



DIALOGUE

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Popular Culture and Pedagogy*



**Popular Culture Pedagogy:
Theory and Application in Academia**

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INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE

Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy is an open access, peer reviewed journal focused on the intersection of popular culture and pedagogy. While some open access journals charge a publication fee for authors to submit, *Dialogue* is committed to creating and maintaining a scholarly journal that is accessible to all—meaning that there is no charge for either the author or the reader.

The Journal is interested in contributions that offer theoretical, practical, pedagogical, and historical examinations of popular culture, including interdisciplinary discussions and those which examine the connections between American and international cultures. In addition to analyses provided by contributed articles, the Journal also encourages submissions for guest editions, interviews, and reviews of books, films, conferences, music, and technology.

For more information and to submit manuscripts, please visit www.journaldialogue.org or email the editors, Lynnea Chapman King, Editor in Chief, or A. S. CohenMiller, Managing Editor, at editors@journaldialogue.org.



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Chapman King also serves as Executive Director for the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association. She received her PhD in American Literature and Film from Texas Tech University and currently writes in the field of Adaptation. Her publications include *No Country for Old Men: From Novel to Film* (co-edited, Scarecrow Press) and the recent *Coen Brothers Encyclopedia* (Rowman & Littlefield).

A. S. CohenMiller, PhD, Managing Editor, Founding Editor

CohenMiller also serves as a member of the Executive Team for the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association and is an Assistant Professor in the Graduate School of Education at Nazarbayev University. She received her PhD in Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching from the University of Texas at San Antonio and currently researches qualitative methods, identity development, and gender in academia. Selected publications include “Developing globalized teacher education curriculum through interdisciplinarity” (CohenMiller, A., Dentith, A., Jackson, G, & Root, D., 2011) and “Motherhood in academia: A grounded theory pilot study of online texts” (2013).

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Editorial

In early 2011, the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association (SWPACA) Executive Team began discussions regarding a journal, which would serve as an outgrowth of the organization. We wanted to make more widely available some of the excellent scholarship that we were seeing on an annual basis at our February conference, as well as provide a venue for popular culture scholars outside of the SWPACA membership. At the same time, we knew that we needed to set ourselves apart from other publications focusing on popular culture studies; the result was a focus on pedagogy as well as popular culture, as indicated in the journal's title.

Simultaneous to these discussions, two areas within the SWPACA organization began to gain momentum—Popular Culture and the Classroom, and Pedagogies and the Profession—eventually combining to become Pedagogy and Popular Culture area, which has continued to thrive, becoming one of the largest areas at the annual meeting. To celebrate this momentum, in 2013 the organization established the Popular Culture Pedagogy award, which honors the organization's late Executive Director, Phil Heldrich, a writer/professor with a passion for teaching. The award is presented each year for a graduate student paper which addresses an issue in the application of a new, engaging, popular culture teaching strategy in a specific area of popular or American culture.

The result of this growing interest is *Dialogue's* Volume 3, Issue 1, *Popular Culture Pedagogy: Theory and Application in Academia*. This issue features several different approaches to the role of popular culture in the classroom, including case studies, curriculum development, applications, and reviews. The pieces variously incorporate research, theory, and best practices, ranging from classroom-ready exercises to reflections on the ever-increasing use of popular culture in secondary and higher education.

The article section of this issue includes a sociocultural and socio-constructivist examination of learning, and by extension teaching, in *Orange is the New Black*, *The Walking Dead*, *Megamind*, *Sherlock*, *Exit Through the Giftshop*, and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*; three autoethnographic assignment reflections which demonstrate the utility of popular culture artifacts as a tool for teaching and learning writing; and two discussions of using music to teach sociological theory and media literacy. The applications section focuses on Harry Potter in higher education and the role of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *The Walking Dead*, and *King of the Hill* in an educational psychology course.

We conclude the issue with our reviews, featuring a retrospective of the pedagogy panels at the 2015 Southwest Popular/American Culture Association conference, a discussion of the current state of online pedagogy, and a comparative analysis of adaptations of *Much Ado about Nothing*.

With this first special issue on popular culture and pedagogy, we bring together insights into classroom practices in academia, providing a peek into the ways in which learning and teaching can be enhanced. We look forward to the continued expansion and discussion of the multifaceted ways in which education and popular culture interrelate.

Lynnea Chapman King
Editor in Chief

A.S. CohenMiller
Managing

(Re)learning about Learning: Using Cases from Popular Media to Extend and Complicate Our Understandings of What It Means to Learn and Teach

Kelli Bippert
kelli.bippert@utsa.edu

Dennis Davis
dennis.davis@utsa.edu

Margaret Rose Hilburn
maggie.r.arnold@gmail.com

Jennifer D. Hooper
jennifer.hooper@utsa.edu

Deepti Kharod
deepti.kharod@utsa.edu

Cinthia Rodriguez
cinthia.rodriguez@utsa.edu

Rebecca Stortz
rebecca.stortz@utsa.edu

San Antonio, Texas, USA
The University of Texas at San Antonio

ABSTRACT

This article utilizes sociocultural and socio-constructivist learning theories to analyze incidents of learning, and by extension teaching, in six different popular media selections. The authors describe their shared theoretical framework and the nature of the original analyses, which were completed as part of a doctoral course assignment. Each of the six excerpts is then described and discussed employing unique theoretical perspectives. The use of popular culture as the context for examining learning and teaching provides a space untethered from traditional notions of schooling through which typically accepted assumptions about pedagogy are revealed, re-examined, and reframed. Keywords Sociocultural, Socio-constructivist, Learning, Teaching, Popular Culture, Media Studies, Pedagogy, Education, Communities of Practice

KEYWORDS

Sociocultural, Socio-constructivist, Learning, Teaching, Popular Culture, Media Studies, Pedagogy, Education, Communities of Practice

In this article, we describe an innovative pedagogy used in a higher education setting to facilitate reflection and unpacking of a complex construct that often goes unexamined in our field. We (the authors) are doctoral students and a faculty member in an interdisciplinary PhD program in learning and teaching, and we all identify as current and prospective teacher educators dedicated to the development of high quality and critically conscious PK-12 teachers. Our doctoral program intentionally highlights the importance of interdisciplinary inquiry as a stance and a methodology for approaching complex problems in educational scholarship (Repko, Klein). Because of the interdisciplinary nature of this program, our departmental membership represents a community of practice (Lave and Wenger) that intersects different educational and teaching backgrounds—art, literacy, early childhood, educational technology, mathematics, and science education—each with its own socio-historically developed commitments to different theories and perspectives on learning and teaching.

Given the variations across our individual perspectives and our goal of finding common understandings that transcend disciplinary boundaries, we have found it useful in our shared conversations about what it means to learn—and by extension, to teach—to identify common accounts of learning/teaching in popular media. Popular culture, including television, literature, and film media, often portrays a snapshot of our world through compelling fictional and historical characters (Storey). In this article, we leverage the potential of popular media to provide common spaces for counternarratives that problematize the givens of learning and teaching.

Traditional accounts of learning/teaching are often corrupted by the assembly-line structures of contemporary schooling (Rogoff, Paradise, Arauz et al.; Sawyer) and the ideological perspectives built into standards and curriculum surrounding knowledge (Luke 13). In this article, we assume that examples of learning in popular media, particularly those that are untethered from traditional schooling, can be illustrative cases for re-conceptualizing what it means to learn and teach. Beyond providing entertainment, popular culture is a space in which our perceptions and taken-for-granted assumptions about the world are shaped (Grossberg 94). The pedagogy described in this article was designed to help us “[turn] a skeptical eye toward assumptions, ideas that have become ‘naturalized,’ notions that are no longer questioned” (Pennycook 7). This “problematization of the given” is an important part of our ongoing work to re-configure our own conceptualizations of learning/teaching so that we can be more effective and critically conscious in our work with prospective teachers. The analyses detailed here center on the following questions: In what ways do the fictional worlds within popular culture create a portal for analyzing the ways that learning and teaching occur in out-of-school contexts; and How might these analyses offer new understandings about learning/teaching that can enrich the way we model and discuss learning with future K-12 teachers in higher education?

The analyses detailed here began as part of a doctoral course, titled *Socio-constructivist and Cognitivist Perspectives on Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching*, focused on socio-culturalist, socio-constructivist, and cognitivist theories as related to formal and informal learning and teaching. The primary assignment in this course was an ongoing inquiry in which we applied these theories to analyze learning and teaching events found in popular culture. Each student-author identified a “narrative of learning” in popular media, defined as an event or series of events in which someone is observed learning or changing, either incidentally or as a result of intentional teaching. Each individual student-author’s contribution featured different modes and theories that encompassed their learning and teaching event. The power of analyzing learning and teaching through six different socio-cultural lenses helped solidify these doctoral students’ understanding of how sociocultural learning and teaching occur in the everyday.

The analysis in this paper is undergirded by socio-cultural and socio-constructivist perspectives that establish learning as an interactive relationship between the individual and the social environment. Several general themes can be extracted from these two theories regarding learning and teaching. One claim is that

all learning exists within the social setting and is internalized by the individual and then transmitted back to society (Vygotsky). A second notion is that learning requires the use of cultural tools (Vygotsky; Wertsch), both physical and abstract, which are inseparable from the individual. More so, in order for learning to occur, individuals must be active participants in their situated environment (Lave and Wenger).

Principally, learning is seen as an interactional process, where the learner is in a constant reciprocal relationship with the environment. These interactions cause the learner to act and react to socially-defined practices by adapting, engaging, contributing, and using past experiences (Alexander, Schallert, and Reynolds; Cobb). These actions change the learner and the community in various ways. First, the learner evolves, by developing past practices and making new contributions. Second, the transformation of the learner affects the situated setting, which can lead to changes in cultural norms, tools, and practices. Consequently, this interplay between learner and society causes learning shifts that are constantly impacting both the individual and their community (Lave and Wenger 51; Wenger 227). This leads to the notion that learning and teaching form a continuous and transformative cycle; “a process results in a product that in turn influences subsequent processes” (Alexander, Schallert, and Reynolds 180).

However, these ideas produce only a general viewpoint of the learning and teaching process. Although there are many social learning theories that seek to further explain these elements, there is an ongoing debate about what learning is (Bruner; Alexander, Schallert, and Reynolds), how it develops (Greeno, Collins, and Resnik; John-Steiner and Mahn), and how varying perspectives on learning might inform the practice of teaching (Sawyer). Because social learning views argue that the learner is inseparable from the environment and cultural tools, examining novice learners in their authentic setting is critical. It is important to consider how new members experience their environment, interact with new cultural tools, and seek support from other community members. In this sense, popular culture provides a unique space to examine a range of diverse learning and teaching scenarios.

THE PROCESS

We engaged in a three-layered process that helped question, reframe, and clarify our understandings about social perspectives of learning and teaching. The process began with unpacking various theories in the context of a doctoral course, then using those understandings to undertake an individual analysis, and finally collaborating with our peers to uncover shared findings to write this article.

First, as authors of our individual analyses, we began with certain shared premises grounded in sociocultural theory. Learning and teaching were understood as mutually transformative practices situated in a common space (Lave and Wenger; Alexander, Schallert, and Reynolds). The space provided opportunities for learning and feedback. The learning process also relied on the use of tools, both physical objects and strategies or practices. Finally, the learning resulted in mastery, making what was internal to the learner visible to the community.

From there, we employed unique lenses to view what was being learned, how it was learned and evidenced, and what was the role of explicit teaching in that process. Our experiences as classroom teachers in varied school settings informed these decisions, as did our different disciplines, and personal preferences regarding popular media.

Finally, the decision to collaborate in this joint analysis emerged from a shared value of interdisciplinarity. The process of reading each other's original papers, exploring common findings, and appreciating varied viewpoints has uncovered understandings that run deeper than a typical co-authoring experience. We have gained insight as to how art, literacy, math, and science intersect with each other, and with early childhood, elementary, secondary, and undergraduate learning and teaching. These common grounds are not simply

in the space of lessons or learning activities, but more fundamentally in terms of how we view our students, ourselves as students and teachers, and the very meanings of learning and teaching.

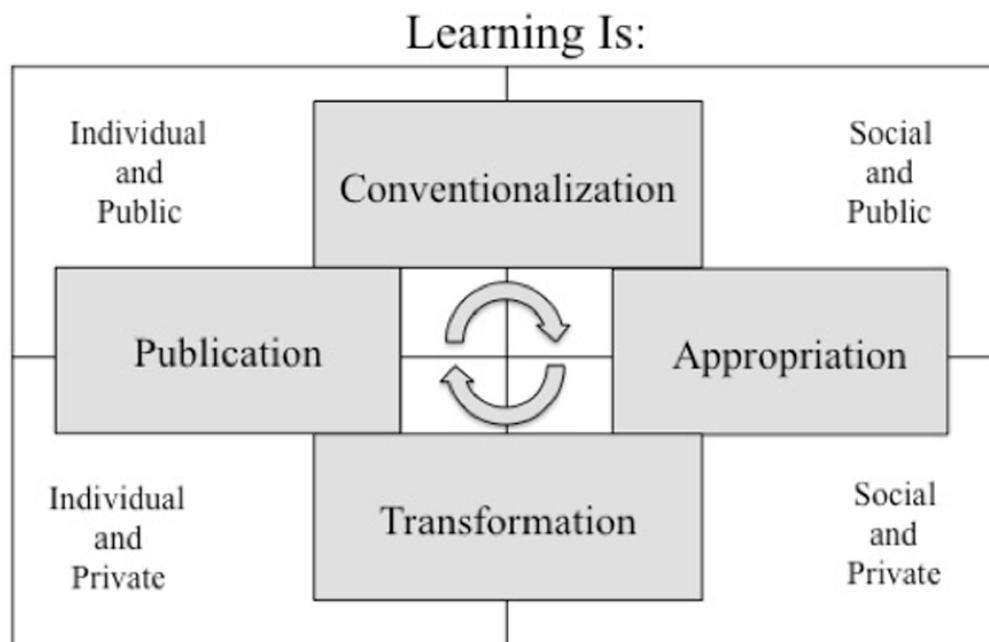
FINDINGS FROM INDIVIDUAL ANALYSES

This study aims to analyze learning and teaching episodes found within popular media. Using excerpts from *Orange is the New Black*, *The Walking Dead*, *Megamind*, *Sherlock*, *Exit Through the Giftshop*, and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, the student-authors follow novice learners as they interact with their respective environments.

In the popular Netflix series, *Orange is the New Black* (<http://www.netflix.com/WiMovie/70242311>), Piper Chapman, a co-owner of an artisanal soap-making business, is living in an upper-middle class neighborhood. In the initial episode, Chapman self-surrenders at Litchfield Women's Prison due to an international drug smuggling crime she committed ten years prior. On her first day, Chapman accidentally insults Red, the veteran kitchen manager, and instantly loses her food privileges. Consequently, she begins a series of problem-solving events to amend her relationship with Red. In order to survive, Chapman has to learn the hidden rules, overcome obstacles, and earn a respected place in the prison community. The social learning concept articulated in Rom Harré's *Vygotsky Space* model was utilized to understand Piper Chapman's interactions as she learned to adapt, participate, and contribute in the established prison environment in the first episodes of the series.

The Vygotsky Space model explores how learners interact within their social environment, internalize learning, and create contributions. The theory states that the learner is always situated within two dimensions: the public/private and the individual/social. Furthermore, it claims that these two dimensions interact with each other to form four quadrants of learning (Gavelek and Raphael 187). As learners transition through the quadrants, they engage in the developmental activities of Appropriation, Transformation, Publication, and Conventionalization (see Table 1, adapted from Gavelek and Raphael).

Table 1 Dimensions of Learning



During Appropriation, knowledge is social and public, allowing the learner to acquire it. In the Transformation phase, the learner's appropriated knowledge is transformed into his or her own, yielding changes in the individual. These changes allow the learner to make visible contributions to the environment in the form of Publications. The acceptance of these contributions by society is seen as Conventionalization. Thus, the product is an ongoing cycle where the learner interacts within various private and social sectors that ultimately alter the individual and social context.

The Vygotsky Space assists in understanding the process of learning by examining both individual and social changes that occur throughout the four quadrants. This theoretical lens was employed to examine the actions of Piper Chapman during her initial stay at Litchfield Women's Prison. Several key findings emerged from the analysis.

First, it was evident that Chapman's initial lack of social knowledge in the prison environment led to immediate mistakes that changed her course of action. This created a need for specific knowledge, which placed her in various developmental opportunities. These included learning the bartering system and understanding the prison's social hierarchy in order to obtain and exchange goods. A second finding was that cultural tools restricted and supported the learner during Appropriation. When the learner encountered physical items, they initially posed obstacles because they were used differently in the prison setting. However, as Chapman practiced using the items through trial-and-error, the tools became supporting elements of learning. Lastly, the examination found that the Transformation and Publication of cultural tools by the new member were substantial in gaining confidence, power, and acceptance. By creating and introducing tools, Chapman showed the community that she had mastered useful practices. The prisoners acknowledged Chapman's actions and accepted her Publications. An example was apparent when Chapman learned to use the bartering system and gathered items to create a therapeutic lotion that she presented to Red. As a result, Chapman regained her food privileges and the respect of the senior inmates.

From this analysis it is evident that the new learner's lack of initial social knowledge placed her in specific developmental opportunities. These led to individual contributions in the form of publicized practices and newly created cultural tools, transforming both the individual and her social context.

The next analysis focuses on *The Walking Dead* (<http://www.amctv.com/shows/the-walking-dead>), the AMC television series about a group of people trying to survive a zombie apocalypse. The presence of the walkers, or zombies, is the driving force behind the group dynamics and the reason their society becomes focused on survival. This analysis examines the motivations between Shane, an established leader in the survivor community and Andrea, a member with less authority in the community with a sociocultural lens. Shane teaches Andrea through a scaffolding approach, enabling him to assess her learning and motivation. (See Neely for another analysis of this same event.

This analysis assumes that the standards and values that motivate individual learning are socially constructed (Hickey and Zuiker 288). Learning and behavior, as well as the society and culture in which they occur, are the forces that drive individual motivation. It is also understood that individuals have different motivations for learning. For example, Andrea is motivated to learn how to shoot so she can protect others and prove herself as a valued member of her new community; however, her ability to handle a gun has been questioned. Shane on the other hand has a different motivation. As one of the leaders, it benefits him to train others for two reasons: first, he does not have to work as hard shooting the walkers because others are helping him; and second, he does not have to continually watch over others while shooting the walkers.

This analysis focuses on three excerpts from Episode 6 in Season 2 that depict motivation through scaffolding. The intrinsic motivation felt by Andrea and Shane emphasizes the importance of learning; it also is essential to the human need for survival. Feedback is essential for one's sense of control, is vital to intrinsic

motivation, and improves learning. Unlike the others, Andrea bypasses the beginner tasks in her training and challenges herself to shoot at a harder target found in the “No Trespassing” sign. In response, Shane challenges her to the advanced class. This challenge to prove herself piques Andrea’s interest and increases her motivation. It also capitalizes on Shane’s motivation because he can nurture Andrea’s skills and help him reach his own goal of having more trained individuals in the community.

In this particular scenario, Shane is badgering Andrea to shoot a moving target, trying to simulate a stressful interaction with a walker. After many failed attempts, her motivation begins to diminish. Illustrated by Madeline Hunter’s observation that degree of success is an important variable in motivation, Andrea’s low degree of success leads to low motivation. Eventually, as a result of her failure and Shane’s negative feedback, she quits and walks off.

By the end of the episode, Andrea’s and Shane’s different personal motivations intersect in pursuit of a common goal of survival. Thus, the urgency to shoot the walkers provides a common motivation for learning and teaching. As Yrjö Engeström explains from his situated learning perspective, the motivation to learn stems from participation in culturally valued, collaborated practices in which something useful is produced (141). Barohny Eun states that when you scaffold the learning process like Shane does, the learner (Andrea) needs to have each skill be both solid and well-embedded (410). It is these scaffolding situations that will help Andrea be able to utilize her gun, effectively utilizing the skills learned in prior situations. When faced with walkers, Andrea is able to apply her learning in a real life situation; she is more motivated and committed in her learning process.

The third individual analysis examines issues surrounding learner identity in the DreamWorks movie *Megamind* (<http://www.megamind.com/>). What forces shape a person into becoming a superhero? What forces shape others in becoming villains? The film *Megamind* acts as a social commentary, addressing the formation of identities by peer groups and the larger society. Through his experiences with society, the film’s protagonist, Megamind, learns as a child to accept villainy as his destiny, resolving to become the “baddest boy of them all.”

Two theories were addressed in the analysis of the opening scene: identity theory and positioning theory. According to James Paul Gee (“Identity as an Analytic Tool”), identity is described as the way a person is seen, a type of person, in society. A person’s nature-identity describes his or her physical traits and other aspects of the person that have been shaped by forces outside of the individual’s control. The institution-identity comprises the person’s official identity within society and his or her related powers and rights. Discourse-identity is shaped by the interactions that take place between the individual and others in the community. It reflects the individual’s relationship with others and is shaped by interactions within society. The fourth type of identity is the affinity-identity related to a person’s involvement in particular groups based on similar interests or activities. An individual’s position in society, and the power associated with it, is directly related to that person’s view of self (Davies and Harré 6). Of course, a person may choose to write his or her own “storyline,” pushing to increase rights and duties within the larger society. According to Rom Harré (“Positioning Theory” 3), positioning theory describes how rights and duties are distributed, change, and challenged over the course of a lifetime.

The film’s exposition was divided into four major parts, each occurring where the account of Megamind’s young life made major shifts. The exposition of the film *Megamind* was analyzed using discourse analysis (Gee, “How to do Discourse Analysis”). Each utterance within these parts was analyzed using Gee’s four types of learner identity (Gee, “Identity as an Analytic Tool” 100) and the expansion or retraction of rights and duty related to positioning (Harré, “Positioning Theory” 3).

