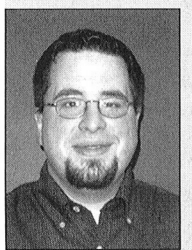


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Popular Culture: Building Connections with Our Students

As part of a larger unit on satire, Bud's high school literature class was slogging its way through Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," and it was not going well. Because of the multiple reading abilities and skill levels in the classroom, Bud had decided to read the text aloud to the class; he asked students to summarize or take notes in the margins as he read. Frequently, he stopped and asked volunteers to summarize out loud the previous paragraphs. As much as Bud thought he was employing successful reading strategies for student understanding of the text, something was not working.

While the students were able to grasp the literal meaning of Swift's

piece—a fictitious proposal to solve hunger, overpopulation, and poverty by cooking and serving as meals the children of the poor—they were not certain why anyone would propose such a ghastly and horrific solution.

"Gross . . . Is he serious?"

"I can't believe you're making us read this!"

"Especially right after lunch. Yuck."

The students were disenchanted and ready to give up on Jonathan Swift, particularly as they saw him as a sadistic baby-eater who used entirely too many flowery phrases to make his disgusting points.

While they understood that satire was a form that used humor to make a serious point, they could not make the connection between the words that Swift used and the point that he was trying to make. A man who had been dead three hundred years was unable to make himself heard by Bud's students that day.

Bud's mind raced. How could he get the students to see that there was a deeper meaning to the text that they were revolting against? He knew that this was one of the Classics—an essay read by thousands of students over hundreds of years. This was a canonical text if there ever was one—from a dead

white guy and everything. Surely this text would connect his students to the great works of past satire and help them to understand one of the many ways that a writer connected with his audience. How else could he teach satire to these students?

In his hurried need to teach the concept of satire to the students, amidst his immediate fears of losing the classroom full of struggling, frustrated, and grossed-out readers, it came to him. The words dropped out of his mouth before he could think of something better:

"Have you ever seen *South Park*?" he asked the befuddled class.

All chatter ceased. Smiles came to the students' faces.

"Outrageous things happen in that show, too, but do you think the creators really want those horrible things to happen?"

"No" was the almost immediate response.

"Then why would those guys use such ridiculous situations?"

That began one of those discussions that only truly curious students can have—those moments that one hopes for in the classroom. With the remaining time that day, students asked intelligent questions and took turns explaining *South Park* episodes to those few students who had not seen the program, a cartoon about four fourth graders in South Park, Colorado, who have

very adult adventures involving everyone from religious deities to political and cultural icons. The show alternates between parody and satire of cultural institutions, such as capitalism, religion, pop culture, and any other topic the creators and writers find worth mining for a joke. Crude jokes are also thrown around on the show. Bud's students have called the program "*The Simpsons* on steroids." One episode that fascinated Bud's students involved a group of magical creatures, called the Underpants Gnomes, who are struggling to understand the mechanics of capitalism through their theft of children's underwear. The main characters help the gnomes while working on a classroom report about corporate America and the local coffee shop, which is under attack by a national chain similar to Starbucks. The episode is a parody of corporate greed and small-town capitalism, and on that particular day it also showed students the inner workings of satire.

Class time expired shortly after Bud's question, but students lingered into their break time to further discuss the cartoon and Swift's text, how both function as satire, and how both are hysterically funny.

"Pop" Is Not a Dirty Word . . . Is It?

Bud knew that teaching students about the world using familiar texts and cultural information was a strong way to engage them in the classroom and in a larger critical analysis of themselves and their culture, but he still felt like he was neglecting a piece of his job. That piece was that the English teacher was supposed to connect students with the books, words, and ideas of faraway places and times. According to the twenty-plus years of cul-

tural information that Bud had received via television, movies, and reading, the English teacher was supposed to wear tweed and recite pithy passages of poetry on demand. The English teacher was to scorn the television, despise all references to popular culture, and be above that lowly culture enjoyed by the unenlightened masses.

The only problem was that Bud was really into that popular culture. He relished listening to the radio and checking out the latest music videos. He was always trying new video games and checking in on his favorite comic-book characters. Bud occasionally watched too much television, as he was captivated by a good story, whatever form it took. But he sometimes felt guilty about his indulgence, even though his college preparation for teaching had included study of how to bring nonconventional texts into the classroom.

