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## MULTITEXTUAL LITERACY IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS: CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS AND THE DAB

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**Karen McGarry**  
University of Cincinnati  
[mcgarrka@mail.uc.edu](mailto:mcgarrka@mail.uc.edu)

**Karen McGarry** is a visual artist and arts educator currently working toward a PhD in Educational Studies at the University of Cincinnati. Research interests embrace reflection/reflexivity and critical pedagogy in teacher education and teacher professional development. Prior experience includes adjunct work in teacher education, secondary level visual art and humanities teaching, and studio practice supporting visual artmaking and exhibiting.

**Abstract:** Literacy is more directly linked to language arts than the visual arts even though both disciplines demand a high level of proficiency knowledge. This article examines how Feldman's (1970) art criticism model, applied in visual arts and aesthetics, and Fairclough's (2015) critical discourse analysis (CDA), used predominantly in literacy research, imbricate to reveal a multitextual literacy approach to gesture as an extension of utterance. Transdisciplinary textual analysis, supported by Bakhtin's theories on addressivity and social language construction (1986), critique both cultural appropriation and media literacy. Gesture, as an extension of utterance, transpired from witnessing a random gestural act, blurring textual boundaries in a decoding process to suggest multiliterate awareness in learning ecologies. Art criticism reflection and CDA reveal methods for examining communication processes within cultural contexts and, as a result, suggest integration into educational settings as vital tools for conscientious textual decoding praxis.

**Keywords:** addressivity; appropriation; CDA; gesture; transdisciplinary; utterance

*Utterance is the topic of analysis when language is conceived as dialogue, the fundamental unit of investigation for anyone studying communication as opposed to language alone. (Holquist, 1990, p.59)*

It started with a sneeze.

While driving one day, I noticed the driver of another car sneezing. Her car was turning left in front of my line of stopped traffic when her sneeze erupted. I witnessed her using contemporary sneeze etiquette: sneezing into the inside of her elbow. I started imagining the various ways people sneeze and how acceptable decorum for sneezing has shifted over time. Sneezing into one's hands, preferably covered by a tissue or handkerchief, was once the *de rigueur*, or required, gesture – the action of covering one's mouth was of strategic importance. Present custom, however, calls for the inner-elbow sneeze method, an entirely different gesture. Sometime during the last decade, socially acceptable hygiene practices for sneezing altered the gesture, with schools, community organizations, hospitals, and businesses all working to re-train a citizenry toward this new gestural choreography.

As defined by Adam Kendon (2004), gesture “is a label for actions that have the features of manifest deliberate expressiveness” (p. 15), suggesting an intentional nature to an action that is also context dependent. The act of sneezing as discussed in this paper, is relevant to the context of social and customary structures in place in the United States, though other countries and cultures may adapt similar gestures and attitudes toward sneezing. Whether one sneezes into a tissue or into an inside elbow invokes an intentional gesture, as Kendon suggests, with an expressiveness developed over time and through convention. As a part of communication, a gesture extends a visual or verbal text toward a multimodal message that often assists in completing a thought, a sentence, or an action. The gesture, then, may be read and deciphered as a text that communicates outwardly to an audience as “a real assertion in the context of a particular utterance” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 83) and, in terms of multimodality and “recurrent patterns of behavior” (Herman, 2010, p. 84), a gesture might realize, extend, or become habitual as an utterance toward a broader contextual understanding. Could the act of sneezing, then, be a gestural utterance?

***As a part of communication, a gesture extends a visual or verbal text toward a multimodal message that often assists in completing a thought, a sentence, or an action.***

This article explores how a gesture, namely the inside the elbow sneeze gesture, became allied with a social phenomenon, known as “the dab,” after the gesture was

transformed into an educational device for teaching students at a high school proper sneeze protocol. The educational device is represented in the form of a poster, which for the purposes of this article, will be called, “the text.” The idea for gesture as utterance, stemming from randomly witnessing another person sneeze into her elbow, and the associated critique of the text, connects to Bakhtin’s (1986) use of the word utterance as a descriptive for speech genres. In turn, gesture as utterance then developed into a desire to understand how a gesture might enhance or instruct an utterance toward specific meaningful intent. Through Bakhtin’s theories, I began to see gesture as an intentional multimodal textual communication device. A device that might activate “secondary or complex speech genres” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 62), like those that might be found in a novel where an author creates a reality, however, that imagined reality is a convention, not part of a real-world experience. For example, in the prologue to Neil Gaiman’s novel, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (2013), he describes a setting in a countryside that includes a farm and a pond. The setting can be imagined as a reality and may even feel similar to an actual setting possibly seen and experienced by someone in real life, however, the reality that Gaiman creates is a contrived utterance: no matter how real the setting is imagined for our reading pleasure, it remains, nonetheless, a contrivance. As an utterance, then, the gesture associated with a sneeze, is a contrived utterance existing in a reality apart from the actual sneeze act.