Four patterns emerged based on the content of the exposition. In part one, the most commonly coded example of identity was nature-identity; at this point the exposition, which displayed Megamind’s earliest

memories, showed very limited social interactions. In part two, institution-identity and reduction of rights were coded most frequently as he makes his home among prison inmates. In the third part, Megamind begins school and interacts with his teacher and classmates, and discourse-identity was coded more than in any other part of the transcription. The consequences of his perceived bad behavior result in his removal from much of the social interactions that occur in the classroom, limiting his rights and duties. Finally, part four of the exposition features the main character continuing the trend of negative discourse-identity formations and reduction of rights, as he chooses to push against social norms and positioning, creating his own storyline, starring Megamind as the “baddest boy of them all.”

By closely analyzing student, teacher, and peer interactions with at-risk children, we can gain better insights to reasons that many children push against norms set in the classroom. Megamind’s experiences in school could describe situations in which many marginalized children find themselves. Megamind, the protagonist in this film, is very much like many students who attempt to participate in school learning community, yet for various reasons fail to thrive as members of their learning environment. Be it intentional or not, the writers of the animated film *Megamind* described the very essence of how and why many children struggle in the traditional classroom.

The fourth vignette investigates identity formation in a different context. Over the course of the three seasons of BBC’s *Sherlock* (<http://www.bbcamerica.com/sherlock/>), John Watson develops from a damaged survivor of the Afghanistan war to a fully-realized, deductive-reasoning, consulting detective’s assistant. He forms and recognizes this new identity through his social interactions and experiences of working alongside Sherlock Holmes as they investigate and solve crimes at various locations within a period of three years. Watson’s cognitive, social, cultural, and psychological identities undergo a transformation that would be impossible without these social experiences. More than just the building of ideas from within the mind, learning for Watson must be analyzed from within the larger context of his place in society.

George Herbert Mead’s seminal work on identity formation stresses the impossibility of separating the self from the society in which it is formed. He further transfers the concept of communication between two or more people into an internal conversation within the individual. The person therefore becomes his own inner community. This concept, which he calls abstraction, cannot be the only interaction within a society, of course, but it helps to explain how identity formation becomes an internalized process, one that ultimately requires full participation of the individual.

Sheldon Stryker further explores the concept of identity theory by refining Mead’s work into a simple model explained as “society shapes self shapes social behavior” (Stryker 28). He likens identity to a mosaic, blending bits and pieces of social interaction to form a complete whole. It is relatively patterned, yet crosses new boundaries as new social interactions take place. Stryker finds that a shared meaning of a concept or idea provided the commonality to link identity and behavior (31). The practices within the identity and social community, and the common usage of the meaning, provide an extension of how identity is created.

In the beginning of the series, John Watson is a returning soldier and a doctor from the Afghanistan war, clearly affected by the violence and trauma of his experiences there. In therapy for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, his therapist has advised him to stay calm, get involved in “normal” society, and reintegrate himself with civilians and a quiet life. He has difficulty reckoning his inner desire to experience more danger and violence with the socially accepted reaction that he should be feeling. Scenes from the first season emphasize this dissonance, showcasing situations where Watson fluctuates between settling down in the life of a clinical doctor and relishing the high energy of detective work. His time is ripe for learning a new life, one where he is both in control and in enough danger to satisfy his needs. This new community Sherlock Holmes provides comes at the perfect time for Watson’s emerging identity.

By season three, Watson proves himself a fully-formed identity as an investigator. One key scene in the

final episode depicts both his skill as an investigator and his mentor's awareness of these skills. Holmes has been shot and has left clues for Watson to figure out the case, knowing that Watson will be able to separate his emotions from logic and connect the dots, realizing that his own wife is the person who has shot his best friend. If this identity as an investigator had not been fully formed, Watson's denial of evidence would have hindered his conclusions. The clues he collects, and the conclusions he makes from them, are symbolic of the larger ability to think like an investigator. This ingrained methodology has become a natural practice, one in which Watson engages without conscious thought. Watson's identity arc corresponds with the narrative arc of the show; while he will continue to grow and develop as an investigator, as all learning continues, he now has ownership of his identity. The social context in which Watson is placed at this time has shifted yet again. A married man, practicing doctor, part-time investigator, this Watson has finally claimed ownership of his new identity.

The next analysis centers on cultural tools and co-construction. The 2010 documentary film, *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, examines Thierry Guerra's induction to the secretive community of some of the world's most famous street artists (<http://www.banksyfilm.com>). Initially, Guerra is allowed access to the exclusive group under the assumption that he is a documentary filmmaker. However, Guerra is not content with simply standing by as an observer, and through an unintentional apprenticeship, remakes himself into the street artist known as Mr. Brainwash. This analysis of Guerra's transformation reveals insights about how cultural tools help to scaffold artistic meaning making.

From a social constructivist perspective, cultural products such as language and signs semiotics are considered to mediate our thoughts and mold our reality (Vygotsky). Sign mediated activities include "systems of counting; mnemonic techniques; algebraic symbol systems; works of art; writing; schemes, diagrams, maps and mechanical drawings; all sorts of conventional signs and so on" (Vygotsky 137). These semiotic means are referred to as tools, and it is with the aid of these tools that we construct our knowledge. James Wertsch believes that these cultural tools manipulate human action within the mind and in the world. He emphasizes the importance between the relationship of external cultural tools and their influence of internal processes.

The concept that individuals employ internal cultural tools to make sense of the external world is referred to as *co-construction*. The mastery of a new concept, skill or tool is the process of *internalization*. Furthermore, a skill or tool can be appropriated, meaning that it has been used in a unique or individual way. It is through an internal conversation that individuals appropriate and reconstruct their understanding (Harré). Semiotic representations, shaped by and indistinguishable from culture, aid our processes of internalization. Ernest Gombrich (as cited in Cunliffe) situates works of art not only in the mind of the artist, but also within social and cultural contexts. He proposes that artistic ability is not simply a naturally inherited gift, but that symbolic cultural representations, in the form of tradition, influence the work of artists by providing visual cues and critical feedback.

In *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, the degree to which graffiti culture influenced Guerra's artistic decision making is extensive. Often, Guerra appropriates the images, style, and artistic approaches that he observed during his time among the street art community. Throughout the film Guerra is able to engage with and observe how expert artists test and refine their practices through the mechanism of corrective feedback. One such example occurs when graffiti artist Space Invader asks Guerra what he thinks of his mosaic, and then later when he seeks Guerra's help in installing the mosaic on a building.

Though frequently unsuccessful in his initial attempts at art making, Guerra is able to appropriate the strategies of trial and error and corrective feedback to his eventual success. Guerra's mastery of these tools is evidence of his internalization of the practices and tools of the street artist community. This internal conversation and transformation was instrumental in reconstructing Guerra's identity from Guerra the documentary filmmaker to Mr. Brainwash, successful street artist.

Finally, although educators frequently conceptualize learning as an intentional product of teaching, an analysis of J.K. Rowling's book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, reveals many layers of learning occurring simultaneously, often in the absence of purposeful teaching, and exposes issues of periphery and power (<http://harrypotter.scholastic.com>). As a new student at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Harry happens upon the magical Mirror of Erised. His initial interactions are directly with the Mirror, but Harry also learns about its powers from his mentor, Headmaster Dumbledore, before encountering it again in a high-stakes duel with Professor Quirrell (possessed by the evil Voldemort's spirit).

In their definition of learning, Patricia Alexander, Diane Schallert, and Ralph Reynolds describe it as both "conscious and intentional," and "tacit and incidental" (178), so learning is continuous (Matusov 338), inevitable (Alexander, Schallert, and Reynolds 178), and multifunctional (Davis 105). Teachers and students constantly (but not always consciously) send and receive messages about expectations, socialization, power, and other cultural norms of their community. So, within a single activity, a learner typically experiences several types, or layers, of learning simultaneously. This study analyzes Harry's learning by what he learns (tool, environment, and identity) and how he learns (incidental or intentional, guided by teacher or learner).

Layers of learning across the what categories is evident when the Mirror drops the Sorcerer's Stone into Harry's pocket. Harry gains new understandings about a magical tool (the Mirror), norms of the wizarding world (the Stone's reflection materializes in his pocket), and his changing identity (from loser in his uncle's household to hero at Hogwarts). Through this single event, Harry experiences three layers of learning.

Harry also experiences multiple layers in terms of how he learns: intentionally through Dumbledore's explanation (teacher) and Harry's following his advice (learner), and incidentally when he experiences the Mirror's magic. Rowling describes Harry's reflection twice as changing from "pale and scared-looking" to smiling (208, 292). The first time is when Harry originally encounters the Mirror and sees his reflection surrounded by family; the next is when he encounters the Mirror during his final confrontation with Quirrell/Voldemort. After the first incident, Prof. Dumbledore suggests that Harry avoid losing himself in the fantasies the Mirror shows him, and Harry decides to do so. Finally, the incidental learning occurs in that Harry accidentally encounters the Mirror in the storeroom before he faces it in a high-stakes situation (assuming that Dumbledore did not mastermind the coincidence).

Power is inherent in educational relationships, with the expectation that a learner's power increases with greater experience, knowledge, and mastery of craft and culture. Although institutional power rests with teachers (compared to students), Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger note that the periphery offers a position of power, too (36). Harry's mastery of certain spells and tools is not valued or even permitted in his classrooms; however, it is invaluable in actual practice. He remains an outsider, even as a hero, because of his unfamiliarity with wizarding culture as well as his own personality and choices. The Mirror episodes afford opportunities to reframe learning, from a planned activity to a continuous, multi-layered experience. Harry's experiences also highlight the power that a peripheral position can confer in a community of practice.

UNCOVERING THE GIVENS AND IDENTIFYING TENSIONS

While each of these examinations uses a distinct lens in addition to the shared social learning theories, looking across these six vignettes brings further insight regarding teaching and learning.

Through our reflections on the process of examining cases of learning/teaching in popular media, we have identified two broad implications of this work: 1) helping us see learning/teaching more clearly, around the boundaries of what we were accustomed to seeing; and 2) identifying dialectic tensions that expand the complexity of our thinking about learning.

As an example of the "givens" in the field of education that we were able to examine more deeply as a

result of our analyses of out-of-school learning as represented in popular media, we offer the following list of assumptions, developed through our class discussions, that are often played out in typical classroom practice in K-12 settings and required of beginning teachers in a typical education program as evidence of readiness for leading a classroom:

- Assumption of designed intentionality: there has to be an observable, measurable objective, written with a clear verb and statement of evidence
- Assumption of observable and instant mastery: the lesson is successful if all (or most) students at the end of the lesson have “mastered” the objective
- Assumption of tangible evidence: Mastery is almost always documented through the creation of tangible artifacts (writing), even to the point where some things are written (or copied) simply for the purpose of creating this artifact when they could be more efficiently and authentically accomplished through talk or other intangible practices
- Assumption of active engagement: the lesson is successful if all students look busy
- Assumption of structure: there is an expected architecture to the lesson sequence and the lesson is successful if all components are performed for the appropriate amount of time in the appropriate order
- Assumption of tidiness: the lesson is successful if it is tidy and compliant such that disruptions or meanderings from the architecture are discouraged and instances of dissonance or conceptual struggle are deemed indicators of bad teaching

It is certainly beyond the scope of this article to argue that these normalized practices are universally incorrect or ineffective, and we do not claim to dispute accumulated evidence for the need for these and other features of standards-based and data-driven instruction. Our point is simply that part of our work as interdisciplinary scholars who hope to extend our quality as teacher educators is to engage in thoughtful critique of these and other givens of learning/teaching that are rarely questioned or even noticed because they are assumed to be true and natural. Each of these ritualized practices rests on assumptions about how learning occurs and what is worth learning. Our cases of learning in popular media give us a shared context for examining learning in a way that is less corrupted by these practices so that we can engage in what Gee calls critical learning: learning to notice, critique, rearrange the design features built into a semiotic domain (*Video Games* 25).

Our reflection on these cases also helped us develop a list of tensions or dialectics—two seemingly opposing states that cannot be easily collapsed into each other or resolved—related to learning that expand the way we now talk about learning with colleagues and students. These four tensions are summarized below.

Coercion/volition is the first tension we identified. Our cases show examples of learners learning through participation in communities they have chosen to affiliate with (or have allowed themselves to be recruited into). At the same time, though, the learners are compelled or coerced to follow accepted pathways of access and to learn a prescribed sequence of practices. There are both individual agency and external authority driving their participation in these communities.

The second tension we identified is labeled replication/innovation. Learners who gain exclusive levels of centrality in their communities do so through the appropriation of tools and practices, which allows them to push the limits of how these tools/practices can be used (Lave and Wenger; Wertsch). Members do not just replicate the conventionalized practices of a community (Gavelek and Raphael). They actually “own” them and transform them, spitting back the transformed forms into the community so that others can also internalize the novelties they have helped build. It is important to point out, though, that replication is not totally removed from the process. There is some degree of absorption of pre-existing practices, things that make the community a community. A learner has to enter into social contracts with other members of the community, and some of these contracts involve the adoption of cultural models, tools, practices, and so forth

that bind the community together.

Our cases also reveal a whole/part tension. Most of our cases center on individuals who are recruited into the practices they are hoping to learn in such a way that they are able to experience (at the very least, observe) the whole practice from the very beginning of their community affiliation. Their immersion in the whole practice is what makes their learning possible; it allows them to imagine a possible future in which they are doing all the parts of the process (Gee, *Video Games*; Lave and Wenger). At the same time, though, a new member in a community cannot do all the parts of the practice instantly (not well, at least). There is a partitioning or sequestration of the content that happens (sometimes incidentally, and sometimes in institutionalized ways). The learner gets access to the whole thing but also works through parts of the whole thing in the sequence that has been deemed acceptable by old-timers in the community (Lave and Wenger).

The final tension exposed in our analysis, intentional/inevitable, reflects our understanding that learning can be launched by an intentional act of teaching or can happen incidentally through interactions or experiences in which there is no nameable agent who purposely fills a teacher role. Furthermore, even when there is intentional teaching, there is always (inevitably) some learning that occurs that is not intended (Alexander, Schallert, and Reynolds). This can be the result of intentional resistance on the part of the learner(s). But even without active resistance, when teachers launch a learning event, they are launching (or better stated, reconstituting) a community of practice, which calls forth a set of norms, practices, discourses, identities (etc.) associated with the particular community. In addition to (or instead of) the intended content of the learning, the learners will inevitably gain facility with their own ways of “doing” this practice: they will learn the rules, how to follow them, how to subvert them, how to use sanctioned aspects of the social language to gain authority in conversation, and much more.

In conclusion, the use of popular culture as a resource in the higher education community can provide a counternarrative to the traditional pedagogical practices usually accepted in academia. We found the common space of popular culture accessible and relatable to all of us, regardless of background or focus. In higher education classrooms, educators often struggle with finding ways to encourage learner agency, authenticity in class work, and a learner-focused curriculum. We contend that the process of examining representations in popular media described in this article helped us accomplish this goal while also informing our understanding of important content that influences our future work as teacher educators.

Through the close examination of our individual popular culture events, we were able to uncover the convergences in our meaning-making, finding ways to assemble the fractured conceptualizations of learning/teaching into a cohesive whole. This pedagogy affords us the opportunity to relearn how we view learning, delving deeper into our beliefs and limitations of the various processes we value in education. We are able to see what is there, not just what we have been taught to see or what we expect to find. Working together to construct our understandings through this process, we step through the popular culture portal into a new area of education. We encourage others in education and related field to engage in similar examinations as a way of developing shared understandings of important concepts in the field, particularly in programs that are interdisciplinary in nature.

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AUTHOR BIOS:

Kelli Bippert is a third year doctoral fellow at The University of Texas at San Antonio in the Department of Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching. Her research interests include digital literacy, adolescent struggling readers, and integrating student interests in literacy learning to motivate learners.

Dennis S. Davis is an assistant professor of literacy education at The University of Texas at San Antonio. He received his PhD in Teaching, Learning, and Diversity from Vanderbilt University. He is a former fourth- and fifth-grade teacher whose research focuses on literacy in elementary and middle school contexts. His bio can be found at <http://education.utsa.edu/faculty/profile/dennis.davis@utsa.edu>

Margaret Rose Hilburn is a practicing artist and educator. She holds a BFA and MAE from Texas Tech University. Hilburn is currently pursuing a PhD in Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching at The University of Texas at San Antonio. She is currently working as a doctoral fellow, and her research interests include curriculum theory, visual culture, and art education.

Jennifer D. Hooper is a third year doctoral student at the University of Texas at San Antonio. Her research interest focuses on the achievement gap between boys and girls in science courses. Upon graduating with her PhD, she plans to swim with great white sharks and seek employment in higher education.

Deepti Kharod is a doctoral fellow in the Department of Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching at The

Kelli Bippert, Dennis Davis, Margaret Rose Hilburn, Jennifer D. Hooper, Deepti Kharod, Cinthia Rodriguez, and Rebecca Stortz

University of Texas at San Antonio. Her experiences as a journalist, mother, and elementary teacher inform her current work as an educator. Her research focuses on environmental education, preservice teachers, and elementary students.

Cinthia Rodriguez is an elementary math specialist at Northside Independent School District and a doctoral student at The University of Texas at San Antonio. Her research interests include effective teaching practices for diverse populations in the elementary school setting.

Rebecca Stortz is an educator and Ph.D. student at The University of Texas at San Antonio. An avid reader and writer, she strives to incorporate technology and multiliteracies into her classroom experiences. Her research interests include literacy identities, poetry, writing instruction, and teacher education.

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Reflections on Building a Popular Writing Course

Emily Howson

ehowson@st-aug.edu

Chris Massenburg

cdmassenburg67@yahoo.com

Cecilia Shelton

ceciliadshelton@gmail.com

Raleigh, North Carolina, USA
Saint Augustine's University

ABSTRACT

Composition pedagogy has typically employed traditional academic texts in the instruction of first-year writing courses. In this article, three first-year writing instructors reflect on their experiences employing popular culture artifacts in lieu of more traditional academic texts in writing classrooms at a small, private, historically black institution (HBCU). By retrospectively analyzing the intersections between theory and practice, the instructors' autoethnographic reflections explore the utility of popular culture artifacts as tools for teaching and learning writing, with an emphasis on rhetorical knowledge and transfer. Though preliminary, their conclusions point to the potential of popular culture for integration into traditional best practices in first-year writing pedagogy.

KEYWORDS

Teaching, Pedagogy, Culture, Writing, Transfer, Learning, Inquiry, Analysis, Popular, Composition

A typical class of Critical Writing Seminar: Concepts in Popular Culture does not look much like a typical writing class. Walk past and you may catch a glimpse of students engaged in discussion of Beyoncé's "Partition" or the "first Ebola victim" viral hoax photo. Or, they might be writing about Sweet Brown "Ain't Nobody Got Time for Dat" memes, car commercials, political cartoons, documentaries, Disney movies, or remixes of Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit." Upon first glance—as students scroll Instagram during class (as research), sing along to Miley Cyrus's "Party in the U.S.A.," or debate the difference between protests and riots based on videos of Ferguson, MO—it may seem as though some of the more traditional rules of classroom etiquette have been tossed out the window. However, inside the classroom, the students are engaged. They are attentive to the subject matter, critical in their thinking, and passionate in their writing; they can carry on a discussion for twenty minutes at a stretch without much instructor input.

This level of classroom engagement was exactly what was envisioned when the Critical Writing Seminar was developed in 2012. The course took its shape—structured, but with protean edges—primarily as a result of an imagined ideal (of students, excited about writing) rather than applications of theory. The curricular need at our small, private, historically black university (HBCU) was clear: students, many of whom were already "behind" upon arrival, were not necessarily "catching up" adequately under the existing curriculum. After completing the required sequence of composition courses (two semesters worth), students were advancing into disciplinary courses that demanded a level of writing for which they were still largely underprepared. They needed more practice. While the need was clear, the path toward a useful response was more nebulous. How could another writing course be different from—and still successfully build upon—the existing set of Composition I and II writing courses? How could another course emphasize rhetorical skills in a way that would help students transfer their first-year writing experiences beyond the traditional composition classroom?

Administrators turned to the people "on the ground," the writing instructors, for guidance in designing a new course. While, in an ideal world, such a curricular development would be the work of long planning, backed heavily by theory, the reality owed more to the necessities: a narrow window of opportunity and the need for input from instructors who had plenty of observations born of teaching but few spare hours in which to theorize. We asked ourselves a question similar to the one Cary Moskivitz asks in *The Duke Reader Project*: "If we had the opportunity to design an ideal writing in the disciplines [WID] program unencumbered by the assumptions and conventions of normative practice, what might we do differently?" (48). Our institution does not have a writing program (WID or otherwise) but aspires to one. Even in the absence of a formal program, we still needed a "stepping stone" course that would help us develop a more robust sequence of writing courses (with the idea of a fully-developed writing program down the road), and we also needed a way to engage students in learning concepts that could help them transfer their writing knowledge and practice as they matriculated and took on more advanced, discipline-specific writing tasks. Following our instincts, we took our observations about what worked to get students excited, the learning outcomes we wanted them to achieve, and we designed a writing course.

If we are to be honest, we must admit: it is only now that we are connecting our teaching practices to theory. We do so now to reflect on its successes and failures in light of current writing theories and pedagogies and to contribute to emergent popular culture pedagogy.

