

# CLiC: THE CONVERGING LITERACIES CENTER

(WHITE PAPER)

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## **converging**

to come together, approaching one another

"Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others. Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives." (Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 3-4)

## **literacies**

*literacies*--versus *literacy*--emphasizes the multiple, socially-sanctioned, people-oriented nature of any "literate" act; literacy thus requires reading and negotiating various contextualized forces that are deeply embedded in identity formation, political affiliations, material and social conditions, and ideological frameworks.

Literate Practices, . . . , refer to those sanctioned and endorsed by others recognized as literate members of a particular [community of practice](#). (Carter 34)

## **center**

a place (virtual/physical) where the chief object of attention are literacies (converging, multiple) as they manifest themselves in the lives of real people--authentic literacy experiences

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Extensive case studies like Deborah Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives* (2001) and Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher's *Literate Lives in the Information Age* (2004) clearly reveal how class as well as race, ethnicity, and gender work against students who come to school "behind" their wealthier peers with greater access to the authentic literacy experiences valued by society--not because of failures of intellect but because of failure to own the means to achieve success as measured in the academy.

Our mission as teachers, researchers, and administrators is to provide the means and support for students without means and support in their private lives. Doing so requires us to discover, articulate, and implement more relevant, authentic literacy learning experiences--and learn from them as they learn from us. To accomplish this mission, we are working to establish the **Converging Literacies Center (CLiC)**, an interdisciplinary site where educators work with students and scholars work with one another (and research participants) to reimagine literacy education in ways that embrace multiple, diverse literacy experiences and multiple modes of communication--from the written to the aural to the digital, integrating written, visual, and aural texts.

At its foundation, CLiC works from the assumption that appropriate literacy teaching in this new context should yield rhetorical dexterity. The most appropriate method for this new context is ethnographic inquiry.

*rhetorical dexterity*--the ability to effectively read, understand, manipulate, and negotiate the cultural and linguistic codes of a new community of practice based on a relatively accurate assessment of another, more familiar one. (Carter 22)

*ethnography*--a research method that flatly acknowledges the interestedness of the researcher as participant observer. The researcher observes, learns, and writes from authority derived from traditional research and from observation of and involvement in the object of study (see Dunbar-Odom's *Working with Ideas*).

CLiC's key pedagogical moves and the primary research methodology are shaped by these principles. And, given our unique institutional and geographical context and that fact that schools like ours serving populations like ours are becoming increasingly common across the nation, such research is important---not only to those of us teaching at Texas A&M-Commerce but, indeed, across the US and abroad.

Our students must learn the verbal, visual, textual (rhetorical!) dexterity that will allow them to see how literacies can both serve them and oppress them. They must also learn the dexterity necessary to please both a larger audience and themselves.

At the same time, however, the artifacts that serve as manifestations of successful research must also be transformed to enable and support collaboration and multiple modes of communication.

## MAKING THE HUMANITIES MATTER

In his recent book *Arts of Living: Reinventing the Humanities for the Twenty-First Century*, Kurt Spellmeyer sees in the humanities—especially English departments—a failure to connect with students' lives and sees this failure as having effect both in and out of the classroom. He is concerned that the content of humanities classes is largely divorced from the realities of culture at large and that neither students nor teachers have a clear sense of the purpose of these classes. According to Spellmeyer, “The humanities are in trouble because they have become increasingly isolated from the life of the larger society” (4).

Humanists like Fadiman and Bloom cite the influences of mass media and a corporate mindset that value profit over everything else as major sources in the decline of the humanities, but Spellmeyer argues that the humanities participated in their own decline in a process that has taken well over a century. In the nineteenth century, for example, literary societies were integral parts of middle-class social life, from debating societies in the colleges and universities to women's clubs which featured written and presented essays by their members:

The denigration of mass culture allowed scholars...to wrest literary art from the undergraduate reading societies, a fixture of academic life since Ralph Waldo Emerson's time, and from the even more successful women's clubs operating outside the university. But these founders were less successful in defining what it was about the literary work of art that required such careful handling. (77)

As education and career preparation became more and more professionalized, faculty in the humanities—particularly in literature—also had to specialize, “developing a ‘scientific’ form of historical scholarship modeled on German criticism and philology,” giving “English and other humanities both a methodology and a quasi-scientific image” (77). Spellmeyer sees these nineteenth-century changes as part of a progression of knowledge specialization that has ultimately resulted in the isolation of the humanities from culture at large. In the contemporary academy, he sees the current manifestation of that specialization as being the “practice of critique” which he metaphorically describes as “illness” (145).

