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Building Meaning Through Metaphor: Using the Arts to Deepen Understanding in *Oedipus the King*

BRIGITTE KNUDSON

Although I have worn many hats in my 15 years as a high school teacher, for the last several years I have taught our school's required core English Language Arts (ELA) course for juniors. For my ELA 11 students, it is a year of high-stakes testing and, oftentimes, anxieties, as many begin to think about life beyond high school. For me, it is a year of increased expectations from administrators who assign me to this cohort with an expectation of results.

In some respects, then, my students and I are hostages of a standards movement where our behavior in the classroom is expected to be controlled and consistent, no matter the composition of the student population (Giroux, 1988, p. 92).

My curriculum is dictated in six-week increments and is so filled with required grammar, vocabulary, writing, and canonical texts that it is nearly impossible to accommodate much teacher autonomy outside of an occasional opportunity to insert an assignment that works with the required curriculum. Eisner (2002) explained that "[t]he teacher's ability to exercise professional discretion is likely to be constrained when the public has lost confidence in its schools" (p. 6). Sadly, this has become a fact of life for many K-12 teachers.

An additional challenge, however, has focused on engaging assignments that appeal to a variety of learners, as the composition of students in my classes is very diverse and includes a high number of students who require additional accommodations or are considered "at risk," a title I loathe. Nevertheless, I am responsible for teaching all of my students to the best of my ability every day.

To that end, my classroom must be a space that fosters inquiry and learning, and I could not provide this without creating an environment predicated on mutual respect, a lesson I have learned from Freire (1998), who wrote:

> Our relationship with the learners demands that we respect them and demands equally that we be aware of the concrete conditions of their world, the conditions that shape them. To try to know the reality that our students live is a task that the educational practice imposes on us: Without this, we have no access to the way they think, so only with great difficulty can we perceive what and how they know. (p. 58)

It is with this philosophy that I approach my teaching. It is imperative that I get to know all of my students and their circumstances, just as it is important for me to present myself to them not as a superior, but as an equal—another person traveling along the path of life just as they are.

Given my student population and the district's curriculum requirements, I constantly find myself instructionally challenged to make the material meaningful. One of the most difficult hurdles is to teach the required canonical text by Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*. Though the play has some high-interest hooks for high school students (fate, hubris, etc.), it is always challenging to make the text accessible for all, especially those who have limited access to traditional print text.

Although when teaching drama one of my strategies is to use audio (we listen to professional recordings and stop frequently to discuss) as well as role play (groups of students act out key scenes as others read from the text), and students seemingly demonstrate understanding through their participation, by the time the required common district assessments are given, it seems that many struggle, with a fair number, usually about 20%, failing the assessment, and others scoring relatively low, typically in the 60%-75% range.

Of course, the idea that my students' success on the common assessment drives my thinking about this is troubling, evidence of our industrial culture that values testing and uniformity above creativity and inquiry (Eisner, 2002, pp. 6-7). My feeling is that if my students had a deeper understand-

ing of the text, something that went beyond our initial reading, discussion, or role play, then their chances of success on the assessment would improve.

After reading Eisner's (2002) "What can education learn from the arts about the practice of education?" I was intrigued with his connection between the search for order during the Enlightenment and the quest for it today as seen through the many facets of the implementation of the No Child Left Behind legislation:

> This search for order, this desire for efficiency, this need to control and predict were then and are today dominant values. They are values that pervaded the industrial revolution, and they are values that reside tacitly beneath current efforts at school reform. (p. 7)

While I can understand the inherent need for people to want "to control and predict," for there is an amount of safety that resides in predictability, it is a mindset, however, that neglects to consider the different ways that learning happens. Eisner (2002) explained the influence of the field of psychology in education effectively by articulating the argument as one of the tangible versus the intangible:

> Science was considered dependable; the artistic process was not. Science was cognitive; the arts were emotional. Science was teachable; the arts required talent. Science was testable; the arts were matters of preference. (p. 6)

But there are many students we don't reach through traditional methods, such as print or audio texts, who are very reachable using other methods. Siegel (1995) argued about the limitations of language, noting, "some evidence suggests that the central tendency toward verbocentrism in schools is limiting for students, as it reinforces the transmission model … position[ing] students as passive learners" (p. 456). Could this be the reason why my students weren't internalizing *Oedipus the King* the way I had hoped?