Critical Writing Seminar: Concepts in Popular Culture is explicit in its aim to present "a variety of cultural texts in an effort to broaden [students'] frame of reference for academic inquiry and thereby facilitate their ability to transfer the reading, writing and thinking skills that they acquire" ("Critical Writing Seminar Syllabus" 1). Its instructors use artifacts of popular culture as course content and ask students to engage their critical inquiry, thinking, and writing skills in responding to those artifacts. The expanded notions of text in this course were intended to act as a kind of catalyst, challenging students to adapt their understanding

of writing with the understanding (or perhaps, the hope) that such an adapted understanding would prove useful later on as students worked to respond to the extensive array of genres, subjects, and conventions they collectively encounter in their disciplinary coursework. By interpreting “expanded notions of text” to mean popular culture artifacts, specifically, this course offers instructors a unique, timely, and appropriate tool for teaching rhetorical skills and concepts that encourage transfer. It seeks to meet and engage students where they are and both broaden and deepen their experience with writing in an academic context.

Bruce Cohen’s *Being Cultural* helped us delineate the relationship between artifact and text: “In cultural studies, ‘text’ is not only books or magazines, but all cultural artefacts (including, for example, works of art, YouTube clips, adverts, items of clothing, iPods, posters, television programmes, the *haka*, podcasts, SNS sites, frozen food, football, and soon)” (7). In designing the course, we drew our definition of popular culture from Deana Sellnow’s *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture*. “Popular culture,” she writes, “is comprised of the everyday objects, actions, and events that influence people to believe and behave in certain ways” (3). We have seen the growth of popular culture’s influence and importance in society today. In *Signs of Life in the USA*, Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon argue that “pop culture has virtually *become* our culture, permeating almost everything we do. So if we wish to understand ourselves, we must learn to think critically about the vast panoply of what was once condescendingly referred to as ‘mass culture’” (v). Popular culture artifacts allow students to engage with content that is familiar and recognizable to them (“permeating almost everything we do”), while also allowing instructors to introduce concepts and questions that are new to the students: in effect, using familiar things to introduce unfamiliar ideas. Students are asked to take the world around them—the popular world they have long been living and believing in and negotiating with—and to merge it with the world of the academy, in which they have only recently arrived and which they are only beginning to learn how to navigate.

In fact, part of the value in using popular culture artifacts as texts to be analyzed and responded to is that doing so can—somewhat paradoxically—convince students to attribute greater value to the artifacts of high culture that they are often introduced to while in college, the canonical great works that Victorian thinker Matthew Arnold called “the best that has been thought and said” (as quoted in Ousborne 1). Over the length of the course, students are challenged to see the similarities and connections between artifacts of high and popular culture, between the texts discussed in this course and the traditional academic texts and art forms used as content in most other courses. The use of popular culture as text also gives instructors an opportunity to present course content that is highly situated and contextualized. In the same way that textbooks are chosen for their suitability for particular programs, in particular schools, with particular students, cultural artifacts can be tailored to fit and respond to a specific institutional culture and student population. Cultural artifacts also allow for a course that is highly pliant and relevant; textbooks can be updated each semester, but new cultural texts can be chosen each week, practically overnight, in response to current events and unfolding discussions in the larger culture.

Using popular culture in a first-year writing course has also helped us to mediate (read: bypass) our students’ preconceived ideas about academic texts. Among those preconceived ideas is a sense that they do not know enough about an essay by Frederick Douglass, or a chapter on child psychology, or a biology lab report to adequately discuss them (much less, be critical of them). Students look to the teacher for the “right” answer or the “correct” opinion when it comes to these texts, which carry with them assumptions of expertise and educational achievement. But few people feel unequipped to have an opinion on Kim Kardashian’s fashion choices. In our popular culture writing classrooms, we try to encourage students to feel that they have just as much of a stake in the conversation as the next person (even when that next person is the instructor). Popular culture democratizes the weight of opinions in a way that helps students to learn to reason confidently, to express critical ideas with clarity and precision, without the intimidation factor involved when the content

consists of staunchly academic texts. Yet, building the capacity to analyze and respond to popular culture texts may prepare students for performing similar activities on more advanced-level disciplinary academic texts. As students decode cultural texts, they are invited to think about academic discourse in a broader sense—less strictly tied to content and more bound up in methodology, in ways of thinking and inquiring. In this way, the course builds on the foundational rhetorical skills that students develop in the traditional composition course sequence.

In teaching the course, instructors must confront the fact that the analysis of cultural artifacts is not an exercise intended to only engage the students. We are all impacted by culture. Instructors are asked to not only lead the students in discovery and inquiry but also to be active participants in those activities themselves. A mutually inclusive space for learning can be created by acknowledging the influence of cultural relativism, which posits that individuals must be examined through the lens of their own culture. Deep discourse in the classroom is created when all members understand that each individual responds to and participates in culture in ways influenced by his/her unique background. Beginning the course with this understanding means that the instructor can help students suspend bias in order to gain a deeper critical insight and can also use students' own backgrounds to help broaden and deepen the conversation and analysis. This negotiation and interplay is not about moral decision-making. It is about creating bridges that both students and faculty can use to enhance learning, curriculum development, and scholarship.

One of the aims of the popular culture writing classroom we have developed is to create a reciprocal learning environment. Students should be encouraged to not just actively participate in the course, but, as they come to understand the nature of the course, to contribute to its direction. This opens up opportunity for the students to introduce their cultural understandings, their vernacular, and their interests to their peers and the instructor. The instructor provides the connection and context. The students apply their nascent rhetorical and creative tools in response to a variety of topics. The course becomes an incubator for interdisciplinary learning, multimodal composition, and participatory analysis. The discussions are made relevant and tangible by the cultural artifacts. Students come to understand the value in academic, professional, and public genres of writing.

Up to this point, we have been focusing on the ways in which popular culture content and pedagogy operate in Critical Writing Seminar, but it is first and foremost a writing course. It is important to discuss how writing pedagogy operates in the course. The course is influenced by both popular culture studies and writing studies, and its pedagogy emerges in conference with the two. As mentioned earlier, the course was designed with an eye toward eventually developing a writing program. However, that writing program does not (yet) exist, and so the course currently functions outside of the composition sequence (though it was designed with the outcomes of those courses firmly in mind). Given our specific institutional context and also given the direction in which more and more English departments and writing program administrators (WPAs) are taking first-year writing courses, we propose that popular culture constitutes a fitting and appropriate form of alternative content for an additional first-year writing course.

The "WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (v3.0)," last updated in July 2014, establishes the current position of writing studies regarding the expected outcomes of first-year writing programs. It categorizes those outcomes according to four primary principles: rhetorical knowledge; critical thinking, reading, and composing; processes; and knowledge of conventions (1-2). These areas of focus reflect the degree to which first-year writing has moved away from a heavy concentration on literature-based essays and the remediation of inadequate grammatical and mechanical skills. Instead, many first-year writing programs have shifted (or are shifting) focus toward what David Smit, in *The End of Composition Studies*, calls "the heart of the matter in learning to write": transfer (119). Increasingly, instructors and scholars are working to prioritize what students can learn to do in writing classes that can transfer across different contexts (Carter,

Diller and Oates, Petraglia), trying to discover what writing strategies (if any) can “travel” effectively to new tasks and discourse communities. Some scholars have explicitly designed Teaching for Transfer (TFT) courses to support students’ ability to develop writing knowledge and practices that can be repurposed and adapted to new settings (Yancey, Robertson, Taczak). Others, like Elizabeth Wardle and Douglas Downs, have designed Writing About Writing (WAW) courses that “present the subject of composition, discourse, and literacy as [their] content” (*Writing About Writing* v). More broadly, most composition courses now emphasize (at least to some degree) the connections between what students have learned already and what they will need to write in a new genre or context by centering on rhetorical concepts themselves, such as “purpose, audience, context, and conventions” (Council of Writing Program Administrators 1).

Wardle and Downs have identified “several important misconceptions about writing and writing skills transfer” that they sought to resist in their courses, including “that academic writing is generally universal, that writing is a basic skill independent of content or context, and that writing abilities automatically transfer from FYC to other courses and contexts” (“Teaching about Writing” 554). Speaking frankly about the lack of scholarship regarding transfer in writing studies, they acknowledged: “Our field does not know what genres and tasks will help students in the myriad writing situations they will later find themselves... We do not know which genres or rhetorical strategies truly are universal in the academy, nor how to help FYC students recognize such universality” (557). However, while specific and transferable genres and tasks have not been clearly identified, the general conditions that promote transfer have been. David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon found that students need to reflect and be mindful of their own actions and environments and they also need “thorough and diverse practice . . . of the performance in question.” It has been our experience that popular culture as course content lends itself to creating these conditions in a course, allowing instructors to challenge students to analyze a wide range of audiences and purposes, genres and conventions (providing that “diverse practice”) as well as to reflect on themselves as consumers/creators of popular culture and leave the classroom with a greater sense of themselves as active, mindful participants in that culture.

Another educational theory that has had a major impact on first-year writing is the notion of “threshold concepts,” described by Jan Meyer and Ray Land in the introduction of *Overcoming Barriers to Student Understanding*, which posits that there are specific ideas, situated in specific disciplines/epistemic communities, that function as thresholds—portals through which learners must travel and “without which the learner cannot progress” (1). In other words, there are certain concepts or ideas that students must master in order to advance to more sophisticated or complex ways of thinking and writing. Threshold concepts “open up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking” and “represent a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something” (Meyer and Land 1). Threshold concepts also challenge the learner to reflect on tacit knowledge of which she is “only peripherally aware or entirely unconscious” (Perkins 40).

In first-year writing classes, threshold concepts have little to do with hard-and-fast rules of formatting, grammar, or how-many-sentences-go-in-a-paragraph. Instead, they are connected to students’ beliefs about the nature and function of writing, their abilities to understand “composing” in an expanded way (beyond the flatly alphabetical “words on paper” sense), and their knowledge of the way in which writing adapts to the demands of audience, purpose, context, and conventions of genre. In “Threshold Concepts for Writing Classes,” Wardle and Downs offered a tentative list of threshold concepts that reflect this shift in pedagogical emphasis in first-year writing. They list the following:

- Conceptions of writing matter, come from somewhere, and various conceptions of writing are more or less accurate and helpful.
- Text [sic] mediate human activity; people don’t write in a vacuum. People use texts in order to mediate meaningful activity. There are some lenses that can better help us understand how this happens.
- Texts make meaning in context. People interpret texts in ways that depend on their own histories and

contexts.

- People create texts using a variety of processes; these processes change depending on the context, audience, and purpose, and some processes are more or less effective than others. In addition, these processes start long before words are put on a page.
- “Composing” goes far beyond our usual conceptions of it as related to alphabetic/print-based writing. What counts as composing changes as our world and technologies change.

The above list of concepts does not necessitate that the texts that students encounter while learning be traditionally academic. In fact, we have found that popular culture artifacts can be used to impart/model these concepts with ease and clarity. The rhetorical diversity of popular culture alone—its many shapes and modes and purposes—makes its use a compelling example of the expanded notion of “composing.” Furthermore, students’ familiarity with the context in which popular culture is created and received (i.e., the context in which they already are comfortable and familiar, because it is one in which we all already participate to some degree) puts that particular concept—“texts making meaning in context”—in closer reach through popular culture than it might otherwise be for texts that operate in unfamiliar contexts (like an annotated bibliography).

Below, we take an opportunity to reflect individually on assignments we have used in *Critical Writing Seminar: Concepts in Popular Culture*, in order to showcase our experiences and the ways in which popular culture combines in our classes with writing pedagogy to meet important student learning outcomes and threshold concepts.

SAMPLING HISTORY: STRANGE FRUIT – CECILIA SHELTON

Like many teachers, I create my most interesting assignments in response to that frustrating moment when I just can’t seem to convey a concept or skill to my students in a way that is meaningful or relevant to them. I would venture to say that almost any writing teacher can relate to the disappointment that follows a class session about using and documenting sources responsibly. As much as we want to convey the importance of the mechanical details of the practice—commas go here, this in italics, that in quotation marks—we are even more invested in students’ ability to understand how texts interface with one another. We want them to understand intertextuality—the idea that integrating sources into your own writing is more than borrowing words; it is borrowing meaning, and context, and subtext. For these reasons, sources should be chosen carefully, quoted thoughtfully, and integrated meaningfully. We’ve all experienced that moment at the end of such a rousing lecture, when a lone student raises her hand and asks, “So, exactly how many quotes do we need to have?” as all the other students nod and pick up their pencils for the first time in the whole class session.

“Yes! That’s what I was going for—the exact same prescribed number of those careful, thoughtful, meaningful interactions between texts—for everyone,” said no (writing) teacher, ever.

After one too many classes like this, I decided that my sources and documentation activities should follow a writing assignment, where I might first work to convey the significance of meaning that travels across and between texts. It occurred to me that my students were much more familiar with the “borrowing” of meaning in the context of music. Who doesn’t love a good remix?

And so, I created an assignment called “Sampling History?: Appropriation(s) of Cultural Artifacts.” The overview on my assignment sheet reads as follows:

In class, students will analyze two related cultural artifacts: the lyrics of the poem turned protest song, “Strange Fruit,” famously performed by Billie Holiday, and *Without Sanctuary*, a photo documentary of American lynching (to be used as an illustration of social context that inspired the song). After their analysis, students will consider the ways that the original text of “Strange Fruit” has been re-purposed through various musical (re)appropriations (covers of Billie Holiday’s rendition) which recontextualize the lyrics and

their message again and again. Students should comment on the impact that these “revisions” have on the significance of the original text in a critical response essay.

My background research about Strange Fruit graduated this assignment from a simple, theme-related, in-class reflection activity to a full-blown writing assignment. Of course, my class prep included listening to Billie Holiday sing “Strange Fruit,” and the easiest method of access was YouTube. A quick search revealed a multitude of covers and samples of her rendition of the song—I was blown away. I thought it curious that such a somber and haunting (though beautiful) song was being so heavily sampled by artists in a variety of genres. It was a perfect opportunity to talk about what was happening to the original meaning of those lyrics as it travels through those samples and covers.

In class, we spent one class period discussing the social context of the two cultural artifacts. I asked them to come to class ready to report their own research about the inspiration for the lyrics of “Strange Fruit,” knowing that a quick internet search would reveal Abel Meerpol, a white, Jewish, high school teacher from the Bronx as the original composer of the lyrics in the form of a poem. His intention was to express his horror at the lynching of black Americans during the Jim Crow period in which he was living. He published the poem in 1937 and later set it to music. It gained popularity in and around New York and eventually, Billie Holiday recorded it as a song in 1939.

My students fell along a fairly broad spectrum of awareness of those details, and eventually we were able to piece the story together. Next, I worked with great care and sensitivity to connect the lyrics to the images that inspired them for Meerpol. *Without Sanctuary* is a museum, which features a collection of postcard photographs of American lynching. Many of the photographs are accompanied by notes that allude, or sometimes speak more directly, to the racist state of mind that was prevalent at this time. Their initial reaction was one of awe, disbelief, and eventually reverence for the significance of the song and the circumstances of its composition. I am certain that they were all prepared to write very poignant essays about the historical significance of Abel Meerpol’s lyrics and Billie Holiday’s song. I instructed them to suspend their ideas, while they completed a homework assignment, and we would regroup during our next class period.

Their homework assignment was to listen to five covers/samples of “Strange Fruit,” recorded by the following artists: Common, featuring John Legend, Tori Amos, UB40, Jeff Buckley, and Kanye West. They were required to listen to the covers on YouTube via links I provided and then to review the comments section for each song. They were clearly intrigued about why I was asking them to take this step before writing—I didn’t assign any formal response to be submitted for the homework. They were simply asked to come to class prepared to talk.

And talk we did. The students made some quick and unanimous observations during our next class meeting. First, the covers sound completely and totally different—different from the original *and* from one another. We all lacked music expertise but shared interest. I stepped into this space to invite that reciprocal learning environment and level with my students as fans of music. We agreed that a good portion of the differences could be attributed to genre; still, we had already identified the music to which Meerpol’s lyrics were set in Holiday’s rendition as complementary to the meaning. Changing the music mattered, we agreed, but we couldn’t come to a consensus on how it mattered, in what ways. Knowing what the lyrics were about and debating the degree to which the covers match or deviate from the tone of the original song was a great opportunity to talk about how the meaning of the song was located in the layers of the songs—not solely in the lyrics, or the music, or the arrangements.

My students and I also discussed the comments that users left for each of the songs. Those comments revealed that most of the people listening to the covers seemed to be listening because they were fans of the artist and had no awareness of the original context of the lyrics. We agreed that it was fair for people not to know about the origins of the sample; most people listen to music as fans of artists and don’t do

research about samples and covers to understand them. The students had made these inferences about the background knowledge of listeners because of the disruption that occurred when a commenter contributed to the discussion to reveal the source of the sample and its significance. When someone would “educate” the YouTube commenters in this way, heated arguments would ensue about race, lyrics, significance, and interpretation of meaning.

Our most interesting conversation happened with the students’ responses to Kanye West’s sample of “Strange Fruit” in his song “Blood on the Leaves” which was newly released at the time. At first, their interest seemed to be related to their relationship to the artist. They were fans of Kanye—at least, more than they were fans of the other artists. They listened to that sample in the same way that other fans listened to the other covers and samples we’d discussed. But the room was split regarding the location of meaning associated with Kanye’s sample. His song, titled “Blood on the Leaves” samples “Strange Fruit” in the middle of an auto-tuned, hip-hop record that recounts the challenges of fame, drug (molly) use, and an adulterous hook-up with painful consequences. Some students felt that the music most closely resembled the tone of the original work and that Kanye was using the sample with intention, though they couldn’t initially comment on how this was happening (these students went on to find sources that supported this theory). Other students felt strongly that the juxtaposition of West’s profane lyrical content with Holliday’s rendition of Meerpol’s sacred lyrics was offensive (these students found support for this theory too).

This in-class debate about meaning and where it was and how it moved between these songs actually was exactly what I was going for with this assignment. At this point, after two full class discussions, I distributed my essay assignment sheet, which included the overview above and links to all of the songs we’d discussed as sources for further consultation. Students responded to the following prompt: “Choose one sample or cover of ‘Strange Fruit’ and discuss how the new song borrows from or departs from the meaning of the original song. Discuss the significance you see in this choice.”

Students followed these instructions and came to different conclusions in their critical response essays. Still, in retrospect, I see clearly that those responses demonstrated my newfound understanding of one of writing’s threshold concepts: “Texts make meaning in context. People interpret texts in ways that depend on their own histories and contexts.” They were a bit better prepared to absorb that lecture on using and documenting sources responsibly than the class before them had been. And I was happy with that.

THE NEW NETWORK ASSIGNMENT – CHRISTOPHER MASSENBURG

I discovered Lisa Barone’s article for Outspoken Media.com entitled, “Creating Your Own Brand Network Like Oprah Winfrey” that discussed Oprah and the development of her television network, OWN, as a model for personal branding. I immediately saw an opportunity to develop a unique assignment for my students. My goal was to talk about branding, to have the students envision the responsibility that comes with delivering a message to a group of people, to involve a presentation tool (without using Microsoft’s *PowerPoint*), and to challenge students to practice their presentation skills. I developed an assignment that I hoped would push my students to consider the rhetorical situations and textual conventions needed to develop an effective argument. I wanted to emphasize visual design through the use of Piktochart, an online infographic design application, so I asked students to develop a Piktochart presentation for a new network that they would create and then pitch to the class.

The students had lots of questions. They weren’t familiar with Piktochart and wanted to know why they had to use it. I explained that it was another means of composition and that the templates provided would make it easier to add visual appeal to their presentations. We looked at various examples of the use of infographics and discussed the effectiveness of infographics as both an expressive and a persuasive tool. I told

them that it would take a few minutes to get used to developing the infographic, but that their final results would look better than their initial attempts. I wanted the relationship of the concept they were developing and the visual aid they would be creating to be different so that they would have to think more about how they would put it together.

In keeping with the assignment's focus on visual design, I instructed students to dress according to their proposed network. I wanted them to really consider what a consistency between the design of their infographic and their personal appearance might mean. What type of dress would be appropriate? Why would it matter? They asked for clarity quite a few times. They were used to just being told to dress professionally. I wanted them to see their dress as part of the visual design of their presentation and to recognize that there are a number ways to dress professionally, just as there are various modes of composition. They hadn't been made to think about the variety of ways professionalism could manifest or that the "text" being read by their audience might even include them.

The learning curve for the Piktochart infographic took longer than I anticipated. I had to help them understand how to manipulate the templates. They wanted more direction on what the presentation should include. I told them to base the network off of something that mattered to them, using their own interests to guide the development of the network and their decisions about their target audience. Soon they were able to grasp the concept and started putting their infographics together.

After that, I had to tackle their concern over the oral presentation. I gave them tips for getting over the anxiety of presenting in front of people. I kept the time length of the presentations short so that it wouldn't seem too overwhelming. In an effort to give value to their perspectives and their ability to articulate their interests, I let them know that their familiarity with the network was the most important element of the presentation.

Many aspects of the assignment went well. The students enjoyed developing the infographic, choosing themes for their networks that reflected their interests, identities, and aspirations. Some based their presentations on future careers, some on their involvement in athletics, and some on practical skills that might be needed to navigate adulthood. Each person felt good about the theme he/she selected and the contents of the infographic. Often, they used models of networks with which they were familiar, and which they had researched in order to develop creative names and slogans for their own networks. I had them create drafts and submit them to me so I could give feedback before they presented the final versions. Most were able to highlight the value of the network and the type of programming. They also were able to recognize the impact of social media in connecting with people, articulating which social media sites they would use and how. The one detail that many students failed to identify in the infographic was the specific location where the network would appear. I assumed they would choose a location based on their home service and selection of channels, yet that didn't happen.

