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# Music, Metaphors, and Politics in the Language Arts Class

GREGORY SHAFER

**B**rian was first. As he began his presentation about The Beatles' song "Blackbird," it was easy to see why incorporating music of any era or genre into the language arts class is important in raising consciousness about language, politics, culture, and history. "Blackbird," he began, "is a song about a single bird that sings alone but is being encouraged to fly, to stretch, to become more than a passive being in a tree. It is easy to see that The Beatles are interested in much more than an animal. The symbolism reflects a political statement that would reach millions."

Now Brian began his analysis of the lyrics. "It's no coincidence that the bird is black and that the song was composed and recorded in the midst of the American civil rights era. The Beatles were using the bird as a glaring metaphor for African Americans who had become paralyzed under centuries of racism and discrimination. The use of black, brings new meaning to a word that was consistently used as a mark of shame and segregation. The repetition of the phrases like "fly" simply reinforce the message of freedom, of movement from the plight Black people were in."

Finally, he commented on the rhythm of the song. "Notice how slow and reflective the song is. This is not hard rock or fast music. Could it be that McCartney was urging African Americans to be patient, to move forward peacefully?"

Incorporating music from various moments in history is perhaps the most effective way I have found to engage students in a judicious and sophisticated examination of not only music but history, culture, and language. With the simple charge to choose a song that has made an important impact on our culture, history, and language, I am able to engage students in a lesson that is both serious and fun. Indeed, as one examines the results of Brian's presentation on The Beatles' iconic "Blackbird," one finds a treasure trove of linguistic as well as historical and cultural lessons.

Equally important, Brian is engaged and enthusiastic, delving into an artistic medium he has always loved and seen

as part of his world. "This was fun," he says as he completes the reading of his paper. "I've always loved the Beatles but I never appreciated their political side, their place in the 60s era."

As we search for new ways to animate our students and teach them about the use of language and history, asking them to transcend the perfunctory analysis of a popular poem, the use of music becomes especially relevant. Each semester I invite my community college students to choose a song or album from any era or genre and discuss its impact on our world. The song, I remind them, should be assessed from a linguistic, historical, and cultural perspective. Metaphors and word choice should be examined and assessed as well as other uses of repetition, rhyme, and alliteration. Further, students are asked to be conscious of the context of the song and its influence on the politics of the age. Did this song emerge in the middle of a national tumult or was it part of another specific milieu? Does it reflect the values and culture of a certain ethnic or racial group? Does it use language to speak to us in a certain way? Did it speak to a generation of people or galvanize a group of rebels? Did it respond to a war?

## Speaking my Language

One of the reasons this assignment works so well is its ability to engage students in a discourse that they already feel excitement for and ownership over. In essence, the assignment is implicitly acknowledging and even celebrating the music, slang, culture, and language of a genre that is not part of academic discourse. In discussing its unique success, a colleague suggested that it is akin to tricking a child into eating cereal that is good for them, by only presenting the colorful and fun-looking cover.

On the surface, the assignment appears to be a fun look at music and artists, something with which most participants are already deeply engaged. However, once each student

moves beyond the inviting façade of glamorous performances and live concerts, they find a mosaic of linguistic and cultural discoveries that need to be discussed and that elevate their appreciation of the arts as a personal and ideological practice. Like the cereal that is actually low in sugar and fortified with essential nutrients, the analysis of an important piece of music, involves higher level thinking and an astute examination of metaphors and their political and cultural uses. Learning emanates from their world, from texts they understand, but concludes with essays and presentations that are analytical, probing, and very sophisticated.

Equally important is the dialogic aspect of incorporating music of different genres into the class. For perhaps the first time, many students are able to venture beyond the mono-

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nologic. According to Carolyn Shields (2007), “monologism is a way of talking to ourselves, of perpetuating a certain way of thinking or a certain set of attitudes that are never questioned and never changed” (p. 145). In engaging students in the literacies and politics of music genre, we create what Bakhtin calls a heteroglossia or a context in which many voices and visions are not only accepted but celebrated.

