

# Reading in a secondary English classroom: agency, interest and multimodal design

## Abstract

Research data gathered from a sequence of English lessons in a London secondary school is used to interrogate the ways in which reading is conceptualised in policy and realised in practice. Analysis of a PowerPoint presentation, created by two thirteen-year-old students, suggests the students' ability to operate as sophisticated, multimodal sign-makers, using the resources of digital technologies in ways that are not acknowledged within the domain of schooled literacy.

## Key words

Multimodality, design, mode, colour, interest, literacy, policy, curriculum

5,806 words

In what follows I want to interrogate the ways in which reading is conceptualised in policy and to question whether the account that policy provides is adequate as a description of the literacy practices that are to be found in the secondary English classroom. To do this, I will draw on research data gathered from English lessons in Wharfside School,<sup>1</sup> a coeducational, ethnically diverse, secondary comprehensive school in East London. The data provide evidence of the productivity of school students, and in particular of their capacity to operate as sophisticated, multimodal sign-makers, using the resources of digital technologies in ways that are not acknowledged within the domain of schooled literacy (Gee, 2004; Street, 1984, 1995; Street et al., 2007).

In the current English National Curriculum programmes of study (DfEE, 1999), reading is categorised according to two broad kinds of text, literary and non-literary. Each of these categories is further subdivided, literature into texts belonging to the “English literary heritage” and “Texts from different cultures and traditions” (DfEE, 1999: 49), non-literary texts into “Printed and ICT-based information texts” and “Media and moving image texts” (DfEE, 1999: 50). Two main purposes of reading are also identified: “Reading for meaning” and “Understanding the author’s craft” (DfEE, 1999: 49): the latter purpose is defined in ways that imply that what is envisaged is an approach to literary texts; the former would seem to be applicable to all kinds of text (though the relationship between purposes and kinds of text is not made explicit).

The taxonomies that are at work here may well seem commonsensical: they bear a family resemblance to the binaries of fiction and non-fiction which are fundamental to the spatial organisation of (most) libraries and bookshops. They are also closely related to Rosenblatt's well-known distinction between aesthetic and efferent reading orientations:

... the difference between reading a literary work of art and reading for some practical purpose. Our attention is primarily focused on selecting out and analytically abstracting the information or ideas or directions for action that will remain when the reading is over (Rosenblatt 1995 [1938]: 32).

And yet, as Carol Fox (2007) has argued recently in relation to comic books, the binary opposition of efferent and aesthetic reading is simply inadequate to deal with the layered richness of meanings that texts such as Anderson's *King* (2005) or Spiegelman's *Maus* (1987, 1992) have to offer. It may be that the affordances of multimodal texts, and the complexities of contemporary textual practice, pose particular difficulties for the rigid categories of text and reading practice that the National Curriculum presents. On the other hand, it may be that new texts simply reveal more sharply the simultaneous presence of aesthetic and efferent orientations in textual practices across time. "Reading for meaning" is not always and everywhere neatly separable from aesthetic engagement, and aesthetic engagement may be a means of getting things done.

As part of their work on Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, a mixed-ability Year 8 English class (twelve- and thirteen-year-olds) was asked to do some research on other famous assassinations. Pairs of students were given the name of a historical figure who had been assassinated (Malcolm X, Martin Luther King,

Mahatma and Indira Gandhi, Anwar Sadat, Leon Trotsky, J.F. Kennedy, Abraham Lincoln, H.F. Verwoerd, John Lennon and Rosa Luxemburg). Using the resources of the school library and of the internet, they were to find out about their allocated figure and share their findings with the rest of the class. The activity ran over three one-hour lessons in May 2005. In the first, the class was taken to the school library, where students were expected to begin their research; in the second, each pair had access to laptop computers in their English classroom, and worked on their presentations; in the third, students presented their findings to the rest of the class. I observed the second of these lessons and interviewed the class's English teacher, Maeve, after the lesson.

This was the students' brief, as outlined on a task guidance sheet:

**Research task**

You are working in a pair. You have been given the name of a person who has been assassinated. You have to find out the following:

- 1) What is (or was this) person famous for?**
- 2) Do you know why this person was killed?**
- 3) When and where was this person assassinated?**
- 4) Three more facts or information you can tell us about this person.**

- Rules: You must use at least one book *and* the Internet or a CD Rom.
- You **MUST** write your sources down (the title of the book, the Dewey number and the internet website's correct address.)

