

The 400 Blows as Cinematic Literacy Narrative

By James Trier

Introduction

In this article, I will discuss a multiphase project that I designed to engage a group of secondary English preservice teachers in a process of reconceptualizing the initial problematic views of literacy that they held upon entering the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program. The sequential activities of the project (listed below) involved the preservice teachers in acquiring a more complex understanding of literacy and literacy practices. At the center of this project was the idea of literacy narratives. To set up my discussion about the project, I will first explain what a literacy narrative is and then I will outline the specific activities that comprised the project.

In their influential article “Reading Literacy Narratives,” Eldred and Mortensen (1992) define literacy narratives as stories “that foreground issues of language acquisition and literacy. . . . Literacy narratives sometimes include explicit images

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of schooling and teaching,” and “they include texts that both challenge and affirm scripted ideas about literacy” (p. 513). Eldred and Mortensen also state, “When we read for literacy narratives, we study how the text constructs a character’s ongoing, social process of language acquisition” and “we focus on the battle over language that is foregrounded in the text” (pp. 512, 529). But what kinds of texts can be read as examples of literacy narratives? The specific

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text that Eldred and Mortensen analyze in detail as a literacy narrative is Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*.

Another kind of text that can be taken up as a literacy narrative is the short story. For example, in her article "Narratives of Socialization: Literacy in the Short Story," Eldred (1991) analyzes "My Kinsman, Major Molineaux" by Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Barn Burning" by William Faulkner, and "The Lesson" by Toni Cade Bambara as literacy narratives that dramatize "the collision between competing discourse communities, their language conventions, and their inherent social logics" (p. 689). Along with plays and short stories, autobiographical texts can be read for the literacy narratives that they construct, as Mary Soliday (1994) shows in her article "Translating Self and Differences through Literacy Narratives." Soliday explains that as part of a basic writing course, she involves her students in reading a variety of literacy narratives, including Amy Tan's (1991) essay "My Mother's English," Gloria Naylor's (1991) essay "The Meaning of a Word," Richard Rodriguez's (1982) book *Hunger for Memory*, as well as others (Gilyard, 1991; Hoffman, 1989; Hoggart, 1957; Lu, 1987).

Novels can also be read as literacy narratives, as Clark and Medina (2000) explain in their article "How Reading and Writing Literacy Narratives Affect Preservice Teachers' Understandings of Literacy, Pedagogy, and Multiculturalism." As part of a project whose purpose is concisely encapsulated in their title, Clark and Medina engaged preservice teachers in reading as literacy narratives the novels *Push* by Sapphire (1997), *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* by Lois-Ann Yamanaka (1997), and *Rivethhead* by Ben Hamper (as well as the autobiographical works *Always Running La Vida Loca* by Luis Rodriguez, 1993; "Mother Tongue" by Amy Tan, 1991; and *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong-Kingston, 1985).

The above examples illustrate that plays, short stories, autobiographical accounts, and novels can be read for the literacy narratives that they construct. What these kinds of texts have in common is that they are all print texts. In the rest of this article I will discuss how films can be interpreted as "cinematic literacy narratives"—films such as *The 400 Blows*, *The Corn Is Green*, *Dead Poets Society*, *Educating Rita*, *Higher Learning*, *The Paper Chase*, and many more.

In the project I designed, Francois Truffaut's classic film *The 400 Blows* (1959) was analyzed as a cinematic literacy narrative. As mentioned, the context of the project is that of an MAT program. My main responsibility in the MAT program is teaching an English theory-methods course during the fall semester. Each secondary English preservice teacher enters the MAT program with a bachelor degree in English, and most of the students have never taught. The particular English cohort that I will discuss in this article was comprised of 20 white students (17 females, 3 males) in their early twenties. The literacy project that I designed was comprised of these four activities, which took place over one academic semester:

1. Students articulated their initial views of literacy by viewing a selected

segment from the film *The 400 Blows* and interpreting it for the “literacy content” represented in the scene.

2. Students were introduced to the concept of “literacy events”—which constitute literacy narratives—through Mary Hamilton’s (2000) chapter “Expanding the New Literacy Studies: Using Photographs to Explore Literacy as Social Practice.”

3. Students reinterpreted the segment from *The 400 Blows* through the theoretical lens and language that Hamilton provides.

4. Students next viewed *The 400 Blows* in its entirety and wrote an analytical essay in which they discussed the film as a cinematic literacy narrative comprised of a series of literacy events. (Students then went on to analyze other school films in small groups.)

As I will explain, preservice teachers underwent a change in their views of literacy as a result of this project.

