

Evolving Awareness of Popular Culture and Pedagogy: A View into Celebrity, Song, Narrative, and Superheroes

As we enter 2021, we can see the evolving nature of popular culture and pedagogy emerging during times of social distancing. For instance, the SWPACA conference is being held virtually, for the first time in its 42 year history. In this issue of *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, we have an opportunity to look across articles linking the way we think about our world through the lenses of popular culture and pedagogy.

Using insights from a range of popular culture topics—song lyrics, the narrative behind video games, superhero story plots, and celebrity speakers—the articles provide readers with ways to think about learning. For those of us who are educators, we have the opportunity to consider informal and formal learning through popular culture. Across these works, the authors speak to questions such as what is the impact of celebrity speakers? How can we make sense of a “dystopic” present? How might superheroes help us to understand civics? And how can we make learning interesting?

In the first of the articles, we hear from Jena L. Hawk’s in *The Power of Cool: Celebrity Influence in the Ivory Tower*. In the text, she traces the development of trends underlying commencement speeches such as that of the initial emphasis on inspirational wisdom-filled lectures by a politician or a graduating star student to a move towards speeches delivered by celebrity speakers. Hawk discusses how this latter approach can serve the educational establishment by providing a means to promote itself and enhance its competitiveness, yet can also pose problems. Setting her essay within the framework provided by parasocial interaction theory, Hawk argues that this practice can be detrimental to the sense of identity of the public attending the graduation ceremony, and more worryingly, to members of the graduating class the celebrity is addressing.

The ways we are affected by what we see and hear can be linked as well to other forms of cultural input, such as through gaming. In the second article in the issue, we hear from Marc Ouellette, in his article, *Society Doesn’t Owe You Anything: Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas and Video Games as Speculative Fiction*. Here, Ouellette likens dystopian literature like Margaret Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale*, for example, and video games like *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* to a type of speculative fiction in whose world issues from our current world are reflected, created, and predicted. More specifically, the tilt towards right-wing extremism that has been amplified in the U.S. during the Trump administration is reflected in *GTA: San Andreas*’ alternative world. Yet a key difference between dystopic literature and video games is the interactive nature of video games, which Ouellette argues acts as a means to mitigate issues faced in a dystopic world and offers a potential for developing solutions.

As we move into the third article, we can consider the influence of the superhero as a cultural icon and its potential for pedagogy. In *The Many Ways of Wakanda: Viewpoint Diversity in Black Panther and Its Implications for Civics Education*, Justin Frank Martin demonstrates the possibilities of embedding popular fiction in the form of superhero films in primary school civics classrooms by highlighting key events

presented in the 2018 film *Black Panther*. Hence, using the responsibilities of T'Challa the main character and superhero of *Black Panther* offers ways to consider issues of fairness, justice, and consequence. Martin formulates his explanation within the framework of social domain theory and draws a connection between the concepts embedded therein and the understanding children are believed to have of the world they live in. By highlighting the situations appearing in the film as well as students' own behaviours that represent aspects of the theory, Martin points to ways these can be used to develop students' ability to analyze and comprehend behaviours and situations, and thus bring about a better understanding of their own social worlds. Martin provides a possible pedagogical plan for approaches which could be integrated into teaching methodology.

The final article of this issue addresses eliciting freshman students' media literacy to enhance engagement in first-year writing classes. In *Guiding Students Down that "Old Town Road: Writing Pedagogy, Relatability and the Sitch,"* Lynn D. Zimmerman addresses how many students, upon entering colleges and universities, may view writing classes as a burden, academic writing as foreign, and the subjects therein as unrelatable. Yet, for Zimmerman, this can be averted by incorporating topical and even controversial issues as demonstrated in social media feeds as a way to encourage discussion and debate. The author demonstrates how bringing these topics into the classroom can guide students away from a tendency to unquestioningly accept one point of view. Instead, she explains how an examination of lyrics such as in the rap-country song, "Old Town Road" by Lil Nas X, can lead students towards being better able to evaluate, comprehend and explain different perspectives.

In the end, these four articles showcase the importance of adapting to and evolving with themes across popular culture to better understand students and ourselves. Just as the issue addresses an *evolving* state, so too is *Dialogue* evolving and adjusting to the needs of the community. We welcome Miriam Sciala as Interim Managing Editor and thank Kirk Peterson for his work. Also, we have brought to the team, Joseph Yap, as our new Reference Editor, who joins with Copy Editors, Rheanne Anderson and Robert Gordyn. Lastly, thank you to our Creative Director, Douglas CohenMiller and our robust set of peer reviewers. The entire team has moved through challenging times and we thank you all for your coordinated efforts and commitment to *Dialogue* and are pleased to share these works in *Evolving Awareness in Popular Culture and Pedagogy*.

Miriam Sciala
Interim Managing Editor

Anna S. CohenMiller
Editor in Chief

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