Zoss (2009) maintained that "visual art can be a means for students to learn to communicate ideas and to learn new ways to think about problems with texts" (p. 183), pointing out that a semiotics-based curriculum serves to "value[] the variety of ways in which young people express their ideas and learning" (p. 185).

I began to question my traditional delivery—reading/listening and discussing *Oedipus the King*—and one that might not be as effective as I had originally thought.

Just as I value my students' experiences on a personal level, Eisner, Siegel, and Zoss were giving me insight into my students' academic selves. If I could get them in to the text deeper, then I would be on to something. I became hooked after revisiting Siegel (1995), who, citing the work of Goodlad (1984), said that students involved in the arts understand "what it means to create knowledge and meanings through different modes of representation," thus becoming exceptions to the traditional classroom paradigm of passivism (p. 457).

After creating a collage in a college course taught by Dr. Phyllis Whitin in response to Marilyn Nelson's *A Wreath for Emmett Till* (2005), I made a connection based on Suhor's (1984) work in Siegel (1995) that when students engage in classroom experiences in which they collage or write about pictures, they "may foster development of a wide range of cognitive, aesthetic, and psychomotor skills which remain untapped in most traditional classrooms" (p. 461).

Similar to the connections Berghoff et al. (2003) make between immersion into the creative meaning-making process and teaching, I found that my understanding of Nelson's text was questioned and deepened as a result of both my own artistic interaction with the text in addition to the ensuing conversations with my peers regarding their interpretations of my collage and mine of theirs, immediately causing me to think about how powerful the method could be in my teaching.

The next logical step for me, then, was to apply this experience as part of an inquiry in my classroom to discover how well—how deeply—students' understanding of a difficult text like *Oedipus the King* would be impacted by a semiotics-based activity using the visual arts. In doing this, I was following a rationale articulated by Albers (2006): "[A]s English educators, we start with what we know is good teaching, and continually reshape our teaching based upon our new learning" (p. 76).

I had learned something new, and was ready to apply it in my classroom to determine its efficacy. By engaging in creating a collage and understanding the theory supporting the learning behind it, I began to question my traditional delivery—reading/listening and discussing *Oedipus the King*—and one that might not be as effective as I had originally thought, giving credence to Smagorinsky et al.'s (2007) observation, "The task assigned by the teacher, in other words, may be the problem, and not the student" (p. 336).

When we began this project, students were quite excited to be doing

something artistic in English class, perhaps because "the role of visual art in education can become peripheral to literacy development" once they enter secondary school (Zoss, 2009, p. 183). I explained to students that I had been doing research that indicated that incorporating the arts in the classroom could help deepen their understanding of texts like *Oedipus the King*—and I wanted to see if that might be the case.

In advance, I had gathered a large bin of various magazines donated by friends and family for the project, as well as stacks of local newspapers for students to find collage material. Students were also encouraged to bring collage-worthy graphics and text to class to use on their projects. Further, because I had no art supplies in my room, I visited a local dollar store the previous weekend and purchased enough scissors, glue sticks, construction paper, and other assorted supplies to outfit a classroom of 34 teenagers, at a cost of about $45.

The project itself consisted of three parts: the construction of the collage, a written personal reflection, and a written critique. In all, it took three full days of in-class time and several additional days for the written responses (students had the opportunity to take their responses to the Writing Center for assistance—and extra credit), for a total of about one week.

After having read Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* in class, students were presented with the Oedipus Rex Creative Representation Collage Assignment. Students were given the choice to either work with a partner (I encouraged this) or individually (only two students in one class chose this option). Each group or individual was then assigned several pages of contiguous text, the point being that each collage would offer an imagistic representation of a particular place in the text, so that when the collages were finished, we would be able to assemble them into a timeline representing a visual depiction of the play, serving as a review (in conjunction with their two written pieces) before the students took the test.

Figure 1. Student collages, from top left to bottom right: Jay, Lee, Laura and Kevin, and Chris

Once the students began the collaging process, I noticed some interest-

ing trends. While some groups spent a good deal of time looking at the text and taking notes on what they might want to include in a visual representation first, others headed straight for the art supplies, reading through the text and creating as they went along.