The task had been devised a year earlier, by the English teacher who had first planned the scheme of work for *Julius Caesar*. In outlining, for the rest of the department, the aims that would inform the work on the play, she had envisaged this activity as one that would provide an "opportunity ... for doing

background research using both books and the Internet.” The orientation suggested here derives from the National Curriculum programme of study for reading, in particular the section headed “Printed and ICT-based information texts”:

To develop their reading of print and ICT-based information texts, pupils should be taught to:

1. select, compare and synthesise information from different texts
2. evaluate how information is presented
3. sift the relevant from the irrelevant, and distinguish between fact and opinion, bias and objectivity
4. identify the characteristic features, at word, sentence and text level, of different types of texts (DfEE 1999: 50).

This emphasis on information – on texts as repositories of data, and on reading as the identification, ordering and evaluation of these data – is reflected in the way that the students’ task is framed through a series of questions: there are facts to be established. The students’ work on a Shakespeare play thus provides an opportunity to explore a relevant theme – assassinations – and through this exploration to develop their skill at retrieving, sifting and synthesising the information that books and ICT-based resources have to offer. In its original conception, then, the task reflects and embodies the categories of reading set forth in the National Curriculum.

Embedded within a longer-term engagement with a literary text, the Shakespeare play – where students might be expected to begin to understand a thing or two about “the author’s craft” – the task encourages a different kind of reading: efferent, not aesthetic.

In adopting this task, Maeve (the teacher whose class I observed) made only one obvious amendment to it. Whereas in its original form, students were to demonstrate what they had learned through an oral presentation to the rest of

the class, Maeve decided that her students would produce PowerPoint presentations – a decision that arose out of her knowledge of the class, of students' interests and expertise, knowledge that is itself the product of a long-term engagement with the class:

that class in particular has always been very good, they have always had quite a high level of skill, which I'm not sure that all classes have ... and they've got a couple of people in there who are REALLY good – Paul and Helen, so if there's ever a problem we can call on Paul or Helen because they always know, and they share. Last year we did a big advertising project ... and they did Power Point presentations there, and they [the two students] taught them, because they knew things I didn't know, about how to do slide transitions, about how to add sound, about how to superimpose things – they found images of bottles of drink and they wanted to superimpose their own labels on them, and Helen and Paul could show them how to do this – so they were rushing around the class inducting all the groups ... so they're all quite good now, so that was really effective I think (interview, 12 May 2005).

Already, in Maeve's awareness of what the students brought to the lesson and to their work on assassinations, there is a perspective on teaching and learning that is irreducibly social and dialogic, a perspective that acknowledges the agency, interests and expertise of the learners. This approach contrasts sharply with the pedagogic assumptions that inform the current version of the English National Curriculum, assumptions that are reflected in the frequency with which the sentence stem, "pupils should be taught ...", precedes the specification of an area of knowledge. The language of policy, positioning students as passive recipients of education, suggests a transmission model of teaching – what Freire termed the "banking concept" (Freire, 1972).<sup>2</sup>

I want to look at one of the presentations produced by two students, Jo and Paul, who were asked to research the death of Salvador Allende. I am interested in what can be established by an analysis of the two PowerPoint slides that they produced – both what do they know about Allende and what do they know about ICT-based information texts?

Before considering the students' work, I should make it clear that what follows is my interpretation of the sign(s) that they produced. I cannot triangulate this interpretation by adducing in evidence the students' commentary on their work. I do not have access to such data – but I would also want to suggest that my analysis is no less plausible for the absence of such extrinsic correlation. As Kress and Jewitt argue, semiotic work – sign-making – always involves making a selection, based on the interests of the sign-maker, from the material that is available to them:

Given this sense of the sign and its making, we can turn the process around and treat it as a means of 'reading': if the sign in all its (formal and material) aspects represents the interests of its maker, we can make inferences, hypothetically, from the shape of the sign to the interests of its maker. The sign is evidence of the interests of its maker in the moment of representation, the sign-maker's engagement with the world to be represented. The sign is also evidence of its maker's interests in communication, their engagement with the social world in which the sign is a (part of a) message (Kress and Jewitt, 2003: 12).

