

TARA NUTT, CHRISTIAN Z. GOERING  
AND ASHLEY N. GERHARDSON

## 1. IT'S LIKE WHEN THE NEW STUFF WE READ MIXES WITH THE OLD AND BECOMES ONE

*Pop Music and Antigone*

### INTRODUCTION

In the film *Mr. Holland's Opus*, the protagonist reaches a frightening moment of realization five months into his first teaching job.

Mr. Holland: "Does anyone here know the difference between the Ionian and Dorian scale? Anybody? [pregnant pause] I just wanted to confirm the fact that I have made absolutely no impact on you in the last five months."

[More silence along with a few awkward chuckles follow his revelation before he begins to relate his curriculum to their music.]

Mr. Holland: "Mr. Sullivan, what kind of music do you like to listen to? Don't be afraid."

Student: "Um, rock and roll"

Mr. Holland: "...I'll bet all of you, whether you know it or not already like Johann Sebastian Bach."

[He plays "A Lover's Concerto" by The Toys, a then recent hit and tells the students it is identical to "Minuet in G major" written 240 years prior by Bach.]

Mr. Holland: "...Now listen and see if you can hear the connective tissue between what I just played and this." (*Field, Cort, Nolin, Duncan, & Herek, 1995*)

Smiles adorn Mr. Holland's students' faces, signs of affirmation for their teacher's methods. In Hollywood, Mr. Holland's students began to develop an understanding and appreciation for the music he wanted to teach because he related it to the music they listened to, their popular culture at the time. In real classrooms, teachers today sometimes face challenges when attempting to teach traditional content; rather than teaching Bach, English teachers often focus on classic works of fiction and non-fiction. These texts are often far removed from students' interests and lives. For many teachers, the struggle to get adolescents to read the classics is one very much worth it. Canonical texts provide windows to other worlds and have enjoyed widespread support in the English language arts curriculum.

We—Tara and Chris—found ourselves wondering how to create relevancy to *Antigone*, a text Tara was slated to teach to sophomores in the then coming months. We returned to the idea of using music in instruction because we thought, like Mr. Holland, that it had the potential to interest and engage students and to perhaps provide a bridge between their world and ours. Later, Ashley joined us in the preparation of this manuscript.

As one student in our focus class defined the concept, *it's like when the new stuff we read mixes with the old and becomes one*. Many reading researchers and practitioners agree that one of the most important skills advanced readers employ is to make intertextual connections while reading. The popularized approach of having students make “text to self,” “text to text,” and “text to world” connections speak to the applicability of intertextuality in educational settings.

Music, we contend, is one ‘connective tissue’ between literature taught in school and the students in our classes. Music is not the only method of reaching today’s students nor is it a panacea able to reach all; it does however, provide a short, accessible medium with which to work and remains firmly situated in the messages and products of popular culture. We chose to direct our instruction and inquiry towards the purposeful interaction between texts and music as a way to understand students connecting with literature. Each year we spend in education, it feels more difficult to interest, engage, and motivate students to read and interact with lengthier works. In an effort to more deeply understand an approach that accessed students’ musical knowledge as they were reading *Antigone*, we tried this approach and kept track of the experiences. We wondered whether high school sophomores, asked to read the classic Greek play, *Antigone*, would make thoughtful musical connections between the play and their own musical knowledge.

#### BUILDING BLOCKS

In thinking about the questions this practice posed, we immediately begin to situate our inquiry at the intersect of the work on the use of popular music in teaching literature and the construct of intertextuality.

##### *Popular Music in the Classroom*

One approach documented in classroom use for a variety of purposes is that of teaching myriad literacy skills with the aid of popular music. This practice has been at least subversive in English classrooms for decades now. In a 1969 *College Composition* article, Steven Carter shared his use of The Beatles, “a contemporary music with a vast and rewarding writing potential for students” (p. 228) with journal readers. Carter used music to teach his students “better writing skills,” by accessing the “common rhetorical elements of voice, tone, structure, [and] continuity” (p. 228) to do so. Since Carter’s work, many have written about the use of popular music. Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) used hip-hop music to study that culture and