They had greater difficulty with the pitch. Even though they had created these networks, each with their own unique identity and value, they weren't confident in explaining their creations to the audience. While they did reasonably well in deciding on a mode of persuasion (ethos, logos, or pathos) to use in the pitch for their networks, they struggled to apply that mode comfortably and convincingly. Many even chose to dress just as they would for other school presentations, no matter how distinct their network was (i.e. sports or entertainment); in doing so, they missed the opportunity to use another visual appeal to pitch their network. I wanted each student to see his/her presentation as a chance to sell what he or she knew in a unique way, determined by their own strategy rather than the traditional rules for presentations, but not every student saw it that way. Many students couldn't escape the feeling that there was a particular standard for how to make a class presentation and that if they couldn't fit their presentation into that standard their grade would suffer. So what I ended up with were some amazing ideas and some not so good sales pitches. To me, this assignment

further affirmed the need for this course, which provides students with experiences outside of standard conventions, but within solid pedagogical frameworks. This type of writing course could help students to trust their own evaluative instincts and value their own cultural understandings.

CONFUSED CATS AGAINST FEMINISM – EMILY HOWSON

In class, we'd just finished watching Jean Kilbourne's documentary, *Killing Us Softly 4*, about the advertising industry's depictions of women's bodies. I'd themed and centered the semester around sex and gender roles in American society and the documentary had presented students with an argument to consider: images of women in advertising are a toxic influence on and contribute to gender inequality and stereotyping. Eventually, students would be completing a more traditional, formal essay assignment in response to that argument, but before we got there, I felt that I needed to provide some smaller, lower-stakes scaffolding assignments to help them develop and deepen their thinking. While our discussions about Kilbourne's premise had been impassioned—some students agreed with her, some disagreed, but just about everyone felt strongly either way—I wanted a chance to challenge and complicate the responses I was hearing, and to do so in a way that blended our rhetorical analysis with more “nuts and bolts” writing skills and practice.

Blending those two facets of the course together—the critical thinking and the critical writing—is consistently a struggle of mine in teaching. For me, the opportunities to invite critical thinking overflow; I can scarcely check my Facebook feed anymore without coming across a new magazine article or YouTube video that would prove highly applicable and interesting to analyze in class. My ability to come up with creative ways to work through the more practical elements of writing is considerably less generative. While students are active and participating when watching Key and Peele's “I Said Bitch” skit, analyzing its constructions of femininity and masculinity, and debating the difference between public and private performances of gender, they are considerably less enthused when we shift to writing about it. Should we transition to a more traditional classroom practice—say, generating thesis statements based on their conclusions about the ideal audience for the skit, and discussing factors that contribute to stronger or weaker theses—the students' engagement begins to wane. To prepare for the larger essay students would write in response to Kilbourne's documentary, I wanted to reinforce the building blocks of well-defended argument—claims (arguable and specific), evidence/reasoning (concrete and compelling), and warrants (the explanations and interpretations that connect evidences to claims)—but I didn't want to lose the students, and I didn't want these ideas to separate from the questions we were considering with regard to *Killing Us Softly*.

This is where the elasticity and responsiveness of pop culture as a teaching tool really shines through. In our discussions of the documentary, a few trends had emerged and one of them centered around a lack of consensus regarding the definition of “feminism;” students were using the term in all kinds of ways, applying many different meanings and connotations, bringing their unique backgrounds and perspectives to bear. The resulting confusion was revealing to me but mostly, well, confusing to the students. We needed some common ground so we could more clearly contextualize our differences. The next class, we watched Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TEDTalk, “We should all be feminists,” as a way to launch our inquiry into the term “feminism.” We also read and compared two different editorial-style articles—one from the right-wing Fox News, the other from the left-wing *The New Republic*—that reported on Beyonce's 2014 VMA performance (in which she stood in front of a huge “FEMINIST” sign, all lit up). Adichie's talk gave us a shared foundation and vocabulary, and we made some real strides with the articles. Many of the students had little trouble identifying claims and evidence made by each of the writers and in making some assertions about the success or failure of those claim-evidence pairs. What the students struggled with was the concept of warrants. Because warrants—the logical connections between ideas—can function implicitly and go unspoken, students had a harder time

pinpointing their use in the articles.

At the same time, I was noticing a refrain in our discussions that I wanted us to investigate further. The refrain positioned the concepts we were examining as largely external to the students' lives—as something above or outside their experiences, something that affected (and was affected by) the famous and talented Beyonce and Jay Z, or the scholarly and accomplished Adichie, but not them. I wanted to push them to consider what impact these ideas circulating in our culture had on them, and also what impact they might have on these ideas. In addition, I wanted to consider the ways in which warrants manifest outside of straightforward article writing. I turned to Tumblr.

On the “Who Needs Feminism?” page, users upload photos of themselves holding signs, usually handwritten, that follow a general template: “I need feminism because [fill in the blank].” Sometimes the photos include the authors' faces; sometimes they don't. Sometimes they include more than one “because;” sometimes they include just one. We scrolled through examples, with students exclaiming over or commenting on submissions that stood out in particular ways. Then, we switched over to a different Tumblr, this one called “Women Against Feminism.” On this site, users upload photos of themselves holding signs that follow the opposite template: “I don't need feminism because [fill in the blank]” (emphasis mine). We scrolled examples of these also, pausing and examining submissions that caught students' eyes. On both sites, students found reasons to be confused and dissatisfied. “I don't need feminism because I love my boyfriend?” read one student aloud, eyes narrowed. “What's loving her boyfriend got to do with it?” Another photo, which read, “I need feminism because a friend of mine says feminism is pointless,” left students scratching their heads (metaphorically speaking), thinking in circles, and eventually concluding that it “just doesn't make any sense.”

Both Tumblr blogs gave us rich ground to cover, both in considering what the pages were doing as a whole—what individual people, often young people just like the students, were doing to participate in a broader social conversation—and in considering how each individual photo worked rhetorically. What the Tumblr pages also offered was a powerful encounter with arguments that possessed both claims (I need feminism or I don't need feminism) and evidence/reasoning (because x, y, and z), but that lacked warrants. On both sites, we found plenty of examples where unspoken assumptions and explanations left holes in arguments and diminished their effectiveness. We agreed that in the boyfriend example above, for instance, the author was working off a definition of feminism that assumed feminists are women who do not love men/boyfriends, or don't have significant others, and that for her argument to be effective, she'd have to first prove why that is true.

When we transitioned over to the third and final Tumblr, “Confused Cats Against Feminism,” students were already halfway in on the joke. This blog parodies “Women Against Feminism” by hosting photos of cats posing with signs that read things like, “I don't need feminism because I need tuna. Where is the tuna?” and “I don't need feminism because what I need is to bite you.” Students were laughing or smirking as we scrolled through. I asked them to ruin the joke by explaining why it's funny. Stumbling at first, but eventually gaining traction, students were more or less able to articulate the ways in which the cats had provided reasons that had nothing to do with feminism, and how this mocked the “Women Against Feminism” page by suggesting that those reasons also had little to do with feminism, or were based on misunderstandings of feminism.

For homework, the students were to make their own photo contributions and submit them to me via email. They could choose which claim they wanted to make (needing feminism or not), and provide whatever reason they wanted, but they would need to be prepared to discuss the image in class and unpack the underlying warrants. I also emphasized the ways in which students would need to think carefully about their composing choices, and that those choices extended beyond the words they put on their signs. I asked them to pay attention to how other elements of the photo impacted their message, to consider if they wanted their face or body in the picture, what they might wear, whether the photo would be in black and white or color, and so on. As expert Instagrammers and selfie-takers, many of the students responded to this element

of the assignment with a comfortable fluency. They were already practiced in the art of curating their own image; what they hadn't yet done was connect their own activities on a conceptual level with those depictions in advertising that we had just finished discussing.

Responses poured in on both "sides" of the debate (some students even sent two or three photos, having come up with more than one idea and wanting to share them all). We could have probably spent the rest of the semester discussing some of the ideas and rhetorical appeals contained within their images, for they were both broadly ranging and complex. I compiled all the images and we went through them one by one, focusing our discussion on a brief analysis of the rhetorical "moves" made by the author and on the missing or hidden warrant implicated in his/her argument.

When students began work on their formal essay, responding to Kilbourne's documentary and the relationship of image and advertising to constructions of gender, they still struggled to connect claims and evidence in clear and precise ways, but there was a notable increase in the attention paid to the logical connections between ideas. The ratio in the previous essay between claims (of which there were many), and evidence and warrants (of which there were fewer) became less dramatically uneven. So, the students' writing did suggest that they were slowing down, trying to make their interpretations of their evidence clear to the reader. And perhaps more importantly, a surprising number of the essays concluded on an optimistic note, sounding a little more confident that there was something to do be done—something they could do—to influence advertising one way or the other.

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Our first two years of implementation of Critical Writing Seminar have been characterized by experiences like the ones outlined above—propelled forward by a productive tension between instinct and experimentation. Our distinct narratives collectively demonstrate how teaching this course can be fraught with challenges, but pregnant with potential. We have learned that pop culture is a uniquely effective tool for applying writing pedagogies and theories in the classroom.

We acknowledge that our comments thus far have significant limitations—most notably, the absence of empirical evidence. There is work to be done to verify that our students' increased engagement, enthusiasm, and responsiveness translates meaningfully into increased rhetorical dexterity. We readily acknowledge that we have not proven concretely, in what ways (if any) that Prof. Massenburg's students understand composing more broadly, or Prof. Shelton's students understand intertextuality in a way that they can apply to other papers, or Prof. Howson's students can articulate warrants more clearly. But, as we alluded to earlier, we are not the only writing teachers grappling for answers to questions of transfer. Examining the genres, tasks, texts, strategies, and conditions that actually facilitate transfer has become a mainstream research topic in the field of writing studies. Scholars are still theorizing about how students develop rhetorical skills across assignments and courses and throughout their matriculation.

We recognize that our reflections are purely anecdotal, and therefore, perhaps still at the margins of the empirical work being done on this topic in writing studies. While we cannot offer data that responds to these inquiries definitively, our narratives can help writing scholars consider the complex dimensions of the research questions that drive their inquiry. Our reflections also offer the emergent dialogue regarding popular culture pedagogy a courage-bolstering set of experiences to confirm that the risk of bucking tradition and resisting the rigidity of the academy is worthwhile—that popular culture can be integrated into traditional best practices in service of disciplinary theories and pedagogies.

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AUTHOR BIOS:

Emily E. Howson, Lecturer, Writing Center Liason, has taught at Saint Augustine's University since 2013. She earned an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from North Carolina State University in 2012 and a B.A. in English and Psychology from University of Dayton in 2009. Currently, she teaches writing courses for the university, serves as the coordinator for the Critical Writing Seminar and Composition courses, and helps to administer the SAU Writing Center.

Christopher D. Massenburg, 2015-2016 Nasir Jones Fellow at the Hip Hop Archive & Research Institute at the Hutchins Center, Harvard University. Former Assistant Professor of English and Creative Writing, Saint Augustine's University. He earned a B.S. in Organizational Management from Saint Augustine's University and an M.L.S. in Art & Culture with a concentration in Creative Writing from the University of Denver. Better known in the art world as Dasan Ahanu, he is a poet, performance artist, lecturer, workshop facilitator, songwriter, recording artist, freelance writer and playwright. Twitter: www.twitter.com/dasanahanu LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/dasanahanu>

Cecilia D. Shelton, PhD Student at East Carolina University in the Rhetoric, Writing and Professional Communication program. Former Director of the University Writing Center, Saint Augustine's University. She earned an M.A. in English with a concentration in sociolinguistics from North Carolina State University in 2007. She earned a B.A. in English from Winston-Salem State University in 2005. Her doctoral research interests include dialect variation in the writing classroom, critical writing pedagogies, and writing program/writing center administration.

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Lady Gaga Meets Ritzer: Using Music to Teach Sociological Theory

Kenneth Culton

Department of Sociology
Niagara University
Niagara University, NY, USA
kculton@niagara.edu

José A. Muñoz

Department of Sociology
California State University, San Bernardino
San Bernardino, CA, USA
munoz@csusb.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper presents methods for instructors to deal with student anxiety over theory courses. The method is an interactive class exercise that provides instructors with direction as to using popular music. The paper accomplishes this through the use of several cases for including music in order to spark discussion and suggestions for helping students to interpret the theory presented. Additionally, suggestions for incorporating writing assignments with the exercise are provided here. A table linking music to a theorist is also provided.

KEYWORDS:

Music, Sociology, Theory, Teaching, Student Anxiety, Subculture, Class Exercise, Undergraduate, Popular Culture.

The challenges involved with teaching an undergraduate Social Theory course are oft reported. Lowney (1998) notes that students often enroll in Social Theory simply to fulfill a requirement for their major. Others cite the mental and emotional obstacles students face. Students are often “anxious and fearful” of Social Theory courses (Ahlkvist 471; Hickson and Stacks 262). Research into lowering student anxiety in theory and other core courses is a critical question explored by many scholars (Ahlkvist, 471; Ormrod, 191; Schacht and Stewart 329). From our anecdotal experiences and writings by Julie Pelton (107), we find students regularly report theory to be the most difficult Sociology course taken. Rumors tend to spread, thereby enhancing the fear and anxiety associated with courses in Social theory. Cases were discovered where instructors work around their students’ difficulty in understanding complex concepts by constructing a theory course that is both fun and enjoyable, resulting in students feeling more comfortable with theory (Flanagan and McCausland 311). As in many courses, the patience and willingness of the instructor to put extra work into a theory course goes a long way in regard to students conquering their fear of theory. One suggestion is looking to contemporary examples and current events as a method for simplifying concepts (Hickson and Stacks 263). This can involve strategies that incorporate intensive writing where film (Pelton 107) or other popular culture content serves to engage students.

Employing popular music in Sociology courses has been lauded by both instructors and students alike (Albers and Bach 237-238; Martinez 260). To date we know of no systematic exercise integrating popular music in a standard Social Theory class; however, in the field of Criminology and Economics scholars have used music to teach key theoretical concepts in their courses (Rothe and Collins 227; Hinds-Aldrich 7; Van Horn and Van Horn 65). This is surprising because courses in Social Theory are important universally required and central to the discipline (Orum 95). Jarl Ahlkvist made an effort to integrate music when teaching classical theory in his introductory Sociology courses (473-478). Ahlkvist used “Progressive Rock” bands Pink Floyd, Yes, and ELP (Emerson, Lake, and Palmer), to illustrate the theories of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber respectively (476). The music served as a “concrete organizing framework” to which students could “easily link abstract social theories.” (Ahlkvist 476) In short, the use of music enhanced students’ learning of social theories; however, there were some stated limitations. Notably, Ahlkvist found that his presentations of conceptually dense progressive rock actually decreased student participation relative to other introductory course topics (476). Moreover, he states, “most [students] initially dismiss this music from the 1970’s as largely irrelevant for understanding our current social environment” (Ahlkvist 480). Ahlkvist writes that “A more ambitious extension of this technique might include the use of popular music that emerged in the aftermath of progressive rock.”(481) This paper does so, not entirely eschewing music from the 70’s, while still moving forward and presenting an interactive exercise that integrates various styles of popular music in the Social Theory classroom.

The musical tastes and stylistic preferences of youth have become more fluid and there is an “essential eclecticism of post-war youth culture” (Bennett 600). Musical tastes are less collective and genre based, reflecting what Bennett calls “neo-tribal sensibilities,” mirroring aspects of “late modern consumer society” (Bennett 614). Like other patterns of consumption, young people are clearly accustomed to individualizing, and even personalizing, their choices. Albers and Bach find that using popular music in the classroom “bridges the gap between the professional and the personal” (Albers and Bach 238). The personal in this case, the world of popular culture and mass media, is a common immersion for most students. The professional is represented by the structured norms apparent to students and emblematic of the typical classroom environment. Material culture in the classroom allows for instructors to achieve their goals by sparking curiosity and limiting defensiveness and conformity (Groce 80; Hoefel 71).

Drawing from the above-referenced experience, using music in Ken Culton’s introductory courses endeavored to bring music into the Social Theory classroom as well. As faculty members we are the bearers

of institutional norms, and as faculty who may have chosen to teach Social Theory, we are often that much further culturally from the traditional college student. Using music and other forms of popular culture allows instructors to appear to be less intimidating and as such should be especially advantageous in the Social Theory classroom, where we commonly find students to be prone to intimidation (Pelton 107; Albers and Bach 239; Hickson and Stacks 262). Less fearful students are more apt to active engagement in the classroom. Martinez finds that “music has always been a springboard for discussion of issues, provoking students to use a certain amount of ‘sociological imagination’” (Martinez 415). The use of music in the classroom allows for “creating an active role for students” that involves the routinization of participation, thereby working to alleviate anxiety about a theory course (Macheski et al. 45). Finally, music in class can be used to create a “common language of discourse,” given that the students take course material and apply it to the music played in the classroom (Macheski et al. 46).

Albers and Bach explain that playing music provides an “opening” or “back region” that allows students to make important breakthroughs in their understanding of the material (239). The authors go on to state that “If students perceive themselves in a backstage environment, they are more comfortable, and they are thus inclined to interact with one another and with us” (Albers and Bach 239). Additionally, Martinez points out that with students’ connections to music culture, they discover that the concerns of social theorists are echoed by the artists they currently listen to—thereby altering their relationship to the entire enterprise (415). The ball is now on their side of the court, so to speak, since the invitation to participate has been delivered on their terms. It has been made appropriate for them to now speak, not as seasoned theorists, but as defenders and as translators of their own cultural artifacts. All of this, again, serves to bridge the gap between faculty members who are well versed in theory and comfortable talking about social theory and students who are not. We feel that bringing music into the classroom can help to alleviate this fear and anxiety.

Scholars who study various music genres and subcultures observed that music and lyrics often serve to reveal hidden truths about society (Assante 10; Wood 4; Gaines 177-192). The insight may add value and depth to the music, as such in the eyes of young students whose development can be seen as a search for truth in the face of myriad contradictions put forth by power holding adults (Hine 45).

THE EXERCISE

A great challenge in Social Theory courses, and many other courses for that matter, is getting students to read and think critically about the reading before class begins. Therefore, the teaching technique we describe in this paper involves beginning each class (or new theory) by displaying the song lyric and playing the song selection that corresponds to the listed theory in its entirety (See Appendix). In most cases the instructor would have come to class ready to play music either by using one of our suggestions or finding their own music. Additionally, the instructor could encourage students to bring in their own music. If the instructor plays a music video such as one may find on YouTube, then this video could add a visual dimension to a particular song before discussion. The lyrics can be posted on Blackboard for an ongoing discussion beyond the classroom. This approach, beginning each class with a song, was applied successfully by Albers and Bach (240). They noted greater student participation in sociological topics at the introductory level. The paper provides discussion having to do with how to extend this approach to sociological theory courses.

The authors feel that it is important for this exercise to be open-ended. The addition of rules and procedures, for the sake of appearances, merely reproduces the institutional imperative and undermines our collective purpose. Students desire involvement and they are less likely to participate if they fear their answer may fall beyond the scope of what the instructor finds acceptable. Under the most unspecified conditions student anxiety may still exist, but in this paper the argument is that it is mitigated by a true commitment to

a sort of structured informality. In short, students are challenged, or forced into thinking, while being given the leeway to think critically. The essence of what the paper proposes is simply process: play a song, present a lyric, and ask students to discuss how it relates to Social theory. The four examples below outline this structured informality in practice; there is an introduction of a song and lyrics followed by comments about how an instructor could incorporate the music into class discussion.

The song “Meat is Murder” by The Smiths¹ is a pointed example of an effort to redefine the commonly held definition of a symbol, in this case “meat.” The vocalist, Morrissey, croons the following passage from the song, “Heifer whines could be human cries, closer comes the screaming knife. This beautiful creature must die. This beautiful creature must die. A death for no reason and death for no reason is MURDER.”

After presenting the lyrics, the instructor can begin the discussion by asking students in an open-ended fashion, to consider how the song relates to symbolic interactionism.² The notion of symbol can arise from this discussion. The instructor might then ask, “What symbol is this song about?” After establishing that “meat” is the major theme, the instructor can then ask, “What is the author trying to say about meat being murder?” Once students engage with the symbol topic, the instructor can ask, “How the meaning of symbols is generally determined?” and “How do most people view this symbol (meat) most of the time?” There is plenty of room for tangential discussions here (ex. ecological cost of eating meat), and they should be welcomed. Vegetarians in the class may certainly weigh in, as well as those who find these ideas foreign. Students may conclude that many symbols in a complex society hold meanings that are subject to revision, often through the contention of various actors, just as observed in the classroom. The instructor may also choose to revisit this and other songs during the course to illustrate theoretical paradigms, such as critical theory.

The song “No” by Vivian Girls is a droll anthem of sorts with an entire lyric comprised of just one word: No. “No” is repeated in various melodies and harmonized in a pop whimsical fashion throughout. In this case, the song itself may function as a “breach,” where the usual social order is disrupted. Similar situationally to Harold Garfinkel’s “breaching experiments” (Garfinkel 44-49), the song elicits breach filling behavior on the part of subjects who, when faced with the true chaotic nature of the social world, are compelled to correct it or fill the breach. The puzzle is for students to figure out this very fact. Some students may at first be confused and even offended by the lack of more traditional lyrics. This confusion will only contribute to the breach and thus strengthen the example by bringing forth more frustration.

One conclusion to draw from the exercise is for students to think more critically about their preconceived expectations. What counts as an acceptable song lyric? Why is the use of one word troubling? Students should be challenged to consider what makes a song lyric acceptable. If Garfinkel and other ethnomethodologists are ‘correct’, then the world is much more chaotic than realized. The ensuing discussion could be an attempt to find other examples where our expectations override our ability to see situations clearly. This discussion could begin with music, where the instructor might ask, “What are some other examples of music that challenge our sense of what is normal?” and “How did you react when you first heard (death metal, gangsta rap, etc.)?” The sounds used in a composition may allude to, or upend, our expectations.

Known to be an empowering, uncompromising, strong, and likely feminist figure in popular music, Lady Gaga espouses the virtues of acceptance in “Born this Way.” In the bridge of “Born this Way,” Lady Gaga sings “Don’t be a drag, just be a queen, Whether you’re broke or evergreen, You’re black, white, beige, chola descent, You’re lebanese, you’re orient. Whether life’s disabilities, Left you outcast, bullied, or teased, Rejoice and love yourself today, ‘Cause baby you were born this way.”