He felt guilty in part, too, because he was also an English literature major in college. While he was enraptured by comics and music, he simultaneously devoured much canonical literature. The sonnets of William Shakespeare moved him to tears, just as Shakespeare's comedy moved him to laughter. Franz Kafka had a powerful effect, as did the poetry of E. A. Robinson. He knew the value of deep texts that functioned on multiple layers.

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And, since he had spent so much of his education working with and

through those texts, surely he should pass on that learning in his high school classroom.

But could popular culture texts—found on magazine racks, at comic-book stores, and on late-night television—contain those useful elements, too? The answer, Bud discovered, was yes they could, provided he chose them just as carefully as he would choose the more traditional texts in his classroom.

How to Choose

Janet Allen, in *It's Never Too Late: Leading Adolescents to Lifelong Literacy*, writes that, when she chooses books for "shared reading experiences" (times when she reads aloud to her students), she considers four factors:

1. Is this the right book to meet the needs of these students at this time?
2. Can I read this book in such a way that students won't see it as "boring"?
3. Is this a book I enjoy?
4. Does this book meet my instructional purposes? (61–62)

We would argue that these four questions are excellent not only for thinking about shared reading experiences but also for any opportunity to bring cultural elements (films, television shows, comic books, Web sites, and so on) into the classroom. Students need to leave school with the ability to read more than books; they must be able to read and negotiate all of the avenues of culture. Why should we limit what is OK to talk about in the classroom, provided we are being respectful and inclusive of all students' points of view?

Further, why should we compromise our instructional purposes for

the sake of making a lesson interesting? We have not done our students any favors if all we have done is watched a funny show or read a scary comic book. We must treat these cultural texts in the same ways that we would treat any other text in the classroom. We must look at them critically and aesthetically, enjoy them for what they are, and still ask challenging questions so as to better understand them, where they came from, and what they are trying to communicate.

Lev Vygotsky argues that learning is a socially constructed process, that students bring what they know to the classroom, and that students learn when they are able to collaboratively integrate what they know with new material. Working in the students' "zone[s] of proximal development," a teacher's job is to bridge the gap between the knowledge that students have and the knowledge that the teacher wants them to have (186–87). This is not a new idea. Many talented writers have discussed this conceptual way

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of thinking about learning, and yet we still notice that classrooms are places where popular culture and students' experiences are banished or marginalized and that teachers, like Bud, are sometimes afraid of or unwilling to incorporate popular culture into the classroom.

According to the report of the College Board's National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges, entitled *The Neglected "R,"* elementary students spend three hours a week writing for school but twenty hours a week watching television (20). This means that students have ac-

cess to much more popular culture than they do writing knowledge. We must tap into that knowledge and experience if we are to provide adequate scaffolding in our literature and writing classes.

A Teacher's Homework: Staying Hip

We ask students to spend year after year with us studying literature and writing. We ask them to read particular authors that we (or our school or district curriculum writers) find to have specific educational or aesthetic value. Our students must be invested in the content if they are to be successful. As teachers, though, we have no requirement to be invested in students' worlds, in the areas of culture that they find personally meaningful. There is no mandate to listen to their music or read their texts. We suggest that teachers who are interested in building connections with students should spend time in their cultural worlds.

Better yet, those teachers should ask students to regularly share their culture and their worlds with the rest of the class. Through bringing popular culture into the classroom, teachers can model learning about unfamiliar topics and customs while still providing bridges for learning. Yes, it is one more task for a good teacher to worry about, and the task can seem (and may actually be) daunting, but there are many ways to incorporate popular culture into the classroom that are not teacher centered. We have invited one teacher to share how she does this in the following section, "Incorporating Popular Culture through the Use of Text Clusters."

Steph Rector has been teaching language arts for five years. She currently teaches eighth-grade lan-

guage arts at Turner Middle School in Berthoud, Colorado. Through her use of text clusters and popular culture, Steph works both to provide connections and to allow students to be teachers in her classroom. Her classroom is a complex fabric of texts brought in by students and Steph.

