

Reading Challenging Texts

Layering Literacies Through
the Arts

**James S. Chisholm and
Kathryn F. Whitmore**

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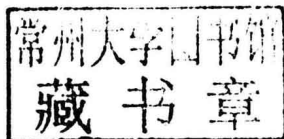
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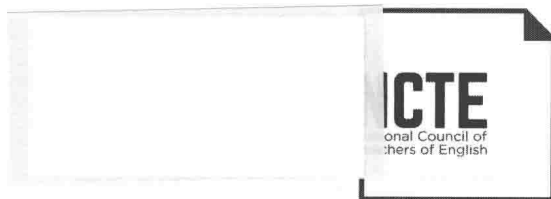
Layering Literacies Through the Arts

James S. Chisholm
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Kathryn F. Whitmore

Co-Published by Routledge and
the National Council of Teachers of English



 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON



First published 2018
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-138-05863-7 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-138-05864-4 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-16406-9 (ebk)

NCTE stock number: 58644

Typeset in Minion Pro
by codeMantra

Reading Challenging Texts

Bringing together arts-integrated approaches, literacy learning, and classroom-based research, this book explores ways upper elementary, middle, and high school teachers can engage their students physically, cognitively, and emotionally in deep reading of challenging texts. With a focus on teaching about the Holocaust and Anne Frank's diary—part of the U.S. middle school literary canon—the authors present the concept of layering literacies as an essential means for conceptualizing how seeing the text, being the text, and feeling the text invite adolescents to learn about difficult and uncomfortable literature and subjects in relation to their contemporary lives. Offering a timely perspective on arts education advocacy, Chisholm and Whitmore demonstrate the vital need to teach through different modalities in order to strengthen students' connections to literature, their schools, and communities. Accessible strategies are illustrated and resources are recommended for teachers to draw on as they design arts-based instruction for their students' learning with challenging texts.

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***Dedicated to teachers who are brave, and becoming brave, about sanctioning
challenging texts and topics in their classrooms***

Foreword

The scene was set. Two hundred classmates and teachers sat waiting in the audience. In the front row was Fred Gross, a Holocaust survivor who had inspired the students with his family's survival stories just weeks before. Two eighth-grade students, who later described how apprehensive they were about performing, and whose teacher acknowledged their typical reluctance at school, walked to the front edge of the stage and each read a personal letter to Mr. Gross. Unexpectedly, Mr. Gross rushed to the stage with tears in his eyes to hug both girls. In this moment, these students discovered that although they knew Mr. Gross's words and story had affected them deeply, *their* words had the power to move him, too.

This was part of a culminating performance of a study that integrated the arts with Holocaust history and literature at one of four schools in a program called the Anne Frank: Bearing Witness Project, which involved a partnership with The Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts, Brown University's ArtsLiteracy Project, and the University of Louisville.

At another school four miles away, a different transformation took place. An eighth-grade student participated with her classmates in the arts-based Anne Frank study, but she had something more personal at stake. She was one of the only Jewish students in her class, and previously she downplayed her Jewish identity at school. During the project, she asked if she could bring her Rabbi to talk with the class and she began to wear a necklace with a Star of David to school every day.

These are just two of the many powerful learning experiences that took place in the Anne Frank: Bearing Witness Project, which James and Kathy expertly evaluated, researched, and wrote about in this important book.

As an arts education director for a leading performing arts center, I am frequently asked to demonstrate the value of teaching the arts and integrating the arts across subjects such as social studies and English. Education and funding communities increasingly request evidence in numerical form. How can you ascribe a number to quantify the impact on two 14-year-olds discovering that their voices as writers have the power to move others to tears? How can you measure the importance of a middle school student finding the courage and resolve to show who she really is in a school environment for the first time? I find that the most important and nuanced evidence of growth does not always lend itself to that kind of measurement.

