“Tech-to-Stretch”: Expanding Possibilities for Literature Response

Phyllis E. Whitin

Incorporating multimodal response strategies into everyday literacy instruction builds comprehension and literary interpretation while giving learners purposeful experience in using these modalities.

Digital literacies offer myriad possibilities for teachers of reading and language arts. However, Smolin and Lawless (2003) and Young and Bush (2004) cautioned that it is ineffective to use technology to replicate traditional paper-based literacy instruction. Using technology to increase literacy achievement and promote critical thinking poses challenges for teacher education, professional development, and classroom instruction alike. The experiences of a graduate class of preservice teachers engaged in a multifaceted study of Through My Eyes (Bridges, 1999), suggested one possible approach to meet these goals. The project was based on the belief that teachers’ own lived-through experiences with multimodalities provide the basis for informed teaching with technology. This study holds implications for higher education and for elementary and middle school classrooms.

Multimodality: Theory and Practice

Traditionally in academic settings, written language has been held in high esteem whereas visual, musical, and dramatic modes have been valued primarily for aesthetic purposes (Eisner, 2002; Kress, 2000; Siegel, 2006). In Kress’s words, “The single, exclusive and intensive focus on written language has dampened the full development of all kinds of human potentials” (p. 156). This statement raises an important concern because modalities other than language—visual, aural, spatial, and animation elements—play key roles in reading and composing digital texts. Kress further argued that specialized knowledge about these non-verbal modalities is necessary to build these “human potentials.”

Classroom research studies involving arts integration suggest ways to broaden the narrow focus on language that Kress (2000) described. Students’ sketches, collages, and other visual representations have been found to facilitate literary conversations about contemporary and historical fiction while supporting readers to analyze literary elements and make personal and intertextual connections (Ballentine & Hill, 2000; Whitin, 2005; Wilhelm, 2008). Wilhelm found that low-achieving middle school readers were able to visualize setting, analyze characters’ motives, and make predictions through drama-related strategies. Primary-age children in Clyde’s (2003) study examined illustrations and textual clues to imagine and role-play characters’ thoughts and emotions, thus building comprehension. Berghoff and Borgmann (2007) described arts-infused interdisciplinary units of study in university and elementary settings, in which students composed and revised visual and written pieces, using each medium to gain new perspective on important social issues. All of these studies showed ways that multiple sign systems are valuable and needed elements of literacy instruction. Effective use of digital technologies builds upon these benefits. Digital software makes it possible to integrate visual strategies such as sketch-to-stretch (Short & Harste, 1996; Whitin, 1996, 2002) with other multimodal strategies, creating what I call “tech-to-stretch.”
An Overview of the Literature Study

The participants whose work is described here were preservice teachers taking a graduate methods course in reading and language arts. The literature study included both traditional and digital literary responses to *Through My Eyes* (Bridges, 1999), a focus text chosen for several reasons. As the winner of the 2000 Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction Literature, it is a valuable resource for integrated language arts and social studies curriculum in upper elementary and middle school.

Ruby Bridges’s autobiographical work relates her thoughts when she, at 6 years old, faced the challenge of being singularly assigned to integrate one New Orleans elementary school in 1960. Federal marshals escorted Ruby through a mob of screaming segregationists. Most white families pulled their children from school. Barbara Henry, Ruby’s teacher, provided a safe haven for her only pupil.

The book is an excellent example of a multigenre text that incorporates interviews, quotations from public figures, excerpts from newspaper articles, and photographs. The central role that the images play in conveying both information and ideology invites the visual analysis that Kress (2000) recommended, while the multiple perspectives encourage readers to raise the kinds of complex questions debated by historians (Zarnowski, 2006). I believed that these varied textual forms could inspire thoughtful literary interpretation via multiple modalities.

The final project, a digital movie composition, was planned to create a purpose for deeper literary analysis in which groups could focus on one theme or issue that emerged from their literature circles. Video editing software was used to incorporate still images with two audio tracks. By working collaboratively, group members could continue to expand and critique one another’s meanings as they negotiated ways to represent their ideas (Siegel, 1995, 2006; Whitin, 2005). Through the use of multimedia software, visual, linguistic, audio, and temporal elements could be interrelated in ways not possible with nondigital media. Thus, the project was intended to explore ways that digital technologies might enhance language arts instruction.

