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1. ADVENTURES IN ADAPTATION

Confronting Texts in a Time of Standardization

ABSTRACT

Traditional and accountability-era expectations for students at both K-12 and university levels have included prescribed and template approaches to writing as well as narrow text analysis governed by New Criticism and more recent calls for “close reading.” This chapter explores incorporating text adaptations as a guiding set of units for honoring student choice in their writing, reading, and text analysis, what Johns (2008) calls “genre awareness.” After exploring the need to shift paradigms away from prescriptive literacy to critical literacy and the paradox of choice, the chapter offers a sample adaptation unit grounded in zombie narratives, anchored by Max Brooks’s *World War Z*.

Across the US, children are apt to read, or be required to read, a reasonably common curriculum of writing from a loose cannon of literature, among that experience is likely to include Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery” as a chilling example of the power of fictional short stories. However, when Jackson’s story first appeared in *The New Yorker* on June 26, 1948, letters swamped the magazine’s office:

[Jackson] said that of all the letters that came in that summer – they eventually numbered more than three hundred, by her count – only thirteen were kind, “and they were mostly from friends.” The rest, she wrote with mordant humor, were dominated by three main themes: “bewilderment, speculation, and plain old-fashioned abuse.” Readers wanted to know where such lotteries were held, and whether they could go and watch; they threatened to cancel their *New Yorker* subscriptions; they declared the story a piece of trash. (Franklin, 2013, n.p.)

A number of readers, it seems, believed the story to be non-fiction: “The fact that so many readers accepted ‘The Lottery’ as truthful is less astonishing than it now seems, since at the time *The New Yorker* did not designate its stories as fact or fiction” (Franklin, n.p.).

Fast-forward to Oprah Winfrey selecting James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*, her book club prompting the work to be a best-seller and Frey, a well-known writer. However, this fame and celebrity would be short-lived since a controversy

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erupted once Frey was accused of embellishing his life to make the memoir more appealing to readers:

The discrepancies and Mr. Frey's reported admissions of falsifying details of his life raise questions about the publishing industry's increasing reliance on nonfiction memoirs as a fast track to the best-seller list. It is not at all uncommon to see new books marketed as nonfiction containing notes to readers saying the author has altered the time sequence of events, created composite characters, changed names or otherwise made up details of a memoir. (Wyatt, 2006, n.p.)

Adding to the controversy was information that Frey originally marketed the book as a novel, but was unable to secure a publisher until he designated the work as a memoir.

What do these events around "The Lottery" and *A Million Little Pieces* reveal? Both a popular interest in and misunderstanding about genre, particularly at the intersection of fiction and non-fiction. For the classroom, particularly educators addressing literacy and critical literacy, that interest and enduring confusion are ideal entry points for addressing genre as a mechanism for fostering critical readers and writers. "This is a story of an ongoing search for a genre-based, social constructivist pedagogy for novice academic classrooms," explains Ann M. Johns (2008), her quest paralleling mine (p. 237). Like Johns, I have come to reject the pursuit of "genre acquisition" (traditionally entrenched and perpetuated by a standards-mania now three decades long) and instead to embrace "genre awareness, which is realized in a course designed to assist students in developing the rhetorical flexibility necessary for adapting their socio-cognitive genre knowledge to ever-evolving contexts" (p. 238).

This chapter will explore and confront what counts as "text" by presenting adaptation as a central mechanism for courses dedicated to literacy and the pursuit of democracy and student liberation (Delpit, 2006, 2012; Freire, 1998; Kincheloe, 2004) – and as a rejection of education as a mechanism for control (Deleuze, 1992; Foucault, 1984). The basis for the discussion below draws from a first year seminar course where students pursue guiding questions about text, genre, adaptation, and reading/writing conventions as an avenue to their own growth as writers broadly and academic writers more narrowly.

ADVENTURES IN ADAPTATION

Soon after I joined my university in 2002, preceded by eighteen years of teaching high school English in rural upstate South Carolina, the faculty adopted a new calendar and curriculum; that curricular change included requiring students take two first year seminars, one of which is writing intensive. This new curriculum also included embracing that faculty from across the disciplines – not just the English department – would teach writing-intensive seminars. Since writing instruction is a primary area of my teaching and scholarship, I have taught a writing-intensive seminar each academic year since the fall of 2008.

Those experiences have allowed me to investigate carefully writing instruction, particularly as that intersects with requiring and allowing choice about texts in classroom settings. My writing-intensive first year seminar has evolved to focusing on *adaptation*; we begin by examining Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron" and the film adaptation *2081* (2009). As I have examined before (Thomas, 2012), the film adaptation of Vonnegut's story reveals a serious misreading of Vonnegut, but examining the two works as separate and dialogic works allows students to consider the sanctity of individual works (Vonnegut's intent in the original story) and the problem of adaptation (the film maker's vision built on Vonnegut's story).