Yet it was important for us to report to the Jewish Heritage Fund for Excellence, our funder, the ways in which their investment in this project had achieved its goals. James and Kathy went far beyond confirming *that* students were engaging and emotionally investing in their learning, responding with empathy to Anne Frank's diary, and making personal connections between

this difficult history and their world today. Through their fastidious and innovative research, they discovered ways to explain *why* and *how* this robust learning was taking place. And herein lies the significance of this book: they provide a path for understanding how the arts play a role in multilayered literacy learning experiences that result in increased levels of engagement, empathy, emotional understandings, and even empowerment to action.

Their research is solidly grounded in multimodal and sociocultural theories, in which they demonstrate how students make meaning through multiple literacies of seeing, being, and feeling the text (visual, embodied, and emotional literacies, respectively). This is true for both processing new understandings and for communicating and expressing those understandings through various modalities.

At the heart of our work is a process developed at Brown University's ArtsLiteracy Project called The Performance Cycle, which is especially well-suited to tackling difficult and uncomfortable subject matter, and what James and Kathy call "challenging texts," because it provides powerful ways to develop a classroom culture in which students support each other as they share a deeper level of vulnerability and authenticity than they are usually asked for in school. Trust must be established. As The Performance Cycle continues, students become partners in constructing the curriculum, and they become more invested as learners.

The Performance Cycle not only uses the arts as a pathway into the curriculum—it also invites students to communicate their understandings artistically to classmates and others. In an especially compelling culminating performance, two students responded to the essential question "What is your humanity footprint?" by connecting the marginalization and oppression of Jews in Anne Frank's diary with shame, body image, and eating disorders. They choreographed and performed a dance using a tape measure as a prop to illustrate their message. The creative components of the Performance Cycle can yield cathartic and healing results when students allow themselves to share something inside that is painful. By taking the pain outside of themselves and manipulating it artistically, they discover that they have a power over it; by sharing their artistic work, they provide hope and courage to others. In this book, James and Kathy offer compelling arguments for teaching difficult and uncomfortable subjects and challenging texts, as well as numerous success stories from actual classrooms.

In this age in which instruction is heavily directed by what can be measured, *Reading Challenging Texts: Layering Literacies Through the Arts* offers a timely perspective with strong implications for arts education advocacy. James and Kathy explain how the arts catalyze robust learning experiences. They also demonstrate how students take their learning further when they engage in creative responses, which provides educators with windows through which more can be discovered about student learning. With many detailed examples, they explain the phenomena of layered understandings through different modalities that arts integration provides. This book is more than a study of successful classroom practices—it is an illuminating contribution to the field of educational research and practice.

Jeffrey Jamner, DMA
Senior Director of Education & Community Engagement
The Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts

Preface

When James was a 16-year-old American high school exchange student in Germany, his history class focused entirely on the First and Second World Wars. He recalls his visceral responses that this context created: *My heart would race when we discussed World War II. Since I was still learning the language, images, propaganda posters, maps, and graphs became crucial elements of my learning and reading in that class. And I learned a word that semester that comprised for me the learning goal for that course: Vergangenheitsbewältigung—coming to terms with the past. How do individuals and societies collectively come to terms with the atrocities of the Holocaust as they/we move toward less disturbing futures?*

Recently, when James visited the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam as a literacy researcher, he reflected in a diary entry: *Yellow/Orange-ish wallpaper adorns many of the rooms throughout the annex. Anne's room was very narrow, and I couldn't take my eyes off of the artifacts that had been affixed to her wall. Newspaper clippings included a spectacular image of Ginger Rogers. Also noteworthy for me was an image of Rembrandt's Portrait of an Old Man—[my family and I] had spent the afternoon that day at the Rijksmuseum where we sketched, among other paintings, Rembrandt's famous "Night Watch." The artifacts adorning Anne's bedroom walls were so diverse and reflected so many different interests. It was such a testament to the fact that people make their surroundings as familiar as they can even in the most unthinkable of circumstances. Anne's artifacts also served to represent her identities as a [Dutch] teenager, a writer, and an artist.*