Though postmodernism is a regularly debated concept, George Ritzer describes it to be “more accepting of the stranger,” where, unlike modernity and its attempts to eliminate ambivalence, the postmodern world is seen to be “more tolerant” (228). Ritzer states that “The postmodern world is destined to be a far more uncertain world than modernity, and those who live in it need to have strong nerves.” (228)

Before attempting to grasp postmodernity, students need a sense of modernity as a project of intensifying bureaucratization, social stratification, and order. The instructor might ask students, “What are some ways in which (modern) society is segregated or stratified?” Next, “How does Lady Gaga’s song respond to this trend of stratification?” From here, the instructor may choose his or her own emphasis. One obvious direction is to question how “postmodern” a society is or is not. This could be effectively framed by asking students “Are we or are we not living in the world described by Lady Gaga?” Postmodernism has also been characterized as “a lack of concern, playfulness, and self-centeredness” (Ritzer 228). This is reflected in the exhortation to “be a queen” and the emphasis on “I” in the lyric above. Students might be asked to consider if these proscriptions are in fact the best way to better the world? Or, is there something more, namely collective action, missing from Gaga’s utopic vision?

“Okie from Muskogee” by Merle Haggard is a classic country tune that many students will find humorous.³ It is emblematic of an era, specifically a prideful affirmation of “small town” values and rejection of the amoral other. Ferdinand Toennies’s *Gemeinschaft* or *community* is certainly on display here, described by Peter Kivisto as based on “habit, tradition, shared beliefs, and affective bonds” (91). Though some tend to dismiss *Gemeinschaft* as the increasingly passé social arrangement in favor of *Gesellschaft*, or *society*, “both types coexist at any particular point in time” (Kivisto 91). This may resonate with students of a conservative ilk, who may find a sociological ally in Toennies, a theorist whom, like Emile Durkheim, clearly favored tradition and the collective over instrumental rationality. Some students may be able to offer examples of modern country songs that extend this trope; these types of lyrics will serve to strengthen the case while also making the classroom more inclusive.

Peter Kivisto brings forth a more nuanced interpretation of Toennies that recognizes both *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* as the outcomes of a social world that is “willed” (91). “Natural will” or *wesenwille* leads to actions that are “less consciously chosen, predicated instead on tradition, habit, or emotion” (Kivisto 91). Deconstructing the lyrical text below can uncover the mood or tap into the unsaid and reveal the implicit agreements made between Merle Haggard and his likeminded audience. Students might be asked to explain if residents of Muskogee in fact see their predilections as natural? Discussion could also be encouraged by asking students to identify the role of emotion in this *natural will* for Toennies to give birth to the *Gemeinschaft* social formulation. The following passage fits this argument: “We don’t burn no draft cards down on Main Street; We like livin’ right, and bein’ free. I’m proud to be an Okie from Muskogee, A place where even squares can have a ball. We still wave Old Glory down at the courthouse.... We don’t let our hair grow long and shaggy, Like the hippies out in San Francisco do” (Haggard).

The lyric loses explanatory power if applied to *Gesellschaft*. The hippies of San Francisco, though derided here, may also consider themselves both then and today a community of people with “shared beliefs” and “affective bonds” (Kivisto 91). Here again is an opportunity to further parse the theoretical terrain through probing questions. Perhaps ask students where they would *not* expect to see *Gemeinschaft*? The *Gemeinschaft* discussion can also be used to illustrate Durkheim’s organic solidarity, though the concepts are not interchangeable. Is it the anomic city? On a rural campus such consensus may surface, but it is understood that cities are home to numerous tight-knit collectives. The instructor might end with the realization that *Gemeinschaft*, in one form or another, is almost universally desired, and *Gesellschaft* feared. The implications of this in a globalizing world is one of the many issues worth exploring.

The use of music lyrics as a class exercise allows for the students to think about the material in greater depth and connect through shared experience. Beyond the discussion based method proposed here, instructors may consider these alternative applications. One suggestion is small writing assignments where students answer a list of questions in light of the lyric and theory presented in class. For example, this could take the form of a brief memo, reflection paper, or as a unique way to begin a journal entry (Coker and Scarboro 219).

For those instructors that wish to incorporate technology, adapting Paul Dean's visual analysis assignment could serve as another outlet for students⁽¹⁾. Students could be given a writing assignment where they would blog about a song of their choosing and make their own connections to a theory presented in the course. Such an assignment would fit Pelton's argument for using "low stakes" or practice writing assignments (111); these assignments have value for reducing anxiety and building confidence. Instructors could also incorporate findings from this exercise in exams as a short answer or essay question. Finally, and ideally for smaller classes, students may be asked to prepare individual or group presentations where, again, a sociological theory is illustrated through an analyzed lyric. This last alternative approach is more advanced, as it puts the student firmly in the instructor's role. This should only be attempted if the instructor has time to offer ample support for the student as s/he develops the presentation.

This paper presents a method for instructors to deal with student anxiety in theory courses. The method included is an interactive exercise that provides instructors with direction as to using popular music in the classroom. The paper accomplishes this by supplying four cases for including music in order to spark class discussion as well as suggestions for helping students interpret the material. The classroom exercise can be reinforced through student reflection by writing short papers, keeping a journal, or alternatively for smaller classes, students may create group presentations where song lyrics are part of the final demonstration. Apart from courses that assign theory, the exercise may be employed in courses such as Sociology 101, Sociology of Gender, Visual Sociology, and Social Movements. For example, one of the co-authors used music on a regular basis in his Sociology 101 course. He teaches at a small private Catholic university that offers BAs in Sociology, which is usually populated by 10-20 students who are predominately white.

The other instructor teaches at a medium sized state university and Hispanic Serving Institution that offers a BA in Sociology. The Sociological Theory course size at this university ranges from 45 to 55 students and are racially and ethnically diverse. The exercise occurred in the final weeks of the introductory Sociology course, where the students were asked to find a song of their choosing and discuss the song's lyrics in light of some topic discussed in Sociology 101. It was found that each year several genres of music are applied in these small papers. Rap/hip hop, hard rock/heavy metal, pop, and country are *always* represented in classes of 30 to 40 students each. Finally, we want to address the fact the limited scope of some of the examples used in this paper. For example, it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide examples for every aspect of postmodernism and modernity. To be clear, the Lady Gaga example does not address every aspect of postmodernism.

ENDNOTES

1. The song samples chosen are not all new. Older songs can be integrated into the course, although it is recommended that at least some newer popular music be used. There is also value in using a variety of music that may appeal to diverse student interest. Students who are unfamiliar with a particular song will only expand their cultural awareness through this process. The use of one musical genre such as the progressive rock use by Ahlqvist is not recommended.
2. Ideally students will have been introduced to the theory through prior reading. Introducing theory in this way may coax students to read more and more carefully.
3. The instructor should be careful not to reinforce stereotypes that may unfairly denigrate a particular group, community, or state. The existence and persistence of these stereotypes however, can and should be discussed.

APPENDIX

Theory/Theorist	Song	Artist
Functionalism	"Don't worry about the government"	Talking Heads
Conflict Theory	"Take the Power Back"	Rage Against the Machine
Symbolic Interaction	"Meat is Murder"	The Smiths
Postmodernism	"Born this Way"	Lady Gaga
	"No Future"	The Sex Pistols
Baudrillard	"Fake Plastic Trees"	Radiohead
Globalization/Neo-Liberalism	"Globalization (scene of the crime)"	Dead Prez featuring Mumia
Foucault (Panopticon)	"I'm Being Watched by the CIA"	Anti Flag
Modernity	"Fitter Happier"	Radiohead
Toennies (Gemeinschaft)	"Okie from Muskogee"	Merle Haggard
Veblen (Conspicuous Consumption)	"Royals"	Lorde
Marcuse (One-Dimensional Man)	"She Watch Channel Zero"	Public Enemy
	"Bullet in the Head"	Rage Against the Machine
Ethnomethodology	"No"	Vivian Girls
Feminist Theory	"FYR"	Le Tigre

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AUTHOR BIOS:

Kenneth R. Culton is Associate Professor and Chair of Sociology at Niagara University. His interests include deviance, social movements, music, and youth culture. He teaches a course called Youth/Music/Subculture where students are encouraged to explore various music and non-music subcultures and consider the relationship between marginalized people and the perceived mainstream. He continues to look for ways to incorporate popular culture when teaching sociology.

José A. Muñoz is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at California State University, San Bernardino. He received his PhD in Sociology from the State University of New York at Stony Brook. José's research and teaching areas include social movements, immigration, globalization, qualitative research, and sociological theory. He has authored papers in the *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, *Social Movement Studies*, the *International Review of Modern Sociology*, *Sociology Compass*, *Migration and Development*, and the *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*. As part of José's current interests in expanding into the area of evaluation research, he was selected for the first cohort of The Annie E. Casey Foundation Leaders in Equitable Evaluation and Diversity (LEEAD) program. <http://joseamunoz.weebly.com>

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A Framework for Using Popular Music Videos to Teach Media Literacy

Jordan M. McClain

Drexel University

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

mcclain@drexel.edu

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the use of popular music videos as a tool for teaching media literacy. First, the article addresses the importance of music videos as popular culture, what other music video research has examined, and what features make music videos a good fit for in-class work investigating media and popular culture. Then the article details a single-class activity for introducing and teaching media literacy through the use of music videos. To achieve this objective, the article also proposes a set of original music video-specific discussion questions. Finally, a particular music video is considered to illustrate possible results of this activity and the broader issues that may arise from class discussion.

KEYWORDS:

Communication, Media, Media Studies, Popular Culture, Pedagogy, New Media, Digital Media, Media Literacy, Media Education, Music Videos

Although popular music videos have long been criticized for their superficiality, fast edits, and sensational content, features like these help make the videos an excellent teaching tool, effective for getting students' attention and exploring broad issues. Many educators may be skeptical about or may have never thought about the benefits of using music videos in the classroom—thus the shortage of research on this approach. Cayari wrote about students creating music videos in order to learn music and technology skills. Maskell discussed the use of music videos for teaching English, saying the content has “huge potential for use across the entire English curriculum” (54). There is still, however, much to uncover about the myriad possible uses of music videos as a pedagogical instrument.

With a focus on popular music videos, this essay discusses their importance, describes an activity using them to teach media literacy skills, offers some new music video-specific ideas for introductory media literacy exercises, and shares example results of the activity. This information may appeal to a wide range of educators, especially media and popular culture scholars teaching undergraduate college courses such as Media and Society, Media Literacy, or Introduction to Popular Culture.

Although the pedagogical value of music videos remains formally under-recognized, many have thoroughly established why music videos are an important and potent way to learn about life around the globe. “Music television deserves serious attention from students of popular culture” (Goodwin and Grossberg ix), proclaimed the introduction of *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*, the influential collection edited by Frith, Goodwin, and Grossberg. Supporting this call to study music videos, Austerlitz saw them as a “fascinating oddity” (1) and a “compelling marker of cultural history” (1). He concluded that the music video’s “triumphs render it a subject worthy of deeper study and attention” (1). In summarizing the state of music video research and demonstrating why they are more than just entertainment, Straw wrote, “music videos are increasingly seen as elements within complex assemblages of image and sound that circulate the world and are recombined within a variety of diasporic media, from satellite television networks through DVD and Internet video clip sites” (3176).

Consideration of certain music video research trends indicates their diverse potential. One major trend adopts a media effects perspective and examines how music videos influence the ways audiences think and behave, especially younger groups like adolescents, teens, or college students. Studies have looked at music video effects in terms of sex, such as how kids imitate the content (Ey and Cupit), how they sext (Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, and Walrave), and what their attitudes are toward sex (Aubrey, Hopper, and Mbure; Beentjes and Konig; Kistler and Lee; Zhang, Miller, and Harrison). Others have researched music videos' effects on perceptions of rape (Burgess and Burpo; Sprankle, End, and Bretz). There is also much work on the influence of music videos on how people think about gender-specific ideas related to misogyny (van Oosten, Peter, and Valkenburg) or bodily self-perception (Mischner et al.).

Overlapping with work that emphasizes effects, there is a trend of research interested in representational patterns in music videos. Gender often emerges as a main focal point, such as Wallis's content analysis of differences in gender displays. Many have also tied race to genre, with rap being a dominant line of inquiry (Balaji; Conrad, Dixon, and Zhang; Zhang, Dixon, and Conrad). Overall, work on representation has spanned topics like sexual objectification (Aubrey and Frisby; Frisby and Aubrey), sexuality (Turner), and violence (Aikat; Smith and Boyson; Thaller and Messing).

Such trends show the utility of music videos in media research, popular culture studies, and beyond. In addition, music videos are characterized by a combination of features that make them an ideal fit for in-class activities about media and popular culture:

1. They are conventionally short, compared to a full movie or television episode.
2. They are often familiar, which benefits group discussion because many students bring background knowledge.

3. They are common online, which makes it simple for instructors to find multiple good examples.
4. They are easy to access, such as the free official content available on video-sharing sites like YouTube or hosting services like Vevo.
5. They are often controversial, working as a compelling catalyst for critical discussion and thus able to help students identify important issues, then articulate their views on social or political matters.
6. They are commonly imitated on the Web, as evidenced by remakes, parodies, satires, and mash-ups that have become a common way for lovers and haters—including amateurs, professionals, and people in between—to express themselves online.¹
7. They are popular culture, as a collective form and as individual artifacts, which gives them instant student appeal and significance as a teaching tool.

ACTIVITY: POPULAR MUSIC VIDEOS AND MEDIA LITERACY

The following activity is a productive way to use music videos to introduce and teach media literacy. This exercise is intended to occur in class and requires the instructor's use of an Internet-connected device that can play music videos viewable by the whole class at once (e.g., via projector or on a large monitor). Objectives include these:

1. The exercise will (A) strategically use music videos as a teaching tool, (B) demonstrate the importance of critical thinking about music videos, and (C) demonstrate the importance of critical thinking about popular culture.
2. Students will (A) strengthen media literacy skills and (B) increase comprehension of popular music videos as a significant form of entertainment media.

Preparation: Prior to class, carefully select a popular music video accessible online and useful as a teaching tool. Billboard charts and YouTube's "Popular on YouTube" section are helpful starting points. The instructor should select something that will resonate with students; this can be based on recency or the interests and personalities of the class. I suggest watching the video many times before class. It is also essential to research the video's production background and popular reception. Immediately before class begins, it is smart to prepare the music video for easy start-up and test all necessary technology—video connection, audio levels, video start function, video end point.

Execution: Once class begins, start the activity by announcing its order (i.e., discuss media literacy, watch music video, analyze video alone and then together) and expected outcomes (i.e., enhance media literacy comprehension and skills).

PART 1: INTRODUCE MEDIA LITERACY AND MUSIC VIDEO-SPECIFIC FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

First, I explain media literacy and the following five key questions of media literacy, using visual aids like PowerPoint slides and the Center for Media Literacy's website, medialit.org:

1. Authorship: "Who created this message?"
2. Format: "What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?"
3. Audience: "How might different people understand this message differently than me?"
4. Content: "What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?"
5. Purpose: "Why is this message being sent?"

As justified in the rationale above, we then briefly discuss why music videos are media content worthy of critical thought.

Next, to successfully analyze popular music videos and expand on the preexisting five key questions of media literacy, I propose the following set of original follow-up questions that are music video-specific—four follow-ups for each of the main questions—to help prompt critical thought and advance media literacy about popular music videos:

1. Authorship: “Who created this message?”
 - a. Who is explicitly identified as a creator?
 - b. Who created the song?
 - c. Who created the music video?
 - d. What are some major components of the music video that people created?
2. Format: “What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?”
 - a. What techniques are used in the music?
 - b. What techniques are used in the music video?
 - c. How does this music video seem influenced by popular culture?
 - d. How has this music video seemingly influenced popular culture?
3. Audience: “How might different people understand this message differently than me?”
 - a. Who do you think are some target audiences for this music video?
 - b. What components of the music video indicate its target audience?
 - c. What parts of the music video seem open to interpretation?
 - d. What parts of the music video seem controversial? To whom?
4. Content: “What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?”
 - a. How does the music video convey this?
 - b. How do you think this relates to the music video’s creators?
 - c. How do you think this relates to the music video’s target audience?
 - d. What may have caused these representations and omissions?
5. Purpose: “Why is this message being sent?”
 - a. Why was this music created?
 - b. Why was the music video created?
 - c. Why was the music video created for this format? (I.e., cable television, the Web, DVD, etc.)
 - d. Who would benefit from the music video’s popularity?

PART 2: WATCH A MUSIC VIDEO

After focusing on media literacy questions, introduce the music video by identifying the song and performer. I find it useful to informally survey how many students know the song or artist and how many *like* the song or artist. It is crucial to establish the significance of studying this artifact. For instance, instructors should cite facts about awards the artist or song has won, sales information like albums or singles sold, rankings from Billboard/Nielsen chart data, concert grosses, YouTube views, and social media metrics (e.g., how many likes or followers an artist has online). It is best also to show students visuals like a Twitter feed or Billboard.com article to support those claims. This will help students recognize the significance of putting popular culture under the microscope—this is not just a song but a social phenomenon that deserves to be studied, and the class is learning a system for accomplishing that.

Here it is helpful to notify students that after watching the video once, they will need to answer and discuss the five media literacy questions and music video-specific follow-ups. Thus, as they watch, students should think about answers to the questions, which they may wish to quickly review before watching the

video at this point.

PART 3: PRACTICE MEDIA LITERACY SKILLS BY DISCUSSING THE MUSIC VIDEO

Solo: After watching the video, students should individually write answers to each media literacy question and the follow-ups. When dealing with time constraints for this in-class activity, I advise students to focus on answers that come easiest, instead of straining to complete all questions (i.e., quality over quantity). This is a good time to encourage optional Internet use for those with enabled devices. Answers are possible with only a pencil and paper, but Web-based research will probably strengthen responses.

Small groups: After the solo work, students form pairs or triads and share their findings with each other. They should consider what they learned from peers to expand their answer list and prepare for a full-class discussion.

As a class: After the small group work, reconvene as a class and watch the video for a second and final time. This provides a chance to see more, helps solidify what students learned so far, and refreshes memories for the following discussion.

I then lead a Q&A through each of the five key media literacy questions and follow-ups. Instructors should seek many answers to each question, solicit like and unlike observations across the group, and play devil's advocate to help students form their opinions.

ACTIVITY RESULTS

This activity results in valuable dialogues, which will vary based on the video(s) examined. One highly recommended music video to choose for this activity is Katy Perry's 2013 hit, "Roar" (Lipshutz; Perry, "Katy Perry – Roar")². Using this video would give the instructor a chance to talk about Perry's many Grammy nominations, MTV Awards, Nickelodeon Kids' Choice Awards, and Guinness World Records. The instructor could also discuss her remarkable billion-plus views that place this song in the top ten most-viewed YouTube and Vevo videos (Jang; Lane; "Vevo Top Videos") and made Perry "the first artist to ever have two videos with over 1 Billion [*sic*] views" ("Katy Perry – Vevo"; "Roar10xCertified"). Students respond well to these kinds of arguments for a video's significance and facts like Perry's status as the most-followed Twitter user—with over 75 million followers, she ranks above people like Justin Bieber and President Obama (Perry, "Tweets"; "Twitter Top 100").

Discussing Perry's "Roar" video would likely cause students to answer the media literacy questions and follow-ups in ways that lead to fascinating conversations about the major media literacy concepts. "Authorship" would relate to the song being co-written by a team of professional hit makers including Max Martin, Dr. Luke, and Bonnie McKee (Hampp; Seabrook). "Format" would connect to sexualization, familiar pop song ingredients, and the use of visual effects. "Audience" would lead to concerns about young fans, PETA's objections to the video's use of animals (Boardman; Palmer), or the video's twist ending. "Content" would tie to portrayals of selfies, makeup use, and heterosexuality or sexual orientation. "Purpose" would relate to product sales, promotional culture, the modern music industry, free YouTube content, conspicuous use of Nokia merchandise, and celebrity branding.

This kind of popular music video analysis, based on the five key media literacy questions and follow-ups, enables discussion of many broad issues. In particular, this includes:

1. How race, class, age, and ability are represented in music videos.
2. How gender, sex, sexuality, and sexism are treated in music videos.
3. How beauty norms are reflected in music videos; how this impacts body image, self-esteem, or eating disorders outside music videos.

4. How celebrities appear in music videos; how musicians are positioned as celebrities in music videos.
5. What music videos tell us about censorship, evolving moral standards, political correctness, and cultural taboos.
6. How product placement shapes music videos.
7. How genre affects music videos.
8. How new and digital media impact music videos.

By using this activity, I have found that students thoroughly enjoy practicing and developing critical thinking skills through the study of everyday media and popular culture. The classroom becomes a space where fun and learning can logically and productively intersect. Students become more consistently engaged with class topics and discussions, searching for such intersection. Their media literacy skills improve— instantaneously and long-term—through the type of practice and collaborative critique that this exercise facilitates. As a result, students are more sensitive, informed, and skilled critical consumers of entertainment media.

This essay expands on general media literacy principles and produces original music video-specific questions, enabling systematic use of music videos as effective resources for teaching media literacy and critical thinking about media and popular culture. The five key media literacy questions are a valuable framework for studying popular music videos and exploring the broader issues they raise. Without the media literacy framework, this exercise might allow only surface-level scrutiny. Using the media literacy foundation strengthens, deepens, and formalizes this learning process, enhancing student comprehension, analysis, and evaluation of popular music videos as important media content.

