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5. WOODY AND ME

Connecting Millennials to the Great Depression

INTRODUCTION

Having taught eleventh-grade English with an American literature focus for much of my secondary teaching career, Depression-era literature enjoyed a welcome place in my classroom due to the abundance of poignant narratives about one of America's darkest times. Not only did Americans valiantly encounter bleak economic conditions, they heroically endured the nation's worst ecological disaster, the Dust Bowl. Even though Depression-era literature is significant and rewarding, my students' impoverished prior knowledge of the era's social, cultural, and economic contexts problematized instruction. Rather than appreciating tales about migrant farmers or "exodusters" my students steadfastly refused to complete assigned readings because they didn't connect with the stories; they simply could not fathom the environmental horrors of the Dust Bowl. My students, immersed in a highly technological era, found it difficult to conceptualize entire sections of the country ravaged by hundreds of "black blizzards" and the resultant plagues of dust pneumonia, malnutrition, and homelessness that ravaged the southern plains.

This chapter explores a unit plan aimed at engaging readers through the application of historical-period music. Why music? It is the medium for knowledge generation. As Campbell, Connell, and Beegle (2007) note, "In adolescence as in infancy, childhood, and adulthood music plays a valuable and valued role in the individual's social-emotional and intellectual-artistic domains" (p. 221). Teens employ devices—cell phones, laptops, and tablets—to manipulate texts and then re-manipulate texts which in turn are filtered and re-filtered by teens and peers through an ongoing process of signification. As a consequence, students develop a distinct set of out-of-school literacies that are far more complex than in prior eras; they compose connective tissue within a multiplicity of formats beyond the printed page (Williams, 2005, p. 703). Hence, by tapping into their finely-developed out-of-school literacies, we can spark interest and generate prior knowledge for the engagement of Depression era literature.

WOODY AND ME: A TOUR GUIDE TO THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Enter poet-singer Woody Guthrie, one of his generation's most powerful voices, as a tour guide to the Great Depression; his message and his music can help Millennials see, hear, and feel the pathos of the period while making connections to their own lives and course content. America during the Depression, with its food lines, homelessness, dust storms, and widespread misery appears very alien to many of today's tech-savvy teens. Nevertheless, Woody Guthrie, the "Dust Bowl Troubadour," brilliantly represents a people, culture, and literature scarred by economic and ecological collapse. Woody was, as Cassuto (2012) described, a "guitar-wielding knight errant who was writing and singing on behalf of the poor, the disenfranchised, the workers: people who needed a voice" (para. 14). Facciola (2011) poignantly characterized Woody's life and career: "Guthrie is the archetype... while his life was perhaps not admirable, his music captured the narrative tradition of the wandering American minstrel" (p. 1280).

The Dust Bowl Troubadour's music, art, writings, pictures, and biography may be employed via a utilitarian model for the study of pop culture of the 1930s. His works craft connective tissue between classic texts, literary concepts, and historical epochs. Woody's singing and writing about the Great Depression are wondrously multicultural, providing teachers with an opportunity to explore issues prevalent in the 1930s and today. In the next few pages, we will explore a Woody Guthrie unit based upon 12 years of experiences teaching eleventh grade English.

WOODY IN THE ELA CLASSROOM

The Guthrie unit is comprised of lessons featuring his songs as well as images and video relevant to the era to produce background. To help us ascertain rigor in classroom activities, I draw upon Webb's (1997; 2007) four "Depth-of-Knowledge" (DOK) levels. This framework denotes the complexity of thinking necessary to successfully complete a particular task. Level 1, recall and reproduction, asks students to use, describe, or explain definitions, concepts, terms and formulas. Level 2, skills and concepts, has students organize, explain, and interpret information in order to explain, make observations, or compare and contrast. Level 3, strategic thinking and reasoning, entails reasoning and thinking based upon evidence in order to justify conclusions. In Level 3, there may be multiple "right" answers. Finally, in Level 4, extended thinking, students plan, develop, and consider over a longer period of time answers based upon a synthesis of critiques, experiments, and connections between multiple ideas (2007, pp. 11-12).