I turn, then, to the students' work, as evidence of their interests and of their learning. Let's start with the words. The first slide, entitled "Salvador Allende," contains the following account of his life and death:

Salvador Allende was the president of Chilean 1970 to 1973 and he was a founder of the Chilean socialist party. Salvador Allende died as he was overthrown, he died in a military coup led by

general Augusto Pinochet. The nature of his death is unclear: His personal doctor said that he committed suicide with a machine gun given to him by Fidel Castro, while others say that he was murdered by Pinochet's military forces while defending the palace. He was born in Valparaiso. He was a president for three years.

The second slide, entitled "Assassins of Salvador Allende," continues thus:

Henry Kissinger and the CIA, directly responsible for his death, and view him as a victim of "American Imperialism. Members of the political right, however, tend to view Allende much less favourably.

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The students acknowledge their source, as their briefing notes had instructed them to. In its turn, the website that they reference acknowledges that the article on Allende "uses material from the Wikipedia article 'Salvador Allende'." And thus, by consulting the Wikipedia website, it is possible to reconstruct the editorial processes whereby Jo and Paul produced the text of their presentation.<sup>3</sup>

The article from which they derived their information runs to about 1,800 words; their version, not including headings and the reference to their source, is 122 words long. There is no evidence, I think, that they were synthesising information from more than one source. If they had consulted any library books in their library lesson, there is no trace of this in the work they produced. This is, perhaps, not surprising: web-based material, for their purposes in producing a PowerPoint presentation, is both more accessible and more easily re-worked, re-fashioned, than print-based sources. Moreover, as I hope to show in the analysis that follows, what is involved in the



production of such a presentation from web-based material is, in itself, a highly complex activity.

The text on the first page of their slide provides answers to the questions posed on the task guidance sheet (see above). They explain who Allende was, why he was famous, and then they focus on the circumstances of the assassination. Nearly half of the text is copied and pasted from the section of the original article that deals with the coup:

On September 11, the Chilean military, led by General Augusto Pinochet, staged the Chilean coup of 1973 against Allende. During the capture of the La Moneda Presidential Palace, Allende died. *The nature of his death is unclear: His personal doctor said that he committed suicide with a machine gun given to him by Fidel Castro, while others say that he was murdered by Pinochet's military forces while defending the palace*  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Salvador Allende&oldid=6176578](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Salvador_Allende&oldid=6176578) (accessed 10 May 2007).

So is this mere “copying out” – evidence of the dangers posed by the affordances of new technology, of the too-easy availability of information via the Internet? On the contrary, what Paul and Jo have done is to identify the forty words from their source that answer their central research questions. At the very least, then, they have, made a selection of what is relevant for their purposes.

More than this, though, has been going on in the construction of Paul and Jo’s text, the first part of which is a carefully crafted synthesis of the information on Allende provided by the website. The single error here occurs in the opening sentence, where the adjective “Chilean” is used in place of the noun, “Chile.” I can find no evidence that this error was a product of copying text from the

source: it may be that the students were confused about the adjectival status of “Chilean,” or it may be the product of eye-slip from the following line, where the adjective is used correctly in the phrase “the Chilean socialist party.” In the source, the information about Allende’s part in the formation of the Socialist Party is presented, in a subsequent section headed “Background,” as “Allende co-founded Chile's socialist party.” The students have combined this with the statement about the dates of Allende’s presidency, derived from the introductory section on the website, to produce a well-formed, fluent and succinct sentence, in which the form of the nominalisation, preceded by an indefinite article – “a founder” – suggests an awareness of the force of the prefix (co-) used in the source:

Salvador Allende was the president of Chilean 1970 to 1973 and he was a founder of the Chilean socialist party.

From the same (“Background”) section in their source, the students have copied the information about Allende’s place of birth. What they have done with this, though, is to move it to near the end of the block of text on the first slide, after the sentence that deals with Allende’s death. It is hard not to read this as a deliberate editorial decision, reflecting their sense of the relative unimportance of this fact. What I am proposing, then, is that the material from the website was carefully selected and shaped by the students in ways that reflected their interests. They were exploring Allende as someone who had, like Julius Caesar, been assassinated, and so it is this fact – albeit a disputed fact, as their text acknowledges – which assumes prominence in the version of events that they produce. The order that they have chosen is a journalistic one. They start with the main facts, provide more detail about the most

important event, and then, down-page as it were, furnish the reader with a little background.