I. Discovering Students’ Initial Notions of Literacy

Barton and Hamilton (1998) write in *Local Literacies*, “We start out from the position that people’s understanding of literacy is an important aspect of their learning, and that people’s theories guide their actions. It is here that a study of literacy practices has its most immediate links with education” (p. 13). Applied to teacher education, this position statement can be slightly altered so that it reads: “Preservice teachers’ understanding of literacy is arguably the most important aspect of their learning to teach, and their theory of literacy will guide the intertwined actions of designing curricula and teaching it.” As much of the learning-to-teach literature has shown (e.g., Feiman-Nemser, 1983; Wideen, Mayer-Smith & Moon, 1998), many preservice teachers (I will also interchangeably refer to them as “students” hereafter) come to teacher education programs holding unexamined assumptions, beliefs, and knowledge about students, teaching, learning, and schools. What these last two statements imply is that it is crucial for teacher educators to engage preservice teachers in examining their initial views of literacy so that students can reconceptualize any problematic notions.

To discover the preservice teachers’ views of literacy, I engaged them in an activity in which they were to analyze a particular segment of the film *The 400 Blows* and then write an essay in which they responded to this prompt: “Analyze this segment of the film for its ‘literacy content,’ and do this by drawing on whatever knowledge and understanding you have about what the term ‘literacy’ means and signifies.” Because this segment of the film is central to the discussions of preservice teachers’ analyses in this and the next section, I need to summarize the segment in detail. This segment is at the very beginning of the film and lasts about seven

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minutes. It takes place in the classroom of a male teacher and a group of boys in the seventh or eighth grade.

At the beginning of the segment, a student seated near the back of the room takes from inside his desk a pin-up poster of a voluptuous female in a provocative pose and passes it to the student ahead of him, who in turn passes it along. The pin-up eventually is handed to Antoine Doinel, the main character of the film. The teacher sees Doinel with the pin-up, confiscates it, and punishes Doinel by sending him to stand in the corner of the room behind a large blackboard resting on an easel. Not long after, the bell rings and everyone but Doinel leaves for recess. Doinel writes on the wall:

Here poor Antoine Doinel was
unjustifiably punished by Sourpuss
for a pin-up fallen from the sky.
It will be an eye for an eye.

When recess ends, the boys flock to where Doinel is, peeking at his poem on the wall. When the teacher enters, he sees the commotion around Doinel and asks, “What’s so interesting over there?” As he approaches, the boys scatter to their seats. The teacher sees Doinel’s poem, grabs Doinel by the nape of the neck, shoves him, and then addresses the class, saying: “We have a new poet in our class. Only he can’t tell an Alexandrine from a decasyllabic verse. Doinel, you’ll conjugate for tomorrow—go to your seat—in indicative, conditional and subjunctive tenses the sentence, ‘I deface the classroom walls and abuse French verse.’” He also says: “Now, Doinel, go get some water and erase those insanities, or I’ll make you lick the wall, my friend.”

As Doinel leaves the room, the teacher begins a lesson that involves students in copying the lines of a poem that he writes on the blackboard into their notebooks. Eventually, Doinel returns with a large bowl of water and a cloth rag and begins wiping away his poem. At this point, the teacher has written down the following lines of the poem (titled “Le Lievre,” which means “The Hare,”) on the blackboard:

In the season when the thickets glow with flowers,
When the black tips of my long ears
Could be seen above the still green rye
From which I nibbled the tender stems as I played around,
One day, unaware that I was there, fast asleep in my hutch,
Little Margot surprised me—

The next line that the teacher slowly recites and writes is: “She loved me so, my beautiful mistress.” As the writing of this line unfolds over five or six seconds, the students make “smooching” and “cooing” noises, throw kisses into the air with their hands, and embrace one another. Reacting to the cooing and smooching sounds, the teacher whirls around to glare at boys, all of whom have suddenly become silent and snapped to attention a split-second before being caught. The teacher then moves to his desk and begins reciting again, saying, “She was tender and sweet.”

He moves back to the chalkboard and resumes writing, saying, “How she hugged me on her lap and kissed me.” As this last line unfolds, the students resume their previous behavior and someone whistles, which causes the teacher to again whirl around, throw the book he’s copying from onto the desk, and yell at the boys. Exasperated, he throws the bit of chalk at a student and then suddenly addresses Doinel and yells: “And you! You call this clean? You made that wall dirtier! Go back to your seat! Your parents will hear from me!” Doinel walks to his desk. Then, addressing everyone, the teacher yells: “Poor France! What a future!”