In a similar vein, Bill Readings points to the increasingly administrative function of teaching and argues that the university is a “ruined institution” (152). In *The University in Ruins*, he seeks

to perform a structural diagnosis of contemporary shifts in the University's function as an institution, in order to argue that the wider social role of the University as an institution is now up for grabs. It is no longer clear what the place of the university is within society nor what the exact nature of that society is, and the changing institutional form of the University is something that intellectuals cannot afford to ignore. (2)

Readings argues that the growing corporatization of the university can be seen as the creeping influence of concepts taken from corporate strategies—particularly the peculiar use made of the concept of “excellence” by the adherents of “Total Quality Management.” Both argue that these movements serve to separate teacher from student, student from culture, and school from culture.

## MAKING RHETORIC MATTER

So Spellmeyer argues that we must “free” ourselves from critique, and Readings argues that we must resist pernicious influences of the corporate world. How are we to achieve these goals? Spellmeyer calls for a “pragmatics” of reading by which he means “ways of reading that restore a sense of connection to things, and with it, a greater confidence in our ability to act” (168). He writes, “The rarification of the arts—their sequestration from everyday life and their metamorphosis into objects of abstruse expert consumption—typifies the very essence of disenchanting society as Weber described it and this development corresponds quite closely to other forms of political and social disenfranchisement” (195). In other words, literature as the preserve of a specially-trained elite is emblematic of a generalized separation of “ordinary people” from sites and seats of power. Instead, for Spellmeyer, the university, and more specifically the humanities, have a responsibility to “offer people freedom, and beyond that, to express real solidarity with the inner life of ordinary citizens” (223).

Readings, on the other hand, argues that teachers must begin to perceive themselves and to speak of themselves in the terms of the *rhetor* as opposed to the *magister*, that is, as “a speaker who takes account of the audience” rather than a speaker who “is indifferent to the specificity of his or her addressees” (158), and he reminds us that the etymological root of “education” is the Latin *e ducere*, or to draw out. It is his position that, ultimately, “the University will have to become one place, among others, where the attempt is made to think the social bond without recourse to a unifying idea, whether of culture or of the state” (191). The disciplines obviously do not offer such a place since, for Readings, their attempts to structure knowledge have greatly contributed to the problems he sees in the contemporary university. Readings also makes clear that the end of such thinking cannot be determined. The direction of true dialogue, such as he calls for, cannot be controlled or predicted if it is become a vital place within a culture.

Spellmeyer concludes that “[o]ur job is not to lead but to prepare and to support” (245). So we are working to find ways in the classroom to capture and provide a sense of invitation and community. We are working to, in a sense, come up with a mission statement that acknowledges how we read and write for many complex reasons and considers how pleasure must play a role—not the only role, just a role—in our own learning as well as in our teaching. We cannot assume that our students hold the same attitudes toward higher literacy as ours. But we cannot know what our students’ attitudes are without dialogue—*real* dialogue. As Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater writes,

Academic discourse communities cannot flourish without real dialogue, without engaged reading, without committed writing, without an extension of the private literacies that are an inherent part of many students who inhabit our classrooms. We must allow ourselves to integrate into our classrooms those literacy/learning practices that will enable students both to belong to and participate in many discourse communities during their university careers and finally in their lifetimes. (167)

## DIALOGUE THAT MATTERS

Having studied the literate practices of two students in and out of the classroom, Chiseri-Strater helps us see how even well meaning teachers can make assumptions that work against our students, expecting them to, in essence, read our minds. She, like Readings, calls for dialogue—“real dialogue.” But that dialogue cannot “flourish” if there is no back and forth, give and take, if there is no consideration of where and how our students find pleasure in their reading and writing and pleasure in their abilities to connect the reading and writing they do to their lives.

To begin this dialogue, we are calling for a consortium of faculty across the curriculum to work to integrate multiple modes of literacy into their curriculum—in other words, to bring the written text into play with aural and visual texts in order to “sponsor” our students’ acquisition of higher literacy on the college level. Deborah Brandt in her article “Sponsors of Literacy” writes:

Sponsors, as I have come to think of them, are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way. . . . Although the interests of the sponsored do not have to converge (and, in fact, may conflict), sponsors nevertheless set the terms for access to literacy and wield powerful incentives for compliance and loyalty. (166)

Sponsors, according to Brandt, can be parents, friends, bosses, or teachers, and they can sponsor in the positive ways we normally recognize and expect, that is, we expect parents and teachers to encourage literacy, or in negative ways we may not recognize as sponsorship, such as when we do something to prove to others who expressed doubt that we could, in fact, succeed.