The in-class activity described in this essay is ideal for undergraduate courses, but can be adapted by prefacing the work with level-appropriate lectures about media and popular culture for a variety of potential student audiences, such as tweens, pre-college teens, or graduate students. One alternative to the in-class activity is to remake it as a written test, which would benefit from a rubric used to grade answers. For example, instructors may choose to teach the five key media literacy questions first, then, on the same or a different day, show a music video and require students to answer the five questions and music video-specific follow-ups as a test of knowledge and skills. Other possibilities include a student presentation (individuals or groups pick a modern video, argue for its significance, analyze its content using the music video-specific follow-ups, and consider the implications); a reflection paper (students address the extent to which media literacy about music videos will impact how they think about such entertainment); or a self-produced video essay (students use the media literacy questions and music video-specific follow-ups as prompts for a prepared, recorded oral critique of a popular music video; bonus points to those who share their video essay on YouTube).

Popular music videos have many educational uses, which span disciplines. These videos are excellent instruments, effective for getting students' attention, and helpful for teaching about many complex and meaningful concepts. Educators should therefore embrace and experiment with music videos as a powerful teaching tool.

NOTES

1. By way of illustration, consider the many humorous takeoffs on The Black Eyed Peas song, "My Humps," which inspired popular online videos by alt-rock celebrity Alanis Morissette, gender-role-defying electronic musician Peaches, and pre-teen remix video YouTube-star MattyBRaps.
2. Here are some other recommended popular music videos that work well for this activity: Michael Jackson, "Thriller"; Madonna, "Erotica"; Shania Twain, "Man! I Feel Like a Woman!"; One Direction, "What Makes You Beautiful"; Robin Thicke, "Blurred Lines"; Pharrell Williams, "Happy"; Taylor Swift, "Shake it Off"; Drake, "Hotline Bling."

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AUTHOR BIO:

Dr. Jordan M. McClain is Assistant Teaching Professor of Communication at Drexel University in Philadelphia, PA. He enjoys researching and teaching about framing in music journalism, celebrity, the intersection of television and music culture, and consumer culture. For the Mid-Atlantic Popular & American Culture Association (MAPACA) he serves on the executive board, as Music area co-chair, and as Journalism and News Media area chair. For the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association (PCA/ACA), he chairs the Professional Development area.

Social media:

Academia.edu: <https://drexel.academia.edu/JordanMcClain>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/jordan-m-mcclain-72304163>

Twitter: https://twitter.com/j_mcclain

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Applications in the Classroom: The Potential of Scholarly Studies in Harry Potter in Higher Education

Anne Collins Smith

Stephen F. Austin State University
Nacogdoches, Texas, USA
acsmith@sfasu.edu

Of what use is a book about the Harry Potter series that was published before the series was complete? Having taught an upper-division college course on Philosophy in Harry Potter multiple times, I believe that the early publication of *Scholarly Studies in Harry Potter* actually increases its potential utility in the classroom. Not only does this book include thoughtful and insightful scholarship, but it is also pedagogically valuable. It raises thought-provoking topics that can serve as the basis for research papers and class presentations, as well as providing important resources for students to use while conducting such research.

Because the book was published before the last two books in the series, a number of the chapters lend themselves naturally to assignments in which students study the later books in the Potter series carefully to see whether the claims made by the chapter authors still remain valid. Students may write papers on *Half-Blood Prince* and *Deathly Hallows* (the sixth and seventh books of the Harry Potter series), addressing questions such as “Does vision feature significantly in Rowling’s ongoing description of the boundaries between the Muggle and Wizarding worlds?” (Chapter 3) or “Do Fred and George continue to enact the dual role assigned to the harlequin?” (Chapter 6). Moreover, the chapters address a wide range of topics and can be used for students from various disciplines and at various stages in their educational careers. For instance, some would be accessible to college freshmen and sophomores, while others would provide a challenging read for juniors and seniors. I find this diversity of levels especially appropriate because the students in my course on Harry Potter range from first-semester freshmen to last-semester seniors.

Most of the chapters that are especially conducive to student assignments are in the first portion of the book, “Serious Scholarship and Academic Hocus-Pocus.” The second portion of the book, “Conjuring Harry Potter into the Canon,” is less directly useful to students, but by offering lively examples of the ways in which the Potter series has been used in the college classroom, may provide inspiration to teachers who wish to use the Potter texts in their courses.

PART 1: SERIOUS SCHOLARSHIP AND ACADEMIC HOCUS-POCUS

In the opening chapter “Educating Harry Potter: A Muggle’s Perspective on Magic and Knowledge

in the Wizarding World of J.K. Rowling,” Sarah E. Maier raises a number of issues. Some topics, such as those addressing the physical space of Hogwarts in relation to themes such as the challenge of education and the architectonic of magical disciplines, are clearly and thoughtfully elaborated; others, however, are mentioned only briefly and not fully developed. For example, Maier claims that the Potter books exhibit what Tolkien called “arresting strangeness” but does not discuss it. She raises, but does not answer, ethical questions regarding dangerous knowledge in the Hogwarts curriculum. While the lack of development of these topics may seem like a weakness in the chapter, it offers an opening for student research. Students could write very interesting papers by choosing and unpacking one of these underdeveloped topics.

Ron W. Cooley’s chapter, “Harry Potter and the Temporal Prime Directive: Time Travel, Rule-Breaking, and Misapprehension in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*,” is well-focused and clearly structured. The transgressive elements of children’s literature, Cooley asserts, link such literature to civil disobedience. Drawing specifically on *Prisoner of Azkaban*, he argues that “the time travel rule . . . is a special kind of rule with a double function that generally illuminates the politics and ethics of rule-breaking in the Harry Potter books” (35). I have noticed that students in a class in which they learn to analyze a text such as Harry Potter are often eager to transfer their developing critical skills to other works they have enjoyed. This chapter’s discussion of civil disobedience provides an excellent lens for examining other texts, especially those in which heroic young characters combat an oppressive dystopia, from the Tripods to the Hunger Games.

Jonathan P. Lewis’s chapter “If Yeh Know Where to Go: Vision and Mapping in the Wizarding World” offers an excellent analysis that demonstrates subtle, careful reading. I shared some of Lewis’s insights with students in my Philosophy in Harry Potter class while traveling in London, and they were intrigued. For instance, the fact that one of the sites used for filming the Leaky Cauldron is now a shop selling eyeglasses dovetails beautifully with Lewis’s analysis of the significance of eyesight, both literal and symbolic, in the Wizarding World. Lewis also connects Rowling’s deliberate vagueness regarding the whereabouts of places like Hogwarts and Diagon Alley to the pleasure that readers derive from being able to imagine themselves somehow stumbling across or into these magical worlds. With its tight focus on vision, this chapter affords students a springboard to construct parallel research of their own to determine whether Rowling’s treatment of eyesight is unique or whether she imparts similar significance to other senses such as hearing.

Peggy Huey’s chapter “A Basilisk, a Phoenix, and a Philosopher’s Stone: Harry Potter’s Myths and Legends” is at once promising and frustrating. The piece opens with a suggestion of a rich theoretical backdrop in the analysis of mythological symbols by 20th-century poet Juan Eduardo Cirlot, but the analysis does not refer back to Cirlot’s framework. Instead, the author focuses discussion on several mythological figures that appear in the novels and offers a variety of historical background and commentary on each one. This chapter was of particular interest to me because I include a unit in my class on the ways in which Rowling adapts mythological elements. As part of this unit, I require each student to give a short class presentation on a chosen mythological object, creature, or person, addressing both its traditional origins and its use in the Harry Potter series. In addition to learning quite a bit about mythology and myth analysis, the students come to appreciate Rowling’s craft in transforming these elements for her own story-telling purposes. This chapter would provide students working on such projects with a valuable starting-point for their research.

In the next chapter, “Death and Rebirth: *Harry Potter* & the Mythology of the Phoenix,” Sarah Gibbons offers a detailed, well-researched, and penetrating reading of the multiple aspects of the phoenix that are woven through the Harry Potter text and that extend from the text into its commodification. I found this to be an especially strong and interesting chapter, as Gibbons interweaves her historical account of the mythology of the phoenix with an analysis of the commodification of the Potter series and its symbolism, arguing vigorously that culture and commerce not only co-exist but reinforce one another. This chapter would appeal to highly able students, particularly juniors and seniors. It offers a theoretical background that students can apply to

researching examples of commodification that have arisen since the chapter was written, such as the Warner Brothers Studio's "Wizarding Worlds" and the Pottermore site.

Rebecca Whitus Longster's chapter on the Weasley twins, "The Harlequin in the Weasley Twins: Jesters in the Court of Prince Harry (and J.K. Rowling)," investigates the role of Fred and George, not only in providing comic relief, but in working behind the scenes to provide unexpected assistance, traits that she links to the traditional role of the harlequin or court jester in works such as *King Lear*. The author develops her point thoroughly with numerous canonical examples, shedding new light on the significance of certain events. This chapter is less theory-intensive than some of the others and would be accessible to students earlier in their academic careers.

The final chapter in this section, Casey Cothran's "Lessons in Transfiguration: Allegories of Male Identity in Rowling's *Harry Potter* series," examines the manner in which Harry travels through adolescence toward manhood in books 1-5. She analyzes his relationship with Cho, his masculine role models both positive (such as Lupin and Dumbledore) and negative (such as Voldemort), and the ways in which Harry shows that he is tempted by the violent exercise of power. While there are numerous academic and popular books and articles available on feminism in *Harry Potter*, this chapter provides a rare and welcome focus on the study of masculinity, an important and often-overlooked aspect of gender studies. During the "Self and Other" unit of my *Harry Potter* course, I have found male students to be generally responsive to feminist philosophy and especially engaged by issues of masculinity. Students who wish to pursue this topic in more depth would find this chapter a useful resource.

PART 2: CONJURING HARRY POTTER INTO THE CANON

The six chapters in this section of the book examine the *Potter* series as literature, as the subject matter of college classes, and in relation to other literary works. With the exception of the first chapter in the section, they do not lend themselves naturally to student assignments. Rather, they are directed towards scholarly readers and college-level teachers.

Ernelle Fife's essay on "Reading J. K. Rowling Magically: Creating C.S. Lewis's 'Good Reader'" takes on the challenge of identifying the role that Rowling sets out for the reader as "hermeneutic narratee." She defines hermeneutic narratee as an active reader who fills in blanks, notices clues, and guesses the answers to built-in puzzles. Fife describes a number of instances in which re-reading—which young readers love to do—is rewarded by subtle clues that Rowling has woven into her text. The active reader can also recognize deeper spiritual allegories and meanings within the series. While the other chapters in this section are less conducive to use for class assignments than those in the previous section, Fife's thesis of the hermeneutic narratee, as well as her discussion of spiritual allegories, would be a rich topos for students to explore in the later books.

Beginning with the next essay, the book transitions to chapters that are less conducive to classroom applications, though useful as stand-alone readings. In "The Problem of Identity in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*," Leigh A. Neithardt asserts that Harry's travels parallel his internal journey of self-discovery, which may be helpful to both children and adults. To children, his journey can provide an exemplar, while adults can also extend their own self-discovery. Neithardt also discusses some parallels between the writing of E. Nesbit, especially her novel *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, and the *Harry Potter* series.

Steven Barfield's essay "Of Young Magicians and Growing Up: J.K. Rowling, Her Critics, and the 'Cultural Infantilism' Debate" explores a common criticism of the *Harry Potter* series. Barfield offers background on the term "cultural infantilism," the notion that contemporary adults are resisting intellectual and emotional maturity, and explains how the *Harry Potter* series has entered the discourse. Barfield argues that the *Potter* series has been vulnerable to this criticism because of the way in which Rowling blends genres and confounds

genre expectations, which can lead her books to be misjudged. He also argues that the concept of cultural infantilism itself rests on problematic definitions of the categories of adult and child. This latter discussion is frustratingly brief, but the former is thoughtful and well-developed and sheds light on the new place that Rowling has carved out for the Potter series.

The next two essays will be of particular interest to those who teach, or plan to teach, courses that include the Harry Potter series. In “High-Brow Harry Potter: J. K. Rowling’s Series as College-Level Literature,” Laura Baker Shearer offers inspiring examples of her use of the Harry Potter books to engage college students successfully. Class discussions and course assignments based on Harry Potter clearly demonstrate the students’ growing skills in literary analysis and criticism, skills that are transferable to later courses on figures such as Shakespeare. Shearer stops short of arguing that the Potter series belongs in the traditional literary canon, instead describing the series as a useful “gateway” to canon.

William Wandless also describes classroom experiences using Harry Potter in the provocative “Hogwarts vs. ‘The ‘Values’ Wasteland’: *Harry Potter* and the Formation of Character.” Wandless juxtaposes the Potter series with a text commonly used in composition courses, Charles’ Sykes’s “The ‘Values’ Wasteland.” While I found Wandless’s argument that the Potter series effectively depicts Harry as someone who is “ethically self-determined” in a manner that calls objective moral principles into question problematic, I found his insights into the psychological usefulness of a fictional work in exploring the basis of ethical decision-making highly valuable. As Wandless observes, a fictional milieu offers students an opportunity to debate ethical issues in a context that reduces the anxiety that can result from the discussion of real-world issues that hit too “close to home,” as well as the anxiety that can result when students feel that they are revealing too much of themselves in discussing real-world issues.

In the final chapter, “Metaphor and MetaFantasy: Questing for Literary Inheritance in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*,” Evelyn M. Perry explores Rowling’s acknowledged inheritance from classic British fantasy. The central portion of Perry’s article is an insightful unpacking of the legacy of T.H. White’s *Sword in the Stone* as found in Rowling’s *Sorcerer’s Stone*. Perry explores the complex pedagogy afforded each young hero and its fruition at each book’s climax, both in terms of the action portrayed in the story and in terms of the effect on the hero’s developing character.

In the future, I plan to use this book next time I teach the class on Harry Potter. Because the course focuses on the philosophy of Harry Potter, the texts that I currently require students to purchase are entirely philosophical. I appreciate, however, the wider range of disciplines and topics represented in this book, and I believe it offers valuable resources to students looking for engaging ideas for research projects. I would put this book on reserve and direct students toward it, perhaps even listing it as a recommended (though not required) book.

If I had never taught a course using the Harry Potter books before and were thinking about doing so, I would find this book highly affirming. The chapters that actually describe using Harry Potter in the classroom are geared toward English composition and literary analysis; college-level English instructors will find them especially useful.

AUTHOR BIO:

Anne Collins Smith is a Professor of Philosophy and Classical Studies at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. She enjoys teaching a course on Philosophy in Harry Potter and also uses excerpts from Peter Needham's superb translations of the Harry Potter books into Latin for the delectation and edification of her Latin students. She has published articles on Harry Potter as well as other popular-culture products such as *Star Trek*, *The Prisoner*, and *Tin Man*. She also co-edits the ethics textbook *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Moral Issues* and has co-written and translated graphic novels for children and young adults.

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Applications in the Classroom: Pop Culture and Ed Psychology: What I Learned from Larry David, Rick Grimes, and Hank Hill

Melissa Vosen Callens
North Dakota State University
Fargo, North Dakota, US
Amelissa.vosen@ndsu.edu

ABSTRACT

In teacher education courses, it is common to teach educational psychology concepts using case studies. Many publishers provide these case studies in textbooks and/or in ancillary materials, and there are many advantages to using them. For example, an instructor does not have to spend extra time finding or writing the case studies, both of which can be very time consuming. In addition, if students have the textbook, they have immediate access. One major disadvantage, however, is that students may find themselves uninterested and disengaged with the cases, depending on the students' interests and the cases. This paper argues that studying fictional characters in popular culture provides a fun and engaging alternative to textbook case studies. Most students enjoy talking about popular culture, and many already know a great deal about it. Some students might even consider themselves experts in popular culture.

What makes popular culture case studies not only fun, but also highly effective, is they are often hyperbolic, which is what ultimately makes that form of culture so funny/sad/engrossing in the first place. Because the examples are hyperbolic, students can easily identify the educational psychology concepts being studied. This paper explores three examples of how an instructor can use popular television to teach key educational psychology concepts. Specifically, this paper will examine Larry David's moral development in HBO's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, the characters' needs in AMC's *The Walking Dead*, and the father-son relationship in FOX's *King of the Hill*. Discussion and assignment ideas are also provided.

KEYWORDS:

Educational Psychology; *Curb Your Enthusiasm*; *The Walking Dead*; *King of the Hill*; Moral Development; Hierarchy of Needs; Discourse Communities, Abraham Maslow; Lawrence Kohlberg; James Paul Gee

Students can learn a lot from Larry David, Rick Grimes, and Hank Hill, and it is not just how to kill a herd of zombies with one bullet or how to successfully fight a citywide mandate on the installation of low-flow toilets. In fact, David, Grimes, and Hill are pretty good teachers. As David would say, “Pretty, pretty good.”

When working with future teachers, it can be helpful to illustrate different concepts in educational psychology and learning theory by using popular culture examples. Studying fictional characters protects the privacy of real individuals, and it provides a safe space for students to explore concepts like moral development, self-actualization, and Discourse communities. Most students also enjoy talking about and critically analyzing movies, television shows, and music. Rather than using the examples and case studies often found in textbooks, instructors can use examples in popular culture. Popular culture examples can provide entertaining and “fun” examples of some very complex theories.

Popular culture also provides students with a topic they may already know a lot about. In 2009, the Kaiser Foundation found that 8-18 year-olds were exposed to 10 hours and 45 minutes of media of all kinds during a typical day (Taylor 149). Instructors can use this exposure as a resource, a talking point, in their classrooms. Meg Callahan and Bronwen E. Low believe that popular culture encourages complex thinking because it “provides a site where students can experience competence at the same time that teachers provide appropriate challenges through careful support, reframing, and questioning” (57). Because of their familiarity with popular culture, students can feel confident entering the classroom discussion and extending the conversation. On a similar note, Greg Dimitriadis believes that the use of popular culture in education has decentered “the presumed and presumptive authority of the educator” because it uses the investments students already have in popular culture texts (26).

What makes popular culture examples not only fun, but also highly effective, is they are often hyperbolic. Hyperbolic examples are a perfect starting point for those just learning a concept or theory because when the concept is so exaggerated to elicit an emotional response from the audience, it makes it easier to identify. For example, much of Larry David’s morally corrupt behavior in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* is over-the-top—almost unbelievable. It is hard to imagine anyone acting that way in “real” life. His hyperbolic behavior provides a perfect example of Lawrence Kohlberg’s lowest level of moral development, a level not often seen in “real world” adults. In an educational psychology class, students could watch an episode of *Curb* to better understand this stage. Students could also watch several clips of *Curb* and debate exactly what level David’s character is in as he occasionally occupies other stages of Kohlberg’s moral development.

Instructors in a variety of fields can use popular culture examples; it is not limited to those who are teaching educational psychology courses. For example, in the healthcare professions, an instructor could ask students to dissect healthcare-related television shows like *ER* and *Grey’s Anatomy*. Students could evaluate the show to see how accurately the show portrays the care being provided. With the plethora of crime dramas on network television, criminal justice instructors could do the same; students could watch *Criminal Minds*, *Law and Order: SVU*, or *CSI* and examine the accuracy of an investigation. In addition, instructors could use clips of the shows to highlight some theories in criminology.

In this article, three popular culture examples are explored; educational psychology instructors can use these examples to teach key educational and learning theory concepts. For example, in addition to using *Curb Your Enthusiasm* to discuss Kohlberg’s moral development theory, instructors can use *The Walking Dead* to explain Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Finally, this article explores how instructors can use *King of the Hill* to explore father-son relationships through the lens of James Paul Gee’s Discourse communities.

CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM AND KOHLBERG’S MORAL DEVELOPMENT

Throughout eight seasons of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Larry David has been confronted with several

moral dilemmas, all of which play out in a hilarious 30-minute sequence of events. His decisions, while mostly self-serving, can be categorized using Kohlberg's three levels and six sub-stages of moral development. Many of David's choices, unsurprisingly to avid fans, could be described as examples of Kohlberg's first level, second stage of moral development, a stage typically occupied by small children and characterized by a "looking out for number one" attitude.

Kohlberg's three levels, preconventional, conventional, and postconventional, are an expansion of Jean Piaget's theory of moral reasoning and are typically covered in introductory educational psychology courses. In Kohlberg's preconventional level, physical consequences often determine the "goodness or badness" of any given situation. Most people at this level, mostly children, are concerned with only their own needs and the needs of others if it also benefits their own agenda (Slavin 54). More often than not, we see David in this stage. A perfect example to provide to students is in season five, episode five when David refuses to donate a kidney to his friend Richard Lewis because Lewis, David justifies, is really more of an acquaintance ("Lewis Needs a Kidney"). In reality, the viewer knows that Richard is much more than an acquaintance; David is thinking only of his own health. Students would not have to be avid watchers of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* to recognize this.

David yo-yos through Kohlberg's three levels throughout the series, and because of this, instructors can use a variety of episodes of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* to illustrate Kohlberg's theory from the first to the last stage. In one particular episode in season four, "The Car Pool Lane," David exhibits moral reasoning from each of Kohlberg's levels and would be a great case study for students. After a close analysis of the episode, students should be able to identify all stages of Kohlberg's moral development theory.

After weaseling out of jury duty, a prime example of Kohlberg's pre-conventional stage, later in "The Car Pool Lane" episode, David moves to the conventional stage, as he picks up a hooker because he wants to use the carpool lane. In the conventional level, people are concerned with pleasing others and maintaining social order/obeying the law (Slavin 54). While picking up a hooker seems like another selfish move, David is adamant that he will not use the carpool lane, as he explains to his friend Jeff, unless he has another person in the car. At least in this case, rules are rules. He even tells an acquaintance, "I didn't pick her up for sex; I actually picked her up so I could use the diamond lane" ("The Car Pool Lane").