When we turn to the second of the two slides, however, it might seem that the claims being made for the students' control over their material become more tendentious. Under the heading "Assassins of Salvador Allende," the words included in the body of the text are copied verbatim from their source. Here are the two paragraphs from within which the words were copied, with the students' selection italicised:

Allende is seen as a hero to many on the political left. Some view him as a martyr who died for the cause of socialism. His face has even been stylized and reproduced as a symbol of Marxism, similar to the famous images of Che Guevara. Members of the political left tend to hold the United States, specifically *Henry Kissinger and the CIA, directly responsible for his death, and view him as a victim of "American Imperialism."*

*Members of the political right, however, tend to view Allende much less favorably.* His close relationship with Fidel Castro has led many to accuse him of being a communist who was destined to eventually transform Chile into a Castro-style dictatorship. They also argue that the socialist reforms he implemented while in power were the cause of the country's economic woes in 1973.

The students' version, extracting text from the middle of a sentence, pays no attention to the grammar of the original, so that the verb "view" is left without a subject (originally the "Members of the political left") and the pronoun "him" sits uneasily, detached as it is syntactically from the "Allende" that begins the paragraph in the original. If the first sentence doesn't quite hold together in this reduced form, the second suffers from even more fundamental problems of incoherence. The force of "however" depends on the binary opposition of political left and right and their different perspectives on Allende. Because

“Henry Kissinger and the CIA” has, in effect, replaced “Members of the political left” as the subject of the first sentence, the original’s balanced presentation of contrary judgements collapses entirely. The violence that Jo and Paul have done to the grammatical coherence and political poise of their source might indicate, then, evidence of the failure of this activity if it is to be construed as a contribution to teaching students to “sift the relevant from the irrelevant, and distinguish between fact and opinion, bias and objectivity,” as the National Curriculum has it.

Talking after the lesson in which students were working on their presentations, Maeve, the teacher, revealed that Jo and Paul’s second slide might have been prompted by her intervention:

... in going round [the class] the things that I’m picking out, that’s the key thing I want them to look at - the history that surrounds these individuals, “so and so is responsible” – but are they really responsible, what other factors and forces lay behind these things – I want them to be aware of those – the whole idea of conspiracies ... in lots and lots of cases it mentions ... I was talking to Jo and Paul about Allende and they said “He wasn’t killed, he died in the coup” and I said “Look at what it says” and they had found stuff on Henry Kissinger, so I was asking them “How is Henry Kissinger connected to it?” And that’s a big idea for them to grasp, and I don’t know what they will come up with tomorrow [when the presentations are made to the rest of the class] (interview, 12 May 2005).

The students’ PowerPoint presentations, however, were not monomodal productions. The words that they used, borrowing and adapting from the article they found on the Internet, constituted one element among many. What I want to do now is to turn to the PowerPoint slides themselves.

# Salvador Allende



Salvador Allende was the president of Chilean 1970 to 1973 and he was a founder of the Chilean socialist party. Salvador Allende died as he was overthrown, he died in a military coup led by general Augusto Pinochet. The nature of his death is unclear: His personal doctor said that he committed suicide with a machine gun given to him by Fidel Castro, while others say that he was murdered by Pinochet's military forces while defending the palace. He was born in Valparaiso. He was a president for three years.

Figure 1

The first and most striking thing about this is that it has been designed. The affordances of PowerPoint are such, of course, that it would be difficult for the user not to think about design: the software is constructed in such a way that design choices are presented to the user. There are obvious constraints, such as the dimensions of the screen and the fairly prescriptive ways in which the user is encouraged to organise the content. Here, the three elements – title, image and printed text – derive from a stock PowerPoint template, a template that enforces a particular spatial disposition of the three elements. What I want to suggest, though, is that the constraints and affordances of the software (and of this template in particular) have been adapted to serve the interests of the students creating the presentation. (Almost as an aside, I would also like to venture that the binary of aesthetic and efferent orientations

becomes untenable, meaningless even, in the context of the students' multimodal design.)