As mentioned, I asked students to write an analysis of the literacy content of this segment by drawing on whatever knowledge and understanding they had about what the term literacy means and signifies. Because I wanted the students to be as detailed as possible in what they wrote, I copied this segment onto a DVD and then made enough copies of DVDs so that each student would be able to play the scene repeatedly either on their laptops or a DVD player (at home or at the media resource center) in order to engage in a deep analysis over a week’s time (we viewed the scene during one seminar and discussed it during the next). What I discovered in analyzing the students’ essays is that most of the students defined literacy in terms of reading and writing, and they identified the literacy content of the segment to be the teacher’s lesson of having students copy lines of poetry from the board, a lesson they described in negative terms. For example, here are some representative passages from three different students:

Literacy is having the basic skills to read and write well enough to get by in everyday living. In [this segment of] the film, the literacy lesson is a dull process of copying. Dull as it is, though, the lesson exposes the students to a formal poem and gives them an opportunity to practice their penmanship. But it is not a very inspiring reading or writing activity. . . . What I would do is teach students the process of writing a formal essay, which is something I was taught and it’s worked well for me (here I am, in a master’s program).

This is an example of unimaginative and boring literacy instruction. Granted, it’s “literacy” because there is writing going on, and the students do have to read what they are copying. . . . This reminds me of the many literacy lessons I endured during some years with some teachers. I recall vocabulary tests, worksheets about the details in short stories, crossword puzzles that helped us use dictionaries, and other kinds of skill-building exercises. . . . Such lessons are probably inescapable.

In my opinion, literacy is about meaningful reading and writing. I don’t really see any “literacy content” in these scenes because the lesson is so mind-numbing and the students don’t seem to be learning anything. About the only thing the students will learn is how to hate poetry and writing.

In analyzing the students’ essays, I discovered that all of the students conceptualized literacy as a teacher-directed activity that involved reading and writing school-sanctioned print texts. Through the project I designed, I sought to bring about a shift

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in the preservice teachers' views of literacy, beginning with the important idea of literacy events.

2. Introducing the Concept of Literacy Events

For this activity, students read Mary Hamilton's (2000) chapter "Expanding the new Literacy Studies: Using Photographs to Explore Literacy as Social Practice." Hamilton describes a series of related research studies that she and her colleagues undertook that involved analyzing photographs for their literacy events, drawing from Shirley Heath's (1982) definition of a literacy event as "any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes" (quoted in Hamilton, p. 16). Heath explained that all literacy events involved the four elements of *participants*, who are the people involved in literacy events; *settings*, where events take place; *artifacts*, which are the texts and other objects that the people are interacting with in the events; and *activities*, which are the kinds of interactions (reading or writing) that take place during the events.

In one study, Hamilton and her colleagues first collected photos that represented literacy events that contained the four elements of participants, settings, artifacts, and activities. Then, they analyzed the photos to discover the different ways that literacy functioned for the people depicted in the photos. The categories they came up with include Literacy as Threat for images of people expressing stress due to issues "associated with money, exam results or legal proceedings"; Literacy as Defiance for images of people engaged in "oppositional literacy practices," such as producing graffiti, or being involved in demonstrations and political protests; Literacy as Evidence for images of people holding objects "such as cheques, letters, identity papers, lottery tickets, ballot papers, and medical paperwork"; and other categories (p. 20).

In another study, Hamilton and her colleagues radically expanded their fundamental criterion for collecting newspaper photos, looking for *any* photo where some (even one word of) written text appears. They eventually collected over 400 images. In their analysis, they found many photos that depicted the "traditional" kind of literacy event that Heath describes, but they also found many more photos that did not. So, to account for all of the photos, they ended up with these categories: (1) "interactions between people and texts," the category closest to the "original prototypical literacy events," conceptualized by Heath (p. 28); (2) "literacy in the environment," a category in which people are surrounded by literacy elements such as traffic or business signs that appear "in the background environment . . . but at the moment that is captured in the photograph, [the people] are ignoring, or not interacting with them" (p. 29); (3) "writing on the body," a category that includes images of people wearing clothing that has writing on it (writing such as the names of businesses or sports teams), of people wearing identifying markers

(such as name tags or badges), and of people sporting tattoos (p. 30); and (4) “reproductions of documents,” a “minor category” in which no people appear in the image and the main literacy element is simply a photo of “a document (a letter, medical form or legal document) without people or a surrounding visual context” (p. 31).

