts that adolescents and adults, too, use throughout their daily lives.
Bring It to Class is about unpacking and delving into the pop culture resources that are part of 21st-century texts in students' backpacks. Many teachers aren’t quite sure how all of these texts connect to their instruction, whether it’s in English language arts or math class. Take, for example, the tension Chandler Dabit feels:

“It’s still hard for me as a reading teacher. To me, text is still text. When it comes to testing, the bottom line is that students must be able to read written text. I know that kids are really into lots of things, and those things can be a good way to support and emphasize the written text. But I’m still a reading teacher, and I need to teach students about print.”

—Chandler Dabit, 8th-grade reading teacher, interview

This book is designed to help educators reflect on long-held beliefs—that informal learning is separated, often by school walls, from formal learning; that print is the mode of choice for communicating in the classroom; and that only people with low-brow tastes engage with pop culture, while the rest of us “educated” folks distance ourselves from television, comic books, and the like, as if the plague had just announced itself.

Most importantly, this book is about connecting texts and texts that connect—pop culture texts, school texts, and texts students create—to develop the necessary competencies for 21st-century demands. Connecting texts that blur across contexts addresses the educational purposes of acknowledging and building on students’ literacies in order to enable them to learn both relevant content and the thinking processes that can lead to productive and fulfilled lives.

We demonstrate how teachers use pop culture in field-tested approaches with students in grades 4–12 to connect to students’ identities, to their social networks, to their belief systems, and to their literacy learning. Our aim is to make emerging theoretical perspectives practical for teachers.
This book is written for novice and experienced educators, classroom teachers, librarians and media specialists, coaches and administrators who want to connect to students. We include various student, educator, and researcher perspectives on pop culture in educational settings. We draw from email communications, interviews, and data transcripts to illustrate not only these different views but also how communication differs across 21st-century texts. For example, an interview transcript shows oral language while a blog posting may show conversational language and an email exchange may seem formal or informal, depending on writers’ relationships to one another.

While some educators easily incorporate pop culture texts into instruction, others find it difficult because pop culture texts often fall outside the definition of textual practices used at school. We understand that it can be hard to “wrap your mind around” a text that may have been banned in schools (like a graphic novel) or that wasn’t defined as text (like a film) only a few years ago and is now promoted as central to the curriculum! Yet most educators can agree that the texts of our day-to-day lives have rapidly changed in the past 10 years, and technology has forever altered how we interact with one another and learn about ourselves and the world.

A TEXTUAL DAY IN A LIFE

Texts are important in our daily lives for reading and writing and for developing the skills to comprehend authorial intent. But it is equally crucial to understand how texts function as social practices that show identities, values, beliefs, and social networks (Knobel, 1999; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Street, 1995).

What do we mean when we say that texts function as “social practices”? We use texts to connect to others. For example, adolescents form friendships via pop culture. They communicate on social networking sites such as MySpace about a favorite TV show...
and share inside jokes that nonviewers don’t understand. Texts, therefore, may be analyzed as artifacts that show users’ identities, values, beliefs, and literacy learning in their social practices (Pahl & Rowsell, in press). Some of the texts we use at home we also use at work, for example. What are the artifacts in a student’s life, in a teacher’s life, or in the life of one of the authors of this book? See if you find your own textual practices connecting across the artifacts shared in the following Textual Day in a Life vignettes.

**A Textual Day in a Student’s Life**

It is summer. Blogs, chat rooms, discussion boards, and an infl ow of text messages replace textbooks. Virtual text has reclaimed its throne, for the time being. My day begins by turning on my Dell Inspiron 530 and checking (in this order) Facebook, Yahoo! Answers, and email. After perusing these online textual smorgasbords, I make my way downstairs. Here I can usually be found reading the cooking instructions for an Amy’s Organic Bean Burrito. After breakfast, I watch television for hours on end—fl ipping channels in desperation for a noteworthy movie. Being without a driver’s license, I typically must wait until 6:00, when my mother gets off work, or for an invite from a friend before I can vacate my home. These excursions consist of a visit to Grandma’s, supermarket, video store, restaurant, and on occasion, social event (such as a party). When I return home, I turn on the computer, anticipating a handful of new status updates and messages. Before bed, I scan YouTube videos or download PETA podcasts, before dozing off to the soothing sounds of whatever animal is being examined at an uncomfortably close angle on Animal Planet, Discovery, or National Geographic.