advocated that song lyrics are, “literary texts and can be used to scaffold literary terms and concepts and ultimately foster literary interpretations. [These texts] are rich in imagery and metaphor and can be used to teach irony, tone, diction, point of view [...] theme, plot, motif, and character development” (p. 89). Copeland and Goering’s (2003) classroom-based account of an interdisciplinary approach to teaching the Faust theme through Blues music, literature, and film provides further support for the connections between music and literature, a connection also discussed in book form (Deither, 2003; Lamont-Hill, 2010; Sitomer & Cirelli, 2004). Caswell’s (2005) work emphasizes using music in the teaching of a classic work, Steinbeck’s *The Pearl*; he relates, “I know many of my students do not possess the experiences to emotionally connect with Kino through a mere reading of the novel” (p. 62). According to Caswell, “Students’ understanding of character remains at a textbook level without the emotional comprehension of how or why the character thinks or acts” (p. 63). His solution to this common classroom problem was to teach *The Pearl* through music, something he found most adolescents connect with readily. Sewell and Denton (2011) situate music within larger units of instruction presented as anchored media instruction, for example, placing music in a specific academic context like that of teaching literature. Rubin (2011) combines the heavy metal album *Operation: Mindcrime* to teach *1984* with his students and advocates, “the use of nonprint materials, such as music, [to] help students engage with the literature presented and encourage a higher level of literary and socio-cultural analysis than just covering the text alone” (p. 78). Scant empirical research on the practice of using music in the teaching of English leaves the area of interest firmly situated as a *best practice*, something many teachers believe works and thus use with their students.

*Intertextuality.* Intertexto, “to intermingle while weaving” is a Latin word that was morphed into “intertextuality,” by Julia Kristeva, a French semiotician who noted in 1967 that “any text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (1986, p. 66). This concept can also be traced to 1938 and *Literature as Exploration* by Louise Rosenblatt: “The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and particular physical condition ... in a never-to-be-duplicated combination” (pp. 30–31). Bloome and Egan-Robertson (1993) placed understandings of intertextuality into three different paradigms: “Literary studies, social semiotic perspectives, and educational studies of reading and writing” (p. 305). Our approach is one based on the latter, “whatever intertextuality exists depends on the connections made by the reader...[and] [t] he reader may make connections between one or more aspects of the text and other literary texts that she or he has read or heard” (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, p. 306). Just as music is critical to our project, the larger concept of intertextuality is too. Harvey and Goudvis (2007) explain, “People’s knowledge of any topic is encapsulated in the forms they know that are relevant to the topic” (p. 21). It stands to reason that the more one reads, the more one can mentally interconnect texts while reading; it also stands to reason that

adolescents have more musical texts swirling around in their heads than examples of book-length fiction or non-fiction. Like Bloome and Egan-Robertson (1993), our approach to intertextuality is one “not limited to literary texts” (p. 306).

Providing further support for intertextuality, Lenski (2001) investigated the connections that competent readers make during discussions with literature. The framework for this study was based on the idea that, “As readers experience a text, either by individual reading or through shared reading, they develop a provisional interpretation of that text” (p. 314). Lenski (2001) continues,

[R]eaders use many texts, past and present, to construct meaning from a new text. The meaning that readers construct is developed through the transaction between the reader’s evolving inner text, the new text, and the context of reading. Students, therefore, learn from interpreting a current text through their connections with multiple, past texts. (p. 315)

These connections to prior knowledge and previous reading experiences may not happen as readily for newer, adolescent readers. Texts from their immediate world may connect more readily.

#### PLAN OF ACTION

Relating *Antigone* to high school sophomores might seem like a tall order. It is. To begin the conversation with students, we began by reading the prologue of the play together and modeled making connections to first anything and then specifically to music. Next, we started working our way through the play by asking the students to make intertextual connections from the text of *Antigone* to music with which they were familiar using a graphic organizer (Figure 1) developed for this purpose. We should say that students also undertook other activities while studying the play. Connection charts were checked periodically throughout the 4-week unit.

Page #	Text Reference	Name of Song	Artist

Figure 1. Connection chart student handout

In making each connection, students were asked to note the page number and give a brief explanation of each which served to help Tara check for understanding while she taught *Antigone*. The 27 sophomores in Tara’s class generated a total of 380 connections to *Antigone* while they read the play. Of the connections, “Womanizer” by Britney Spears was connected most frequently – six times. Other frequently mentioned songs were, “Where is the Love,” by The Black Eyed Peas (5), “Kryptonite” by 3 Doors Down (5), “Hot N Cold” by Katy Perry (4), and “Miss Independent,” by Ne-Yo (4). The artists most frequently connected to *Antigone* were Spears (12), Paramore (11), Wisin y Yandel (9), and Taylor Swift (8). An example of the connections made are represented in [Figure 2](#).