Reflecting on their analysis of photos, Hamilton explains that she and her colleagues had put into question “what counts as an ‘interaction’” in a literacy event, so much so that “the notions of ‘event’ and ‘activity’ become uncomfortably stretched,” and this led them to conclude that “we need to reconsider the ideas of what *interaction* may consist of in a literacy event and perhaps the adequacy of the notion of *event* itself. We need a form of description that acknowledges that people can participate in literacy practices in a range of ways, some of which involve a very passive role” (p. 32). The term Hamilton uses to describe these more passive range of ways of being involved is *incorporation*.

3. Students’ Reinterpretations: “Pushing at Theory”

In her chapter, Hamilton explains that by reconceptualizing (or opening up) the concept of *interaction*, she and her colleagues were faced with the necessity of explaining a wide range of images that featured literacy content that did not fit the typical notion of literacy events as defined by Heath, and making sense of these “marginal cases” served as “a powerful way of pushing at theory, developing a more flexible framework for analysis that includes features [they] might have previously overlooked” (p. 25). I focused preservice teachers’ attention on this explanation by Hamilton as a way of introducing the next activity, which involved responding to this prompt: “Write another analytical essay in which you use the key terms and ideas from Hamilton’s chapter to articulate your reinterpretation of the ‘literacy content’ in the segment from *The 400 Blows*. Be ‘speculative,’ ‘pushing at theory’ as Hamilton and her colleagues did in their analyses.” What preservice teachers wrote in these essays became the source material for the seminar discussion when we replayed and reinterpreted the segment. Through both the seminar discussion and my analysis of the essays, I found two major changes in the preservice teachers’ analyses.

One major change was that all of the preservice teachers now saw Doinel as being the main participant in an important literacy event. (Recall that in their first essays, preservice teachers described literacy as having to do only with teacher-directed activities.) Many preservice teachers identified Doinel’s writing of a poem as an example of what Hamilton called “Literacy as Defiance” (p. 20). For example, one preservice teacher wrote:

Doinel is the main participant in the literacy event of writing his poem during recess. This activity is a subversive one, in this setting. Already being punished for being caught with the pin-up, he risks even more punishment if [his poem is] discovered. So, writing the poem is a defiant activity. It boldly challenges the teacher’s authority.

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Not only is the activity of writing the poem defiant, but the *content* of the poem is equally defiant and subversive—as well as quite imaginative—which another preservice teacher reveals through her sophisticated close reading of Doinel’s poem:

The teacher describes the poem as expressing “insanities,” but it’s actually a really good poem. In 24 words, it is a morality tale with a hero [“poor Antoine Doinel”], a villain [“Sourpuss”], a plot climax about injustice [Doinel the hero is “unjustifiably punished”], and the promise of a sequel of justifiable revenge [“It will be an eye for an eye”]. The poem has figurative language [“fallen from the sky”] and makes a Biblical allusion [“an eye for an eye”]. It also has a formal structure. It’s a quatrain, and the third and fourth lines rhyme. . . . My favorite line is the third one because it can have many meanings. One is that the description [of the pin-up as having] “fallen from the sky” protects the other boys who passed the pin-up around. I also think “fallen from the sky” suggests chance and a gift.

Of course, “Sourpuss” does not perform such a sympathetic, preferred reading (Hall, 1980) of the poem. Rather, he sarcastically ridicules Doinel for not possessing the school-sanctioned knowledge about poetic forms by stating to the other students, “We have a new poet in our class. Only he can’t tell an Alexandrine from a decasyllabic verse.” He then punishes Doinel, an act that one preservice teacher interprets as follows:

The teacher punishes Doinel in two ways. One is that he orders him to wash away his poem. I see this as his attempt to “erase” any literacy [practice] that doesn’t conform to what he authoritatively imposes. The other [punishment] is that he assigns Doinel the activity of conjugating “in indicative, conditional and subjunctive tenses the sentence, ‘I deface the classroom walls and abuse French verse.’” This is a perfect example of “Literacy as Threat” [p. 20] because Doinel probably can’t do the conjugations, but also because he is being forced to write an admission of guilt. By using writing as a punishment, the teacher is “incorporating” Doinel in a literacy event that he would otherwise not participate in.

Interestingly, another preservice teacher uses the concept of incorporation to identify an empowering tactic that Doinel deploys:

In “pushing at theory,” as you say, I would say that Doinel manages to incorporate the teacher into a literacy event. By writing his poem on the wall, he forces the teacher to interact with it. The teacher has to read it and respond, and the fact that he punishes Doinel shows that Doinel has won a battle, even if it comes at some expense to himself.