In her book *Literacy in American Lives*, Brandt, via interviews, learns how literate practices are very much a part of virtually everyone’s home and working lives and to what lengths individuals will go to become increasingly literate, even those individuals whom we do not necessarily see as more than marginally literate, but she also clearly demonstrates how literacy is not equally available in the same ways to all. Juxtaposing Delores Lopez, a working-class Latina of immigrant parents, and Raymond Branch, a white middle class son of professional parents, she shows how their access or lack of access to the manifestations of literacy (in this example, largely represented as computer knowledge and comfort) clearly affects the trajectory of their lives. Branch is the son of a computer science professor, and, from his earliest memories, he had access to computers, computer labs, to people highly knowledgeable about computers, and to the expectation that he, too, would be highly knowledgeable about computers. In other words, compared to Lopez, he had a head start. Lopez, on the other hand, had to play a continual game of catch-up. She is bilingual because her parents’ first language is Spanish; when she and her family become aware of the importance of computer skills to economic (and linguistic) success in this country, her parents find the means to buy her a used word processor. By the time Brandt interviewed Lopez, she has a job of which she is proud and that she performs proudly, but she is still, and will most likely always be, behind Branch, who has a lucrative job in terms of income and status in the computer field.

We are stating the obvious: students who start out behind tend to stay behind. And at Texas A&M-Commerce, our student body tends more toward the Delores Lopez's than the Raymond Branch's. The undergraduate students we teach are more likely to be first-generation college students than not and are likely to be working part time and commuting. Of course, these are the broadest of descriptive strokes.

Part of our charge as educators and researchers should be to find the specifics and patterns of literacy acquisition embedded in these broad strokes and figure out how to better support the acquisition of *new* literacies—literacies that may shape themselves in ways we've never before considered. It should be clear that by "literacies" we are not talking about the rudimentary decoding of letters but about the complex of ways we "read" the texts that swirl around us—the visual, the cultural, the digital, the aural, as well as the literary and written texts.

Certainly, MySpace, YouTube, and Wikipedia have had profound effects on our student's intellectual lives. We see the exciting potential of these spaces, but when we look to our own student population we see roadblocks in their paths that students from more affluent families at more selective universities don't face. At our mid-sized public university nearly 60% of the student population is first-generation students, a large number of whom are required to take one or more "developmental" courses during their first year. Rather than seeing this as a deficit to overcome, however, we see it as an opportunity to rethink our positions as teachers, learners, and scholars.

## **CLiC MATTERS**

With the full support of key administrators and in collaboration with scholars from across the university, we are working to developing a center for the study and teaching of converging literacies or the "Converging Literacies Center" (CLiC). One of the intellectual foundations of our conception of this center is the work of Henry Jenkins, the founder and director of the Comparative Media Studies Program at MIT. In his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Jenkins defines convergence as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences. . ." (2). As media and culture converge, manifestations of literacy are transformed—transformed in ways that have been largely ignored in most humanities classrooms (even in many online and distance education sites of instruction). A Center can offer a place for faculty across the curriculum to "converge" to transform their own pedagogical practices to tap into the energy of the participatory nature of convergence culture.

Modeled after well established ones like the Center for the Study and Teaching of Writing at the Ohio State University and the Center for Writing Studies at University of Illinois, our proposed center would be concerned with supporting literacy learning *and* research into how such literacy learning occurs. As A&M-Commerce differs from OSU and UTUC in both size and student population, the research opportunities available at our proposed center would necessarily differ as well.

Our desire is to provide a site for both research in multiple literacies and professional development activities to support teaching and tutoring informed by this research. We anticipate that the proposed center will be concerned with questions like the following: What are the material realities limiting and shaping our student's acquisition of new literacies? What do these realities have to teach us about literacy learning and literacy education? How do digital literacies inform (and challenge) traditional ones? How are print-based, alphabetic texts absorbed by multimodal ones? What can we learn from all this about writing and the teaching of writing?

One approach to learning that provides fruitful ground for the work we are beginning is ethnography. Ethnographic work gives students an opportunity to bring together the oral, written, digital, and cultural literacies as they observe, research, collect data, interview and survey subjects, gather visual artifacts, and produce a final project, emerging with a kind of expertise that few other methods of research enable. With the firsthand knowledge that field research provides, they can confidently challenge the claims and assumptions made by others—even published experts in the field they are researching. From their ethnographic research, students are able to learn things about their themselves and their culture and then to teach those things to their teachers and others, so that teachers and students learn from each other in the dynamic way educators hope for.