Phases of the Investigation

The investigation comprised three phases. It followed a case study design (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1989) so that I could trace how preservice teachers learned about modes of expression and how they developed proficiency in using these modalities to interpret literature (Figure 1). Phase I was designed to give them experience in recognizing the unique potentials of modalities other than language.

In Phase II, they used a range of multimodal strategies to respond to the text and images in *Through My Eyes*. Data from these phases included online responses, notes from small- and whole-group activities and discussions, written and visual artifacts, and observational notes. These data were examined for ways the preservice teachers described the potentials of various modalities and how they used these tools of communication to interpret elements in the book.

The groups composed digital movies in Phase III. Although I expected that their work would reflect more complex and well-defended compositional choices, I did not anticipate the level of intensity and investment that occurred during the first composing workshop. As a result, I extended the project to a portion of a second session, and several groups met voluntarily before the next few classes to fine-tune their movies. Intrigued with the complexity of their products, I added a layer of analysis to Phase III. I examined the movies for ways in which various expressive modes (e.g., visual, aural) intensified the intended message (Siegel, 2006). Following the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I reexamined data from the first two phases to trace the roots of these movies. Follow-up reflective interviews with students served as additional data sources.

Building Foundational Knowledge of Multimodality

During one class session, I presented a minilesson on principles of design (Bang, 2000; Gonyea, 2005), such as diagonal lines convey movement, cool colors...
they used color, font, animation, and images, as well as words, to convey their message. These slideshows were shared with the whole group and posted online for later reference.

During the composing process and follow-up discussion, I asked groups to defend their compositional choices, such as the use of color, image, and words, to reflect the book’s theme. One group read The Name Jar (Choi, 2001), a book about a Korean child’s first days at school in the United States. To reflect the story’s theme and resolution, the group members composed one slide with a warm red background, signifying friendship, along with an Asian art print and each member’s name written in English and Korean. In addition to providing an opportunity for multimodal composing, this tech-to-stretch strategy demonstrated one way that digital tools can enhance literacy instruction.
Following these experiences, I posted two reflective questions on the course’s Blackboard site. Blackboard is the online course management system used by our university; blogs are an alternative option. The questions read, “What possibilities for expression and communication does writing afford? What possibilities do images and other visuals afford?” In addition to their PowerPoint responses and analysis of images, the responses guided my assessment of the preservice teachers’ initial understanding of visual modes of communication. Sample comments included the following:

- Images and symbols bombard us daily. But we’re so accustomed to it, we often ignore the obvious.
- Writer’s block is one of the “possibilities” for the lack of expression and lack of communication that comes with writing.
- Both text and images convey messages on their own, but they can carry greater impact when coordinated.

These comments represent several themes that emerged from Phase I. The first implies the importance of articulating the “grammars” of visual design (Kress, 2000). The second suggests that verbal expression cannot always capture one’s thought or meaning, while the third hints that new layers of meaning are created through interrelationships among sign systems (Siegel, 2006). These themes were pursued in Phase II.

### Multimodal Response to Through My Eyes

Phase II spanned a two-week period. It involved individual and collaborative responses to Through My Eyes that gave the preservice teachers opportunities to apply their knowledge of multimodalities to a content-related unit of study. After independently reading the text, they chose from response prompts (Figure 2) that involved verbal and visual interpretation (Kerper, 2001; Vasquez, 2003). A benefit of responding online was that they had access to one another’s thoughts prior to the next class meeting as well as throughout the study. As one class member noted, “Reading my peers’ responses often made me think of things from another’s perspective.” During class small groups met, elaborated upon their postings, and found connections and differences among the group members’ interpretations.

Next, each group summarized their ideas for the others, and together the class identified new connections and questions for further discussion and exploration. Common themes and emotions that emerged included Ruby’s innocence; prejudice as a learned belief; empathy for Ruby, Mrs. Henry, and Mrs. Bridges; and shock at the segregationists’ words and actions. The groups then reconvened to represent their revised interpretations in visual or dramatic form, as described in the following examples. Analysis of their work showed ways that they represented their increasing understanding of the potentials of various modes of communication and used these means to delve more deeply into their interpretations of the book.