As an artist/teacher/researcher, contrivance as utterance is in continual flux and negotiation in my work: how I select and represent ideas through gestural forms as texts. Speaking through gesture, my utterances reveal a dialogue addressing how I encode meaning and intent in my arts-based research. My research process entails deconstructing images and ideas to examine intentional praxis, eventually re-presenting other texts with informed utterances based on my reflexive activity. The gestures I create form texts that undergo critical discourse analysis (CDA) processes as a recurring condition for creative expression. Content analysis is a process I incorporate into my studio practice and one that I take into educational settings as a pedagogical tool for learners within those knowledge generating ecologies, as sites/habitations and learning/logos environments.

In this article, I begin by describing the central text and the school setting where the text was introduced and displayed. Then, the text will undergo an art criticism analysis modeled on a process developed by Edmund Burke Feldman (1970) and CDA by employing the tools developed by Norman Fairclough (2015), to examine the idea of gesture as an extension of the utterance. These two analysis methods share some overlap and these distinctions will be made clearer within the article. Next, Bakhtin’s theories on addressivity as connected to the utterance are developed, connecting to a discussion on how multitextual literacy impacts decoding processes as a valuable tool in multiliteracy awareness within learning ecologies. As a form of summary, I discuss

implications for how this method of decoding texts may enhance media literacy in learning environments and how thinking across and through texts, in a transdisciplinary fashion, may positively impact processes for knowing.

Transdisciplinary approaches to learning or communicating suggest a more fluid relationship between aspects of learning, attempting to break siloed processes of generating knowledge. This notion of a flow between disciplines, establishes an integration of content-specific knowledge into a process of embodied knowing within new intellectual and generative, cooperative learning spaces (Marshall, 2014). By incorporating the prefix *trans*, I am attempting to reveal textual relationships that imply lucidity and informed critique, not collective relationships, as in multi- or cross-disciplinary, and not combinative ones, as in an interdisciplinary focus (Marshall, 2014). How we consider texts through various channels, as verbal and visual, or gestural, may lead toward learning that is less “verbocentric” or less dependent on “oral or written language” as the predominant mode of communication and knowledge acquisition (Leland & Harste, 1994, p. 337). An expanded range of communicative pathways might introduce more contextually attuned, authentic communication, or communication that is multitextual-centric, or -imbued. Communication often takes the shape of a text and can be realized through visual, aural, and/or verbal modes of expression, hence my creation of the term “mutlitextual” to imply and envelop these various communicative strands. The term multitextual has only a slight variation from a term like “multimodal,” which also establishes communication across multiple modes, the former emphasizing texts.

For this analysis, my aim is to reinforce all modes of communication as texts, to make the term explicitly inclusive, attempting to avoid any perceived hierarchical associations that might value some texts over others. If we consider gesture as an extension of utterance, we may begin to entertain different pathways for learning that eventually might lead to understanding, realizing action as a compliment to experiential knowing. In this article, I aim to reveal how the overlapping models of an art criticism model and CDA inform methods for examining forms of textual communication within cultural contexts and, as a result, suggest inclusion of these techniques into educational settings as vital decoding tools for enhanced multitextual awareness.

## The Text: Sneezing and the Dab

Don't Spread Germs  
This Winter



Destroy All Bacteria  
When You Sneeze

*Figure 1.* This image is a representation, created by the author, of the layout of the original poster. (To see the original poster image, see endnote<sup>1</sup> for a website link.)

Based on the introductory sneezing anecdote, I selected the text for this critique (*Fig. 1*) as an illustration worthy of investigation from the perspectives of an art criticism reflection model and CDA. (The image above is a representation I designed to show the layout of the original poster, however, in the body of article, I describe the original poster. A link to that image is included in the endnotes.) In this poster, set within a meme design, a “bespectacled man is seen posing in front of a row of red lockers. His face is dipped into the crook of his right arm, which is bent, while his left arm is held up to his side” (Stern, 2016, para. 4). The bespectacled man in the image is identified as Alex Kovach, a teacher at the Design and Innovation Center, Newark High School, Newark, Ohio. Mr. Kovach, it is reported, was known to “dab” in this manner in his classroom and

throughout the school, regardless if his actions caused irritation or hilarity to the student/school body (Michael, 2017). In his defense, Mr. Kovach stated that he often repeated the gesture because he found his actions humorous.

The text format and content reinforced my idea of folding this text into a discourse analysis following an art criticism model and CDA, revealing the overlapping structures. The gesture depicted, and the message made implicit in the written text, coalesced a multitextual, multiliterate, multimodal engagement with the text as a decoding process to inform media literacy awareness in an educational setting. The text represents what Ranci re (2009) describes as a “sentence-image,” suggesting a powerful expressive “relationship between the said and unsaid in a photograph” (p. 46), with all aspects of this text operating as visual and verbal elements. By creating this poster as an in-school public service announcement (PSA), this teacher potentially opened a door to media literacy that, based on the reporting available about this action, never occurred. The poster image became a bit of an Internet sensation for a time: going viral on the website called “Imgur” (Stern, 2016); gaining popularity through friend sharing; and, receiving permission request from an out-of-state organization wanting to borrow the idea for their own use (Michael, 2017). The PSA poster brought attention to a health issue that plagues various communal settings: the spread of germs. The content of the image, however, may do more to reinforce stereotypes of nerdy adults glomming onto trends not meant for their consumption, use, or appropriation, than the original PSA idea Mr. Kovach might have intended. Decoding this text and critiquing ideas of cultural appropriation are addressed later in the article where I discuss how multitextual or multiliterate awareness might impact educational settings toward embracing critical literacy skills.