Kathy recalls her first encounter with Anne Frank's diary as a young teenager: *In junior high school, Anne's diary was my introduction to the Holocaust. I have vivid memories of how the smooth, wooden seat felt under me in the darkened auditorium as I watched a black-and-white film based on the diary after we finished the book. Watching trucks marked with swastikas and hearing the eerie sound of sirens brought the haunting words in Anne's diary to life before my eyes and ears. Kathy remembers how years later, while researching literature study groups in a third-grade classroom (Whitmore & Crowell, 1994), the children held each other, arm-in-arm as they read Christopher Gallaz and Roberto Innocenti's *Rose Blanche* (1985), a sensory-rich Holocaust picturebook filled with terrifying and beautiful illustrations of Rose's experiences in Nazi Germany, and other picture and information books. The third-graders debated the ambiguities of the ending of *Rose Blanche* and vowed that they would have hidden their friend Aaron, the only Jewish child in the group, had they lived during those times.*

Inherent in our recollected initial encounters with Anne Frank and the Holocaust is the confluence of feeling and thinking surrounded by a multimodal ensemble that created lasting impressions on us, and enduring moral questions for us to consider throughout our lives. Visual

maps in the history classroom, the tangible wall artifacts in the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, and the sounds of the sirens in a film adaptation of Anne Frank's diary shaped our emotional responses and influenced our meaning-making experiences. As a reader, you might now be re-appreciating the sensory experiences of your own unique encounter with Anne Frank's diary or other challenging texts that caused you to think and feel in profound ways. We invite you now and throughout this book to consider how those moments are imbued with visual imagery, physical and visceral embodied perceptions and movements, and deep-seated—perhaps troubling—emotions. What implications might these realizations have for literacies learning in K-12 classrooms today? How do these realizations inform your role as a teacher when students have similar experiences?

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

In this book, we offer an arts-based pedagogical approach to promote inquiry and enduring understandings for adolescents whose learning about Anne Frank is re-contextualized in 21st-century contexts. We organize the approach according to visual, embodied, and emotional literacies (although we recognize the overlap of these categories) that engage learners in seeing, being, and feeling the text. Each of Chapters 2–4 begins with a vignette, followed by classroom narratives of active and arts-based learning strategies that highlight how *seeing, being, and feeling the text* supports eighth-graders' engagement with Anne Frank's diary (which we often refer to as *The Diary*) and other challenging texts.

Chapter 2 focuses on three visual arts-related instructional strategies—Cordel, Icons, and Archives—that provide opportunities for learners to represent, read, create, recreate, and ultimately deepen meaning by *seeing the text*. The Cordel, a simple string stretched across one side of a classroom, is a place for learners to enter into challenging texts through photos and words. Icons are pieces of visual art, initially created by students in response to words, and later prompts for process drama. In Archives, students juxtapose images from their own family photo albums with Jewish families' photos in the first half of the 20th century, resulting in their relational and historical learning about individual lives before, during, and after the Holocaust.

In Chapter 3, we address the question, "What does it mean to *be the text*?" and share arts-based techniques that emphasize the body's role in literacies learning. Tableau and Pantomime invite students to position and move their bodies in ways that convey meanings of written texts to an audience (typically their classmates). In Sculpture Garden, students mold each other's bodies into shapes and stances to express meaning in response to excerpts of texts. Dramatic and Staged Performances are scenes that are composed, rehearsed, revised, and performed to share with others. These collaborative process drama strategies help us see how learners use their bodies to mediate thinking about challenging texts.

Chapter 4 draws on the role of emotion in literacies learning and focuses on how students reading challenging texts *feel the text*. In Creating Thick Air, firsthand interactions with Holocaust survivors contextualize the event historically and elevate the emotional intensity. Contemporary Connections are parts of dramatic performances in which students use music, dance, and spoken word to relate the content of challenging texts to their contemporary lives. And Marquee is a strategy to engage the broader school community in lessons from challenging texts. In our narrative, the Marquee becomes a call to action when an act of vandalism results in students' heightened desire to promote unity in their community.

In Chapter 5, our colleague, Eileen Landay, co-founder with Kurt Wootton of the Arts-Literacy Project at Brown University, contextualizes their instructional framework—The Performance Cycle—for use with challenging texts, including Anne Frank’s diary. Eileen describes, specifically, and with compelling examples, ways to invite students into an arts-based community.