### Figure 2
Response Choices for Week 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choices for a two- or three-column chart:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What I know (paraphrase the book)</strong></td>
<td><strong>What I wonder</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quote</td>
<td>My thoughts/ connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image (page # and identifier)</td>
<td>My thoughts/ connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quote</td>
<td>My thoughts (words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image</td>
<td>My thoughts (words)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Include four items (e.g., four quotes, four responses). Limit quotes to a sentence or two. Your responses can be two to three sentences each. Images can be drawn, scanned, or from clip art.

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Exploring Visual Representations
Some groups created a collage of geometric shapes (Ballentine & Hill, 2000; Bang, 2000). They used construction paper to symbolize people in the book, taking into consideration how the size, color, shape, and spatial placement of the pieces might convey different messages. For example, jagged red shapes around the perimeter might suggest the angry protestors. As suggested in Bang’s book, the sharp points evoked feelings of fear and danger. A softer color representation of Mrs. Bridges or Mrs. Henry might overlap a shape that stood for Ruby to signify support (Figure 3).

In essence, each colored shape was a visual metaphor (Siegel, 1995, 2006). Creating a visual representation did indeed generate a different kind of literary analysis than the earlier discussions had. As group members considered alternatives, they asked one another, “What might it mean about [a particular character] if we use this color or shape? If these pieces were close together, what message would we convey?” They found that their discussions focused on relationships among characters and the strength of various themes, thus reflecting the potential of art as a nonlinear representational mode (Kress, 2000; Whitin, 2005).

One of the written commentaries that accompanied a collage gave further evidence of their growing expertise in visual literacy: “We paid close attention to the proximity of each [shape], that is, how close they should be placed, and if or if not they should be overlapped.” Size, orientation, shape, color, and spatial arrangement were considered in these visual representations.

Developing Perspectives Through Drama
Other groups chose dramatic responses, such as an imagined interview with Ruby or a tableau in which they assumed the roles of people in one of the book’s images (Clyde, 2003; Wilhelm, 2008). This choice was particularly appropriate for Group A, whose initial discussion related to several Blackboard responses that raised questions about the protestors’ present lives. For example, one student had written this response to an image:

I am sickened by this picture. Especially by the lady in front holding a sign and the young girl by her holding a cross. They have smiles on their faces, and it infuriates me. I don’t understand how people could not only think their racist thoughts, but be proud of them and put their face onto them. What if the lady holding the sign was my grandmother? It is somebody’s grandmother, and I wonder how they deal with this.

This response, and others, had generated an animated discussion about present-day perspectives of those portrayed in these historical photographs. Although they realized the speculative nature of their interpretations, raising multiple possibilities encouraged them to view these people as individuals rather than as generalized groups (Zarnowski, 2006). Role-playing gave these preservice teachers an opportunity to give voice to the perspectives they had considered in their discussions, thus strengthening their interpretations of the images and making them more life-like. Their portrayals, as well as the comments they made about the activity, suggested that they were making new personal connections with the text.

The Second Response: Assuming Roles, Imagining Context
The second Blackboard response (Figure 4) was due the following week. I designed these prompts to give all class members material that would lend itself to dramatization or oral interpretation before they composed movies. As Wilhelm (2008) observed, teachers and older children are often more reluctant to engage in dramatic response than in visual modes.
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Expanding Meaning Through Multimedia Composing

During the next week’s session, the technology education coordinator led the class in a digital movie workshop. She also recommended tutorials available at movies.atomiclearning.com. I had instructed the groups to have their materials ready: a planned sequence of digital images and a draft of a narrative. As their tech-to-stretch projects took shape, however, groups revised and elaborated upon these initial plans. Sensing their enthusiasm and commitment, I allotted additional time for the project, as noted earlier.

To create an effective digital movie, the groups needed to consider the potentials and limitations of the various modes of design (Kress, 2000). The Blackboard responses, collages, tableaux, and dramatized interviews served as multimodal resources to be recombined into compositions that synthesized and extended earlier historical and literary interpretations. Analysis of these projects revealed a variety of ways that the preservice teachers purposefully used the various modes made available in this digital format.