As I circulated around, I learned that some students were perplexed about what they should be focusing on—they wanted me to tell them what was important in the text. While Siegel (1995) attributed passivity as being connected to verbocentrism in school, I began to think about how this generation of students has been victimized by the culture of standardized testing, where many of them have been accustomed to being spoon-fed their information, literally being told what to think.

Gee (2000) wrote of the effects that this culture has had on people, especially workers, who are accustomed to being told what to do, something that is initiated in school (pp. 46-47). Further, Eisner (2002) maintained, "[In education] we place a much greater emphasis on prediction and control than on exploration and discover … [and] it also exacts a price" (pp. 10-11), and I was definitely seeing that at times in some of my students' initial inquiries to me about the 'correctness' of their choices.

That said, they worked through it and all were able to complete the project, though some more intuitively and more creatively than others.

Creating the Collage
Chris

Chris is a special education student who reads at a third grade level and has severe anger issues that impede his functioning both inside and outside school. This was his second year taking ELA 11. He approached me with concerns about this project, because he had great difficulty reading and understanding the text. So I worked with him reading through it, asking him to think about the words and images that might go along with the words to represent them.

He constructed a collage (Figure 1) with the world as the basis, because he rationalized that everything that he put on top was related to things happening in Oedipus's world.

He chose the figure from Lucky Charms because of the four-leaf clover and, he explained, he thought that Oedipus was lucky to have been as successful as he was in his life. He included the shadow in the middle, because it represents things that Oedipus didn't know about his own life. Finally, there are other connections to characters Jocasta, Creon, and Laius.

All of these connections came from a boy who was just about ready to give up on this assignment. After we talked through the text, class time had just about expired. I asked him if he would be willing to work on this at home.

Though he said yes, he said he didn't have any materials (he comes from a very disadvantaged home), so I loaned him materials to take home. He came back the next day with his collage—one of the few assignments he had done up to this point in the marking period.

Before engaging in this project, Chris would merely sit quietly in his desk, seemingly waiting for English class to end, behavior that is common, in my experience, to students with low literacy skills. He did not want to be perceived by his peers as incapable, so he merely assumed a "too-cool-for-school" demeanor to mitigate his classmates' perceptions.

While it is highly unlikely he would have submitted a traditional paper and pen assignment, the collaging assignment not only demonstrated his ability to make deeper connections to the text, but it also provided him the opportunity to make determinations about it autonomously —the connections he made were his own and just as valid as any of the connections made by his classmates—or even his teacher, for that matter

Creating the Collage
Laura and Kevin

Unlike Chris's collage, Laura and Kevin's collage included a combination of text, visual imagery, and color to represent their assigned pages. They thought the text worked well in tandem with the other elements to give it more depth of understanding, explaining that they placed the text in a particular order to draw the eye to the main issue they identified—life changing issues — by placing it in the center, yet also deciding to include other key terms, like madness and anger, that they reasoned were the results of the larger issue.

Moreover, they explained that they placed the focus text "will change your life" beneath an image of the sky and clouds to demonstrate the importance of the Greek idea of Fate. Another artistic choice was to cross out the placed text "it's in your hands" to show that people really had no choice in a society governed by the concept of Fate.

It is important to note that their choices and observations would have no voice in a traditional assignment, where expectations are dictated and fixed. Given the opportunity for autonomy through creative expression,

though, presented Laura and Kevin with the freedom to identify what they believed to be key considerations in the text, but, more importantly, to have the chance to explain their connections and reflect on their process, activities that serve to deepen understanding.

In sum, in looking at the collages, I noticed that the students focused on a combination of how they perceived the characters felt, how the students felt about the narrative (their value judgment/s), as well as some of the larger ideas expressed in the play, such as the concepts of fate, truth, alienation, and death. While some chose to represent these purely as images, others chose a combination of image, text, and color—I left these choices totally up to the students. Additionally, and I had some concern about this, how does one address concerns if a representation does not appear as "deep" as we'd like? Does that mean that students aren't really learning by engaging in the process? Siegel (1995) seemed to think no:

> Even when students produced what seemed to be a literal translation of a particular text, as when children retold the plot of a story through a series of little scenes in separate boxes, we must appreciate the fact that they had to invent this connection, as it was not given to them a priori. As a result, their experience with transmediation involved both reflective and generative thinking. (p. 463)

So, by engaging in the actual act of processing and creating—transmediation—students ultimately benefitted from participating in the collaging component of this assignment.