—Jordan Ford, high school senior, email exchange

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identities</th>
<th>Texts</th>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Social Networks</th>
<th>Literacy Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Textbooks</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Teachers, students</td>
<td>English, math, science, history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teenager</td>
<td>Blogs, chat rooms, discussion boards, text messages, email, TV</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Family and friends, celebrities, others</td>
<td>Pop culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>Friendship</td>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>Maintaining close bonds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetarian</td>
<td>Amy’s Organic, PETA</td>
<td>Healthy living, ethics, activism</td>
<td>Activists, vegans/vegetarians</td>
<td>Animal rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature enthusiast</td>
<td>Animal Planet, Discovery, National Geographic</td>
<td>Conservation</td>
<td>Naturalists, animals</td>
<td>Saving the planet</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Textual Day in a Teacher’s Life

I prefer to begin my day by reading the major articles in the local newspaper delivered to my door. Getting my 4-year-old ready for school in addition to myself keeps me from reading the full articles. Then it’s on to “My life in a hamster’s wheel.” On the drive to work I alternate between reading billboards and street signs, singing children’s nursery rhymes to my daughter, and (I must admit) texting and emailing on my BlackBerry. Once I get to work as the head of the English/Language Arts Department, I read and respond to all pertinent departmental emails. Then, during instructional time, I use varying strategies to improve my students’ literacy levels, including comic books, Vocabtoons, SmartBoard activities, and so on. After school, I sing along to the car radio, listen to an iPod audiobook at the gym, check Facebook statuses and post comments, read and write lesson plans, and, if time permits, complete my reading of the newspaper or a novel for fun.

—Chandler Dabit, 8th-grade reading teacher, personal reflection

Table Int.2. Analysis of Chandler’s Textual Day in a Life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identities</th>
<th>Texts</th>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Social Networks</th>
<th>Literacy Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>Local newspaper (in print)</td>
<td>Current events</td>
<td>Community member</td>
<td>Headlines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Text message, Email</td>
<td>Communicating</td>
<td>Colleagues/ELA department</td>
<td>Faculty’s needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Vocabtoons, SmartBoard, Reading and writing lesson plans</td>
<td>Students’ literacy achievement</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Means of connecting students to content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer</td>
<td>Radio songs, iPod audiobook, Reading novel</td>
<td>Leisure experiences</td>
<td>Others who like same songs or stories</td>
<td>Items of popular interest, Lives of families and friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Facebook, Singing nursery rhymes</td>
<td>Language play with child</td>
<td>Friends and family, Parenting</td>
<td>Child’s development of sounds, vocabulary, and story content</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Textual Day in an Author’s Life

My text experiences toggle between virtual and print. At 5:00 A.M., I skim a speed tip chart inset next to the full article in Runner’s World before heading out to meet the early-bird runners. On arriving home, I download to my iPod a podcast interview on World Café with Michael Franti about his new album to listen to later. I text-message our babysitter asking about her arrival time while I make breakfast. I put March (Brooks, 2006), a fan fiction spin-off of John March’s account of his experiences in the Civil War while away from Marmee and the girls from Little Women (Alcott, 2004) and the pick for this month’s girls’ book club, by the back door as a reminder to return it to the public library. At midmorning, my computer windows open onto various worlds: Facebook status updates of long-lost childhood friends, current neighbors, and professional colleagues; a search result for scholarly articles on reading workshop implementation; an Omega Weekend sign-up for a yoga workshop in New York City; email exchanges with colleagues and my husband; and two images of my children I’m editing in Adobe Photoshop to post online. I finish the day with “family movie night,” watching Ice Age (Wedge, 2002)—for the third time—with our sons.