The website that the students had consulted contains no images, so they found an image of Allende elsewhere on the Internet.<sup>4</sup> What then seems to have happened is that Paul and Jo, with ingenuity and considerable skill, created a background to the slide that is an extrapolation from the design of the image of Allende that they had pasted into the slide. In the image, a photograph of Allende's head and shoulders is superimposed on a background of the Chilean flag, with the flag represented as if hanging from a horizontal pole, so that the left side is red, and in the top right-hand corner is the white star on a deep blue ground, below which falls the white rectangle. The background of the slide picks up the red of the flag, which becomes the dominant colour of the whole slide. The blue of the flag's upper right corner is echoed in the top right-hand corner of the slide, where the red background fades through purple to blue. The white of the flag is echoed in the headline and in the body of the text.

Even if viewed in isolation, the dominant mode of the slide is colour (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001): it carries a weighty semiotic load and it frames, both literally and figuratively, both the words and the image. So what does red mean here, in this context? Any doubt about this is dispelled by the second slide.

## Assassinsators of Salvador Allende



Henry Kissinger and the CIA, directly responsible for his death, and view him as a victim of "American Imperialism. Members of the political right, however, tend to view Allende much less favourably.

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**Figure 2**

The layout of the second slide parallels the first, with the disposition of title, image and written text the same on each. The image of Kissinger<sup>5</sup> may well have been chosen because it, too, mirrors the image of Allende. Both men are presented with their bespectacled faces and their besuited torsos angled very slightly to the left of the viewer. One again, though, the dominant mode is colour, and the most prominent sign on the slide is blue. The sentence grammar of the writing on the second slide may be unclear, confused and incoherent; the grammatical organisation of the two slides as a single multimodal text is exemplary in its coherence. Central to the students' design is the opposition of red and blue, signifying political affiliations and orientations. (There might also be a subsidiary meaning in the sequence of the slides, which represents a chronological movement: the triumph of the blue forces is thus prefigured in the blue corner of the first slide, its placing on

the right an indication, within Western reading conventions, of futurity ...

[Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996].)

I want to return now to the issue of the grammatical coherence of the writing on the second slide. In my earlier analysis, I treated it as a piece of continuous discursive prose – as if it were the same kind of text as the source from which it was derived. I am not at all sure that these assumptions are warranted. The words are the same, but they have been differently framed.

The Internet website where the words originated presents information much as it might be presented in a print-medium encyclopaedia: perhaps the only significant difference is that the use of hyperlinks allows the reader to navigate between entries with greater facility. The article on Allende starts with a short summary, which is followed by a number of sections, organised more or less chronologically, each of which provides more detail on aspects of Allende's life and times; it then concludes with a list of references. Despite the complicating presence of hyperlinks, then, the organisation of the article is predominantly linear and temporal.

In contrast, the students' PowerPoint presentation is organised spatially. Within each slide, the different elements stand in apposition to each other: that is the meaning of their presence on the same slide. Thus, on the first slide, Allende is represented by the title, the image and the written text – and also by the red background that infuses all the separate blocks of semiotically significant material. On the second slide, the same set of relationships exists.



The presence of the image of Kissinger identifies him as one of the “Assassins of Salvador Allende,” as the title has it. What, then, of the written text on this slide? In PowerPoint, written text tends to be organised not in continuous prose but in bullet points, with each bullet point standing in parallel to the others on the same slide: the internal organisation of writing thus mirrors in detail the appositional relationships of the larger blocks of semiotic material within a single slide. If we apply these organising principles to the words that Jo and Paul pasted into the text box on their second slide, the issue of their (in)coherence begins to look rather different. What they have done is to identify two categories of people who can be labelled as “Assassins of Salvador Allende”:

- *Henry Kissinger and the CIA, and*
- *Members of the political right.*

What looked like carelessness or a lack of understanding of the sentence grammar and textual coherence of the source might better be understood as motivated selection of appropriate material. There is an additional piece of evidence that suggests that what the students did was to choose two sections from the article, and that is the absence of the inverted commas after “imperialism.” The most plausible explanation for this omission is that the text was imported in two sections, each section standing in an appositional relationship to the title: in the blue corner we have these forces, as it were.