Our literacy colleague at The University of Iowa, Renita Schmidt, provides a critical synthesis of picturebooks and adolescent Holocaust literature in Chapter 6. Teachers may consult this synthesis to pair challenging texts with *The Diary of a Young Girl* to develop extended units of study related to the Holocaust. This critical review of literature is organized around the central concepts of *seeing*, *being*, and *feeling the text*—the foci of Chapters 2–4.

Chapter 7 applies our approach to *seeing*, *being*, and *feeling the text* through the arts to three popular challenging texts: *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007), *The Skin I’m In* (Flake, 1998), and *Enrique’s Journey* (Nazario, 2013). We describe each selection using our criteria for challenging texts and highlight the particular ways in which *seeing*, *being*, and *feeling the text* can support robust reading experiences. We demonstrate how visual, embodied, and emotional strategies used with *The Diary* can be adapted for the purposes of studying these widely used challenging texts. We include additional teaching resources that promote layering literacies through the arts.

Chapter 8 highlights how and why arts-based literacy engagements position students to approach the Holocaust with respect. In their reflections on how they engaged with challenging texts and each other throughout their study of *The Diary*, adolescents show us how they “stand next to” Anne. Students demonstrate how they are interested in and capable of learning with challenging texts. We close by raising new questions about the Holocaust and theory and pedagogy about layering literacies with challenging texts.

Special Features

In this book, we link arts-based approaches to literacies learning with examples that allow readers to imagine themselves as teachers and students inside the classrooms we describe, particularly via photographs of compelling moments of engaged and embodied learning. Additionally, we offer brief teacher perspectives, culled from interviews and presentations by teachers in the project, and presented in “Teacher Voice” boxes in many chapters. These excerpts reveal teachers’ worries, delights, questions, and insights. “Student Voice” boxes complement the teachers’ perspectives by amplifying students’ perceptions of their arts-based engagements with challenging texts.

We also include an example of multimodal assessment for arts-based instruction that we developed in the classrooms. We describe the Visual Learning Analysis (VLA) in Chapter 1 and use examples throughout the chapters. The VLA creates a pedagogical space within which students can teach their teachers and us about how they learn through visual, embodied, and emotional layers.

Lastly, three Appendices offer resources for educators. Appendix A includes directions for all of the arts-based strategies featured in the book. Appendix B, created by Renita, is a list of recommended picturebooks, information books, and adolescent literature about the Holocaust, organized by genre. Appendix C, which we co-created with Renita, is a list of contemporary texts we recognize as likely to be challenging in many school communities. You may consider adopting these for your own pedagogical purposes.

OUR PERSPECTIVES AS LITERACY RESEARCHERS

Anne Frank's diary was first published 70 years ago. And although *The Diary* has been taught in countless numbers of classrooms for generations now, having been translated into 70 different languages ("The diary at 70," 2017), there has been in the educational research literature relatively few accounts of teachers and students as they engage deeply with this topic. Despite the fact that the study of the Holocaust is mandated in curriculums in many states and countries across the world, there are few research-based portraits of the complexity of teaching this topic in classrooms in which teachers and students are striving to teach and learn this content deeply (e.g., see Gray, 2015; Juzwik, 2009; Schweber, 2004; Spector, 2007 for notable, empirical exceptions). As Schweber (2006) notes, "While hundreds of articles and an increasingly large number of books advocate Holocaust education, only very few of these base recommendations for practice on empirical research" (p. 51). Through this book, we seek to contribute to this literature by documenting and sharing the efforts of teachers, teaching artists, and students in our community who have found in the arts a means of mediating teaching and learning about challenging texts. Our focus on visual, embodied, and emotional literacies to teach challenging texts and our corresponding illustrations of classroom practice emerge from our analysis of students and teachers across varied classroom contexts striving to do justice to an important topic.