While our proposed center will be deeply concerned with literacy practices in which our students are involved beyond school, our obligation is to train them to produce critically aware, rhetorically sound, aesthetically effective texts in and for these new spaces and audiences and, at the same time, to provide opportunities for ourselves to learn from this training. Our vision is to promote diverse authors in diverse spaces with diverse media for diverse purposes. As Henry Jenkins in *Convergence Culture* writes:

“None of us can know everything; each of us knows something; and we can put the skills together if we pool our resources and combine our skills” (4). At A&M-Commerce, we are moving in a new direction in our efforts to be positive sponsors in the acquisition of new literacies, providing an intellectual, physical, and virtual space in which we can “pool our resources and combine our skills.”

## **CLiC INFRASTRUCTURE**

The key places and spaces involved with the Converging Literacies Center are the Writing Center, the First-Year Composition Programs, and associated communities.

1. *The Writing Center* serves as a hub for the study and teaching of writing and rhetoric on our campus. In addition to conducting original research in writing, literacy, and rhetoric, we support writers across the campus via research-based practices influenced by the larger scholarly fields and our own findings. Most new graduate students begin familiarizing themselves with our various writing programs through the writing center by serving as tutors, and all remain involved throughout their study here by supporting and encouraging their student's extensive use of these services. Many of our graduates also contribute their own original research in writing center studies by presenting at local, regional, and national writing center conferences (more than 40 since 2001!) and publishing in the key publications in the field (two in the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, one in *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*). Some

have chosen to focus their theses and dissertations on issues directly related to research and teaching occurring in our Writing Center. A forthcoming article in *College Composition and Communication* explores issues related to writing center publicity and the power landscape (see Shannon Carter's "The Writing Center Paradox: Legitimacy and the Problem of Institutional Change"). Another explores a related issue as it overlaps with the WPA's position (see Carter's "The Feminist WPA Project: Fear and Possibility in the Feminist 'Home'" in Brownwyn William's collection *Identity Papers: Literacy and Power in Higher Education*. Utah State UP, 2006).

2. *The Classroom*. Not unlike most campuses, the bulk of formalized writing instruction takes place in the Writing Center and the classroom. Our writing programs guide students through curricula that places their experiences at the center of the classroom and introduces intellectually-rigorous and rhetorically-sound methods for examining those experiences and making sense of them in new contexts. To that end, students read challenging texts that expose them to an ongoing, scholarly conversation surrounding a topic that's immediately relevant to their lives and invite them to join that conversation through their own ethnographic inquiry and write up. Recent topics include "places and spaces," "faith and religion in the classroom," and the multiple literacies of our lives. See <http://faculty.tamu-commerce.edu/scarter/fyw.html> for more about our various writing programs and recent curricula.

Just as we do in/for the Writing Center, we approach the classroom as teacher-scholars. That means our classroom practices are deeply informed by our research and our research deeply informs our classroom practices. Much scholarship and major teaching resources have emerged directly from our First-Year Program, including Donna Dunbar-Odom's innovative textbook *Working with Ideas* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001), her provocative scholarly book *Defying the Odds: Class and the Pursuit of Higher Literacy* (State University of New York Press, 2007), and a number of related articles and conference presentations. The Basic Writing Program at A&M-Commerce is small by some standards, but it has received much scholarly attention as both conference presentations and recent and forthcoming publications. See especially Shannon Carter's *The Way Literacy Lives: Rhetorical Dexterity and Basic Writing Instruction* (State University of New York Press, March 2008), "Living Inside the Bible (Belt)" (*College English*, July 2007), and "Redefining Literacy as a Social Practice" (*Journal of Basic Writing*, Fall 2006).

A number of graduate student presentations, dissertations, theses, and publications have emerged from these spaces.

As we've already suggested, the reach of graduate student research in our department stretches across A&M-Commerce and into the scholarly community (through publications/presentations). In similar ways and for similar reasons, first-year student research does to. At the end of their second semester in first-year composition (English 102), students participate in Celebration of Student Writing (see <http://faculty.tamu-commerce.edu/scarter/csw.htm>). At this event, the entire campus and surrounding community came to meet the researchers, learn about their projects and findings, and view relevant artifacts and other materials. As one key administrator described it following our first CSW, "Yesterday's Celebration of Student Writing was outstanding. I have been a