What these representative passages reveal is that the preservice teachers articulated sophisticated analyses about the literacy content of a literacy event that had been invisible to them during their first analysis of the segment. In the rest of this section, I give some examples of the preservice teachers’ reinterpretations of the teacher-directed literacy event that they had only superficially analyzed in their first essays.

In their first essays, all of the preservice teachers wrote something to the effect that the copying lesson was dull and unimaginative. In their reinterpretations,

however, they saw much more happening in this literacy event than they had before. The major change was that they now saw the students' resistant behaviors as being an important element in the literacy event. One preservice teacher captures this importance quite well:

The teacher has chosen the poem they will read, has forced the boys to interact with it in a certain way, and has incorporated them into doing activities they don't want to do. What's most interesting, though, is that the students' show that they know what the poem means by what they do in reaction to it. Their behavior is not just empty-headed disruption. It's actually a critique of what's going on and of the poem. I mean that the students show they know what the poem "The Hare" is about by all the kisses they throw and the hugging they do. These activities could be said to be "traces" of a literacy or understanding of the poem. I see it as a rejection of a poem that is told from a rabbit's point of view, and a poem that is about the love between this rabbit and his "Little Margot," who caresses him in her lap. To boys who were passing around a pin-up of a beautiful woman, this poem must seem childish, so they make fun of it.

This preservice teacher's interpretation of the students' resistant behaviors as being an enactment of a collective critique of both the form of the lesson and the content of the poem is quite insightful.

Another insight was offered by a preservice teacher who, "pushing at theory," speculated on the connections among different texts and student actions in the entire segment of the film:

Speculating, I see as a "text" things that I did not [see] the first time and I see possible relationships between them. The "pin-up" [passed around early in the segment] is now to me a visual text that calls to my mind the idea of "literacy as threat" or "literacy as defiance" [Hamilton, p. 20]. It is subversive in the same ways that Doinel's poem and (I'm really stretching things on this one!) the students' mocking actions are. These three things all stand in contrast to the official one [the poem "The Hare"].

This preservice teacher is expanding the notion of a text here to include the pin-up as a visual text, and though she does not go so far as to call the students' "mocking actions" a text, it is easy to see that such actions could be persuasively conceptualized as the performing of what can be called a social text. The students, through this social performance, could be said to be producing a counter-text to the official text of the lesson. And along with expanding the idea of text, the preservice teacher sees the pin-up, Doinel's poem, and the students' mocking actions as all sharing the same resistant and transgressive elements and intent, as against the official text of the lesson. This is an important insight in that it implies an awareness of the power dynamics that are in play and at work between the students and the teacher, dynamics that are manifesting themselves through literacy events and practices that leave their traces for us to interpret and theoretically speculate about.

What all of the representative passages quoted in this section reveal is that the preservice teachers articulated very sophisticated analyses about the literacy

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content of the segment by taking up many of the key terms and ideas from Hamilton's chapter in their reinterpretations, such as participants, setting, activities, literacy event, literacy as defiance, literacy as threat, interaction, and incorporation.

4. Interpreting *The 400 Blows* as a Literacy Narrative

In this activity, I first introduced preservice teachers to the idea of literacy narratives and then assigned them to view *The 400 Blows* outside of class and write an analytical essay about the literacy narrative that the film constructs. As an introduction to literacy narratives, preservice teachers read the articles by Eldred (1991), Eldred and Mortensen (1992), Soliday (1994) and Clark and Medina (2000). What I have said about these articles in the introduction is much of what preservice teachers came to understand through a seminar discussion about them. I also emphasized Eldred and Mortensen's important explanation that most texts—such as plays, novels, and films—are actually comprised of multiple narratives that “interact and compete” (p. 530), and typically a literacy narrative, if there is one, “operates as subplot,” as “one of many competing” narratives in the whole text (p. 531).

This is the case with *The 400 Blows*. The literacy narrative intertwines with the main narrative of the film, which is a tragic *coming-of-age* narrative in which Doinel's troubles are an effect of a combination of having a mother and stepfather who do not care about him and of being unable to succeed or stay out of trouble at school. The film can also be viewed as a narrative of *social critique* for its indictment of the social institutions of the family, the school, and the legal system that collectively fail Doinel. These intertwined coming of age and social critique narratives became central to the preservice teachers' understandings of the film through our eventual discussion of the film during seminar. The main interest of our project, however, concerned the literacy narrative. To focus preservice teachers' viewing on the literacy narrative, I gave them the following prompt for the third analytical essay they would be writing:

Because literacy narratives are constituted by literacy events, take note of the literacy events that Doinel participates in or is incorporated into. Refer to these events as you explain how the literacy narrative intertwines with the “coming of age” and “social critique” narratives that the film constructs. Draw upon Hamilton's terms and ideas as you develop the essay. Also, keep in mind that the phrase “400 Blows” means something close to “raising hell.”