Viewers see David occupy this stage in other episodes as well. In season three, for example, David reluctantly attempts to create a real-life manger scene around Christmas time, despite being Jewish, to please his in-laws after an earlier faux pas. In this case, his actions are all in the name of keeping the peace ("Mary, Joseph and Larry"). Because all of these examples are so hyperbolic, students should be able to better understand Kohlberg's stages.

Finally, in "The Car Pool Lane," viewers see a glimpse of David's compassion, as he moves into the post-conventional stage. People in this stage, unlike the conventional stage, believe that laws can be rewritten and changed for the good of society; in addition, decisions made by people in this stage are often driven by self-chosen principles or their conscience (Slavin 54). In the postconventional stage, people define their values by ethical principles they have chosen to follow.

For example, Larry approaches a drug dealer to obtain medical marijuana for his ailing father. He tells his father, whose vision is so deteriorated he can no longer complete crossword puzzles or watch television, "I have no idea how I will get it, but I will." He reasons that even though it is illegal (neither he nor his father have a California medical marijuana card), it is the right thing to do because it might help his father and ease his suffering. The awkward exchange between David and the drug dealer makes one thing clear: David is not accustomed to buying *any* sort of illegal substance.

Drug Dealer: OK, now walk away!

David: Any particular direction?

Drug Dealer: Just walk!

David: OK.

(He walks away)

Drug Dealer: Jesus Christ.

(Larry comes back and walks by him the opposite direction)

Larry: I actually have to go this way.

David's reasoning behind buying medical marijuana is a great example of the postconventional stage for students.

This is not to say that David's post-conventional intentions do not go awry. The marijuana purchased, unbeknownst to David, ends up with an acquaintance, an acquaintance that is quickly mauled by drug-sniffing dogs at the airport. As he stands before the judge who dismissed him from jury duty, David must ultimately decide if he should admit the drugs are his. This is clearly a difficult situation for David. What level is David in when he accepts the drugs are his? This is a great question for instructors to ask students. Instructors could require students to free write a response, requiring students to cite theory to support their answer, or they could ask students to reach a consensus as a group.

In HBO's hit comedy, protagonist Larry David is presented with an onslaught of moral dilemmas in each episode. While often criticized as egotistical and narcissistic, David offers several glimpses into a much kinder, more moral, version of himself. Kohlberg's theory of moral development provides students a theoretical framework to analyze and understand David's behavior and decisions. After analyzing David's behavior in one episode as a class, students could analyze his behavior in another episode individually or in groups. If an instructor does not want to use *Curb*, he/she could use *Family Guy* or *The Simpsons*. Both cartoons have many episodes in which the morality of a character is called into question.

THE WALKING DEAD AND MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

Another common human development theory discussed in introductory educational psychology courses is Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow describes the different types of needs all human beings have by using a triangle; according to Maslow, the needs at the base of the triangle must be secured in order to move to the next tier. The triangle is as follows: physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization (Maslow 372-82). In order for students to understand the tiers, examples often need to be provided.

AMC's hit television series, *The Walking Dead*, provides an excellent lens in which to examine this theory. *The Walking Dead* follows a group of humans as they try to survive the walker apocalypse and is widely popular. According to *Time*, the season five premiere had 17.3 million viewers without counting DVR recordings and encores (which brought its viewership up to 28 million last season) (Poniewozik). The show set a viewing record, and it is likely many students would be excited to discuss it in class.

Because of the apocalyptic setting, viewers see characters continually fighting for the most basic of needs. In many episodes, however, we see the main characters bounce from tier to tier. To help students understand Maslow's hierarchy, instructors could ask students to watch one episode, or even part of an episode, and determine which stage each character is in. In a good percentage of the episodes, characters work endlessly and tirelessly securing physiological needs like food, water, and air. It is a primary focus of the show. According to Maslow, "For the man that is extremely and dangerously hungry, no other interests exist but food" (374). We see this extreme desperation in season five when the main characters come across another group of people who have resorted to cannibalism ("Strangers").

After physiological needs are met, a person's focus turns to safety needs, needs that focus on security of the body, mental health, and resources (Maslow 376). For example, during much of season three and part of

season four, this is where one could describe Rick, the once strong and capable leader of the group. In season four, the group secures a former prison, seemingly has an adequate water supply, and has started to grow their own food. For many characters, this is the first time since the apocalypse that their physiological and safety needs are met. Rick, however, is reeling from the loss of his wife Lori (“Home”). Despite the physical security the prison provides and the water and food available, he struggles to cope with her death. At times, he even sees Lori, and it is clear that his mental health is not what it should be. Because of his mental illness, he is unable to move past the security stage in Maslow’s triangle. Students would likely be able to see how mental health issues can, without adequate care and help, prevent a person from moving up the triangle, a point often made by Maslow.

The next tier, once security needs are met, is love and belonging (Maslow 380). It is in this stage that humans can focus on friendship and intimacy. For most of characters at the start of season four, they feel secure, and with security, there is routine. Characters such as Glen and Maggie are likely in the love and belonging stage. Throughout the show, viewers see their bond form, moving beyond sex (physiological stage) to intimacy (love and belonging stage), particularly once the prison area is secured. They consider marriage and what their future looks like together (“The Sorrowful Life”). An instructor, for example, could show the scene in which Glen proposes to Maggie in the prison yard. It is a reciprocal relationship based on “both giving *and* receiving love” (Maslow 381).

In season two, Herschel provides shelter and care for the group; he becomes a caregiver of sorts. He did not, however, hesitate to ask the group to leave when he felt his own way of life and his physiological needs might be threatened. As soon as he realized Rick and his group viewed the walkers differently, that they wanted to kill them, he wanted Rick and the group gone. He only remained with the group, however, when walkers threatened the farm. An instructor could show a clip when Herschel asks the group to leave (“Pretty Much Dead Already”).

After the love and belonging stage, the next stage is esteem (Maslow 381). Esteem needs focus on respect and building and gaining confidence: respect for others, respect and confidence in oneself. Daryl, at this point in the series, season five, could be in this stage. Some might argue this point, but Daryl is forging relationships with other group members and gaining confidence in his own abilities to lead. In this stage, Maslow argues that “desire for strength, for achievement, for adequacy, for confidence in the face of the world, and for independence and freedom” is paramount (Maslow 381). At one point, Carol tells Daryl, “Give the stranger sanctuary, keep people fed, you’re gonna have to learn to live with the love (“30 Days Without an Accident”). With Rick grieving his wife in season four, Daryl takes on a more prominent leadership role in the group. More importantly, he is learning to value and respect himself—something that he has struggled with because of past abuse from his brother Merle and their father.

The final stage is self-actualization (Maslow 382). There are very few characters in *The Walking Dead* that have achieved such a status, if any, making it an interesting talking point for students. Is self-actualization possible in the apocalypse? The key to self-actualization is simply an acceptance of oneself and of the situation. Carol consistently, throughout season four, makes difficult choices, but choices that reflect her awareness of the situation and her desire to protect herself and the group. After the death of her abusive husband, she has come into her own, as a leader in her own right. According to Maslow, “What a man *can* be, he *must* be” (383). Carol is meant to lead.

It is worth noting that *The Walking Dead* may not be appropriate for *all* classrooms. Unlike *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, it is hard to tease out some of these concepts by watching only one short clip. Generally speaking, it is more difficult to follow if one is not an avid fan. Students would likely have to watch longer scenes, and possibly full episodes, in order to understand how Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs can be applied to the show. In addition, *The Walking Dead* can be very gory, so it would be important to warn students about the violence

ahead of time. There are, however, some shorter, violence-free clips available (like the ones noted above). In addition, for example, instructors could show the scene in which Daryl and Beth are talking about Daryl's abusive childhood in season four, episode 12. This scene is free of violence, and it provides a starting point for discussing how physiological and safety needs are important in order to achieve esteem and self-actualization.

The Walking Dead provides a great case study for students. Stages for each of the characters, at many points in the series, are not necessarily cut-and-dried. Students could argue for one tier or another, which makes this show perfect for understanding this theory. If an instructor did not want to use *The Walking Dead*, he/she could use the television series *Lost* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as the vampire development in *Buffy* mirrors Maslow's hierarchy.

KING OF THE HILL AND DISCOURSE COMMUNITIES

For thirteen years, Mike Judge's *King of the Hill* was a staple of FOX's Sunday night animation domination line-up, rivaling Matt Groening's *The Simpsons* in popularity. Part of the show's appeal was that it was easy to relate to the characters, which makes it an excellent cartoon to engage students in classroom discussion. Unlike four-fingered, yellow-as-the-sun, Homer Simpson, Hank Hill looks—and acts—like most t-shirt-wearing-middle-class dads in America. The same could be said for mother Peggy, son Bobby, and niece LuAnn.

Throughout thirteen seasons of *King of the Hill*, viewers watch Hank struggle to build a relationship with Bobby, and this struggle is often the centerpiece of each episode. At its simplest, the conflict in Hank and Bobby's relationship is a conflict of their interests. Hank enjoys what is often thought of as traditional masculine activities: watching sports, working with power tools, and drinking beers with the neighbors. On the other hand, Bobby is very comfortable indoors with his mother Peggy, exploring and honing his interests in comedy, magic, and bubble baths.

For the most part, Bobby is happy with himself and comfortable with these differences, but these differences, and the fallout from these differences, make a fascinating case study. At its core, *King of the Hill* is a story about Hank and his troubles and triumphs as he awkwardly, yet often successfully, navigates multiple Discourses, all in the attempt to build a relationship with his son.

Linguist James Paul Gee argues that there are "instructions on how to act, talk, and often write" for anygiven Discourse (526). In Gee's work, discourse refers to "connected stretches of language" (p. 526). When combined with other social practices (words, acts, values, beliefs, etc.), Gee calls these connected stretches of language Discourse, with a capital "D." This can often be a difficult concept for introductory students to understand. *King of the Hill*, however, provides a platform to explain and explore this concept.

Each Discourse has an identity kit, and with that kit, there are certain expectations or guidelines on how to act. Growing up in the Southern United States and raised by a very strict and sexist father, Hank's primary Discourse, his initial Discourse used to make sense of the world, is a Discourse that supports very traditional family and gender roles. In one episode, after Hank expresses his admiration and love for his male boss, Hank's veteran father, Cotton, cringes. Cotton is disgusted by Hank's openness and views Hank's behavior as feminine and thus unacceptable. This scene provides students with the opportunity to reflect on their own primary Discourses and any conflict they have experienced.

Bobby, a witness to Hank and Cotton's conflict, naively explains the situation to his mother, "Why did Dad have to act like a woman in front of Grandpa? Grandpa hates women" ("The Father, the Son, and J.C."). The ridicule from his father, and Bobby's subsequent reaction, forces Hank to confront the values with which he was raised. By expressing his love publically, he has gone against the expectations of his father and his Discourse community. As Gee argues, "Failing to fully display an identity is a tantamount to announcing

you don't have that identity; that at best you're a pretender or a beginner" (525). It is not just ridiculing Hank faces. He also faces possible exile from the community. Students may have had similar experiences, and this episode would give them the opportunity to reflect on this. Because of the sensitive nature of this topic, asking students to write individually on this topic first is generally best. Teacher education students could also discuss on what happens to the students they will be teaching when the students' primary Discourse communities conflict with the Discourse communities found in schools.

Another example of conflict instructors could use is in the eighth episode of the series. In this episode, Cotton attends Bobby's birthday party where he begins teaching Bobby some alarming habits. Initially, it is hard for Hank to intervene, but after Cotton takes Bobby birthday shopping for prostitutes, Hank intercedes and questions his father. While difficult, Hank knows it is the right thing to do. A young boy shopping for prostitutes is far from acceptable—even in Hank's more traditional primary Discourse community. Because Cotton is so extreme in his actions in this particular situation, it is clearly easier for Hank to say something. Here students could discuss times they have gone against their primary Discourse community because of their own moral convictions, much like Hank did.

Secondary Discourses can also be difficult for students to understand. According to Gee, Secondary Discourses are Discourses that we interact with and acquire outside of the home and are associated with "institutions in the public sphere, beyond the family and immediate kin and peer group" (Gee 527). While there may be some overlap between a person's primary Discourse and secondary Discourses, there can be a schism between them as well. When this is the case, tension and conflict can ensue.

In another episode that highlights the conflict between primary and secondary Discourses, Bobby asks to go to theater camp. Hank tells Bobby he would rather have him work with him instead of going to camp. While Bobby finds Hank's work tedious and boring, he does find amusement in using the store's propane accessories as comedy props. Although initially irritated, after seeing the jovial reaction of his boss, Hank encourages Bobby to write more skits and put together an entire comedy team called the Propaniacs ("Meet the Propaniacs"). In order to develop routines, Bobby must learn more about propane, and in the process, Hank learns more about comedy. He also begins to appreciate Bobby's talents. This episode is an excellent example of *both* Bobby and Hank successfully navigating two Discourses and, in many ways, melding them together to create their own. Students can discuss the growth of Hank and Bobby's relationship.

This particular episode is also a good example of what Gee calls mushfake. Gee explains, "'Mushfake Discourse' means partial acquisition coupled with meta-knowledge and strategies to 'make do'" (533). Reflecting on the time they spent together, Hank tells Peggy, "Yup, those were some good times. Bobby tells me something about comedy, and then I'd teach him a little bit about propane" ("Meet the Propaniacs"). Bobby's growing knowledge of propane helps him to gain access to Hank's Discourse community and vice versa. They both were able to mushfake. With his new knowledge, Bobby is able to gain acceptance. He is not only able to "make do" in the community, but also build his relationship with Hank, which is really what he has yearned for all along. This is not the only time this has happened, and students could work to find additional examples in the series.

For example, in a very appropriate series finale, Hank and Bobby finally find an activity they both love and enjoy: grilling. Over dinner, Bobby impresses Hank with his knowledge of cuts of beef. This is an appropriate end to the series because we finally see the Hill men engaging in an activity they mutually enjoy. Any of the clips mentioned above provide a starting point for discussion; in addition to these, there are many others that students could find. If an instructor did not want to use *King of the Hill*, he/she could use examples from *Mad Men* or *Community*.

Don Draper, the main character of *Mad Men*, adopted another man's life after the Korean War. Throughout the series, he struggles with his conflicting Discourse communities. Specifically, students could

examine how Don responds to the conflict that arises because of his primary and secondary Discourses. Does he successfully mushfake? In the television show *Community*, Jeff Winger, a suave lawyer, is forced to go back to community college to finish his bachelor's degree. His conflicting Discourse communities (lawyer and student) are often a centerpiece for conflict in the sitcom.

In this article, three examples of how educational psychology instructors can use popular television to teach key educational and learning theory concepts were provided. Instructors, however, across all disciplines can use popular culture examples to engage students. Film, television, and music are all great conversation starters. Not only can instructors use popular culture to illustrate different educational psychology concepts, but popular culture also can be used as a platform for classroom writing assignments and debates. There are many other in-class activities instructors can use in conjunction with popular culture.

- Students can watch a clip of a television show and can engage in a debate in regard to a character's behavior or situation.
- After providing students with examples, students can bring in their own clips to teach a course concept to the rest of the class. For example, one student might bring a clip from *Breaking Bad*; what stage is Walter White's moral development in season one?
- Students can write a letter, drawing on course concepts, from one character to another. What would Walter White say to his son at the end up *Breaking Bad*?
- For larger assignments, there are many different possibilities as well.
- Students can write a review of an episode of their choosing, citing course concepts for support.
- Students can create an individualized education plan for a fictitious character.
- Students can create fictitious Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, or Instagram accounts for certain characters. What would Carol tweet, for example, during season three of *The Walking Dead*?
- Students can work together, creating a class archive, by bookmarking different popular media examples in regard to a certain concept. Students can then compare and contrast examples from different sources. Moving beyond popular culture, students can then collect academic materials on each of the concepts.

The possibilities are endless. By starting with popular culture, instructors are providing a safe space for students to examine complex course concepts. Because many students are interested in popular culture outside of the classroom, talking about popular culture is not only fun, but also may encourage students who are more apprehensive to speak up because of their familiarity with and interest in popular culture.

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AUTHOR BIO:

Melissa Vosen Callens is currently an assistant professor of practice in instructional design and communication at North Dakota State University, Fargo. Her areas of research and teaching interest include Popular Culture and Online Education. Her writing can be found in *The Ultimate Walking Dead and Philosophy*, *English Journal*, *100 Entertainers Who Changed America: An Encyclopedia of Pop Culture*, and *A Sense of Community: Essays on the Television Series and Its Fandom*, among other publications.

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/melissa-vosen-callens-4119a224>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/mavcallens>

Facebook, Teaching and Learning Resource Page: <https://www.facebook.com/ahssteaching>

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A Pedagogical Journey: Albuquerque 2015

Laurence Raw

Baskent University

Ankara, Turkey

l_rawjlaurence@yahoo.com

The subject of pedagogy and popular culture has assumed increasing significance in academic circles, especially since the publication of Phil Benson's and Alice Chik's anthology *Popular Culture, Pedagogy and Teacher Education* (2014), a series of interventions discussing how popular culture can be implemented in a variety of teaching situations across the globe. The book offers valuable insights into how popular culture can inspire learners through materials drawn from everyday life but tends to avoid essential questions such as *what constitutes popular cultural material* (and how it differs from other textual forms) and *what learning outcomes might be accomplished* through its deployment in the secondary or tertiary classroom (Benson and Chik). Such questions are intrinsic to all efforts to improve pedagogical standards.

In February 2015, I attended several panels in the "Pedagogy and Popular Culture Section" of the 36th Annual Southwest Popular/American Culture Association (SWPACA) Conference in Albuquerque, with the intention of discovering some possible answers, as well as finding out more about the latest thinking on the topic. In the following paragraphs I offer brief summaries of the papers I found most exciting and how they cumulatively represented a quest for the pedagogical Holy Grail of what should be taught in the classroom and why. Based on the evidence of what I heard, I conclude by offering a brief theoretical framework focusing on how and why popular culture offers unique opportunities for educators and learners alike to experiment with alternative forms of learning.

In a panel on "Teaching with Film and Television," the independent scholar Bryanna Bynum offered some thoughts as to how *Downton Abbey* might help introduce lower level undergraduates to other cultures past and present. Although the series is in itself an historical (re-)construction, with its origins in earlier period dramas such as *Upstairs Downstairs*, it provides the impetus for a variety of activities designed to promote empathy: learners can rewrite the plots, undertake prediction exercises, or even role-play (if educators are brave enough to tolerate it!). Through such activities they develop abilities such as group negotiation and collaboration. Bynum's presentation seemed plausible enough but left me wondering whether such objectives could be fulfilled with other materials. Learners could equally well empathize with Shakespeare as *Downton Abbey*. With a neat sense of timing, Tiffany Scarola (Northwestern Oklahoma State University) offered a series of what she termed "unusual" approaches to pedagogy using *The Daily Show* and different social media. She could not have known that regular presenter Jon Stewart would have announced his retirement from the show the day before her presentation; the news rendered her arguments all the more up-to-the-minute, proving unquestionably that popular culture possesses a contemporaneity that is denied to other forms of material and

hence exerts an immediate appeal for learners.

After one panel, one of my questions had been partially answered: popular culture's sheer ordinariness renders it superficially attractive, especially for educators faced with the prospect of working with large classes and limited preparation time. Yet still Scarola's presentation left me with lingering questions; how can we create a "true scholarly environment," as she put it, using material which to the majority of educators might seem profoundly unscholarly? Do educators need to rethink their roles in the learning process? Jennifer Bankard (University of Southern California) tried to answer this question by drawing a distinction between different types of responses to popular cultural texts. Learners tended to react "personally" to a text on first viewing; it was only after educators had provided vital input that they could formulate a "truthful" response integrating theoretical concepts with informed analysis. Bankard asserted that the process of transformation from "personal" to "truthful" responses could only be accomplished through collaboration, but I was not so sure. Three days previously I had taught to a group of learners in a Texas institution, the majority of whom experienced difficulty in comprehending auteur theory and how (or whether) it should apply to their lives outside the academy. Although their educator had assigned them several basic texts, they admitted that such texts appeared "highbrow," in complete contrast to their quotidian way of speaking. Their "personal" response (that the texts were difficult) seemed irreconcilable with the "truthful" response expected from them by the educator. Bankard attributed this problem to some of the long-standing binaries (educator/ learner, theory/ practice, highbrow/ popular) that stand in the way of accomplishing successful learning outcomes.

Yet such comments do not offer much of a way forward for anyone interested in creating effective popular culture pedagogies. Perhaps we need to set aside the notion of a "proper scholarly environment" (whatever that means), and rather work towards a learning environment in which everyone – educators and learners alike – are treated as equals. Another panel on "The First-Year College Experience" offered various accounts of how educators addressed this issue. Kristine Larsen (Central Connecticut State University) proposed a series of extracurricular activities such as walking trips as well as in-class activities designed to forge classroom unity. Kate Huber (University of Central Oklahoma) advocated the introduction of classic satire (Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, for example) alongside popular cultural material to stimulate critical thinking and thereby transform learners from passive into active participants in the classroom event. Miriam Kushkaki (Arizona State University) begged to differ; she believed that learners could only refine their judgments through popular cultural texts – a point reiterated by Margaret Wintersole (Laredo Community College), who believed that the fear of failure needed to be overcome before an effective learning environment could be established. This, she believed, could be best accomplished through collaboration, giving learners the freedom to construct their own syllabi (in collaboration with educators).