professor for 40 years and I have never seen that kind of enthusiasm expressed over a writing assignment in a required class. Having 240 students proudly display their work is a phenomenon." Says another, "The students who participated were excited and eager to talk about their projects, and this event was a great venue for them to share their work with a live audience outside their classrooms. According to another, "It was refreshing to see student work celebrated rather than complained about, and the students I talked to were able to speak with real authority about the work they did." As yet another put it, "Yesterday was a great example of passion in writing and learning and teaching. . . . *It was a great day at our university yesterday.*" And the buzz continues: "I just keep smiling when I think about CSW – the energy and enthusiasm generated from faculty and students about learning...What really gets me, is the second and third wave of conversations about the day. People are referencing 'factoids' and the observations they picked up at the event. . ." According to yet another, the CSW "was a special day for the university. . . Too often, we focus on the problems we have and not on the good things...and then there is *a ray of hope*. . . Just think...when we look back into our history, it will be the CSW and your leadership that gave us the example of how it is done." (for additional comments, see [http://faculty.tamu-commerce.edu/scarter/csw\\_comments.htm](http://faculty.tamu-commerce.edu/scarter/csw_comments.htm) ).

That's what we are all about.

Two of our first-year students have even been able to extend their research beyond our campus. Recent English 102 student Eric Pleasant's "Punk Literacy in Mid 1980's Waco: An Ethnography," has been accepted for publication in the next issue of the innovative, national, peer-reviewed journal *Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric*. February, 2007, Stephen Williams, then a current English 102 student, presented his original research at the Federation Rhetoric Symposium (with Shannon Carter, see "The (Il)literate Lineman: Deconstructing the Literacy Myth Through Ethnographic Inquiry" at <http://faculty.tamu-commerce.edu/scarter/FRS2007.htm>).

3. *The Community*. Though we are just getting started with more formalized community outreach, on an informal level A&M-Commerce has been involved with various community literacy projects for a number of years. Especially interesting with respect to CLiC may be our partnership with Texas HOPE Literacy (see [http://faculty.tamu-commerce.edu/scarter/commerce\\_hope.htm](http://faculty.tamu-commerce.edu/scarter/commerce_hope.htm)), a prison literacy program in the Dallas area. Additional projects include our forthcoming "Tutors in the Community" program, which will take place for the first time during the third International Writing Center Week. We also extend our reach into the community through our first-year writing programs. The projects developed in English 100, 101, and 102 (see <http://faculty.tamu-commerce.edu/scarter/fyw.html>) send students out into the world to explore and research a particular place (English 101) and/or literacy as it manifests itself in a particular community (see English 100 at [http://faculty.tamu-commerce.edu/scarter/bwp\\_introduction.htm](http://faculty.tamu-commerce.edu/scarter/bwp_introduction.htm) and 102 at [http://faculty.tamu-commerce.edu/scarter/102\\_Resources.htm](http://faculty.tamu-commerce.edu/scarter/102_Resources.htm)). Most select communities in the areas in or surrounding A&M-Commerce. For additional information about areas explored in previous years, please visit <http://faculty.tamu-commerce.edu/scarter/csw.htm>.

4. *The University*. A major effort is taking place across the campus to locate and exploit the scholarly/pedagogical possibilities available at the intersection of multiple

disciplines. One such effort is a collaboratively written grant that will focus on the cross-disciplinary potential of Math 131 and English 100 ("developmental" courses). We hope to extend that grant to Math 171 and English 101 (credit-bearing courses). Principle investigators on this are Pamela Webster (Department of Mathematics), Christy Foreman (Department of Literature and Languages), and Shannon Carter (see [http://faculty.tamu-commerce.edu/scarter/special\\_projects2.html](http://faculty.tamu-commerce.edu/scarter/special_projects2.html) for more about this work in progress).

An important aspect of the Center for the Converging Literacies Center is our connections with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Communication Arts and Design, the Art Department among others.

An Advisory Committee of faculty and staff from across the campus guides CLiC. Committee members and additional information will be available soon.

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Episode: 3195 Newspapers vs. the Internet: The Converging Literacies of the Digital Age. Today, we read old newspapers. Richard H. Armstrong. | Posted on November 20, 2018, 12:01 AM. Episode: 3195 Newspapers vs. the Internet: The Converging Literacies of the Digital Age. Today, we read old newspapers. / To embed this piece of audio in your site, please use this code Converging Traditions in Literacy Research 2. The Convergence of Literacies. New communications and information technologies pose significant challenges for their users.Â the rise of mass literacy, many people became literate but not literary, and the uses of literacy. became increasingly subject to regulation (Luke, 1989); we see a similar process occurring. today with new forms of media. Technologies never stand still and, therefore, nor do the literacies associated with. their use.Â centered on understanding and critiquing the operation and consequences of these filters. Now that almost anyone can produce and disseminate internet content, with fewer and. different kinds of filters, the basis of critical literacy (or critical viewing) must alter.