Indeed, I noted that more groups had chosen the collage option. This set of response prompts might serve as a rehearsal or transition to oral dramatization. To encourage them to further explore the multiple perspectives described in the book, I suggested writing character journal entries for both major and minor figures, (e.g., Ruby’s teacher, Mrs. Henry, the marshals, or an unnamed protestor).

Creating a “missing scene” (Wilhelm, 2008, p. 134) was another way for the preservice teachers to make these historical events more immediate and personal. To respond to these prompts in a justifiable manner, they could infer from information in the book or seek additional sources through research. Interestingly, several preservice teachers took the initiative to modify the prompts and imagine the characters’ thoughts decades later. Based on my analysis of observational notes from class, I suspected that these changes reflected the in-class discussions, collages, and dramatizations. Students were adjusting the ways they used these multimodal tools to achieve specific purposes.

As with the first online responses, students had the opportunity to read and comment upon the postings from their own literature circle as well as those of other groups. During class, groups met and discussed new insights, connections, and perspectives. They then began to plan a digital movie that would synthesize and extend their most salient ideas. As I had hoped, two of the collage groups incorporated aspects of the role-playing prompts into their plans. These modifications provided opportunities for the class to explore further a wide range of modalities during Phase III.

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Figure 4
Response Choices for Week 2

Choose one

1. Choose a picture that includes children (not Ruby). Assume the voice of one child and create journal entries for one to three days. What did you observe? What did you hear? What did you think about what you saw? What action did you take? What did you say to others in the street, or what did you wish you could say or ask?

2. In some parts of the book information is left out. For example, representatives from the NAACP came to Ruby’s house to urge Mr. and Mrs. Bridges to allow Ruby to attend the William Frantz Public School. Imagine that conversation. What questions did Mr. and Mrs. Bridges ask? You may wish to consult historical sources about the NAACP and their work for school integration.

3. Other “missing information” for possible imagined conversations include the following:
   a. Mrs. Henry talking with her husband or calling a college classmate
   b. Ruby’s mother talking with her grandmother
   c. The filling station owner informing Mr. Bridges of his being let go
   d. The thoughts of U.S. Marshals as they escort Ruby to school
   e. Your own choice of scene

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An Overview of Projects Developed From Collages

Most collage groups incorporated the colored shapes directly into their digital movies but in different ways. Group B’s members appreciated how the collage conveyed emotion and portrayed relationships among key characters in the book. They wanted to incorporate these aspects of the collage into their digital movie. At the same time, they wanted to provide specific details that were missing in the collage. They decided that quoted material and photographs about each of the characters could fill these gaps. Group members examined the Blackboard responses to locate significant quotes that the class had identified for each character. In this way, Group B incorporated into their composition not only their own interpretations but also the collective thinking of the class. They also searched online sources for archival photographs to supplement some scanned images from the book (Figure 5).

The group structured their digital movie by following a uniform sequence of these elements. A quote introduced each character. The symbolic collage piece became the transition between this quote and its corresponding historical image. As the words faded, the symbolic shape representing the character(s) emerged and then made a transition to reveal the photograph. Finally, the group selected a classical piano accompaniment that, in one member’s words, was “contemplative, steady and uplifting.” Personally, I felt a sense of urgency in its tempo, a message that I thought also to be thematically appropriate.

This group’s work met my criteria for effective integration of multimodal forms of expression. They integrated several representational forms to convey the history of the period, personal reflections, multiple perspectives, and emotional tone. In the process of creating the structure of their digital movie, they carefully chose among modes of design—visual, spatial, linguistic, and musical—to capitalize on the unique potentials of each. As a whole, this layered, multimodal composition conveyed stronger messages than the sum of its parts. Siegel (2006) described this potential of multimodal expression as “transformation” that occurs “not simply by translating a signifier into a signified, but by expanding the meaning of one sign through another sign” (p. 69). These expanded meanings integrated thinking with feeling, described by Eisner (2002) as “qualitative relationships” (p. 8). It is also important to note that the features of the software contributed to the depth of meaning conveyed by this composition. The same effect would not have been possible by using only nondigital tools (Smolin & Lawless, 2003; Young & Bush, 2004).