Reflecting on the Process Eddie and Kelly

On the third day, students brought their finished collages to class; we assembled them in sequential order, and then placed the Oedipus Timeline at the front of the class for observation. Students then spent the rest of the hour viewing, deciding which of their classmates' collages would serve as the object of their peer critique. The process was fascinating to watch, and they took it very seriously, looking at each one, pointing out 'cool' renditions to friends, making comments like, "Wow, I wish I would have thought of that."

I was very impressed. Even though we have a no cell phone policy in school, as soon as one student asked if she could take out her cell phone to take a picture so she wouldn't forget what the collage looked like when she got home to write, all of a sudden just about every student was holding up a phone to the timeline.

For the two written components of this project, students had to produce one-page reflections in which they discussed their process in creating their collage as well as their observations about one other collage. Zoss (2009) stated:

> The literacies valued in an integrated curriculum with pictorial and linguistic texts involve both analysis and composition of visual and print texts … performance in an integrated literacy class is assessed through the use of both visual and print media compositions and texts. For example, assessment tools may include portfolios, compositions using language and/or image, and oral performance. (p. 187)

While the visual (collage) response to literature is itself a form of composition, by having students further articulate their thinking through writing, teachers provide a "valuable educational end" (Zoss, 2009, p. 190). Moreover, giving my students the opportunity to reflect on their work is similar to what Albers (2006) called the focused study, where "learners are given opportunities to reflect on what they know, bring their own experiences and questions to bear, to construct new understandings, and to use those new understandings in support of further learning or action" (p. 82).

Reflecting on his collage, Eddie wrote:

> We were trying to relay the strong emotion that was being conveyed in the story. In *Oedipus*, the prophet Tiresias was summoned to tell of the fate that was laid before Oedipus. This was mainly conversation that was rather heated so we attempted to incorporate the color element to give the point across. The conversation between Oedipus and Tiresias started off to be softer and calm, but then started to soft towards the angry high tension argument. So what we did was use the cooling color of blue, and the shaped it into the form of water to symbolize coolness and stability. Next, on the other side of the collage we used the hot color red to symbolize rage and chaos. Between the two we used the colors we thought seemed mystic to symbolize fate such as purple and gold. To add the finishing touch we added the picture of an eye that was meant to stand for the prophecy that was the cause of everything else in the collage.

In his reflection, Eddie demonstrates not only a confidence that comes with autonomy—he writes with the knowledge that there are no "correct" answers, but only observations that are supported by the text, which he references when supporting his decision—but makes symbolic connections that go beyond the text, showing the depth and quality of his thinking, aspects that would not be visible in a traditional assignment.

Like Eddie, Kelly writes confidently about her observations and connections. It is evident she not only understands literal aspects of the text, such as plot, but she is able to go beyond a mere literal interpretation when she makes artistic choices that also require her to explain her thinking.

> One of the main ideas in the play was fate. I place the word "fate" above the baby that represents Oedipus, because Jocausta [sic], his mother left his life up to fate and she thought she could escape it. Under the baby is a patch of grass to show that he was left out in the forest to have his fate decided. Another theme is death. I wrote out the word "death" on a dark black cloud. Around the cloud was a rope to show that Jocausta had hung herself after finding out the truth about her son/husband. To represent all the troubles and all the confusion with Oedipus, I put a red ribbon all tangled up. Within the ribbon was a pair of eyes and a needle going through an olive to show the end result of how Oedipus dealt with his situation. Above the eyes are a pair of weights to represent the weight that Oedipus had to live with knowing he killed his father, married his mother, and had children with her. He was appalled at the truth and he could not handle it.

Traditional review assignments, such as those that ask students to identify elements of plot or character, do not allow for depth of thinking, whereas creative representation, using the arts in the English classroom, gives students limitless opportunities for exploration of the text.

Critiquing Peers Hans and Jessica

Hans wrote his peer critique about the *Pollution* collage (Figure 1):

> It was easy for me to pick up on the images. The artists decided to go with one theme from the text to represent the story. The idea with pollution all over the field is representing the pollution over Thebes. It is more leteral [sic] interpretation of the text in the play. The pictures were placed all over the peace [sic] of paper to represent the pollution all over the land. The collage would not be different if the images were placed differently. They incorporated the word pollution into the collage to give more of a literal sense of pollution. It contributed to the message of the collage the same as the pictures. Overall the collage represented the message that there was pollution all over Thebes.

