
From the Editor



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Two weeks into the ninth-grade elective, I knew the students' names but not much about their interests. One day, Rick was the last to leave the room. He was a quiet young man who wore a denim jacket even in the warmth of early September in Spokane, Washington. To make conversation, I asked, "So what do you think about the class so far?" Shyly, he replied, "Well, I don't mind learning about radio and TV, I guess. But what I want to know is when are we going to start working on engines?"

Engines? Eventually I realized that he had confused the name of the class, Popular Communications, with his favorite magazine, *Popular Mechanics*. At that moment I understood that teaching about popular culture was going to be much more difficult than I thought. Using current texts, such as television shows and rock music lyrics, would be insufficient to connect with students who were engaged in social practices and cultures I had little knowledge of. As a second-year teacher, I also learned that when you are immersed in a culture, it is difficult to examine what you've always taken for granted. Of course, media literacy and critical literacy advocates have been telling us this for years. But this is now . . . and that was then.

The authors of the features, articles, and columns in this issue of *English Journal* understand the complexities of teaching today's students through and about popular culture. This issue offers rich resources that I wish I had had when I started teaching. I hope that you will find them provocative and useful.

A common theme runs through a number of the articles, features, and columns that resonates with my experiences: Learning with and from the students is essential. This important concept, often touted in education classes with solid theory and research to support it, is too seldom realized in sec-

ondary classrooms. Some teachers contend that it is difficult enough to teach what we believe the students need without having to continually incorporate new material from what the students know. Other teachers may feel that popular culture, by virtue of being popular, has no place in school, where students should be learning about high culture, acquiring core knowledge, or reading material they would never read on their own. In addition, while we might *want* to negotiate the curriculum, its substance has become narrowly focused on reading and writing skills to meet governmental mandates and increase achievement on high-stakes tests. To help students do well on the tests, many teachers feel they must pretest, teach, assess, and post-test the prescribed material, which leaves little or no time for areas of the English language arts curriculum not directly tested, such as film and nontraditional texts. Literacy is narrowly defined as reading and writing *print* with no acknowledgment of the prevalence of meaning-laden visual images.

I have learned a lot from and about teaching since I met Rick, and the forms and details of popular culture have continued to change. Although I really do try to keep up, I have had to realize that there are performers, films, genres of music, and so on, that are not designed for me. There are references that I just won't understand without some expert assistance from those closest to the culture—the students. And that's educational for all of us.

The distance between what I knew and what the students knew was reinforced for me one year when I referred to lyrics from a song by the Beatles. Julia said, "Oh, yeah. My parents listened to them." Now, we're teaching a generation whose *grandparents* listened to the Beatles. The creators of the Be-

loit College Mindset List understand the importance of knowing the worldview of incoming first-year students and how it differs from that of the faculty. Compare a few items from the 2003 list to your experience, remembering that most students entering Beloit College this past fall were born in 1984:

- > Richard Burton, Ricky Nelson, and Truman Capote have always been dead.
- > “Big Brother” is merely a television show.
- > Bruce Springsteen’s new hit, *Born in the USA*, could have been played to celebrate their birth.
- > The “Fab Four” are not a male rock group but four women enjoying “Sex and the City.”
- > Ozzy’s lifestyle has nothing to do with the Nelsons.
- > Hip-hop and rap have always been popular music forms. (http://www.beloit.edu/%7Epubaff/releases/mindset_2006.html)

As Professor Tom McBride, one of the list’s creators, notes, it is important for teachers and students to learn from each other: “While they are learning from us, we need to make ourselves understood or we run the risk of failing to convey the base of ideas that will allow us to share the road to wisdom” (par. 6).

Of course, just knowing and using referents that students recognize is not enough reason to teach through and about popular culture. Why should we engage in teaching that makes us feel vulnerable by risking the loss of our authority in the classroom? What reasons compel us to teach film in a district that prohibits the showing of any films rated other than PG or G? How does a focus on popular culture enhance students’ abilities to read, write, and think critically in ways that a focus on classic literature may not? Most of all, given resistance from students, parents, and community members, why should we bother?

These are essential questions to consider, and the authors in this issue provide thoughtful perspectives on them.

There are other considerations, too. Students may resist examining material they find entertaining. If they enjoy Nintendo, should we ask them to analyze it, too, knowing that they may find less enjoyment in it? How is our engagement in popular

culture related to identity formation? How do we help students identify and critique the portrayals of individuals and groups that are not like them? In what ways can we question what popular culture tells us about ourselves and what it implies about others?

When we teach students to question what they take for granted, we must also encourage them to investigate *whose* culture is popular and speculate on the reasons for that. Why, for example, does a film like *The Matrix* open simultaneously in London, Tokyo, and New York? Why did British schoolchildren ask me, when I visited their classes in the mid-’80s, if all New Yorkers carried guns or if all Americans were as rich as those on *Dynasty* and *Dallas*? Why, with the Latino population dramatically increasing in the United States, does my local newspaper carry only one comic strip that features a Latino family—“Baldo”?

Were I to teach Popular Communications again this semester, there are some things I would do differently. Rick might still make a mistaken connection to engines when signing up for this elective, but I would teach him and the other ninth graders that studying popular culture is essential to our understanding of who we are and who we wish to be. I might even explain James Gee’s argument that video games can be a powerful learning device because of “the ways in which they meld learning and identity” (*What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003], 199). I would begin the class by having small groups of students work with the following quotation. Although the vocabulary might be difficult and unfamiliar, I know that they would make connections to the parts that have meaning for them, and they would be able to draw on examples from experience. Who knows what all of us might be able to learn from there?

Culture enables people to rehearse identities, stances, and social relations not yet permissible in politics. But it also serves as a concrete social site, a place where social relations are constructed and enacted as well as envisioned. Popular culture does not just reflect reality, it helps constitute it.

George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place* (London: Verso, 1999), 137

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