Though the idea for critiquing the text, and exploring critical literacy skills, stemmed from witnessing a random sneeze event, the idea of gesture as an extension of utterance, led me to ponder over other actions where a gesture may complete, accentuate, or evidence an utterance. Like Mr. Kovach’s dab gesture, how might other gestural acts inform an utterance? As an illustrative example, a hand might narrate ideas through “gesture-language” (Kendon, 2004, p. 52) by invoking the action a word may conjure to connote meaning. Adam Kendon traces the origins of gesture use from the nineteenth century in chapter four of his book, *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance*, situating gesture and utterance within languages, not necessarily dependent on spoken words. Expanding upon Kendon’s theories then, a hand might hold a device or a tool for extending or completing an utterance. The gesture of a baton, for example, in the hand of a symphony conductor communicates tempo, pacing, and tonal texture for a musical ensemble. A baton in the hand of a police officer, however, communicates an entirely different action, one generally associated with intimidation or even violence. Like a baton, a paint brush in an artist’s hand is more likely to depict an expressive utterance

than would a contractor finishing work on crown molding. These ruminations reveal a multimodal link between an utterance in a written or spoken format, with a gesture as an illustrative event or complex act within an utterance. The gesture-language within the PSA text described above, is aimed at communicating an utterance through an alternative communication device: the dab.

The image of Mr. Kovach dabbing provides a text for critiquing a gestural referent — the sneeze act, used as an instructional device, or PSA, within an educational setting. Analysis of the text aims to consider both the context and cultural significance of the dab gesture, while analyzing a direct action by a school administration to borrow the meme format as a tool for teaching dispositional behavior. Though the text seems meant as an instructional device, the overall composition suggests that any intentional impact may be lost if the intended audience is repelled by the device, theoretically negating the utterance. As an evidentiary artifact, the text provides a vehicle to examine cultural appropriation and media literacy. Critiquing the evidence, through theoretical relativity and textual analysis, might reveal pathways for engaging within an educational ecology in critical multitextual analysis and awareness.

## **Textual Comparative Analysis Models and Theoretical Justification**

To better understand the content of the text, it may be illustrative to perform a content analysis on the PSA poster. Since the poster contains both visual text and written or graphic text, two models from distinct disciplines were selected to scrutinize this text. The two models selected are frameworks stemming from art criticism and from critical discourse analysis (CDA): Edmund Burke Feldman's (1970) model of art criticism and Norman Fairclough's (2015) stages of CDA. Fairclough represents his matrix for CDA as stages of describing (analyzing a text), interpreting (processing that analysis), and explaining (providing a social construct of the analysis) (Fairclough, 2015; Janks, 1997). Similarly, the Feldman model incorporates description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment or evaluation (Feldman, 1970; Geahigan, 1999) as processes for learning to appreciate artworks (See *Figure 2*). In both frameworks, the first stage, description, is intended as a foray into a text, as a process to reveal what is within a text, on a more objective level: *describing what is there*. Geahigan (1999) describes these stages as "illocutionary" (p. 9) acts and encourages an adaptation of the Feldman model to better reveal a process of critical reflection aimed to engage students as informed critical thinkers, not automatons able to recite words or utterances devoid of known meaning or understood intent. He sees the descriptive stage as a vital component of the analysis process, but warns that using the Feldman model without clear content understanding may create possible misrepresentations of language utterances, possibly oversimplifying any critical reflection or impact meant to build from the initial analysis



stage. What Geahigan is suggesting, is that any critique model requires instruction and scaffolding so that the language of the criticism model is understood between participants employing the Feldman model, or any another content analysis tool. If used in an educational setting, such an approach to critique may provide a framework for decoding texts, potentially fostering heightened critical literacy awareness when encountering multitextual content.