Incorporating Popular Culture through the Use of Text Clusters

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As much as I miss sleeping like regular people, I find that attending school while teaching eighth-grade Language Arts and Reading keeps what I teach fresh and new to both the students and myself. Call it selfish teaching, but I do not want to get bored with the material in my class any more than do the students.

However, I am not the only one in my classroom contributing to the freshness of material. I have adapted a concept called text clusters that was introduced in a graduate class. As the professor explained, text clusters are groups of related material arranged in a progression that reveals more and more about a central topic as each new piece is added. In my classroom, a text cluster might focus on a central topic or piece of writing. For instance, I teach the novel *Shadow of the Dragon*, by Sherry Garland, by discussing issues surrounding the novel and adding different genres of material to my lessons to reveal more and more levels of understanding about the characters, culture, plot, or writing style of the author. I include music, poetry, student writing, art, short stories, excerpts from other novels, films, and documentaries to complete the text cluster.

The use of popular culture is unavoidable for me. I feel that if I do not make material relevant to students and their world, why should

Students see my interest in their worlds, so they show interest in mine. Mutual respect is built on the pop culture of the current school year.

I expect them to care? What connections can students make between their lives and new material? While many adults in and out of the field of education might find the popular culture of thirteen- to eighteen-year-old students to be obnoxious, disrespectful, loud, and otherwise inexplicable to any educated person, I contend that it is invaluable to the way I teach.

The students agree with me. They are the ones who help me construct my text clusters year after year, making my lessons current, accessible, and relevant. Their help gives me credibility as well. Students see my interest in their worlds, so they show interest in mine. Mutual respect is built on the pop culture of the current school year. When I incorporate Eminem's lyrics into my lessons, students are more willing to give Walt Whitman a try. Why not? Maybe there is a connection there and what is happening in Whitman's world of the late nineteenth century actually has something to do with the life of a student in the early twenty-first century. What a concept!

Because of their interest in what is going on in class, students begin to bring in pieces of the text-cluster puzzle themselves. Using pop culture in class creates validity and a payoff for a student listening in class and continuing to think about class at home. Imagine finding something in one's own house

that relates to English class, something that one can bring in and have read or displayed in the classroom! And imagine that doing so was not an assignment but rather something done out of pure passion or interest in what happened the day or week before. The student was thinking—thinking while watching MTV, while at football practice, before dinner, while skateboarding at the park with friends. Imagine if, while doing these things, the student was even *discussing* these subjects with friends. Where will the madness end? Amazing.

Examples of texts brought to me include a Linkin Park CD because a song on it refers to being an outcast and the main character in *Shadow of the Dragon* felt like an outcast. Other CDs brought in include a parody of Maya Angelou reading her poetry. The students know that I worship Angelou but they also know that I still have a sense of humor. Since we were discussing satire and parody, some students downloaded a skit from *In Living Color*, a sketch-comedy show, so that I would have a more relevant example of parody. They brought me up to speed on their pop culture, apparently tired of the "old" examples I had been using. Invaluable resources, these students of mine.

Building Connections

As Steph illustrates, a large part of figuring out how to be a successful teacher is knowing when and how to introduce a text. When we consider popular culture as an arena for textual selection, it makes our job much more complicated. New teachers have enough difficulties when it comes to lesson planning and text selection. Involving the additional world of popular culture in

the classroom adds to that massive load. How will parents respond to time spent studying MTV? What will administrators think of the considered study of Web sites and magazines? How can we balance the effects that traditional and nontraditional texts bring to the classroom? All of these are important questions for us to consider as we negotiate the curriculum choices available. Incorporating the study of popular culture in the classroom does not mean eliminating the traditional literary selections that fill department book rooms and students' minds. Using popular culture is not an either/or proposition.

Steph emphasizes the value of connecting to the students through their knowledge and experience; popular culture also has value in that it can serve as a tool to connect today's texts to the lasting literature of our classrooms. Better still, when we recognize the cultural icons or elements that students are passionate about, we come to know them more as people. We make connections between our classrooms and students' lives. When those connections exist, we, along with our students, have the opportunity for powerful learning. Any texts that can help to build those links deserve time and space in our classrooms.

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