Page #	Text Reference	Name of Song	Artist
754	“Clashed along in combat”	“Citizen Soldier”	3 Doors Down
749–752	Argument between Antigone & Ismene	“Jericho”	Hilary Duff
760–761	Creon’s anger	“Riot”	Three Days Grace
758–761	Creon wants control over the Chorus	“Before He Cheats”	Carrie Underwood
756	“And death it is, yet money talks”	“Mia”	Paper Planes
770–774	Haimon is respectful, but wants to save Antigone	“Don’t Take the Girl”	Tim McGraw
775 (chorus)	Haimon’s love for Antigone	“Love Story”	Taylor Swift
775	When Antigone dies	“Independence Day”	Martina McBride

Figure 2. Musical intertextuality example

### Connection Explanations

Following the reading of the play and participation in the *Antigone* unit, students were asked to choose one of their connections and write an explanation of it, essentially explaining the specifics of their thinking and reasoning behind that connection. Students then defended their connections with a short presentation in front of the class. Student explanations varied in length, depth, and levels of critical analysis.

As Mr. Holland described ‘connective tissue’ in his context, these students were asked to make associations between their popular music and *Antigone*. As we read the written explanations of the students’ connections, we observed students taking on traits of argumentative writing in their explanations. Students used quotations and other evidence to support their ideas, often naming the author of the reference

or character in the play. Grant's (all student names are pseudonyms) text provides an example:

One of the song connections I made to *Antigone* was the song, "Defend You," by Silverstein. One part of the song says, "Defending you is getting harder every day." I think this describes *Antigone*'s attitude towards defending her brother, Polynices. She knows defending her family is the right thing to do but each day it gets harder and harder until she finally cracks. This song is a perfect example of her attitude throughout the play.

This specific connection that utilized song lyrics and specific examples from the play provides insights into this particular student—a Silverstein listener and *Antigone* reader.

Some of the connection explanations were straightforward as is exemplified in Eileen's connection between the play and the Black Eyed Peas song, "Where's the Love?" about which she explains, "this is why I made this connection," following a single sentence explaining the connection between Creon, *Antigone*, and Polynices. Eileen represented a simple literal connection between the title of the song and a scene in the play. We valued each connection made though as teachers we wondered whether or not some of the students were actually reading and comprehending the play based on the simplicity of their responses.

Alexandra shared a justification for the song choice she made replete with complex sentence structure, a quotation from the play, specific evidence from the song, and a summarizing final sentence that reinforces her ideas.

The song connection I think best fits the story in the end is the song, "Animal I Have Become," by Three Days Grace. In the end of the play, Creon changes dramatically because he finally understands everything he knows has gone wrong. In the song, the singer talks about how everything the person has done turned him into an animal and that he regrets what he's done because his actions ended up hurting him in the long run. That's exactly what Creon means in the play when he says, "I have been rash and foolish. I have killed my son and wife. . . fate has brought all my pride the thought of dust." Creon realizes he has become an animal and must suffer the consequences of his actions.

Following our readings of the 27 passages, we concluded that David's connection was the most elaborate.

I made a connection with the song "Fences," by Paramore. It reminds me of the path that Creon took. "You can't turn back, because this road is all you'll ever have," is the specific line that reminded me of Creon and *Antigone* as well. Both characters were too proud to stop and think about what would happen and they took a certain action. Neither could turn back and repair the damage done, so in a way, both followed to see where their paths would lead them.

From Grant who made a very simple connection to David who displayed skills beyond those of his peers, markers of academic writing were present in the responses. Tara remarked that her students far exceeded their academic writing skills versus what they'd previously achieved. While this was not the point of the activity, we do believe it is worth noting in a high stakes, standardized testing-crazed school culture.

#### TAKE-AWAYS

In analyzing the text to song connections and student-authored explanations, we gained several insights about the strategy and about the participants. *First, although* using music is one approach that many teachers draw on, we've heard teachers say that they used music *just for the fun of it*, or as a way to pander to students' interests. The connections and writing samples shared in this chapter provide a different picture. The student work shows that students were able to create well-developed arguments by making connections between their knowledge of pop music and their reading of *Antigone*.