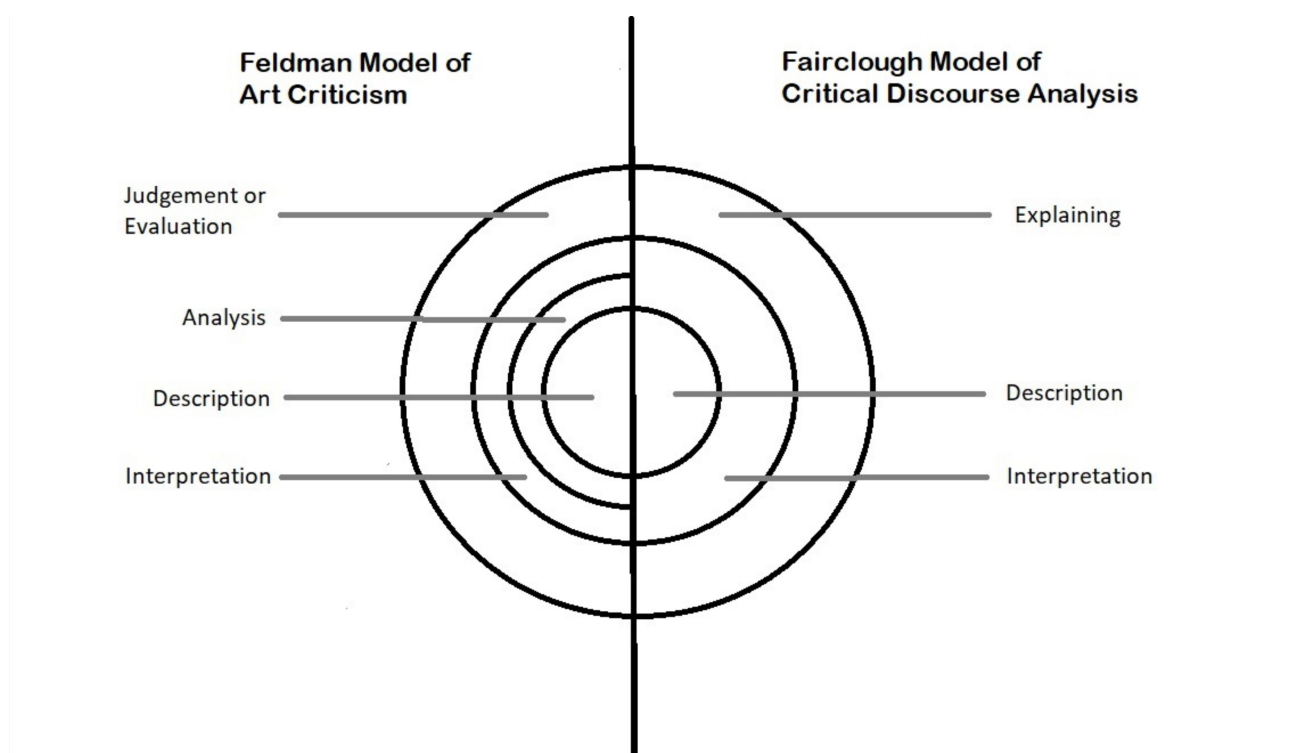


Figure 2. Stages of Analysis for Feldman and Fairclough Models (author credit)

As detailed in *Figure 2*, the two frameworks differ with the addition of an “analysis” stage in the Feldman (1970) model. Here, one is meant to reflect on the descriptive stage and begin to use that description as a basis for analyzing the formal features within an artwork. For example, how the elements and/or principles of art and design are incorporated into the artwork and what might be suggested within the text through the integration of these language and design features. The elements of art and the principles of design are a set of words invoking discipline-specific language to assist in this analysis stage:

Elements of Art: line, shape, color, value, form, texture, space

Principles of Design: balance, contrast, emphasis, movement, pattern, rhythm, unity

Often this stage is interwoven seamlessly from the descriptive stage, especially if an artwork is composed of abstract elements and in describing the artwork, the same discipline specific terms are invoked to designate what one sees within the work of art or in another text. This list of words is meant to focus attention on what one sees within a visual text and guide viewers toward naming what they see through specific terminology. Take the word “line” for example. It can mean a mark in any length or direction that is longer than it is wide (too wide and a line becomes a shape), however, other terms can express what a line does: it may undulate, or be jagged or short, or it could spiral around. As descriptive terminology, the elements of art are the visual components an artist uses when making artworks; the principles of design detail how an artist used the elements of art while creating an artwork, often revealing intent. The elements and principles offer an introductory language toolbox for describing what one sees in a visual text as suggested discipline-specific vocabulary.

There is, however, some debate within the field of art education regarding these terms with some scholars arguing that the elements and principles stem from historical connotations, linking these words to modernist usage as foundational language when critiquing works of art (Barrett, 2010; Gude, 2007; Tavin, 2000). These criticisms do offer alternative terminology as replacement or complimentary terms to the list above that might appeal to a more contemporary or postmodern framework. Though I appreciate and understand both the debate within art education circles and the desire for developing supplemental vocabulary within arts-based praxis, for this article, I will focus on and implement the time-specific language in place when Feldman (1970) authored his art criticism model: the elements of art and the principles of design<sup>2</sup> (see list of terms above).

Returning to the analysis models, the final two stages of interpretation and judgement/evaluation and explanation are complementary between the frameworks. Both Feldman (1970) and Fairclough (2015) view the interpretive stage as a place to consider context, sociocultural implications, and intent or meaning as directly impacting a text. It should also be noted that both scholars view the matrix stages as connected or additive, that one stage informs and enriches the next. However, in the Feldman model, the final stage of judgment or evaluation is often omitted for educational use. It is in this Feldman stage where a discussion related to possible successes or merits within an artwork, or other visual text, are considered. Determining whether an artwork is successful is less critical in an analysis activity, where the intent is on decoding a text. Creative merit judgement is a unique process in art criticism, muddled with aesthetic considerations and variables such as subjectivity, personal taste, and market forces. With these considerations in mind, for the purposes of this critique in this paper, I will engage in an evaluative stage, blending the Feldman and Fairclough models in a textual discourse analysis.

The discourse analysis to follow will reveal the two analysis models in an overlapping critique of the text introduced above as a PSA poster displayed in a school setting. This analysis will then introduce and explain how the theories of Bakhtin (1986), as related to his writing on speech genres and addressivity (see also Holquist, 2002; Morson, 2006), stimulate my theorizing that the utterance, incorporated into the text, is a complex, actualized gesture, flirting with cultural appropriation. As indicated above, my interest in gesture as an extension of the utterance compels this theorizing as academic support and contextual framing. Relatedly, notions surrounding gesture as utterance found in the writing of Adam Kendon (2004) provide foundational grounding of an idea that began as a casual meditation on a sneeze.