One of my starting points for the analysis of the students’ work was the question of what it reveals about their knowledge of ICT-based information texts. What the analysis suggests is the inadequacy of the way such knowledge is framed within the discursive world of policy. Within the current

English National Curriculum, the separation of “Printed and ICT-based information texts” from “Media and moving image texts” seems, at best, somewhat arbitrary, and carries with it the implication that questions of design can somehow be relegated to a special category of text, safely insulated from the business of retrieving, sifting and synthesising information from the written (printed) word. In the proposed revisions to the National Curriculum, there is the suggestion that “Pupils should be able to ... understand how meaning is created through the combination of words, images and sounds in multi-modal texts”

(<http://www.qca.org.uk/secondarycurriculumreview/subject/ks3/english/index.htm>, accessed 11 May 2007). Even here, though, it is only when school students are positioned as readers that multimodality is mentioned. As far as the productive capacity of school students is concerned, there is nothing more adventurous than the injunction that they should be able to “present material clearly, using appropriate layout, illustrations and organisation”: what the gloss on this reveals is that what is envisaged is that this “could include headings, subheadings, bullet points, captions, font style and size, and the use of bold or italics when presenting work on screen” (ibid.). For students as writers, then, all that the new technologies can provide is scope for some presentational embellishment, typographical aids to ensure that the meaning of the words gets through.

The problem with this is, firstly, that it does not begin to describe what Jo and Paul know about ICT-based texts, and, secondly, that the perspective of policy encourages the kind of misreading of students’ work that was

exemplified by my initial (monomodal) approach to what Jo and Paul had produced. The meaning of their PowerPoint presentation does not reside in the words, with the images and the background supplying a little decorative curlicue or two: it resides in the multimodal ensemble, in the totality of the presentation. The meaning of any element within this design is relational and contingent, no more reducible to its parts than any other complex text – *Julius Caesar*, say.

(Mention of the Shakespeare play prompts me to raise a further layer of complexity involved in the PowerPoint presentation, to which I have not attended at all. I have treated the two slides as if they were the presentation, as if the students' semiotic work was all on screen, rather in the manner of those Shakespearean critics who treat the script as if it were the play itself, as if performance were merely the shadows in Plato's cave. I have little choice in the matter: I did not observe the subsequent lesson, and have no data on the presentation that Jo and Paul gave to the rest of their class. But I must at least register my awareness of this lack. The affordances of PowerPoint consist of the means whereby the software encourages and constrains the disposition of elements on the screen, but also involve the ways in which it functions as a mediational tool, as something between a script and an aide memoire as well as a backdrop to the live presentation. How did Paul and Jo present their research? Where and how did they stand? What did they say? And how did the audience of their peers respond? I don't know.)

Consideration of the meaning of the students' PowerPoint presentation takes me back to the other question with which I started: what do they know about Allende? One way of answering this question would be to look at the content of the first of their two slides, to identify the pieces of information that Jo and Paul have extracted from their source. They know, too, that there is a debate about whether Allende was assassinated: this is clear from the words that they have included to describe the different interpretations of the circumstances of Allende's death – words that gesture at the controversy that has rumbled on for years within the Wikipedia site, as well as more widely. They have learned, with specific reference to Allende's death, something of the difficulty of distinguishing, as the National Curriculum demands, "between fact and opinion, bias and objectivity."

But the second slide reflects a different kind of learning. As I have suggested above, its creation would seem to owe something to the teacher's intervention, her suggestion that Jo and Paul should go on thinking about what the website had to say about the role of Henry Kissinger, among others. The intellectual step that she encouraged them to take, to move from a conception of assassination as bounded by the immediate physical circumstances of the death (did Allende shoot himself or was he shot by Pinochet's troops?) to a broader, more contextualized and more political understanding, is, as Maeve acknowledges, a big one. And it is possible to construe linguistic features of the second slide as evidence that the students are operating at the limits of their conceptual reach. The collapse of sentence structure might indicate this; so might the heading that they have used.

“Assassinators” is an intriguing choice. Is it that neither Jo nor Paul had come across “assassin”? This seems unlikely, partly because the word has currency within the lexis of video gaming: for example, *Hitman 2: Silent Assassin* is a popular game, available on a variety of platforms (and first released in October 2002). It might be more plausible, then, to speculate that the students did not quite connect the word “assassin” with Allende’s assassination and the way that Maeve was inviting them to think about wider issues of agency, power and responsibility. The students’ solution is to coin a new word – and it is an apt coinage. Effectively a back-derivation from “assassination,” its Latin suffix suggests power and impersonality (a bit like Terminator). If the assassin is the individual who fires the bullet, the assassinator is the one whose word makes the death happen.