We know that good readers connect to other texts as they read—these students were afforded the chance to practice that skill and did so in an admirable way. The connections to *popular culture* and school-sanctioned uses of students' popular culture can provide opportunities for students to engage in meaningful literacy practices. As Hagood, Alvermann, and Heron-Hruby (2010) explain, “pop culture texts, when viewed as part of everyday culture, convey meaningful messages that are as varied and complex as the readers, viewers, listeners who come into contact with them” (p. 18). Students who made and defended connections grappled with those meanings and messages. Beyond, the popular music texts, connections revealed attributes of the people making these connections. Identity, literacy ability, or even values could be teased out of which popular songs were immediately accessible to the students. A cursory glance back to the Billboard Top 100 leading up to the time period of the study reveals that “Where is the Love” and “Kryptonite” had experienced recent chart success and were likely part of the students' immediate popular culture. The juxtaposition of a group of students, for example, that connected more to Britney Spears with a group that connected more to Taylor Swift could begin to build an understanding of students' identities.

Whether it is music or one of the other motivating forces in the lives of teenagers, the coalescence, harmony, and/or ‘connective tissue’ between pedagogy, curriculum, and adolescents is one that *can* authorize students and teachers to find success with the curriculum. When we, as teachers, incorporate texts that are part of the student domain like music, we run the risk of “schoolify[ng]” (Hagood et al., 2010) those texts. One important element of our approach we'd like to reiterate is that it is based in what the students bring with them, their cultural capital, and thus we contend it helps students by putting the ball in their courts. Even so, when we use music to attempt to entice students to read *Antigone* or the like and perform writing tasks that include their music, success is not guaranteed.

## PRACTICAL ADVICE

Teachers considering an approach to teaching a canonical text such as the one we share here might think about it as but one of many ways of helping students see the relevance and connection from their adolescent lives to the school curriculum. Those interested in replicating all or part of this approach might also consider having students connect to other forms of popular culture and to have the students interpret their connections for meaning themselves. As students make intertextual connections, we, as people concerned with their success, can begin to understand the concepts of academic and personal identity, values, and literacy abilities as they contribute to other literary practices in or out of school.

Since the century old fight about what should or should not be used for literature instruction seems to be alive and well, we assert that now is the time for a renewed and vigorous discussion of the validity of alternative, innovative approaches to teaching and what counts as text. We contend that if teachers use music (or other popular culture texts) in their classroom just for the fun of it, they will be serving the psyches of their students well. In the age of accountability, high-stakes testing, and common curricula, the act of listening to, appreciating, and discussing a song from time to time may very well be the motivational method that many students desire. Some of our students needed that. The opus of song lyrics as discussion texts often inspire students to not just listen to the music but also listen to the words, hence providing a ‘connective tissue’ to other worlds. Perhaps the best use of outside texts like song lyrics is when they are brought to class by the students, when they can be combined and used with existing curriculum acting to bind it all together, and therefore “illuminat[ing] and mak[ing] relevant what may appear to . . . students as the cryptic experiences of obscure humans in ancient times” (Luebke, 1995, p. 11).

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*Tara Nutt*  
*Teacher, Old High Middle School*  
*Bentonville, AR*

*Christian Z. Goering*  
*Associate Professor, English Education*  
*University of Arkansas*

*Ashley N. Gerhardson*  
*Instructional Facilitator, Darby Junior High School*  
*Fort Smith, AR*

LESSON PLAN

*Instructional Goal*

This lesson, a miniature version of the project the article discusses, can be completed in a single class period and is designed to build skills in making connections to text and to give purpose for careful, engaged reading along the way.

*Introductory Hook*

To begin the lesson, take something from popular culture such as a movie, song, article out of the newspaper, idea, etc. and ask students to connect as many different other things to that original idea. As the class works together on this, keep a record of all of the different connections made and at the end of the connections, ask the class to look at all of what was contributed and to make meaning of it. So what? Ask them, “taken together, what do all of these connections mean and/or reveal?”

*Teacher Tasks*

Short pieces of fiction and non-fiction are a natural part of all ELA classrooms and the rest of this lesson should take one day to complete. Prepare a piece of fiction or non-fiction that connects to the unit being taught.

*Activities*

1. Read aloud the first part of the story.
2. Ask students to make connections from the story to any/all music they can think of.
3. Share and discuss connections.
4. Read the remainder of the story, asking students to continue to make connections to music.
5. For the last 15 minutes of class, ask the students to look again at their connections and decide what kind of connections they are (see connection types in Myers & Vest chapter, this volume).
6. As a final discussion, ask students what the value is in doing something like this? Ask them questions about the piece they read as well—did the musical reading have any negative consequences on their interpretation of the piece or the value they took from the story itself?
7. As a possible extension activity or a quick ticket out of the door, ask students to choose a connection to explain in more depth.