Contemplating the context of a gesture through a multitextual framework begs consideration for the social and performative aspects surrounding that gesture. Besides understanding gestural intent from a verbal or written description, a gesture may also be viewed through these various modes as a text (Jancsary, Hollerer, & Meyer, 2016) and as a social semiotic device in educational environments (Kress, 2011). For example, experiencing a video installation in a museum setting incorporates elements of sight, sound, and possibly projected words. All these elements, when experienced, are filtered through a viewer's social lens. This social lens, then, informs an individual viewer's associations to the work and, eventually, to the meaning they ascribe to the work. Since a museum can be an educational site, how work in that site is consumed, appreciated or denied, is dependent upon semiotic structures in place within the site and within the individual.

Filtering experiences through semiotic structures are context-dependent, formed through prior knowledge and relationships to and with the social structures in place. If we continue with the video installation example from above, a viewer brings personal semiotic experiences or baggage into a viewing encounter. That baggage may or may not inform the content on display or the multiple sensory information offered for consumption. These multiple modes of filtering information impact multitextual approaches to decoding texts as related to Bakhtin's (1986) notion of an utterance as a secondary or complex utterance. As a text, gesture envelops language as a social construct and language as a performative action (Austin, 1962). As a social construct it is important to consider gesture as having a certain narrative structure (Herman, 2010) with intended meaning (Bal & Bryson, 1994), as well as an affective impact on experience when receiving texts through multitextual engagement (Jagodzinski, 2010). Performatively, language can act as a communication tool when expressing a feeling or mood through a bodily act: returning a salute for military personnel; signaling a high five or a fist bump; or extending an open hand to indicate "stop." These gestural acts may be examined through a media literacy process (Jolls, Walkosz & Morgenthaler, 2014)

where signs are decoded and subsequently encoded for meaning. A gesture as a performative act impacts both the gestural performer and the gestural audience or receiver as co-constructors within a de/encoding process (Kendon, 2014). In the following textual analysis, employing the Feldman (1970) and Fairclough (2015) models and the theoretical frameworks on addressivity, I will illustrate how gesture as utterance can impact critical multitextual literacy engagement toward enhanced learner awareness in educational settings.

## Critical Discourse Analysis of DAB Poster Text

This section begins by providing a critical discourse analysis of the text (the D.A.B. poster illustrated in *Fig. 1*) through the Feldman (1970) and Fairclough (2015) model matrixes with consideration for the distinct, though interrelated, stages of textual analysis. From there, theoretical implications related to gesture, the utterance, addressivity, and the dab and cultural appropriation are contemplated as contributing factors toward entertaining the idea of gesture as an extension of utterance for multitextual awareness.

### Feldman and Fairclough Models

This critique will consider the following stages of investigation: description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation or judgement, and explanation. Though the Fairclough (2015) matrix does not include the analysis stage, it will be included in this critique to reveal how the Feldman (1970) method of art criticism may impact the process of reading a visual document.

**Stage 1: Description.** Using the Feldman (1970) model, the text shows a landscape (horizontal) format poster including words (using different typefaces) and a visual image. The composition is split into two sections, with the top section encompassing three-quarters of the overall page size. The top section has the words, "Don't Spread Germs This Winter," on a black background, and a photograph of a man in a white shirt with an identification badge, wearing a necktie and glasses in front of a set of red lockers. His arms are extended to the left of his body with his right arm bent and his head tucked into the inside of his right elbow. The bottom section has a light blue background banner with the words, "Destroy. All. Bacteria.," printed above the words, "When You Sneeze." The letters D, A, and B are all a larger font size than the other letters on the same line, with the smallest font reserved for the "sneeze" message. The text appears to be hung on a cinderblock wall close to the ceiling. The overall size of the poster is estimated to be approximately 30 inches wide and 24 inches

(approximately 76 x 61 cm) high and looks to be printed on a high-quality paper stock or shiny poster vinyl, with grommets in the corners to support hanging the text.

By following the tenets of the Feldman (1970) model, a viewer endeavors to describe what is seen (using the elements of art as language indicators where applicable) prior to adding any value or interpretations to the text, avoiding, for example, any terms that may suggest an impression such as beautiful or silly.

In the Fairclough (2015) framework for the descriptive stage, he emphasizes vocabulary, grammar, and textual structures for interacting with a text to better understand content (p. 129-30). In considering vocabulary, this image contains words that, in an educational setting, might be understood to instruct an audience with a prescriptive message. Though instructional, the words imply a certain informality and the image of the man might indicate a type of euphemistic rendering of a command meant to be less domineering, more playful. From a grammatical perspective, the words reveal an active or instructive presence, as seen in the words “don’t” and “destroy,” and the only pronoun used is “you” which implicates the viewer directly. The textual structures reveal a direct command while the man’s dress, size, lanyard badge, and pose create visual cues for the message, as a recognizable authority figure within the overall textual message. Text placement seems to doubly reinforce the commanding implications – hung close to the ceiling, the message and image are dictated from above or from an authority figure towering over the text’s consumers.