What makes this interpretation of the heading as the product of motivated decisions by the students rather less fanciful is the fact that the heading exists, and means, within the multimodal semiotic ensemble of the slide presentation as a whole. For what the second slide, with its carefully constructed mirror image of the first, does is to move the students’ presentation of Allende beyond the death in the Presidential Palace of La Moneda and out into the arena of world politics.

This shift has implications for more than the focus of the students’ research project. As it had been conceived by the teacher within the English department who had originally devised the scheme of work for *Julius Caesar*, the opportunity for students to find out about other assassinations was

tangential to the exploration of Shakespeare’s play. The activity, thematically linked to the play, involved a different kind of text – information, not literary – and different kinds of reading: reading that was oriented towards the retrieval of specific bits of information. In its original conception, then, the activity did not disturb the taxonomies of the National Curriculum. Maeve’s approach to the activity is significantly different:

that’s the key thing I want them to look at - the history that surrounds these individuals, “so and so is responsible” – but are they really responsible, what other factors and forces lay behind these things (interview, 12 May 2005).

The presentation on Allende that Jo and Paul produce demonstrates their understanding that the events of 1973 can be differently framed, differently interpreted. This conceptual development has huge implications for their understanding of *Julius Caesar*. More than this, though, it opens the possibility that their reading of *Julius Caesar* will inform and be informed by their understanding of the world. The questions that Maeve poses here bring the research project and the study of *Julius Caesar* into a different alignment. The distinction between literary and information text becomes much less important, since both kinds of text become tools for thinking with.

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<sup>1</sup> Names of the school, teachers and students have been replaced with culturally appropriate pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> In the new version of the National Curriculum, to be introduced from September 2008, there is a welcome return to the “more open, and learner-focused, stem, “Pupils should be able to ...” ([http://www.qca.org.uk/qca\\_12195.aspx](http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_12195.aspx), accessed 17 August 2007; see also Yandell, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> The website consulted by the students, [www.brainyencyclopedia.com](http://www.brainyencyclopedia.com), republishes almost verbatim the text from the Wikipedia article ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salvador\\_Allende](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salvador_Allende)). Wikipedia articles undergo a continual process of collaborative – and contested – amendment. The version that the students consulted would seem closest to the version that was posted on the

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Wikipedia website at 23:44, 26 September 2004. It can be found in the Wikipedia archive at

[http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Salvador\\_Allende&oldid=6176578](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Salvador_Allende&oldid=6176578)

(accessed 10 May 2007). There is no equivalent archive for the [www.brainyencyclopedia.com](http://www.brainyencyclopedia.com) site.

<sup>4</sup> The image of Allende was probably imported from

<http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/recent03-04.html>, the website of the Centre for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean, York University, Canada, where it was used to advertise a two-day conference entitled “CHILE: Civil Democracy in Neoliberal Times” (Friday, November 28 & Saturday, November 29, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> The Kissinger image comes from

[www.wtv-zone.com/Mary/NEWWORLDORDER.HTML](http://www.wtv-zone.com/Mary/NEWWORLDORDER.HTML), an American Christian website, with quotations from a variety of public figures on the idea of a New World Order. The evidence that this is the source is the file size: the size of the image in the students’ PowerPoint is the same as that of the image from this site (224.9 kb). The same image of Kissinger is available on a number of different websites, including [http://www.case.edu/vpdebate/content/programs\\_speakers.htm](http://www.case.edu/vpdebate/content/programs_speakers.htm) and [www.guesswhosthejew.com/Henry\\_Kissinger.html](http://www.guesswhosthejew.com/Henry_Kissinger.html). Versions of the same image, differently cropped, are available at [http://www.cooperativeresearch.org/entity.jsp?entity=9/11\\_commission](http://www.cooperativeresearch.org/entity.jsp?entity=9/11_commission) and at [www.topsynergy.com/famous/Henry\\_Kissinger.asp](http://www.topsynergy.com/famous/Henry_Kissinger.asp).

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