As qualitative educational researchers, we recognize how our own beliefs, histories, life experiences, and identities (influenced by race, gender, ethnicity, class, among other powerful social forces circulating in our society) shape how we view the world and how we interpret interactions in classrooms. To portray a more complete picture of how who we are shapes what we see and the meanings we interpret, we share here briefly our own positionalities, including the recognition that we are not Jewish. Nor are we Holocaust survivors, descendants of survivors, or Holocaust scholars. We are not arts educators. We are, however, literacy educators who desire to understand how to teach children and adolescents about issues of inequity in contemporary and historical contexts. We recognize that it won't be long until the survivors of the Holocaust are no longer with us to tell their stories firsthand. We take up the cause to help young people "bear witness" to the narrative of the Holocaust, and to other narratives that can help us develop critical consciousness about power and justice.

As we learn and write about Anne Frank and how teachers and students in our own community study the Holocaust, we consider our language choices carefully. Although we may not make the right decision in each example in this book, we choose not to appropriate language that was used by Nazis to frame the Holocaust (e.g., "Final Solution," "extermination"). Rather, we seek to use language that is authentic to each context where we conduct the research and respect the complexities of the realities of perpetrators, victims, resisters, and bystanders. For cogent discussions of the etymological complexities inherent in the language people use to talk about the Holocaust (including the problematic linking inherent in the term Holocaust itself), see Gray (2015) and Schweber and Findling (2007).

We recognize and appreciate that there are as many opinions about how to teach or not teach challenging texts as there are ways to teach. For example, simulations are generally recognized as a teaching method to avoid when approaching Holocaust history and literature, but Schweber (2004) portrays very positively a teacher who uses simulation effectively to evoke emotional learning for her students. In the end, as our colleague Fred Whittaker notes, teachers in each and every context are charged with the responsibility of bringing students safely into and out of their studies of the Holocaust. We offer this book as a resource for teachers who choose to take this journey with their students with care.

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Acknowledgements

We first acknowledge, with solemnity, the survivors, their descendants, and the more than six million Jews and millions of other souls who lost their lives in the atrocities of the Holocaust. We pledge to “bear witness” to their shared and individual stories through the best means we have at our disposal—teaching young people, so that the world does not forget this history, its complexity, and its connection to our present day; and encouraging teachers to do the same.

Our invitation to participate in the Anne Frank: Bearing Witness Project, which initiated the learning we share in these pages, came from our friend and colleague, Jeffrey Jamner. Jeffrey, we thank you and The Kentucky Center for The Performing Arts for giving us the means to learn, innovate, and co-create with you. We now consider the Performance Cycle pivotal to our way of thinking about the arts and literacy thanks to our new friends and colleagues, the ArtsLiteracy team of educators—Eileen Landay, Kurt Wootton, and Len Newman. The project described in these pages continues to deepen and widen thanks to your talents and insights. We are grateful to Renita Schmidt, on whose expertise we relied to recommend an array of high quality Holocaust literature for children and adolescents.

We thank the teachers and students in whose classrooms we spent hours every week for months at a time: Kim (JJ) Joiner, Fred Whittaker, Tiffany LaVoie, and Kelly Holland. These teachers and students were welcoming and generous, and from their willingness to take risks, be reflective, and include us we learned so much. We appreciate the principals who supported these teachers’ decisions to participate in the project, as well as the other teachers and teaching artists who participated and willingly allowed us to observe and record.

A special thank you to Fred Gross. Fred regularly visits so many of the classrooms we reference in this book, sharing the story of his childhood escape from Nazi Europe, and deeply affecting hundreds of students each year.

At the University of Louisville, a team of support helped with large and small tasks associated with the research and preparation of the book. Research assistants and doctoral students Ashley Shelton Arnold, Irina McGrath, Jonathan Baize, Aly Jacobs, Emily Zuccaro, Christie Angleton, and Leah Halliday were engaged in various phases of the project, from data collection to page proof reading and indexing. We are deeply appreciative of the Early Childhood Research Center community of scholars, and for the funding that supported all phases of this work. Vicki Johnson-Leuze, was our ever-present admin extraordinaire, and responded to each of our requests for chasing down permissions, formatting, and record keeping with a smile and a discriminating eye for detail.