Students also have opportunities to compose their thoughts in smaller assignments that form a bridge to a five-page research paper. Consequently, students write a short report; complete graphic organizers based upon media analysis; participate in a group project analyzing primary sources; and create multimodal compositions, or

“PowToons.” Rather than creating a simple argument based upon dry statistics and facts, the unit helps students to consider how the events affected the people who lived through them; hence, they synthesize the material to visualize the implication of their reading (DOK level 4).

LESSON ONE

The goal of the first lesson in this unit is to teach students to analyze non-print texts. To anchor the lesson, I show pictures featuring children who wore “flour sack” dresses. The dresses were so popular that manufacturers included dress patterns and offered multiple prints and colors. Students then research and select an image about the Great Depression. The picture became a “text” for study. To scaffold textual analysis, we focus on one of our senses: sight. Students then write a report of four or five paragraphs (DOK level 3) hypothesizing what the figures might be doing in the photograph, and describing the setting, and any other information helpful for understanding it better. Mini-writing benefits students by familiarizing them with the era; more importantly, it gets them contextualizing and writing about these events in a more incremental fashion rather than grappling with the subject in a five-page paper. Furthermore, we hone our research skills by creating a MLA-style Works Cited using photographs as our source entries (DOK level 1). Finally, students share their observations findings in class (DOK level 3), thereby making learning a social act.

In general, most students produce recall-level writing describing what literally transpired in the picture. However, I am often pleasantly surprised to see some students writing fictitious narratives, thereby demonstrating some creativity beyond merely the reporting of what they literally saw in the picture.

LESSON TWO

Lesson One focuses on visual texts; we add auditory texts for schema-building in Lesson Two. I utilize a two-minute clip from Ken Burns’ *The Dust Bowl* (2012) to introduce Guthrie to the class. The clip also outlines the mistreatment of the “Okie” in California. Having established context on Guthrie and the plight of the Okies, we examine Guthrie’s song, “Do Re Mi,” from Kerr’s (2012) video essay, “The Dust Bowl Balladeer.” It combines songs with iconic images like Dorothea Lang’s photography.

I use graphic organizers to make learning more tangible and engaging. Robinson, D. H., Katayama, A. D., Beth, et al. (2006) found that “When students take notes...they generally comprehend better because note taking requires that students selectively attend to the information, and that activity assists in encoding” (p. 103). In the prereading stage of a text, graphic organizers activate schema to prepare students for new information. During the reading stage, students organize

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information and take note of important concepts. Finally, they summarize, assess comprehension, and highlight new learning (Singleton & Filce, 2015, p. 111).

The “Do Re Mi” graphic organizer contains level 1 to 3 tasks where students responded to the six questions (see [Figure 1](#)). These organizers provide formative feedback about student thinking, and they help students analyze and compare multiple texts. In the third column, students record a peer’s answer. This fosters a more social dynamic by considering alternative responses.

Questions	Your Answer	Peer’s Answer
Who migrated to California?		
What were the migrants called?		
What problems did they have when they arrived?		
What was an example of racism from the film?		
What are Guthrie’s tone and message in “Do Re Mi”?		
How would you react if you migrated to California and faced similar experiences?		

Figure 1. “Do Re Mi” graphic organizer

LESSON THREE

In Lesson Three, students analyze two of Guthrie’s songs as texts. Anchoring the assignment, we view Stead’s (2008) YouTube video that combines videos of migrants traveling to California with Guthrie’s “Talking Dust Bowl Blues.” The text wonderfully captures the difficulty of the text and especially highlights the crudeness of the migrant’s vehicles. For example, as Guthrie sings, “I was bouncin ‘up and down/Like a popcorn a popin’,” an old Ford jarringly bounces up and down as it crosses an old wooden bridge. The other anchor, “Dust Storm Disaster,” is featured on Kerr’s (2012) YouTube video. The combination of image and song poignantly captures the terror of Black Sunday. To guide students through textual analysis, we use the “Song Analysis” graphic organizer (see [Figure 2](#)) featuring a range of DOK level questions. In the fourth and fifth columns, students do some extended thinking and record a peer’s thoughts. In the last column, students select one of their favorite songs and compare it to Woody’s. This column follows the utilitarian model for the recontextualization of pop culture by providing students an opportunity to bring their musical interests into the classroom. Since music reflects the spirit of the times through lyric, instrumentation, and rhythm, students’ comparison and contrasts of musical texts, therefore, increases their historical schema.