The structures that Fairclough (2015) includes in this stage of a CDA are designed to locate and name what is present within a text, like the Feldman (1970) model, and indicate specific aspects of a text prior to analyzing or making any value judgements or evaluations. The description stage is an inventory of the essentials within a text.

**Stage 2: Analysis.** This stage is part of the Feldman (1970) model only. It provides a place to expand upon the descriptive stage by analyzing how a text is rendered or ordered, often through use of discipline specific language, also known as the elements and principles of art and design. The composition or arrangement within this text is predominantly flat with the photographic image of the man sandwiched between two distinct blocks of text in a horizontal balance. In other words, the text has little depth and predominantly reveals only a foreground image. Without the use of the rule of thirds for composing photographic space, this image bisects the picture plane, visually breaking the space into distinct sections of word and image. The dress shirt color, the man’s body, and his position create a focal point or emphasis in the center of the picture plane, drawing the eye to his image. His white shirt is contrasted against the red background color of the lockers. Graphically, the white text (font number one) above

the man creates a link to his white shirt and the letters D-A-B (font number two) reflect the red in the lockers above, while the remaining letters in the lower section are black and appear to be a mix of the other typefaces. The stop-motion nature of the image implies a gesture or performative pose, while the words provide a static grounding, all of which create a flat image that references the contemporary meme format, a format that resonates with youth culture.

In this stage, Feldman (1970) incorporated a place to name and characterize what could be seen and then described, often with distinct language use, as a tool of textual analysis that emphasizes the organization of an image.

**Stage 3: Interpretation.** For this stage, the two models overlap and reveal similar analysis processes to construct potential meaning, situational context, and discourse type (Fairclough, 2015, p. 159). Both authors ask that we examine a text and look for evidence to ascribe meaning and/or intent. This image is clearly meant to instruct for a disposition within an educational setting. We see an adult white male performing an action with words meant to direct viewers toward making similar actions. Invoking Fairclough's idea of member resources (MR), those taking cues from this message would understand both the environment in which it resides, and the tone or manner imbued in the content – as an instructional guide. The members in this environment can recognize power hierarchies and dynamics and know that the adults instruct, and the students learn. The members also understand the relationships between themselves, the image, and the intended message because they are well indoctrinated to interpret instructional codes of action and behavior in educational settings. In seeking meaning, the Feldman (1970) model would follow a similar path and have viewers inquire about intent, feelings or emotions, and searching within the text for evidence to support responses to those points. This text intends to invoke a message to “you” while imploring “you” to comply and alter individual dispositions accordingly. The words and image, as deciphered here, elicit feelings of compliance and explicit direction, without opening any space for feedback or discussion.

How, though, are the punctuation marks (the periods) used between the words, “destroy all bacteria,” meant to be interpreted? The word “dab” is not an abbreviation for a series of three words made into an acronym. According to the Urban Dictionary online (<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=dab>), *dab* is a dance move with origins from an Atlanta hip-hop group that reflects a sense of pride; a dance move, however, that became famous nearly as quickly as it became infamous. By inserting the grammatical mechanics into the word dab and then including the words, “when you sneeze” directly below, the message could be misconstrued to imply that dab sneezing destroys all bacteria, probably not an intended interpretation.

Both analysis models could interpret or ascribe meaning and intent in this image as follows: as an educational device to quickly deliver an instructional message of behavior modification.

**Stage 4: Evaluation/Explanation.** Overall, based on the Feldman (1970) model, the image, though not graphically compelling due to the lack of compositional space and style, does communicate the intended behavioral modification idea, while borrowing the meme format configuration. If taken as a PSA for educational purposes, it mostly succeeds in projecting its intended message. Fairclough (2015), however, includes elements of power, struggle and change into this final stage. If the image is successful as a pronouncement, who is measuring that success and what power struggles are imbedded in the message? Based on media reporting generated after this poster went viral (Coe, 2017; Michael, 2017; Stern, 2016), most adults, teachers, and administrators deemed the poster a success, applauding it for its ability to educate for a disposition and finding the humor as something students could relate to overall. One report in the *Daily Mail* (Stern, 2016) however, used cynicism to reveal another side to the dynamic at play. Their headline read as: “Dab when you sneeze! VERY trendy school teacher uses popular dance move to teach students how to avoid spreading bacteria this winter.” Posting the word “very” in all capital letters reveals a wink and a nod toward another reading of the gesture and one that implicates the power struggle at play within this poster image. The idea of “the dab” as making a trendy connection to an action typically not performed by adults reveals a disconnect between languages and words as utterances within social contexts. As an embodied gesture, the text reveals an affective process of experiencing the text’s content without truly consuming the intended message (jagodzinski, 2010). Since the dab gesture does not stem from adult experiences or from white culture, the image shows a detachment and potential power struggle between those meant to engage in this text conversation, namely, between students and teachers/administrators.

The section to follow takes up the power critique by examining the text through a social semiotic lens and through Bakhtin’s (1986) notion of addressivity as impacting the meaning of utterances and, in this case, the meaning of a gesture. These theoretical links aim to support the idea of gesture as an extension of the utterance and, relatedly, to reveal a process of media literacy as a pedagogical tool for addressing cultural appropriation in educational settings.