Students are used to being taught the literacy of the academy and often feel a sense of disaffection from the experience. Music, on the other hand,

creates a setting for multiple voices and an atmosphere that is more democratic and expansive. “If we take seriously the plurality of voices that comprise a school and learn to live dialogically, we will find a sense of freedom that we may never have anticipated” (p. 150) adds Shields later.

One cannot overestimate the importance of giving students ownership over the assignments they do, inviting them to incorporate their language and interests into the academic classroom. At the center of much of student alienation is what many consider to be what Michael Apple (1993) has called “official knowledge.”

In essence, Apple suggests that schools have historically been in the business of perpetuating a specific kind of knowledge, or truth—one that reinforces the values of those in power, while often marginalizing or simply dismissing other ways of knowing.

In the process, students who come from other socioeconomic classes are quickly alienated, realizing that language learning is not meant to liberate or empower but to inculcate rarefied truths. In such endeavors, students quickly learn their place as passive recipients of what Freire (1988) calls the “banking system,” leading to assignments and attitudes that result in what Lynn Z. Bloom (2011) refers to as assignments that have no spirit, no passion but that are simply “good enough.”

In addressing the importance of a pedagogy of empowerment and relevance, Henry Giroux argues, “It is no small matter to argue that students need to affirm their own histories through the use of a language, a set of practices, and subject matter that dignifies the cultural constructs and experiences that make up the tissue and texture of their daily lives” (p. 63).

Put simply, students work best when there is a sense of congruence between their lives and those ideas and values that are extolled in class. The skills of writing a paper or dissecting a metaphor are more easily accessed when students feel comfortable in what they are doing, seeing it as an extension and validation of their own existence.

Once the affirmative nature of such a pedagogy is established, it becomes possible for students, especially those students who have been traditionally voice-less in schools, to learn the skills, knowledge, and modes of inquiry that will allow them to analyze critically what role the existing society has played in both shaping and thwarting their aspirations and goals. (Giroux, date, p. 63)

The fact is, when lessons become insensitive to the cultures and verities of their writers—when they fail or refuse to affirm the voices of their students—it results in what Signithia Fordham (1999) has called “guerilla warfare,” arguing that students who do not see a consonance between their home culture and school discourse often resort to subtle and more stark acts of defiance. Most students at the school, writes Fordham, “resist the requirement that they learn to speak and communicate in the standard English dialect, especially in the school context. Their resistance to this state-approved curriculum requirement is their way of ‘dissin’ or disrespecting the this dialect” (p. 272).

In essence what many of the African Americans do is simply refuse to speak a language that is not serving their social interests as part of their non-academic discourse community. Such dichotomies, such difficult decisions confront students all of the time. When teachers construct a lesson that is far removed from their students’ cultures and language

patterns, there is a necessary struggle for identity, a grappling between success in school and the identity they have forged as individuals among their friends and family. Indeed, one of the most gratifying aspects of the incorporation of music into the class is the ability to bridge this invidious gap, to forge a connection between home and school. It makes literacy authentic, real rather than simple practice for school.

### Rudy's Project

This can be seen in Rudy's project on the music of rapper Nelly and the coining of the word "tip drill." For Rudy, an African American, this term and the song for which it is a part, symbolizes a major chasm between male and female African Americans. As part of his final project, Rudy introduced the artist, the song, and discussed the controversy for not only many white listeners but also several female listeners of all colors. The song is incendiary to say the least but also represents a powerful mode of discourse in our students' world. Nelly, a popular rapper, speaks to millions and does so in a language that needs to be probed and interrogated. This is the essence of the assignment's efficacy. Students come face to face with the music and artists that are part of their world. The project began with a look at the opening lyrics:

I said it must be ya ass cause it ain't ya face  
I need a tip drill, I need a tip drill.

Later in the song, another stanza is sung by a woman who sings:

I got you payin' my bills and you buyin' my  
automobiles  
You's a tip. . .

### Rudy's Presentation

"I think it is hard for white people," argued Rudy, "to appreciate the culture of the Black man and the questions and contradictions this song presents. For many," he continued, "the song is a reinforcement of an African American man's ability to feel masculine, and this cultural value goes back to slavery."