To set up my discussion of the preservice teachers' analyses of the literacy events and how the literacy narrative intertwines with the coming-of-age and social critique narratives that the film constructs, I will summarize the main elements of the plot. (The reader might analyze this plot summary with the above prompt in mind, thereby engaging in a process somewhat similar to that of the preservice teachers during their viewing of the film.)

As mentioned, the phrase “the 400 blows” means something close to “raising

hell,” and this is what Doinel does throughout the four or five days that make up the time-span of the film’s main narrative. After the opening segment in which Doinel has gotten into trouble over the pin-up and his poem, his already unfortunate fate progressively worsens. Because Doinel has not finished his “punishment” writing assignment, he skips school the next day with a friend from class named Rene. They spend the day going to a movie, playing pinball machines, and wandering the streets of Paris. At one point, Doinel sees his mother kissing another man, and for a split-second she sees Doinel (seeing her), so she knows he’s skipped school. Doinel and Rene hurry away. Before they depart, Rene gives Doinel an excuse note he always uses, telling Doinel to copy its contents in his mother’s handwriting and to present the note the next day as his excuse. That night, Doinel copies the note before his father comes home, but he makes a mistake (he copies “Rene” rather than substituting his own name at the “Please excuse my son” part of the note), and throws the page into the fire. Before he can begin again, his father arrives home and he is unable to complete copying the note.

The next day, the teacher demands a written excuse of absence. Doinel says he doesn’t have one, and when the teacher threatens to tell his parents, Doinel, feeling cornered and wanting to avoid further punishment, blurts out the shocking news that his mother has died, which immediately softens the teacher’s manner. This temporary escape from punishment, however, is soon reversed when Doinel’s parents find out that very day that he skipped school and told such a big lie. They go to the school, where his father slaps him twice across the face in front of his classmates and yells, “We’ll settle this tonight at home.” That night, however, Doinel doesn’t go home. Instead, he writes a short letter to his parents that says, “My dear Parents. I understand the gravity of my lie. But now, we can’t live together anymore. So I’m going to try to live my own life here or elsewhere. When I’m a man, I’ll return and we’ll talk about everything. Goodbye. Love, Antoine.”

After a night of wandering the city alone, Doinel returns to school. His mother goes to the school to get him, and later, at home, she showers Doinel with kindness, obviously fearing that he will reveal her secret about being involved with another man (which he never does). Attempting to win his silence and also to encourage him to improve his grades, she says she will pay him for all the good grades he gets in the future.

Doinel soon gets a chance to make some “good grade” money. This chance is related to Doinel’s love of Balzac. Doinel loves Balzac so much that he has built a little wooden shrine to his literary hero, placing a large photo of Balzac within the wooden box. In a key scene, we see Doinel at home alone, lying on the couch and reading a book by Balzac. We hear a voiceover narrating the last lines of a story Doinel is reading, lines that end, “Eureka! I found it!” Back at school, the teacher assigns the students to write an in-class essay about a serious event that they have personally witnessed or been involved in. Doinel recalls the line “Eureka! I found it!” and then writes his essay. When he gets home, he places a lit candle in his Balzac

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shrine. Unfortunately, later the candle catches the shrine on fire, but before it can cause damage his parents put it out. His stepfather is furious but his mother comes to his defense (again, to deepen their “pact” and keep him quiet about her affair).

On the day when the essays are returned, the teacher publicly accuses Doinel of plagiarism. His proof is that Doinel has not only appropriated the plot of a well-known Balzac story, but he has also included lines he memorized from the story (the ones we hear narrated in the previous scene, ending with “Eureka! I found it!”). The teacher expels Doinel from the class for the rest of the year. Doinel, fearing the wrath of his parents, does not go home. He tells his friend Rene that he is going to live on his own from now on. Realizing he will need money to do so, Doinel hatches a scheme (with Rene) to steal and pawn a typewriter from his father’s office. Doinel steals the typewriter, but they are unable to pawn it, and Doinel tries to return it (he knows his father will suspect him first as the thief), but he is caught in the act. The dire consequence (or final “blow”) is that his parents sign away their parental rights over him and turn him over to the Department of Juvenile Delinquents. He is fingerprinted, booked, and placed in a house of corrections with other adolescent boys. His mother visits him one time, to tell him that she and his father no longer wish to have anything to do with him. The last segment of the film shows Doinel running away from the detention center, heading for the sea nearby. The last scene is of Doinel alone on the beach.