As well, this opening activity addresses text-only traditional stories against the conventions of film. Many students have never read a film critically, but also have only confronted text-only short stories in prescribed and narrow contexts (such as applying New Criticism to the text as is common in Advanced Placement courses). Examining Vonnegut's challenging story against the more conventional messages of *2081* also introduces students to issues about how texts position readers; how genre, medium, and mode impact text content; and how creators of text must negotiate either within or against conventions of genre, medium, and mode when drafting purposefully.

Since the first year seminar I teach is writing intensive, I seek opportunities for students to grow as critical readers and writers – which includes increasing their awareness of genre conventions in varying contexts. First, I introduce students to the unique and often artificial conventions guiding expectations for students as readers and writers. This helps students recognize the power dynamics involved in their education during the K-12 education and how those conventions can help and hinder (Scheele, 2004) their success at the university level. We explore how the conventions guiding K-12 expectations for students tend toward compliance, and not critical or independent thinking. Ultimately, we deconstruct New Criticism, literary analysis, and template paradigms for student essays.

This confrontation of normalizing student behavior through mechanistic approaches to text (New Criticism and the literary technique hunt) and prescriptive dynamics surrounding student writing (prompted essays conforming to five-paragraph models) is then placed against, initially, authentic essays. For example, I often share with students essays by Barbara Kingsolver (see *High Tide in Tucson* and *Small Wonder*), focusing on how her essays contrast the expectations for essays students have experienced in high school. A foundational activity asks students to examine several opening paragraphs from ten or so essays by Kingsolver (see Thomas, 2005, pp. 58-59). Instead of structured introductions and overt thesis sentences, students discover that essays open in a variety of ways, primarily seeking to engage and focus the reader. In the Kingsolver samples, for example, we note that she incorporates a wide range of craft in her openings – allusion, wit, literary quotes, hypothetical "you," questions, narrative, misdirection, figurative language, genre manipulation, one-sentence paragraphing, song lyrics, and dialogue.

These opening activities, again, are guided by building student awareness (Johns, 2008) of conventions forming texts so that students can embrace and

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develop their own critical literacy (Freire, 1998). As students build their awareness of how school essays and school literary analysis promote artificial conventions (when compared to authentic texts, such as Kingsolver's), they begin to reconsider essay forms, genre (as readers and writer), what constitutes *text*, what counts as *reading* (we consider reading film and graphic novels, for example), and how all of their reconsiderations are confronting who has power, why, and how.

From the opening consideration of Vonnegut's story as film and challenging students' perceptions of the essay through Kingsolver's essays, we move to considering how college and scholarly conventions for reading and writing compare to their K-12 experiences and, again, authentic models. One approach to increasing student awareness of college and scholarly conventions is to confront traditional citation style sheets. Students tend to leave high school thoroughly familiar with MLA citations (often having failed to conform to MLA conventions in a number of assignments, but not really understanding MLA style narrowly or citation conventions broadly). For my course, since I teach in the education department, I ask students to use APA as an entry point to reconsidering citation, plagiarism, research, and scholarship. I also ask students to consider the conventional expectations for citation found in journalism (much different than in academia) and to explore the hyperlink-based citation found in the growing online world of writing (which spans and has even created genres).

Related to this last point, I share with students my own work as a public intellectual, my blogging that merges public and scholarly work. Many of my public blog posts incorporate traditional citations, hyperlinks, embedded video, and images. The hybrid forms of genre, mode, medium, and even tone allow students to explore, confront, and challenge narrow expectations for text, scholarship, and citation.

The foundational and introductory activities, all confrontations of conventions and expectations grounded in specific contexts (K-12 schooling, university, authentic settings), are designed to prepare students for the central mechanism driving our adventure with genre – choice. Many students, especially so-called “good” students (Scheele, 2004), struggle when allowed and required to make choices about their learning as well as the artifacts they produce, artifacts they associate almost exclusively with being evaluated, graded. Next, then, I examine the paradox of choice in a writing intensive course seeking genre awareness and autonomy in the students.

THE PARADOX OF CHOICE

Building a course on essential and enduring questions – what makes poetry, poetry? or what makes a comic book, a comic book? – allows teachers and students the opportunity to gain critical awareness of literacy conventions as an avenue to reading and re-reading the world, writing and re-writing the world (Freire, 1998). But the challenging paradox of offering and fostering autonomy through choice in the classroom is that many students have few experiences with choice and balk at

choice when offered because they have been conditioned to avoid risk (as a defense mechanism built up within the punitive grading culture of traditional schooling).

However, Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (2012) explain: “The idea of gradual release is quite simple: in the most effective lessons, there is a stepwise transfer of responsibility from the teacher to the student” (p. 39). In other words, a purposeful and systematic release of decisions from the teacher and to the student is not only essential for democratic education that honors human agency, but also best practice. Offering and requiring choice with students, nonetheless, remains challenging, in part because students resist choice.

In my writing intensive first year seminar, choice is central to the two largest elements of the course. The first is that students are asked to draft and submit four original essays throughout the semester, all by choice (students determine the content and form/genre the essays take in conferences with me, although they are confined to non-fiction). The second is that students select a major adaptation unit to experience and then share with the class at the end of the course. Both assignments often cause students a great deal of concern about making the *right* choices and how they will be evaluated.

Writing instruction and assignments have historically been trapped within narrow paradigms of inculcating grammatical and stylistic correctness, conforming to artificial five-paragraph-essay templates, and more recently, fulfilling the prescriptions of a scoring rubric (Kohn, 2006; Wilson, 2006, 2007). As a result, in-school writing and students’ expectations for writing are powerfully linked to traditional pedagogy and assessment practices (writing being primarily evaluated against grammatical correctness and how well the writing conforms to the five-paragraph template and prescriptive writing prompts). Student writers and real-world writers, then, have very little in common; thus, when my students are asked to transition away from behaving as student writers and toward acting as real writers do, they are resistant and ill equipped to fulfill that opportunity. Thus, the paradox of choice.

To support students as writers with choice, first, drafting and feedback for original writing must be de-graded (Bower & Thomas, 2013). In other words, the drafting process must be *feedback rich* without assigning grades to each draft. Helping students transition to a de-graded writing environment is complicated, however, by those students also having to shift away from prescriptive and prompt-based writing and toward making their own decisions as writers. This problem is compounded by students’ weak grasp of genre, form, and writer’s purpose. The paradox of choice, then, is that direct instruction is needed in order to help students acquire the awareness necessary for them to be autonomous.

The texts examined in this writing intensive course all serve to support students as developing writers. We ask, What genres and forms do writers choose, especially in scholarly situations? Simultaneously, students are offered multiple and rich opportunities to mine authentic writing samples for the qualities found in effective and excellent writing while comparing and contrasting what conventions guide both popular and academic writing. As noted earlier, we discuss what techniques, craft, and conventions work in Kingsolver and how her essays compare

and contrast with expectations for student essays in academia, highlighting the nuances of conventions among the disciplines. Students then choose genres, forms, and content for their own essays, providing a foundation for my guiding their drafts. For example, I offer a mentoring role of asking if and how their drafts fulfill the purposes and forms they are seeking to produce.

One of the key aspects of exposing students to authentic texts and exploring the expectations of scholarly writing as those are bound to different fields is guiding students as they come to recognize the importance of evidence in many genres and writing forms. The use of evidence, then, leads to the necessity for citation style sheets. In this course and within the requirement that students write four original essays, one of which must be research-based and cited, students often have authentic recognitions of the need for evidence and citations; this contrasts with the mechanical and often artificial ways in which research and citations are addressed in high school.

Conferences during the drafting process also include discussions of possible abandonment of essays. Along with genre awareness and coming to embrace choice, students need the authentic option of abandoning an essay, despite that decision creating some tension in a classroom setting since the students remain obligated to produce an essay. Throughout this process, the focus must remain on student choice and purposefulness with the teacher playing the role of authoritative mentor. The choice paradox is also apparent in the adaptation unit assignment in the course that provides opportunities for students to confront rich ideas that may (or may not) serve as inspiration for their essays.

While I will detail below an adaptation unit focusing on zombies at the end of this discussion, students in this course are asked to choose not only their essay topics and forms but also a major adaptation unit that includes a work adapted in one or more genres and/or media. For example, students can choose a work such as *Watchmen*, the graphic novel (itself compiled from a comic book series), that has been adapted into a film. Often I encourage students to seek out works that have multiple adaptations. Several rich texts have multiple adaptations such as the following:

- The HBO series *True Blood* is based on The Sookie Stackhouse novels and has also been adapted into graphic novels.
- Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* inspired the 1982 film *Blade Runner* and more recently has been adapted into graphic novels that include every word of the original novel. An interesting aspect of these adaptations is that *Blade Runner* also has several film versions, the theatrical run version and a Director's cut that also was surrounded by a good deal of controversy.
- A fascinating adaptation of the film *The American* is based on the novel *A Very Private Gentleman*, which was itself renamed *The American* once the film was released. Both works are strong texts, but the American in each is significantly different and the works share some basic elements but also differ in important ways.