Even though, as Hans explained, his perception of his classmates' representation was that it was a "more leteral [sic] interpretation," the process of autonomous critique allows him the freedom not only to make the statement itself, but also to expand his thinking and make observations based on his knowledge of the text as applied to his classmates' collage, making meaning from metaphor and strengthening his understanding of the text.

Another student, Jessica, had this to say about the *Pollution* collage:

> I believe this collage is talking about the Oedipus finding out that he has pollution in his city and has to drive it out. The pictures that would stand for this would be the ones with a tank and men in the army. The men in the army represent how the pollution will be flushed out, by force. The tank then represents that the pollution will be flushed out with any means necessary. Along with these pictures is a picture of a family and in it a father is smoking. I believe that the cigarette stands for the death that Oedipus will later encounter, meaning that it will not kill you right away but the damage is being done. Throughout the collage the colors red and black appear in large streaks. The color black might represent fear with the unknown, along with the demotion of strength and authority. Red, in this case, could represent the feeling of war and danger.

Above the eyes are a pair of weights to represent the weight that Oedipus had to live with knowing he killed his father, married his mother, and had children with her.

Similar to Hans' response, Jessica is also able to draw from her previous knowledge of the text as a basis for making observations and connections about her classmates' representation. Once she identifies an aspect of the artistic representation in the collage, such as "red and black appear in large streaks," she also offers a possibility for understanding ("black might

represent"), an authorial decision that indicates her understanding of the validity of the multiple meanings that can emerge from a text, something that would not be possible using a more traditional assignment.

According to Siegel (1995), when translating textual language, like *Oedipus the King*, to visual language, like a collage, they not only produce metaphors, but also do so openly, making the process visible (p. 472). She added, "Transmediation can be conceptualized as metaphor because in both cases the generative power of semiosis is intensified and made visible" (p. 472). Ultimately, by engaging in this assignment, the majority of students participated in three separate transmediation events, each transaction serving to build their understanding.

According to Pine (2009), "Classroom teaching and learning are embedded in a complex network of interdependent variables, all of them situation-specific, constituting a complex array of human/environmental behavior and variables that influence classroom events, phenomena, and processes" (p. 17).

When presented with the task of helping my students deepen their understanding of a difficult, ancient text like *Oedipus the King*, I was skeptical that something so seemingly simple as embedding the arts into the curriculum could assist me in doing that. Moreover, in light of the constraints put on classroom teachers in this age of standardized tests, where creativity is often put on the back burner to accommodate jam-packed curriculum requirements, often resulting in disengaged students and rampant boredom, students now, more than ever, crave teaching methods that heartily engage them.

My students were happy to work on this project, especially the collage, even though I had to help a few through the initial hurdle, no doubt a result of what Eisner and others have discussed. Further, Smagorinsky et al. (2007) noted that the way students are most often asked to demonstrate their knowledge of literary texts is through tests that expect them to memorize events or through essays that expect extended written analytical engagement with the text, which ultimately leads to the assumption that students who do not perform well are in some way deficient (p. 336).

Unfortunately, after this assignment, my students were required to take the district assessment for the *Oedipus the King* unit that requires memorization of events about which Smagorinsky et al. refer. The good news is that by engaging in this artistic project —or at least this is what I attribute it to—my test scores were phenomenally higher than they had been, with all students receiving scores above 70%, which is considered a C- in my school district.

While having 100% of students pass an assessment is exciting, given my diverse student population the results are that much more amazing. While I usually have about a 20% failure rate on such assessments without using an arts-based activity, none of the students who have engaged in this arts-based collaging project did poorly on the *Oedipus* test, making an especially strong argument for incorporating the arts into the English curriculum in order to help students deepen their understanding of print text.

Based on my experience with incorporating arts-based instruction for *Oedipus the King*, I plan to apply this concept to other units I am required to teach, such as with Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, though slightly differently—I want to use music and drama in addition to art in an attempt to replicate the success I have seen with *Oedipus the King*. As I have shared my success with colleagues, I have seen a stream of new ideas teachers are trying in their classrooms to help deepen their students' understanding of text. This is what teaching is all about, sharing and trying new ideas in order to equip our students with the skills they need to be successful.

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