During the seminar discussion of the film, we viewed and discussed all of the literacy events that take place by analyzing one scene and then another on the DVD. In discussing the literacy events, preservice teachers drew upon what they wrote in their essays. I will quote directly a few representative passages from different essays. For example, in the following passage, one preservice teacher identified and creatively labeled most of the literacy events (this passage can be read against the above summary to see how insightful this analysis is in terms of literacy events):

I see different kinds of literacy events. There are “interrupted” events, which prevent Doinel from writing the [punishment] assignment and the excuse note. There is an attempted “forgery” event with the excuse note. There is a “letter of goodbye” event. There is Doinel’s so-called “plagiarism” event, which couldn’t have been plagiarism because he wrote the essay in class. His memory was apparently very good about what he read. He also didn’t seem to understand the assignment. . . . There’s a “reading a literary genius” event when Doinel reads Balzac. There’s a “paying homage” event when he lights a candle to his literary hero. . . . There is also the serious “punishment” event when the teacher expels Doinel for “plagiarism.” Also, at the end, there is a series of literacy events that incorporate Doinel into his doomed situation. His parents sign away their rights over him [an “abandonment” event?], and there is a “confessional” event when Doinel is forced to sign his name on an official statement of his crimes.

As I have explained earlier in this article, all of the preservice teachers initially conceptualized literacy as a teacher-directed activity that involved reading and writing school-sanctioned print texts, but such a narrow conceptualization does not

appear in the above passage. On the contrary, the preservice teacher identifies a rich variety of literacy events that occur both in and out of school. Most important is the preservice teacher's understanding that the "series of literacy events" that comprise the literacy narrative "incorporate Doinel into his doomed situation." In her article "Translating Self and Difference through Literacy Narratives," Mary Soliday (1984) explains that school is often "a contradictory place where children learn not to learn . . . and it is ruled by an unjust authority that closes down resistance." She also explains that this closing down of resistance typically involves "a coercion into literacy" that takes place "on a battleground of literacy" (p. 514). Throughout the film, Doinel has been engaged in a desperate struggle on this "battleground of literacy," and as the preservice teacher observes, this struggle has led to "his doomed situation" of being abandoned by his parents and being coerced into signing a confession of crimes that results in his becoming a legal ward of the state.

This recognition of how the literacy narrative plays a central role in Doinel's destiny is also expressed in the following passage by another preservice teacher:

In reflecting on the literacy events, I see that Doinel is punished for what he does and does not do in terms of literacy events. For example, he is punished for the poem he writes on the wall and for the essay he writes in class. But he is also punished for not having certain "texts." For example, he doesn't do the [punishment] assignment, which leads him to skip class, and he doesn't finish writing [forging] the excuse letter, which means he hasn't got the written document he needs to be let back into school after skipping. So he lies, which gets him into more trouble. . . . The literacy narrative is a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" narrative.

This preservice teacher's interpretation of the literacy narrative as being "a 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' narrative" echoes the other preservice teacher's insight that the literacy narrative plays a key role in bringing Doinel to a "doomed situation."

Yet another preservice teacher—drawing on terms and phrases from the writing prompt—articulated what is to me the most important insight to have about the literacy narrative, which is that "Doinel does not realize that he is not to blame" for the tragic situation he ultimately finds himself in:

The literacy narrative is not only intertwined with the "coming of age" narrative. It is essential to it. It constitutes it. What I mean is that without the literacy narrative, the other narrative wouldn't exist. At every turn, the events that get Doinel into deeper trouble are literacy events. Some are minor events, some are major events, but they all play a role in the spiraling descent that ends with Doinel being abandoned by his parents. . . . What is sad is that Doinel does not realize that he is not to blame. Though he gets into situations where he seems to be "raising hell," it is really the situations that are raising hell, and the "hell" is aimed straight at him, caused by the adults around him. If I had to label this literacy narrative, it would be "A Literacy Narrative of Exclusion and Punishment."

The 400 Blows as Cinematic Literacy Narrative

This passage is an especially succinct explanation of the inextricable connection between the literacy narrative and the other main narratives, and most preservice teachers expressed this same insight in various ways.