Rudy continues, talking about the emasculation of the Black man during the racist period in the United States and how the only way for many men to show their virility and power was through the fathering of children and the accumulation of physical treasures. "This has resulted in the perversion of much of the music we play," he continues. "It has

led many artists to make manhood about things, including the accumulation of women as things."

What added to our discussion was the music video, which was shown as part of the presentation. The video presents a graphic image suggesting that sex with a woman can be nothing more than a transaction that all men of power must be able to do. And, part of the song is sung by a woman. In essence both genders seem to be using the other, exploiting one's body for the other's material wealth. It is a relationship devoid of love or even humanity.

The discussion that followed reinforced the efficacy of incorporating music into the writing class. Comments ranged from the sexist depictions of women as objects to the empowerment felt by minorities in no longer having to abide by rules of white men and their demand that music follow a certain decorum. "No matter how offensive this is," said Marcus, "it cannot erase the fact that African American men are in charge, speaking in their own language and engaging in actions that are free of fear. Nelly is admired because he has not surrendered to racial barrier."

But Shelly, a white student responded by arguing that much of the record producers who are responsible for this music—music which she believes damage the liberation and advancement of African American women—are done by white men. She pointed to the record labels' owners and found that many were white and in no way affiliated with any kind of racial progress. "These Black artists are being used by White businessmen who want to make money off of their rapping," she argued as part of her response.

A third edifying voice came from Tilda, an African American woman who contended that the song epitomizes all that is wrong with relationships in the Black community. "We are in this destructive game of trading sex for money and it leads to single moms and dysfunctional families," she argued. "This song should be something that we all study as a problem that needs to be solved."

In discussing the vital aspects of an effective language arts class, Rebecca Powell (2011) reminds us that "quality assessment focuses on what students can do—their strengths, competencies, and resources that they bring to learning—versus the deficits. Effective assessment is motivating" (p. 90). In considering the assignment, one immediately notices students galvanized around culturally and personally important issues. They are engaged. They are grappling with ideas and issues that bring their concerns and values into the school. There is none of the alienation felt when having to abandon those cultural practices. "All forms of literacy," adds Powell,

require active involvement in which participants are engaged in acts of communication and interpretation” (p. 97).

Indeed, in addressing the questions around a controversial song like “Tip Drill,” a song that would seem to have no place in the academic classroom, Rudy and his fellow listeners are able to bring a part of their music and cultural world into the language arts class. In the end, the activity becomes cultural, linguistic, and educational.

Such opportunities for engagement and participation are also evident in looking at Sally’s essay and presentation on the music of the Dixie Chicks and their political battles with George W. Bush. In their album and their concert tour, the group made political stand against the war in Iraq and brought the entire issue of art and war to the fore. “I’m one of the few Country and Western people who still love the Dixie Chicks,” she said as she began her presentation. “Their album was an act of political courage that we should all respect. They essentially confronted the president and the entire country and Western community and took a stand for peace.”

The song that was eventually presented to the class was truly a riveting challenge to the war, while also declaring Natalie Maines’s independence from living life for other people. The first lyrics of the song establish the transition to political activism Maines experienced.

My friends from high school  
Married their high school boyfriends  
Moved into houses in the same zip code  
Where their parents lived

But I could never follow  
No, I could never follow

I hit the highway in a pink RV with stars on the ceiling  
Lived like a gypsy  
Six strong hands on the steering wheel

I’ve been a long time gone now  
Maybe someday, someday I’m gonna settle down  
But I’ve always found my way back home.

By taking the long way  
Taking the long way around  
Taking the long way  
Taking the long way around.

In examining the lyrics, Sally first points to the metaphors, noting that Maines is not simply talking of a physical trip but one that occurred in her mind, as she found her voice and gained independence. She wasn’t willing to stay in town and marry her high school boyfriend, anymore than she was willing to allow her mind to stay in the same place and settle for the hometown values she was taught. Indeed, her “trip” is both physical and existential, as she learns to find her own way, which often results in the long way.