The link between Group C’s collage and digital movie was subtler. They thoughtfully designed their collage to emphasize a sense of hope, the message that they agreed was the strongest in the book. Despite the harsh realities described in the text and images, they felt that without hope there is no possibility for change. Their collage reflected both of these ideas. Long, jagged fingers of red (the mob of segregationists) pointed inward from the perimeter, but, importantly, there was a gap on the left-hand side (see Figure 3, page 412). A field of yellow filled this gap, and small footprints led horizontally toward the edge of the paper. The circular shape placed at the center of their collage symbolized Ruby, protected by her mother (the open circle “halo”) and the marshals (the rectangles). A group member explained, “Ruby is able to move away from the damaging feeling of the crowd [through the gap] and remain hopeful. The footprints leading out are symbolic of the future possibilities.”

Interestingly, instead of incorporating parts of their collage into their digital movie, this group chose to symbolically follow the footprints. One member located additional resources describing Ruby Bridges’ present work for educational equity. In their
composition, they opened with the title “Hope” whirling into view against a background of warm shades of yellow and tan. This thoughtful choice of color and animation conveyed a sense of energy and strength. The body of the composition consisted of a series of images of Ruby as a child with captions such as “Carrying us from the past, through today and tomorrow.” To close they connected this sense of hope to Ruby’s adult life, emphasizing her ongoing activism.

Their completed movie conveyed the important message that the events of the past continue to have an impact on the present. However, the cause of justice can only be pursued by those sustained by conviction and hope, like Ruby. For Group C, it was the theme conveyed visually by the collage and the conversations that transpired while making it that inspired the final project, rather than its physical elements. This group’s work illustrates the point that effective multimodal composing is not an additive process—a process in which audio, visual, or animation is simply added to a verbal message. Instead, it involves synthesizing and rerepresenting the ways of thinking made possible through experiences with various modalities.

The Evolution of a Dramatic Response

The groups who had originally chosen a dramatic response likewise expanded their interpretations through their digital movies. In their second Blackboard posting, several Group A members (the tableau group described earlier) continued to imagine the thoughts of people in the book. As one member once again considered the picture of the child with the burned cross, she pondered,

Many of the segregationists pictured in this book are probably still alive. I wonder if they have changed at all. Do they still hold their racist beliefs? If they have changed their views, have they done anything to try to fix the harm that they have caused?

She further explained the impact of this posting in a follow-up e-mail:

I envisioned [the girl] feeling embarrassment and regret. Although I thought she changed her beliefs and realized what she did wrong, I also thought that she probably hadn’t done much in her life to make up for it (volunteer, educate others, etc.).

This statement made me wonder if using role-play to imagine the mindset of this historical figure had opened spaces for her to explore her own beliefs about race and racism in the past and present.

Group A expanded upon their discussions and tableau for a digital movie titled, “Then and Now.” The font they chose made a visual tie to their dramatizations; it conveyed “a personal feel, like a person was writing in their diary or journal.” In the script, each member role-played a secondary player in the book: the principal of William Frantz Elementary School, the little white girl holding a burned cross, a United States federal marshal, and Daisy Gabrielle, a white woman who opposed segregation and continued to bring her daughter Yolanda to school. Because the book does not include any quotes from any of these people, Group A needed to build justifiable accounts based on available evidence, a process related to the work of historians (Zarnowski, 2006). The text gave brief examples of actions taken by the principal and Mrs. Gabrielle, but the marshals and the little girl only appeared in photographs. (Another group located a recent interview in which a marshal expressed his views and incorporated portions of his statement in their digital movie).

In developing their scripts, Group A members made inferences from the visual and verbal texts in the book. They considered both their own online postings as well as those by others outside their group. For example, one non-group member speculated about the views of the U.S. marshals who served as Ruby’s bodyguards: “I am just wondering which side they support, the segregated or the desegregated side. I know everyone has an opinion.” Her comment countered a simplistic view in which readers might assume that all marshals supported the cause of integration by virtue of the role they played in protecting Ruby. Just like people today, those in the past did not share the same views (Zarnowski, 2006). Interestingly, the portrayer of the marshal decided to cast him as one who reluctantly served his duty.