—Margaret Hagood, literacy professor, personal reflection

Table Int.3. Analysis of Margaret’s Textual Day in a Life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identities</th>
<th>Texts</th>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Social Networks</th>
<th>Literacy Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Athlete</td>
<td>Runner’s World, Omega Weekend</td>
<td>Exercise/health</td>
<td>Runners, Yogis</td>
<td>Strategies for improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Text message, Adobe Photoshop, Ice Age</td>
<td>Scheduling, Documenting childhood, Time with children</td>
<td>Young adults, Children, Family</td>
<td>How to use texting effectively, Editing strategies, Children’s humor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Scholarly articles</td>
<td>Literacy education</td>
<td>Scholars, Students, Colleagues, Family, Friends</td>
<td>Methods for implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman, friend</td>
<td>Facebook, Podcast, March, Little Women</td>
<td>Connections to friends, Music, Activism, Pleasure reading</td>
<td>Yogis, Political activists, Music lovers, Female book club</td>
<td>Connections between personal and professional lives, Issues about nonviolence, Politics in Iraq, Civil War history</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reflection Activity:
What’s Your Textual Day in a Life Look Like?

Use the following chart to list the texts you use throughout any given day. Think broadly about what counts as a text.

- What identities do you associate with your text choices?
- How do your text choices show your beliefs and values about literacy learning?
- What social networks are apparent from your text uses?
- How does your analysis compare to the student’s, teacher’s, and author’s?

Table Int.4. Analysis of Your Textual Day in a Life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identities</th>
<th>Texts</th>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Social Networks</th>
<th>Literacy Learning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

WHAT’S THE HANG UP WITH POP CULTURE AND TEXTS?

While some teachers readily embrace pop culture, others are more hesitant and skeptical about how it connects to classroom learning. Can you hear yourself, your colleagues, or your students in these voices?

I wish that teachers listened to the music we like and would learn some of the dances through watching the videos. It would be really cool for a teacher to ask me how to do a dance or learn about a song. We could get to know teachers some, and teachers could get to know us some.

—Derrantae Holmes, 7th-grade student, interview
Text to me is anything that is created in any kind of symbology, whether it's words or images or a grocery list. It can be a telephone number; it can be a billboard on the highway. It can be anything from a caption to *War and Peace*. Of course text is connected to pop culture like text messaging in the digital age with all of the ways people communicate with MySpace and Vonage on the computer. The ways that we communicate now is changing the definition of text in some way. We don't have a choice. We just have to deal.

—Susan Kern, elementary, middle, and high school ESOL teacher, interview

Using pop culture texts helps teachers to understand where the kids are coming from in this generation because there's just a gap there.

—Nadine Brown, assistant principal, middle school, interview

It depends on how teachers find out about my pop culture interests and how they use it in class. If the teacher watches and notices some things that I like, like music or sports, and then uses it in class just to get me to interact, then that is weird and stalkerish. Then the teacher is going too far. The teacher doesn't need to do all that just to get me interested in the class.

—Caroline Frangos, high school sophomore, interview

I don't look to using popular culture for its own sake. I have to see some connection to the standards, and I also have to be able to achieve some connection to it myself. Essentially, it's as much about my popular culture if not more than the students.

—Becky Haste, high school English teacher, email exchange

For many educators, pop culture presents a paradox: While its texts might bridge gaps between teachers’ and students’ literacy interests, schools must still be mindful of issues of appropriateness. High interest in genre and digital format can't trump content.

*Bring It to Class* addresses the tensions and messiness of working with pop culture, illustrating how balancing didactic lesson planning and organic inquiry can open spaces to value adolescents’ texts, identities, and social networks that link learners and content. Throughout the book, we present ways to update literacy...
What's in Your Backpack?

instruction in a contemporary world that is changing at a pace once thought impossible.

VIEWS OF POP CULTURE

There are three different ways to view pop culture: as mass culture, as folk culture, and as everyday culture (see Table 1.5).

When we engage with pop culture texts (or any text for that matter), we negotiate the producer’s assigned meanings and our own accepted meaning, at a given point in time and place. In this way, we construct meaning and determine how we are going to use a text in a given context and what the text means. (See section in Chapter 1 on production-in-use for further discussion on constructing meaning.) For example, rap lyrics that seem on the surface to some users to be callous and have little socially redeeming value may hold great value for street performers who are generating revolutionary messages about social inequality. Our view(s) of pop culture influences not only how we construct meaning about a text, but how we use pop culture in our instruction.