### **Addressivity, Appropriation, and the Dab**

The gesture known as “the dab” was a short-lived pop culture phenomenon, affiliated with distinct sociocultural groups, originating from urban, hip-hop culture. The

Atlanta-based dance move began growing in 2013, though it remains unclear who can claim official copyright for the move. More widespread, cross-cultural use happened when the move was incorporated into football games, where stadium and televised audiences could witness what was originally a locally developed and executed action or gesture, now displayed for broader consumption (Frandsen, 2017; Groome, 2017; Selby, 2017). Gestural actions and utterances are socially constructed (Bakhtin, 1986) and semiotically related to significant social structures. Exploring the social context of dabbing helps to frame this critique in terms of cultural appropriation and power relationships inherent in language use and action.

The text in *Fig. 1* reveals the cultural appropriation of a dance move stemming from urban, African American culture re-appropriated by a white power authority, re-purposed as a tool of power and influence in a school setting and re-presented by co-opting the meme<sup>3</sup> format contemporaneously utilized within youth culture. The meme, as a communication tool, is quickly developed, replicated and shared to a contagion level, just before another meme comes along to usurp its communicative positionality. Typically, meme creators and consumers are young and, from my position as a teacher and a parent, the meme format is protected territory: a place that “older folk” are not meant to inhabit. Appropriating the meme format in the text might trespass on youth culture domain, essentially establishing a power dynamic through word and image. The older folk, in this case, created a text with a specific audience in mind, as Morson (2006) suggests, by forecasting a precise listener, within an utterance exchange. The intended listener must then actively decode the utterance, shaping understanding based on how that listener reads the implied message, which may or may not have a mutually affective or cooperative understanding. In an educational setting, this text, featuring the dab gesture, as a “site of learning” (Kress, 2011, p. 213), sought to communicate intentional meaning through an easily identifiable, social communication device. But did intentionality tread on cultural responsibility?

The creators of this text may have presumed that borrowing a gesture from a social media context would help their message and establish relevance for their intended audience: the students of the school. This act of borrowing, however, establishes a “completed for” and not a “completed with” approach to engagement policy, assuming compliancy with a school population where it might not exist, and without securing any requisite permissions. Borrowing without citation is akin to plagiarism, a forbidden academic practice. Citing authorship, whether in word, image, gesture, or song, acknowledges original voice and fends off complicity. What better place, than in an educational setting, for such procedural adherence, and an opportunity to engage dialogically into matters of cultural appropriation and academic integrity?



When a power authority appropriates from another culture, without regard for crediting a culturally specific voice, that authority mutes the original source or context, possibly even commodifying a cultural context (Jagodzinski, 2010). Cultural appropriation and cultural essentialism stem from such power dynamics, though contemporary scholars differ as to the potential harm such appropriations might convey. Taking utterances from other cultures might be viewed as something to be cautious of but, in total, cultural appropriation may not be ethically or morally wrong (Young, 2005). However, this type of philosophical discussion has the potential to purport an essentialist view, where cultures are classified as homogenous collectives – a dangerous and possibly damaging cultural view (Matthes, 2016), that tends to distinguish insiders from outsiders based on cultural authenticity claims. Essentialism negates the nuances within groups, segregating voices within an imposed classification system that conceals the spectrum of difference within a classified group. A voice from within a group does not necessarily speak for the entire group. Recognizing that a voice originated out of a group, practicing conscientious historical accountability by knowing where and when a prior voice spoke, are vital characteristics for critical media literacy. The text used as a PSA in an educational setting, appropriated a dance move from another culture without proper credit or citation. In an educational setting, that type of plagiarism would be grounds for failure. Appropriation, as in the text, whether intentionally committed or enacted through ignorance, is problematic because the act silenced an original voice when borrowing a gesture without recognizing prior context.

A prior voice has context, and gesture as utterance has implications for the text's creator and for its intended audience. In theorizing about addressivity, Bakhtin (1986) recognized this audience as the "third person" (Morson, 2006, p. 56), the other voice that spoke before. In this instance, the other voice belongs to those that developed the dab as a culturally specific communication gesture. Discounting or failing to recognize this third voice represents a potential infringement, or silencing, from a media literacy accountability framework, for the text's designers. Borrowing a culturally specific social gesture and repurposing it out-of-context, negates full ethical or procedural consideration and appropriates from a position of privilege.

In his writing on Bakhtin's theory of addressivity, Morson (2006) noted how context is evoked through words, therefore, when taken out-of-context, words cling to a memory. It is the memory within this text that is recalled and in question, the memory of the other voice, or gesture, that uttered before, those "past and potential utterances" (Morson, 2006, p. 56) that impact meaning and understanding. Without proper contextual recognition for this prior voice – the dab gesture inventors, this text becomes a pretext, a guise, or an attempt to conceal meaning of a specific gestural utterance. Morson highlights how Bakhtin's third person, the voice that spoke already, is always present and that any new utterance has "no alibi" (2006, p. 57), no excuse or

justification outside of responsibility to the utterance. Attention and recognition of prior voices, for educational purposes, may foster an appreciation for contextual appropriation. In an educational setting, voices matter and voices in context provide the best route toward appreciating and teaching for intentional meaning.