All four presenters offered plausible accounts of their pedagogic experience, but overlooked the essential point of any learning exchange: what do those involved actually get out of it? It's all very well to claim that popular culture is accessible to learners' (and early career academics') daily lives, but that advantage does not really provide a justification for using this type of material in the classroom. Negotiation and collaboration are significant components of any learning experience, but they are not exclusive to popular culture pedagogy. They form a basic part of my junior year courses in "Introduction to English Literature" in the Department of Education at Başkent University, Ankara, Turkey. The term "critical thinking" is frequently cited as one of the major advantages of any form of humanities education, but I find it highly imprecise (critical thinking about what?). Perhaps the roundtable on "Popular Culture and Media" led by seven representatives of the University of Texas at San Antonio would offer answers to my questions. Drawing on a variety of sources such as *The Walking Dead* and *Megamind*, the presenters explained how popular cultures could be used to explore notions of postcolonialism, identity and participation, and thereby help learners acquire the kind of citizenship abilities intrinsic to their lives outside the educational institution. I was encouraged

by the way this panel drew a connection between popular cultural texts and tolerance, while claiming that learning takes place throughout one's life, not just in the academy. Even while watching a movie or chatting online, individuals might experience an "aha" moment. Popular culture pedagogy dissolves the (culturally constructed) boundaries between work and play, school and home, and thereby stimulates learners to become more mindful of themselves and their potential for intellectual development.

In the panel "Multimodality and Maker Culture" Vittorio Marone (also of the University of Texas at San Antonio) argued that we all experience moments of "silent-being," as we step out of our socially-constructed roles as educators, learners, parents, or siblings and reflect on our past as it shapes the present and future. Such reflections are most intense once we are exposed to popular cultural products: while taking a vicarious pleasure in their "popularity" (as compared to the more refined pleasures of high cultural products), we lay ourselves more open to being influenced by them. This helps to explain why certain musical styles and their stars are transformed into global phenomena. Marone argued that by drawing upon our "silent-being" we can establish alternative modes of learning extending beyond the classroom into every aspect of our daily lives. This model offers fruitful areas of research designed to answer such questions as can we stimulate learners to make sense of their "silent-being," not only in class but through social media? What potential might there be for creating virtual discussion-groups to develop this facility through exposure to popular cultural texts? At last I was beginning to find answers to my previous question about how popular culture pedagogy might differ from other pedagogical forms; perhaps educators do not have to proclaim the fact that they are using "popular culture" but rather establish a collaborative, non-judgmental approach to learning extending beyond the classroom in which everyone has sufficient time and space to savor moments of "silent-being" and share them with others. These points underpinned the talk given by Tiffany Bourelle (University of New Mexico) on twenty-first century literacies, as she referred to the importance of continuous learning geared towards personal growth. Maggie Melo and Anushka Peres (University of Arizona) offered a case study of how this objective might be implemented, as they recounted a unit of work wherein learners had to script, research and evaluate short films of their own, as well as integrating their prior knowledge of film studies with new insights gained as part of the filmmaking process. Melo and Peres took into account the fact that unlike previous generations, twenty-first century learners possess a quite astonishingly sophisticated visual literacy. It is incumbent on every educator to draw upon as well as refine that literacy, and perhaps the most accessible means to achieve this is through popular cultural texts.

The truth of this notion was admirably reiterated in a panel led by Moorea Coker and Jared Bolin, both graduates of Texas A&M University – Commerce who are currently teaching English and composition at high schools in the same state. With the participation of several of their learners (Zachary Alan Leonard, Hannah McKeon, Emily Alavarenga, Jennifer Velazquez, and Pascal Ibe), they offered a case study of a scheme of work introducing film and popular culture as modes of learning. The subject matter might have been familiar; the style of delivery certainly wasn't. Coker and Bolin had given their learners the freedom to develop their own ideas, and the learners had responded with a quite alarming degree of critical and intellectual sophistication. In their short presentations as part of the panel, they revealed a facility with certain concepts (e.g. Foucauldian constructions of power) that would flummox many an under- or postgraduate learner in different contexts. Inspired by such concepts, they arrived at nuanced appreciations of popular culture and its essential role in promoting dissident viewpoints. The learners spoke with rare passion; the assignments they discussed were not just designed to be graded and forgotten about but represented genuine attempts to forge a community of practice involving themselves and their educators. The age gap separating Coker and Bolin from their learners had been seamlessly negotiated; everyone developed their visual literacy through a series of learner-generated activities and used that experience to develop transferable abilities such as negotiation and listening.

As I listened to the high school learners and marveled at the facility with which they set forth their

ideas (with a fluency that would put many academics to shame), I began to see how my experience witnessing different interventions in the “Pedagogy and Popular Culture” area might help me formulate a basic theory of pedagogy and popular culture that differs from other pedagogic forms. The high school learners’ panel emphasized the importance of working from the bottom-up rather than top-down. It is not necessary to forge “a proper scholarly environment,” as Jennifer Bankard suggests; rather educators and learners should develop material of their own. The University of Texas San Antonio roundtable helped me understand the significance of setting aside culturally-relative distinctions between school, home, work and leisure, and regarding every experience as a potential learning experience, to be shared virtually as well as face-to-face. Marone’s analysis of “silent-being” draws our attention to the importance of being non-judgmental and thereby creating spaces for everyone to cultivate their own perspectives. This seems to me a far more suggestive and liberating than the overused term “critical thinking,” that might require a degree of scholarly sophistication that seems antithetical to popular culture’s essential attraction. Through exposure to familiar and accessible material, learners can not only cultivate their visual literacy but look into themselves, thereby developing a reflective capacity that recognizes the presence of unknowable aspects of our own (as well as others’) personalities. Learning should transform the unknowable into the knowable and thereby expand our awareness of the world we inhabit.

Choosing the texts for learning can be accomplished through various means. We can follow Bynum’s suggestion and place the responsibility in educators’ hands, or we can take the path trodden by the Texas high school learners and forge a collaborative approach. What matters more in popular culture pedagogy is the methods by which such texts are exploited, with the emphasis placed on discovery learning designed to bridge the generation gap between educators and learners as well as promoting cross-cultural awareness. This is something both inter- and intracultural; as education becomes more globalized as well as multicultural in scope, we have to develop more openness to alternative points of view, a willingness to negotiate and a toleration of difference. This requires a high level of understanding on the part of learners and educators alike; what is not said is often more significant than what is overtly stated.

What the panels helped me understand is that popular culture pedagogy is *difficult*, despite all appearances to the contrary. While the texts employed might be more accessible than other types of writing, learners and educators have to make a considerable ideological shift so that they can work effectively with such texts. In place of critical thinking, they have to acquire a facility to really listen to one another and use that experience to forge a genuinely cooperative atmosphere wherein learners can trust themselves and not feel the need to seek validation from their educators. Modes of assessment have to be rethought with the emphasis placed on visual literacy-based assignments rather than the more familiar research paper and/or written exam. I am not saying these last-named activities should be dispensed with, but rather that they should be a constituent part of a menu of assessments encompassing visual, spoken and writing abilities. We have to understand how the term “knowledge” in the Victorian sense has become obsolete now; what matters more is the development of transferable abilities that not only contribute to career development but prove beyond doubt the intrinsic place of the humanities within any curriculum, irrespective of the institution. It is this potential that renders popular pedagogy significant, and I pay tribute to all the presenters, as well as the panel chairs Kurt Depner and Erik Walker for organizing such a series of inspirational sessions.

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Connecting the Disconnected: Pedagogy Goes Digital Native

Kurt Depner

New Mexico State University - Dona Ana
Las Cruces, New Mexico, USA
kudepner@nmsu.edu

I remember the first time I encountered Twitter--everyone's favorite, love-it-or-hate-it microblogging miasma. I dismissed it as many do; it was too callous, too "mainstream," too much about **#twerking** and not enough about **#OnlineLearning**. Then a few years back, I was teaching a composition course when word came in that a tornado had just swept through Joplin, Missouri, where many of my spouse's family lived. Immediately, we stopped class to pause and reflect, looking for any sources that could give us information about loved ones. The traditional narratives of local news and The Weather Channel told us nothing. Then some students pointed out that people living there were **#LiveTweeting** video of the tornado's destructive path, complete with videos of what used to be the south side of the city, now a stream of rubble and destruction. In this brief and sobering moment, my students and I collectively realized that online education, even through the seeming banality of Twitter, was real and profound. And like all tools, Twitter was more than a steady stream of Miley's latest shenanigans; it had powerful pedagogical implications as well.

The reality is this: we must redefine online pedagogy as here to stay. Is it any wonder that popular culture pedagogy is moving more from a focus on liberation pedagogy to a commodity based one? While traditional "brick and mortar" course enrollment has flattened or even dropped recently, online courses continue to see increased enrollments. In the case of the university system I'm in, we've seen an overall drop in enrollment of 10-15% since 2010 but an increase in online sections of over 30%, and we know the reason, in most cases: as tuition increases and salaries remain flat, more students are forced into full-time work, relegating their degree programs to the virtual realm. In addition, the bulk of our students are now digital natives, at least as comfortable with online interactions as they are with face-to-face ones. It's no surprise then that their preferred method of learning is an asynchronous, virtual one.

The challenge is for us to reflect on better ways to adapt our courses to meet the needs of our students, ourselves becoming members of the Digital Communities. This may seem foreign to GenX and Baby Boom professors, who still look at email as a modern mode of communication and Facebook as our primary digital connection to the world. Our pedagogical challenge then is to speak the language of the **#DigitalNative**, to overcome what Prensky calls our "accents" as digital immigrants and still be able to operate with authority. Social media can play no small part in this, as can allowing the use of smart devices in the classroom, something many of us have been reticent to do.

So as we continue to reflect on **#BestPractices** and **#LifelongLearning**, the challenge is to question our assumptions about what makes for effective learning environments for our current students. As a “digital immigrant” myself, I find myself chaffing at the thought of students punching away on their iOS device as I am conducting a lecture, until I realize they are **#tweeting** key points or taking notes in **#GoogleDocs**. Each generation of educator must learn to adapt to our upcoming learners to help ensure **#lifelonglearning** happens for teacher and student.

As popular culture scholars already know, there is a growing intersection of popular culture and the global classroom, helping teachers ground content in the relevant and topical and thus making materials more relatable and accessible to students. This need is even more important in online pedagogy, when disengagement is the biggest complaint that students have about the virtual environment. As an educator, I can think of no greater challenge than to connect the disconnected, as Prensky puts it, and popular culture is one of the finest ways to do that. Of course, that means to retrain ourselves, especially in the **#flippedclassroom** or **#onlinelearning** environment, where educators themselves may perceive themselves to be educationally challenged. Perhaps the best way to look at this is through the lens of **#gameculture**, whereby we attempt to **#gamify** our classroom in a way suited to our video culture learners. Who wouldn’t want to learn English, Sociology or Math if they are presented in the context of the Lannister Vs. Stark struggles of **#gameofthrones**? Or perhaps science would become more accessible if **#sheldoncooper** was our avatar for learning physics or chemistry?

If we can engage in our subject through contemporary topics that invigorate and excite our students and ourselves, that’s half the battle right there, tornados or not.

AUTHOR BIO:

Kurt Depner is an Associate Professor of English at New Mexico State University - Dona Ana, where he spends his time teaching his students about social media and zombies. He also works with his schools cultural diversity committee to expose his community to cellos, drumming, drag culture, ska, and the world outside own yards

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Film Review: Joss Whedon's *Much Ado About Nothing*: Whedon, Branagh, and the Anxiety of Influence

Jessica Maerz
University of Arizona
Tucson, Arizona, USA
jmaerz@email.arizona.edu

Long before he was the internationally famous head of a major Hollywood superhero franchise, Joss Whedon was a beloved writer/director of cult TV shows, boasting a dedicated following of fanatics who parsed his every quirky turn of phrase. In the 1990s, when Whedon was building his fanbase with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Kenneth Branagh was at the height of his dominance as a mainstream interpreter of screen Shakespeare, thanks to the series of adaptations that he inaugurated with 1989's *Henry V*. While Shakespeare plays like *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Macbeth* have received multiple big-screen adaptations, *Much Ado About Nothing* has received only two: Kenneth Branagh's own in 1993, and Joss Whedon's, exactly twenty years later. This essay examines Whedon's adaptation through the lens of Branagh's, noting the many conceptual, stylistic, and industrial similarities that unite them—for despite Whedon's insistence that Branagh's *Much Ado* did not provide him with an adaptational roadmap, the films demonstrate striking similarities in context and content that can't be simply explained by their shared source text.

Indeed, Whedon takes pains to distance his own version of *Much Ado* from Branagh's. Whedon refers to the 1993 film only occasionally in interviews (and generally has to be prompted by his interviewers to mention it at all); clearly he prefers to avoid the issue of comparison. In the introduction that prefaces the published screenplay for Whedon's film (in itself a structural precedent set by each of Branagh's own published screenplays), Whedon's disavowal of the earlier film is much stronger: "I didn't want to try to make what Branagh had already made," he asserts (Screenplay 24). In describing the tonal differences between his and Branagh's film, Whedon rather dismissively references what he calls a "Branagh-like experience" in working with his own cast, surrounded by "sun-dappled vines and a general air of joy and kind of sunny good times and when I looked at the movie as a movie, I realized that that wasn't the sort of overriding emotion that I was trying to evoke" (Screenplay 21). While Whedon expressly denies having used the earlier film as a model for his own, the new *Much Ado* bears unmistakable marks of Branagh's influence.

One style trait often associated with Kenneth Branagh is his use of a core group of collaborators; screening a Branagh Shakespeare film is, at points, much like watching a polished repertory company. Branagh's *Much Ado* features cast staples like Richard Briers (Leonato), Richard Clifford (Conrade), Jimmy Yuill (Friar), and Brian Blessed (Antonio). Behind the camera, Branagh relies on collaborators like production

designer Tim Harvey, cinematographer Roger Lanser, and composer Patrick Doyle (who often appears in character in Branagh films, as he does here, as a provider of diegetic music). In this way, Branagh's film preserves the "company" aesthetic that characterizes much of his filmed Shakespeare work. Alongside core cast and crew members, the presence of American film stars like Denzel Washington (Don Pedro), Keanu Reeves (Don John), and Michael Keaton (Dogberry) testifies to Branagh's desire not only to mix accents, but to combine American box office weight with classically trained British Shakespeare savvy.

As regarding his own casting practices, Whedon expresses a similar commitment to allowing his actors to perform without dialect, claiming that "[t]he thing about Shakespeare is that he works in any voice" (Screenplay 28-29). He refers to his cast as his "troupe," and indeed, nearly every actor in the film is familiar to Whedon's fanbase. Core collaborators like Amy Acker (Beatrice), Alexis Denisof (Benedick), and Nathan Fillion (Dogberry) are fixtures in Whedon-helmed projects, and most of the performers in *Much Ado* list multiple Whedon productions on their resumes. Actors who work with Joss Whedon become famously, fiercely loyal to him: for instance, Tom Lenk, who plays Verges in this film, and who also appeared in Whedon's film *Cabin in the Woods* as well as in a recurring role on *Buffy* and *Angel*, has claimed that he'd do "performance art in a water fountain" if Whedon asked (Screenplay 31). (Fortunately, he needn't bother; Branagh himself took care of this in his own *Much Ado*.) Such intense personal loyalty allows Whedon to staff boutique projects like this film and *Dr. Horrible's Sing Along Blog*; further, this company aesthetic, much like the one facilitated by Branagh, helps to create the very convincing sense of family and intimacy in the Whedon film.

Another point of similarity between the films concerns the locations upon which they were shot. Surrounding its original release, promotional literature for Branagh's film made "much ado" of the fact that its setting is Mona Lisa's country home, the Villa Vignamaggio. This inspires in Branagh a visual style that is suitably pictorialist; note, for instance, the sweeping crane shot that marks the film's conclusion, the self-conscious artifice of the montage sequence that intercuts the nighttime revels at the heart of his film, and the lovingly photographed villa and gardens. The principal set of Whedon's film, famously, is his own house: designed by Whedon's architect spouse, the home and its grounds provide a casually elegant and convincing setting for the "house-party" action of the plot.

Whedon's decision to use his own home as the principal shooting location for his film is motivated less by his palpable love for the property and more by the film's own unique budgetary concerns and conditions of production. Filmed in a super-secret, twelve-day shoot and financed by Whedon's Bellwether production company on a bare-bones budget, *Much Ado* was conceived as a small project, a palate-cleanser of sorts, to be enjoyed between obligations to the massive Marvel *Avengers* franchise. (Notably, Branagh himself directed an early iteration in the franchise, 2011's *Thor*.)

The two *Much Ados* share striking similarities in content that do not necessarily proceed from their shared source text. For example, both films choose to dramatize the play's central trick—the "window scene," or Borachio's seduction of Margaret in Hero's clothing. Indeed, windows are as persistent a motif in Branagh's film as mirrors are in Whedon's. Throughout Branagh's *Much Ado*, characters (most often Hero and Beatrice) are shown "framed" in a window, shot from the apparent point-of-view of an admiring onlooker. The frequency of this motif serves to highlight the film's focus on overhearing and appearances, while at the same time foreshadowing the fact that the film's main conflict revolves around a woman in a window. In Shakespeare's text, the "proof" of Hero's disloyalty is rendered verbally; the event occurs offstage and is entirely constructed through the dialogue of other characters. Branagh, like Whedon, chooses to make this incident part of the onscreen action. The final lines of Shakespeare's 3.2, Don John's goading of Claudio and the Prince, provoke an ellipsis in Branagh's film: suddenly, the evening has arrived, and the three men are gazing up at Hero's window. The deception is made complete by Borachio's slightly slurred delivery of the

words “here...oh,” which is naturally interpreted as “Hero” by the men gathered below.

The dramatic necessity of this scene is clear: it is certainly more effective for a screen audience to see the event played out, rather than to reconstruct it from dialogue alone. Further, the scene helps to align viewer sympathies with Claudio, as the audience laments both the dangerous betrayal (Borachio and Margaret’s, not Hero’s) and Claudio’s unbelievable naiveté, which has not been corrected nearly as much as Branagh expects: even backlit, in silhouette, Kate Beckinsale’s Hero and Imelda Staunton’s Margaret bear little resemblance. On this point, Whedon’s film is more convincing, as is his treatment of Margaret throughout.

While Branagh re-orders Shakespeare’s text in order to present the window scene in its real-time flow, Whedon instead makes this a flashback and allows Borachio to narrate the action in voiceover. One fascinating and powerful character moment emerges from this flashback scene, as we see Margaret’s obvious discomfort with being asked to wear Hero’s clothing for Borachio’s benefit: it has become clear by this point that Borachio’s motivation is his own obsession with Hero. This character moment pays off for Whedon later on, when Margaret tries to convince Hero to select a different dress for her wedding ceremony.

Another element of Whedon’s film that seems to find its generative force in Branagh’s involves the relationship between Don John and Conrade in the “plain-dealing villain” scene. Both films sexualize the relationship between the characters, connoting Don John’s lechery while adding action to an otherwise expository scene. Branagh films Keanu Reeves’s Don John receiving a torchlit oil massage from Conrade as he delivers his speech, a choice potentially engineered to capitalize on Reeves’s chief strength in 1993—his appearance—and to downplay the actor’s obvious lack of facility with the text. Whedon stages the same scene as a chatty sex romp between Don John and his girlfriend—not servant—Conrade. By the time Borachio enters the scene in Whedon’s version, and John can’t be bothered to stop “handling” Conrade, the scene recalls a similar moment in Branagh’s *Hamlet*, when Reynaldo relays the results of his surveillance of Laertes to Polonius, who’s actively occupied with a prostitute.

Finally, I’d like to consider the way in which each director treats the flow of Act 5, for I’ve long noted that Branagh’s scene transpositions seem to scramble the narrative logic of the text. Branagh’s film essentially “flips” scene 5.2 (which begins with Benedick composing a love song to Beatrice) with 5.3 (Claudio’s penance at the tomb of Hero); rather than occur on the same day, these events in the film take place in an evening and on the subsequent day. In the source text, the events of Act 5 play out as follows: in 5.1, Leonato and Antonio confront Don Pedro and Claudio, Benedick challenges Claudio, Don John and Borachio’s plot is revealed and Claudio’s penance is set; in 5.2, Benedick tries to compose a poem for Beatrice, who meets him to find out if he has issued his challenge to Claudio, and Ursula relays the news about Don John’s plot and Hero’s innocence; in 5.3, Claudio performs his penance at the tomb that evening; and the “real,” second wedding takes place the next day. In Branagh’s film, Claudio’s penance occurs the night before the film’s equivalent of 5.2, thus straining credibility by asking us to believe that Beatrice, Benedick, and the rest of Leonato’s house do not hear about Borachio’s confession until the day *after* it is revealed to the other central characters. Whedon’s film version replicates this same scrambled flow, rendering Beatrice’s 5.2 conversation with Benedick even more baffling: we saw her watch Claudio’s procession *with Hero*, and therefore we are confused to hear her checking in on Benedick’s challenge and reacting with surprise to the news of the confession. Even more curiously, the published screenplay of Whedon’s film renders Act 5 in its textual, non-scrambled flow, which seems to suggest that the flipped timeline was a late revision, and which leaves Branagh’s film as a fairly obvious precedent.

When asked how his version of *Much Ado* distinguishes itself, Whedon responds with the familiar postmodernist’s lament: “[E]verything you could ever say or do somebody’s said or done,” he sighs, “Usually by Shakespeare, and usually better” (Screenplay 18). Here, without naming names, Whedon is surely referencing the “anxiety of influence” that must come hand-in-hand with essentially rebooting a fairly popular Shakespeare adaptation for a new generation. Frankly, Branagh’s stamp is all over this film, and while Whedon

claims to want the play to speak for itself, the voice it uses sounds suspiciously like Branagh's.

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AUTHOR BIO:

Jessica M. Maerz is an Assistant Professor of Theatre Studies and head of the MFA in Generative Dramaturgy at the University of Arizona's School of Theatre, Film, and Television. Her primary research interests lie in the film adaptation of classical stage drama. She has published and presented her work at venues such as *Literature/Film Quarterly* and the Literature/Film Association, the Shakespeare Association of the Americas, and the Popular Culture/American Culture Association. She currently serves as Chair of the SWPACA's Shakespeare in Popular Culture area.

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