Again, the value of incorporating music into the language arts class can be seen in the political engagement, the work with figurative language, and the real life story of an American icon. Students love music and making it a focus invites them to use it to delve into skills that we all hope our students will practice. Figurative language, political controversy, cultural values, and the power of music all coalesce in a powerful lesson.

And, as can be expected, the example of the Dixie Chicks stimulated more debate and participation, as students lined up to either support or decry the actions of the group as the Iraq War began. “Free speech isn’t absolute,” argued Lonnie, a student who had a brother in the war. “She shouldn’t have said it at that time. It was insensitive to the men who had to actually fight.”

But Lonnie was quickly countered with Jessica’s belief that the war was unjust and based on lies. “If we don’t speak out at such times, when people are going to war,” she asked, “when do we? We need people to be brave and to stop the madness before it starts. How many have been killed and maimed?”

Others pointed to the personal growth that Maines sings about and the way she has benefitted from her fight with the President. “It makes me rethink the idea of patriotism,” opined Ted, an older student who had previously remained quiet. “Is it best to silently support the troops or is it our duty to be vocal when we see that lives could be lost for nothing?”

Again, in reviewing the various opinions and recriminations, it is easy to see the value of incorporating music into the language arts class. Students become empowered by the ability to take control of an assignment that is ensconced in their world—one that is imbued with their language, interests, and values. At the same time, the level of discussion is nothing short of captivating, as culture, sexuality, misogyny and politics are debated. In incorporating music into my class, I created a context for diversity and learning beyond the academy, and that is important. Our students are grappling



with their identities as people in a certain social and linguistic community. They want a forum where questions can be answered, where their cultures and voices are valued, and can be the subject of serious classroom discussion. Further, they want to be experts. In exploring their music, they become teachers, reveling in the role of authority and learning to articulate their values about the life they are living.

### Challenges and Questions

Of course, all assignments present us with challenges and the Music Essay is no exception. Many students found it difficult to probe the linguistic differences and their significance to the song. For instance, Johnny, an older African American man, focused on the Marvin Gaye song, “Ain’t Nothing Like the Real Thing Baby,” but needed plenty of assistance in analyzing the use of double negatives, slang, and other uses of language that distinguish the song from academic or “proper English.”

One of the topics I like to explore in asking students to do this assignment is the significance of language, such as word choice and syntactic change, as in the use of new words and double negatives. Why, in the end, does this work better for this context and genre of communication? How has this song carved a special place for itself by using language that is less formal and specific to its audience? Part of assessing the greatness of a song is examining its lyrics, the style, the appeal to certain demographics.

Indeed, part of the reason the Marvin Gaye song is so endearing is its use of double negatives, its unabashed employment of language that is natural and genuine. The song is a duet between Gaye and his real life lover Tammy Terrell, and their affection for each other is obvious in the way they use language to express their love. One of the issues that I believe is important is the effective and very successful use of different discourses and multiple literacies. Many students are forever limited to academic discourse while in school, so I want them to both use and acknowledge other dialects and ways with words. In helping Johnny to interpret the reasons why the song is so special, I highlighted the stylistic differences between the song and language he might hear in a classroom, pointing to the artists’ distinctive use of language to create an intimate yet social celebration of love. “It’s easy to see they’re in love by the way they sing the song,” added Johnny in concluding his analysis.

This is perhaps where scaffolding comes in handy. Students implicitly understand that popular music is using a

different language but need to be instructed in appreciating the way language correctness is fluid and context dependent. This, of course, helps them in considering other discourse communities later in their lives.

### Final Thoughts

How do we inspire our students to have meaningful literacy experiences—experiences that transcend the perfunctory and engage them in questions of language use to satisfy political, historical, and cultural goals? How do we transcend the predictable academic paper and engage students in an activity that asks them to consider the various registers we use each day as language users? While there are many exciting and innovative answers, one that I have found effective involves the impact and substance of music. When students are asked to explore the lyrics, tempo, history, and cultural impetus of a favorite song, they find that writing can be both relevant and challenging, which is the goal of any English class.

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