### **Implications, Insights, and Additional Contemplation**

Words and actions, as equal parts of language, shape and form communicative agency and intentional meaning. The analysis performed on the dab gesture text revealed potential pitfalls that may interrupt or even silence that agency. Not all utterances translate between contexts and though the text creators may justify their actions as a bit of fun, the ignorance or arrogance of pilfering ideas without regard for context warranted highlighting. As a former high school teacher and a parent, I have learned that young people do not want their authority figures dabbling in their context; they want autonomy and to be treated as maturing adults. For the dab text, the school faculty and/or administrators could have consulted the student body for their opinions prior to creating a school policy on sneezing etiquette: consulting student voices for their input rather than ascribing input for them (Cohen, 2010), and including the students as meaningful contributors to an educational process. Instilling a mindset as stewards of context in an educational setting might encourage a sensitivity toward language utterances, promoting audience awareness to the reception or rejection of intended utterances.

In educational settings, opportunities for learning engagement should find intentional blending into an entire school learning ecology. Consider this: what if the school administration and faculty opened the text design and creation to student input? What if the message about controlling germs was viewed from an ecological lens for the entire school population to resolve? Might the message construction change? This article contributes to a body of scholarship investigating critical literacy, revealing potential learning opportunities through multitextual analysis as a dialogic engagement process. Classrooms and other educational settings should engage dialogically in intentional critiques of texts, including discussions into cultural appropriation and essentialism, that might teach for the disposition of informed consumption of media while promoting a multiliterate awareness ecology. As a transdisciplinary process of critical examination, the critique of texts might create future opportunities for similar processes of critical engagement through multitextual learning. Outcomes might produce new texts, as informed, considered media, designed and supported by a community that engaged in a critical cultural pedagogy process.

Learning examples that incorporate critical literacy skills and cultural awareness in educational settings do exist in the literature and in workshopping opportunities. For example, in 2014, I attended a professional development seminar at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, CA, hosted by the Center for Media Literacy (CML) (<http://www.medialit.org/educator-resources>), that focused on CML's framework design for conducting media literacy in classroom settings. CML president, Tessa Jolls, led a workshop with educators interested in implementing media literacy processes into curricular models.

Media literacy can impact learning through guided interaction and participation in educational settings (Aarsand & Melander, 2016) as a contextual learning practice that builds transdisciplinary awareness and competencies. Relatedly, instructing for cultural sensitivity when confronting cultural appropriation and essentialism, especially when considering indigenous cultures (Haig-Brown, 2010), facilitates social awareness of semiotic structures within language regarding Bakhtin's "third person" (Morson, 2006, p. 56), or the memory of the original voice. Contemporary examples of curricular implementation are available as inspirational models for use in educational settings. Incorporating such models into praxis, however, is the challenge facing interested educators, learning sites, and policy makers. The implementation may lie in locating the action to change learning pathways toward embracing multitextual, transdisciplinary awareness. However, if actions do speak louder than words, then the actions of some may help shape a model for the action of others. If actions, or gestures, create more impact than other utterances, might action toward multitextual learning encounters endeavor to impart knowledge into educational settings?

The focus of this article was to reveal gesture as an extension of the utterance through a critical discourse analysis of the dab gesture text. Witnessing a random sneeze event initiated an inner dialogue about a gestural act and how such an act informs an utterance or performative act. By employing two distinct methods of analysis, the Feldman (1970) model of art criticism and the Fairclough (2015) model of CDA, this study revealed how these models imbricate to potentially inform media literacy practice, leading toward multitextual awareness. The expanded critique concerning addressivity and cultural sensitivity when interacting with texts through conscious contextual awareness, advances critical literacy praxis within an analysis process. -

Gesture as an extension of utterance stemmed from a desire to decode aspects of communication that interlocked with theoretical musings. Revealing how I consider the reflective qualities of critical multitextual analysis as vital to reflexive praxis is my invitation to open dialogue, to start a conversation about how we communicate, because not only what we utter matters, but the method of uttering also matters.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Since copyright permission could not be obtained for the original photograph of the DAB poster used as the text for this article, I included an image I created as a stand-in for the poster layout. To see the original photograph described in the article, follow this link: <https://abc6onyourside.com/news/local/school-shout-out-viral-illness-poster-going-viral-online>.

Photo credit: HOTELBEDMINTS

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the history of learning through the arts, authors have worked to coin a language for describing, interpreting and analyzing works of art. One author, Maitland E. Graves (1902-1978) wrote *The Art of Color and Design* (1951) which included the terminology found in Fig. 3 and which would have been in use during the time that Feldman theorized his art criticism model. Though this is not the only author to develop and name terms for arts-based practices, this one example assists in locating an historical reference for the use of this language within art education.

<sup>3</sup> Origin of the word meme can be attributed to Richard Dawkins in his book, *The Selfish Gene* (1978). He coined the term based on the association to and the pronunciation of the word gene, a desire for a one-syllable word as a basis for his theory: a word to describe the process of replicating an idea through communication, almost like a contagion.