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Teaching Popular Culture to Diverse Students in Secondary English Classrooms: Implications for Literacy Development

Ernest Morrell

Classrooms across Michigan and the entire United States are becoming increasingly diverse with respect to ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic status. Too often this diversity is viewed by educators as a challenge or obstacle rather than an authentic opportunity to create vibrant learning communities. Sadly, those who can least afford it—the marginalized in society—are also marginalized within diverse classrooms and schools. This marginalization prevents certain students from acquiring the literacies they need to succeed in school. Given this reality, secondary English teachers are increasingly challenged to find curricula and pedagogical strategies that are simultaneously inclusive and affirmative, yet empower students academically and critically.

In this article I argue that the teaching of popular culture can help English teachers to help diverse groups of students acquire and develop the academic and critical literacies needed to succeed in new century schools. From my experience as an English teacher and researcher, I have seen that popular culture can serve as a link between student worlds and canonical texts. It can also help students to more critically interrogate canonical literature as well as their own worlds. Finally, given its widespread appeal to youth across ethnic lines, popular culture can afford English teachers the opportunity to develop culturally relevant curricula within multiethnic classrooms.

Often, the failure of students to develop “academic” literacy skills or to make meaningful connections with canonical literature stems not from a lack of intelligence, but from the

inaccessibility of school curricula to those who do not adhere to the “dominant” or “mainstream” culture. New literacy theorists believe that students are not illiterate per se as much as they possess literacies that have little connection with the dominant literacies that are promoted through institutions such as public schools (Street 105). I argue that English teachers in diverse secondary schools can build upon new literacy theory to examine the non-school literacy practices of their students, especially those practices associated with participation in popular culture, to find connections with the dominant, academic literacies of schooling.

Through the sharing and analyses of classroom practices that follow, I illustrate how the teaching of popular culture can help diverse groups of secondary students make meaningful connections with canonical texts and more critically reflect on their own lives. I draw here upon data collected during the six years that I taught high school English. I focus on two particular manifestations of popular culture (i.e., Hip-hop and popular film) around which classroom units were prepared. I include classroom unit descriptions and vignettes where appropriate.

Hip-hop Culture

A strong argument can be made that hip-hop music is the representative voice of urban youth, as the genre was created by and for urban youth (George 23). In addition to merely being a voice in the urban community, many rappers considered themselves as educators and see at least a portion of their mission as raising the

consciousness of their communities. The influence of rap as a voice of resistance for urban youth proliferates through artists that endeavor to bring an accurate yet critical depiction of the urban situation to a hip-hop generation.

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Given the social, cultural, and academic relevance of hip-hop music, a colleague and I designed a unit that incorporated hip-hop music and culture into a “traditional” senior English poetry unit. We started out the unit with an overview of poetry in general, attempting to re-define poetry and the role of a poet in society. We emphasized the importance of understanding the historical period in which a poem was written to come to a deep interpretation of the poem. In the introductory lecture, we laid out all of the historical/ literary periods that would be covered in the unit (Elizabethan, Puritan Revolution, Romantics, and Metaphysical Poets from England; and the Civil War, Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Movement, and Post-Industrial Revolution in the United States). It was our intention to place rap music and the post-industrial revolution right alongside these other historical periods and poems, so that the students would be able to use a period and genre of poetry they were familiar with as a lens with which to examine the other literary works and also to encourage the students to re-evaluate the manner in which they view elements of their popular culture.

The second major portion of the unit was the group presentation of a poem and rap song. The groups were commissioned to prepare a justifiable interpretation of their poem and song with relation to its specific historical and literary period and to analyze the linkages between the poem and song. After a week of preparation, each group was given a day to present to the class and have their arguments critiqued by their peers. In addition to

the group presentations, students were asked to complete an anthology of ten poems, five of which would be presented at a Poetry Reading. Finally, students were allowed to write a 5-7 page critical essay on a song of their choice.

The students generated quality interpretations and made interesting linkages between the canonical poems and the rap texts. They were also inspired to create their own poems to serve as both celebration and social commentary. The critical interrogation of the popular cultural texts empowered these students to produce traditional oral and written critiques, yet they also empowered students to become cultural producers themselves.

Popular Film

The NCTE Standards for the English Language Arts, Standard 5 includes popular film and television as visual texts worthy of study in K-12 classrooms. The idea that films are texts worthy of academic study has been growing within the postsecondary academy for some time. Increasingly, critical film studies, as a field, has grown in prominence, and there are now academicians who use critical theory to study film at nearly every major university in the country. These recent developments underscore the legitimacy of popular film as academic texts worthy of critical interrogation by urban educators and their students.

In my classrooms, I created units that allowed students to use their visual literacies and experiences with popular film to learn to interpret literary texts. This analysis focuses on two classroom units that incorporated popular film into the traditional curriculum to make meaningful connections with canonical texts and to promote the development of academic and critical literacies. The first unit began with *The Godfather Trilogy* and incorporated Homer’s *The Odyssey*. Another unit joined Richard Wright’s *Native Son* with the film *A Time to Kill*.

During the units, the students watched the films in class while reading the texts at home. They would take notes on the film, and we would discuss

each segment in class. On a typical day, there might be 30 minutes of film watching and 25 minutes of critical discussion. There would be times during the film watching where the books would be introduced, and students would discuss similarities and differences between characters in the film, the books, and people in their own lives. For instance, while watching *The Godfather* and reading *The Odyssey*, students discussed the portrayal of heroes in Western epics and Western society writing at large. They compared Odysseus to Michael Corleone, yet they also looked to their own society for examples of heroes as a manifestation of our contemporary values. While watching *A Time to Kill* and reading *Native Son*, the students discussed justice in the context of the lives of Bigger Thomas and Carl Lee Hailey, yet they examined their own school for examples of injustice.

By combining popular film with canonical texts, the students were able to hone the critical and analytical skills they already possessed and bring these skills to their interpretation of these canonical texts. They were also able to understand the connection between literature, popular culture, and their everyday lives. Further, they were able to translate their analyses into quality oral debates and expository pieces. The *A Time to Kill/ Native Son* unit traditionally concluded with a mock trial and the *Odyssey/ Godfather* unit with a formal debate. Both activities laid the groundwork for more traditional essays.

Conclusion

Much of the excitement around the potential of popular culture is tempered by the recent focus, at the state and national levels, on standardized tests as the sole and primary evaluators of academic merit and skill. I contend that secondary English teachers can and should envision their practice of teaching popular culture as compatible with the current educational climate and, at the same time, culturally and socially relevant. English teachers in diverse schools should not flee from the standards debates, nor should they apologize to colleagues and parents

about innovative curricula and pedagogies that do, in fact, teach the skills that students need to be successful in school. Rather, they need to be at the forefront, conducting classroom-based research on these innovative practices and participating in policy debates at every level. These teachers also need to participate in conversations about alternate forms of assessing students' literacy levels that are more compatible with recent developments in literacy studies and inclusive of students' non-school literacy practices, such as those associated with participation in popular culture.

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