The principal’s portrayer based her interpretation on quotes from interviews with Mrs. Henry, Ruby’s teacher, “The principal was a rigid, prejudiced woman who gave me no guidance or help” (Bridges, 1999,
The impact of the image on oral interpretation was especially striking for the student taking the role of Daisy Gabrielle. Based upon textual clues, she felt it was likely that today Mrs. Gabrielle would regret having succumbed to the segregationists’ pressure. She decided to emphasize the weight of the decision to ultimately withdraw her daughter Yolanda from school with an image of a wizened, haunting face framed by a dark, foreboding background. The image accentuated the weight of this guilt borne over the years, in this case not for protesting, but for retreating from her stance as a supporter of integration. In her audio narration, the despair in her voice appropriately matched the portrait. She moaned, ‘Oh Lord...I can’t believe that time...I feel so guilty putting my precious baby through that. She keeps telling me how proud she is of me for standing up for equal rights of others. But my daughter lost part of her childhood because of that year. The nightmares, her begging me to stay home from school so she doesn’t have to see those screaming people anymore.... Now Yolanda speaks to me of the importance of the fight and tells me she wishes she would have stuck through it to the end. I just couldn’t do that to her. I tried. I tried.”

One group member explained how she and her peers had shifted among visual, aural, and verbal elements as they composed the narratives in their movie:

As we worked on our tableau we discussed many different aspects of feelings and opinions from that time period. Initially, when we began our [digital movie], we tried not to stray too far from the original pictures in the book. [Our] discussions and the portraits that we were able to find on the internet helped us emphasize our speeches.

Group A members did not simply transfer their scripts to a digital form. Instead, as they searched for present-day representations of their character, the visuals became mediating tools for deeper interpretations. They could then apply this new thinking to “emphasize” their narratives. Both the selected images and their emphasized speeches conveyed strong emotions. As another reflected, “We could get into character and show our emotions through our speech patterns.” This group’s work also showed how the social studies content-related goals of the study were enhanced by capitalizing on the potentials of digital composing.
Thinking Beyond the Experience

This investigation suggests implications for teacher preparation, professional development, and classroom instruction. Effective use of digital media involves knowledge of the potentials of all communicative modes (Kress, 2000). Developing facility with interpreting as well as composing multimodal texts must involve explicit, systematic study of these communicative forms. The minilesson and activity in this study offers one way to address this need with adults.

Alternatively, Berghoff and Borgmann (2007) suggested enlisting the support of art and music teachers in both university and public school contexts. This kind of collaboration is also a helpful way for regular classroom teachers to manage time constraints. Incorporating multimodal response strategies into everyday literacy instruction, such as the text set study described here, builds comprehension and literary interpretation while giving learners purposeful experience in using these modalities (Whitin, 2005; Wilhelm, 2008). Online spaces such as Blackboard or blogs can be used to make these responses accessible to class members or to a professional development study group. To promote critical thinking and interdisciplinary content, in-depth studies should involve “issues of real social significance” (Berghoff & Borgmann, 2007, p. 27), such as the choice of Through My Eyes.

Digital composing raises other instructional considerations. In any context, collaborative work provides opportunities for learners to capitalize on each other’s technology skills. Smolin and Lawless (2003) offered additional sound advice, especially in elementary settings. They suggested teaching skills such as software use to a small group of students, who then become the leaders for the rest of the class. Following their method, small-scale responses such as animated, illustrated quotes on PowerPoint slides can first be incorporated into literature studies. In fact, except for the double-track audio option, the kinds of representations described in this article could be accomplished
using PowerPoint software. The digital movie project
described here would be more appropriate for a major
unit of study planned for the latter part of the year.

The range of possible modes of expression will
continue to expand as newer technologies emerge.
As Eisner (2002) noted, “New possibilities for matters
of representation can stimulate our imaginative ca-
pacities and can generate forms of experience that
would not otherwise exist” (p. 13). These “imagina-
tive capacities” involve thought and feeling. They
encourage students to view ideas from multiple
perspectives and to envision a better world. In the
context of all teaching, from the university level
to elementary school settings, these are important ca-
pacities to nurture.

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