Our thanks to Ranen Omer-Sherman, Jewish Heritage Fund for Excellence Endowed Chair of Judaic Studies at the University of Louisville. Ranen's review of the sections of the book that share historical and religious content was invaluable to us, as was his consistent encouragement and support. Any omissions or mistakes are our own.

We are thankful to have had the opportunity to conceptualize this book with Naomi Silverman during the final months of her career that over the years deeply influenced literacy research and education. Along with the reviewers' insights and questions, Naomi's response to our initial manuscript pushed our thinking forward and inspired the voice, message, and organization of the final version of this book. Karen Adler, our editor at Routledge, was a steadfast source of support throughout the production process.

The co-publication of this book with Routledge and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) will bring it into view for so many English language arts teachers and teacher educators. To that end, we thank Kurt Austin, for his belief in the project and enthusiasm for its contents throughout the production process, and Emily Kirkpatrick for her intention to engage teachers in learning about this work.

This project, and *Reading Challenging Texts: Layering Literacies Through the Arts*, would not have been possible without generous financial support from the Jewish Heritage Fund for Excellence. Jeff Polson, David Kaplan, and Tiffany Fabing embraced this project from its inception and "stood next to" us as we studied the power of the arts in engaging our community in Louisville in learning about Anne Frank and the Holocaust.

To Vandy Chisholm and Tom Barten: Thank you for learning with us every step of the way.

Credits List

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Contents

List of Figures	ix
Foreword	xii
<i>Jeffrey Jamner</i>	
Preface	xiv
Acknowledgements	xix
Credits List	xxi
1 Layering Literacies for Teaching about Anne Frank and Other Challenging Texts	1
2 Seeing the Text	18
3 Being the Text	38
4 Feeling the Text	58
5 Begin Reading Challenging Texts by Building Community	76
<i>Eileen Landay</i>	
6 A Critical Synthesis of Picturebooks and Adolescent Literature About the Holocaust and Other Challenging Texts	91
<i>Renita Schmidt</i>	
7 Layering Literacies with Other Challenging Texts	101
8 Standing Next to Anne Frank: Layering Literacies and Challenging Topics with Respect	117
Appendix A. Directions for Arts-Based Instructional Strategies	125
Appendix B. Picturebooks and Adolescent Literature About the Holocaust	129
<i>Renita Schmidt</i>	
Appendix C. Additional Challenging Texts: Some Recommendations	132
<i>Renita Schmidt, James S. Chisholm, and Kathryn F. Whitmore</i>	
Index	134

List of Figures

1.1	A likeness of Anne Frank, called “Morning,” as conveyed in fabric art by Penny Sisto	14
2.1	Three of the four parts to Ellsworth Kelly’s “Memorial,” on permanent display at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum	18
2.2	A cordel with multimodal texts in Kim Joiner’s classroom	22
2.3	Students enter the text by browsing the cordel in Kim Joiner’s classroom	23
2.4	Teachers respond to the challenging texts presented on the cordel	23
2.5	Kelly Holland’s students move quietly through the cordel as their study begins	24
2.6	An example of a photograph labeled with words of discrimination	25
2.7	Procedures for the Visual Learning Analysis (VLA)	26
2.8	Callie’s Visual Learning Analysis (VLA) describes her reading of bodies and visual texts at the cordel	28
2.9	Students in Kim Joiner’s class work to create their icons	29
2.10	Brittany’s icon of the word “scared” hangs on the cordel in Kim Joiner’s classroom	30
2.11	Icons from students in Kim Joiner’s class (left to right, top to bottom): “determined,” “innocent,” “ambition,” “optimistic”	31
2.12	A large bulletin board outside Fred Whittaker’s classroom is filled with archives—images of his students and people who lived during the Holocaust	32
2.13	Building snowmen across time and space	33
2.14	Children playing with sand buckets on the beach in two times, places, and circumstances	34
2.15	Arianna and Chagit ride horseback in nature, making connections across time and space	35