As mentioned in the introduction, *The 400 Blows* was the first film that I had the students analyze in depth within a larger project of analyzing other cinematic literacy narratives. I have discussed this particular film as a representative case of how preservice teachers engaged with the film through the theoretical ideas and terms offered through the academic readings. After this project, preservice teachers went on to view either alone or in pairs other films including *Dead Poets Society*, *Teachers*, *Educating Rita*, and *The Paper Chase* for the cinematic literacy narratives that these films construct. The students interpreted these other films in the same kind of depth that they engaged with *The 400 Blows*, and they explained their interpretations through essays and seminar presentations. What emerged from the seminar presentations and the discussions of these other cinematic literacy narratives was the recognition that *The 400 Blows* offers one literacy narrative—and a rather negative one, at that—and the other films offer different kinds of literacy narratives.

For example, preservice teachers explained that *Dead Poets Society* offers a literacy narrative that (I am quoting from preservice teachers' essays hereafter) "shows a teacher tapping into his students' undiscovered talents and desires," a process that leads the cinematic students "to express themselves in ways they had not been expected to or imagined before." *Educating Rita* "reveals what positive 'literacy' results can be accomplished when a teacher patiently nurtures a student's desire to acquire a new literacy practice that she can use to improve her life." *The Paper Chase* includes a literacy narrative "with the message that no matter how educated you are, like the law students [in the film], you may not have the kind of literacy that the school expects, even if you do all you can to achieve it." Each of these other films offers different kinds of literacy narratives, constituted by a wide range of literacy events.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to show how the preservice teachers underwent a gradual change in their initial, limited views of literacy, and how they acquired, through engaging with both academic articles and cinematic literacy narratives, a more sophisticated perspective informed by the ideas of literacy events (Hamilton, 2000) and literacy narratives (Eldred & Mortensen, 1992). Though this was the overall effect of the project, it is essential to add that the preservice teachers also realized that *The 400 Blows* and the other films that were taken up played a collectively powerful role in bringing about the shifts in perspective about literacy that they underwent. So, another major effect of the project was that it modeled a pedagogy that involves taking up films as central texts in one's teaching. Though it has been beyond the scope of this article to explain how I engaged this cohort—as well as other cohorts of preservice teachers—in many other activities that

involved taking up other films, I would like to conclude with a brief discussion of some of these activities. My intent here is to suggest that a rich archive of films exists for teacher educators to take up for a variety of critical purposes in their own work with preservice teachers.

The genre of films I have mainly taken up as part of pedagogical projects is what I call “school films,” which I define as films that are in some way, even incidentally, about an educator or a student. Some well-known school films are *Mr. Holland’s Opus* and *Dangerous Minds*. Some lesser-known films are *Drive Me Crazy*, *Flirting*, and *Welcome to the Dollhouse*. Some obscurer films are *Zero for Conduct* and *Torment*. And some recent films are *Mean Girls* and *Elephant*. For years, I have been collecting school films and using them in video form as key pedagogical texts in a variety of projects (Trier, 2005b). For example, in one project (Trier, 2001a) I had preservice teachers analyze how certain school films (such as *Waterland*, *This Is My Father*, and *To Sir, With Love*) represented the personal and professional lives of teachers. In another project (Trier, 2002), I drew upon the school films *Disturbing Behavior* and *Educating Rita* to introduce preservice teachers to concepts that are typically not part of a preservice teacher’s preparation, such as that of “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1984). I also designed a project (Trier, 2003a) to introduce preservice teachers to the concept of “techniques of power” through analyses of the film *The Paper Chase* (1973), analyses informed both by Gore’s (1998) articulation of eight “techniques of power” and by certain elements from Foucault’s (1977) *Discipline and Punish*. (For other projects, see Trier, 2001b, 2003b, 2003c, 2004, 2005a.)

In these pedagogical projects, my work connects with that of others who have also taken up school films and other media texts (like television dramas about teachers and students) in their own teaching practices. For example, Giroux (1993) engaged a group of students in an analysis of how the film *Dead Poets Society* constructs a seductive yet problematic representation of “liberal pedagogy.” Robertson (1995) analyzed the emotional investment that a group of female preservice teachers made in “certain scenes, characterizations, and investments of teaching” (p. 38) while they viewed such school films as *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *Stand and Deliver*. Brunner (1994) had her students take up films in tandem with print texts for the purpose of using one to illuminate the ideas of the other, as when students analyzed the film *Educating Rita* for possible representations of the critical pedagogy they encountered in Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). (For other examples, see Freedman, 1999; Freedman & Easley, 2004; and Paul, 2001).

As these examples suggest, teacher educators have been taking up films in a variety of ways for a variety of critical purposes, and these examples can serve as important models for anyone interested in engaging in a pedagogy involving the coupling of academic and media texts, whether it be to examine issues related to literacy (as in this article), race, ethnicity, power, gender, language, pedagogy, or other important issues in education.

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