Table Int.5. Views of Pop Culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mass Culture:</th>
<th>Folk Culture:</th>
<th>Everyday Culture:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For the people</td>
<td>Of the people</td>
<td>For and of the people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>It is assumed that audiences passively accept the text and the meanings intended by the text producer.</th>
<th>It is assumed that texts have no inherently produced meaning.</th>
<th>It is assumed that both producers and audiences hold meaning-making potential.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pop culture texts are part of low culture, as opposed to high culture.</td>
<td>Pop culture is an important part of people’s lives.</td>
<td>Pop culture is an important aspect of life, and we learn about audiences’ identities and beliefs when we study text uses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pop culture connotes pleasure, which is unworthy of serious study.</td>
<td>Text study focuses on the audience’s uses of texts, not on producer’s intended meaning.</td>
<td>Study of texts focuses on the producer’s intended meaning and on the audience’s constructed meaning, which may differ.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Hagood, 2008
It can be challenging to change long-held views about pop culture. For example, Amy Haynie completed a 2-year professional development experience in which she learned about 21st-century texts and incorporated pop culture texts into her middle school writing classes (Hagood, Provost, Skinner, & Egelson, 2008). Yet she felt conflicted about this practice, and her views of pop culture didn’t end up fitting neatly into one category.

Texts are only things that kids can read from rather than watch. I definitely don’t think of them as visual—like movies or TV shows or other videos or other visual forms, and I don’t think of texts as music either. I really have a hard time with that. Texts have to have words that can be read.

Education in my life has always been extremely important, and TV was not allowed in our home. Well, for maybe a half-hour. I am of a traditional mindset. My parents are a librarian and a high school English teacher. I was taught that we didn’t learn from videos, and they were only to be used in conjunction with a book, after it had been read, like in being able to compare and contrast. So I just have a hard time with that.

—Ms. Haynie, 8th-grade writing teacher, personal reflection

Many educators feel like Ms. Haynie: Only the printed word can be deemed “text worthy.” Yet when she gives writing assignments, she draws on students’ unique interests and uses pop culture to help students make meaningful connections. She explained:

Their current writing assignment begins with a prompt where a girl has gone missing from a hotel room. It says, “Here are the clues. Write your story.” Well, all the kids watch investigative shows on TV. Now is their chance to write about them. This is the one paper that kids turn in, and turn in on time, because it’s something they’re all interested in. Because they have to write it, they’ll make it their own.

She sees the value of pop culture as a resource to engage students in traditional curriculum. She uses pop culture, which she doesn’t view as text, to help students see connections to writing, which she does view as text. When she links television
to the curriculum, she shifts her view of pop culture from mass culture to everyday culture. This is a give-and-take view of pop culture: Texts produced by mass media do influence people’s meaning making, but only to the extent that people give value to the messages the media convey. Audiences construct meaning depending on the context in which they view, read, hear, or write the text. Pop culture as everyday culture values teachers as crucial negotiators in helping students construct meaning using several different instructional models (see Chapter 2 for further discussion).

**Reflection Activity:**
**What Are My Views of Pop Culture?**

Our views of pop culture influence how we approach texts with students. As you read this book, and try out new lessons with students, we suggest you return to these questions:

- Do I see pop culture as mass, folk, and/or everyday culture?
- When does my view change?
- How does my view connect to my identities, my values, my belief systems, and my social networks?
- How does my view influence my instruction with students?
- How does my view change depending on the text discussed and the context in which I would use it?

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

1. **Still unsure about what pop culture is?** Go to http://www.wsu.edu/~amerstu/pop/. Washington State University’s American Studies program offers various definitions of pop culture in America and internationally, along with resources for exploring how pop culture gets used across cultures.

2. **What is your knowledge of pop culture?** Go to http://www.popculturemadness.com/. This website gives an overview of all things pop culture updated daily. Glance over the homepage and count how many of the news stories you already know about. Which are unknown to you? How do
those known/unknown items connect to your own pop
culture interests?

3. **What are your school’s and district’s guidelines for using**
   **pop culture texts?** Check out your school district’s website,
policy manual, and curriculum guide. What do these
documents say about the kinds of texts allowable in your
instruction? Are there also policies specific to your school?
What views of pop culture are implicit in the descriptions or
specifications?