Questions	Evidence from “Talking Dust Bowl Blues”	Evidence from “Dust Storm Disaster”	Your Reaction	Peer’s Reaction	Your Song Compared to Woody’s
Your Song Title					
Song’s thesis or message					
Woody’s ethos (how he demonstrates concern for his topic/ audience)					
What images enhance or deny the message?					
List two or three words that enhance or weaken the message?					

Figure 2. “Song Analysis” graphic organizer

LESSON FOUR

Lesson Four draws upon Guthrie’s powerful ballad, “Don’t Kill My Baby and My Son.” A stark reminder of race relations in Oklahoma in the early twentieth century, it has significant parallels to current events throughout the United States. The song recounts the 1911 lynching of an African-American woman, Laura Nelson, and her 13-year-old son, L.D., following the accidental shooting of a deputy sheriff, George Loney, who was investigating livestock theft. Although the two were incarcerated, a lynch mob broke them out of jail. Laura gave birth while she was in prison; the infant was never found. Prior to the lynching, she was raped. The incident, occurring near their hometown was very personal for the Guthrie family: Woody’s father, Charley, was a party to the lynching (Chimesfreedom, 2011). Woody did not approve of his father’s actions: he wrote the ballad from Laura’s point of view, providing a critical voice for a woman battered and marginalized by society.

As a prereading activity and media anchor, we view the infamous photo of the Nelsons strung from a bridge. The class discusses what would make 58 spectators (including 6 women and 17 children) lynch a family and then commemorate it in a postcard. Students read the first four paragraphs of the Wikipedia article “Lynching of Laura and L.D. Nelson” for background into the incident. As a post-reading activity, the class deliberates: what prompted the initial arrest; who was *murdered*; who was punished; what happened to the baby (level 1). We then shift to a level 4 question in which they ponder the relevance of the Nelson tragedy to current racial issues.

After discussion, students form teams for a research activity based on primary texts of the era. Each team is assigned to read a particular text and determine its

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message, tone, and purpose. Team A studies a May 25, 1911, article from the *Okemah Ledger* recounting the hanging in a way that justified the lynch mob's acts. Team B reviews a much different article from May 25, 1911, issue of *The Independent* in that it was sympathetic to the Nelsons. Team C studies the song in order to examine how it differs from Guthrie's other material. Once complete, all three teams compare and contrast the texts to demonstrate multiple interpretations (level 4) of the incident.

ASSESSMENT

The summative assessment is a traditional five-page research paper. Given that they have now worked the material in a variety of ways, students operate at the highest DOK levels in that they produce substantive writing that is organized, explains and evaluates information instead of simply recalling it like an old-fashioned book report. As it is important to provide scaffolds for the writing of a longer essay, the unit employs two prewriting activities. The first activity is a one-page letter to me where the student describes what his or her essay will be about and why the topic would be of interest to his or her audience. The letter is an informal way for students to conceptualize their smaller writing assignments as a draft of a potentially larger work. Ultimately, the activity compels them to determine their research topic so they have time to cognitively process their ideas before moving into the drafting stage. Finally, the letters provide a feedback mechanism so we can refine their topics.

The second prewriting activity continues their use of multimodal intertextuality to build background and generate new knowledge. Using the free, web-based software, PowToons, students create a three to four minute animated presentation that communicates their writing topic to the class. PowToons permit students to recontextualize historical facts and figures into an audio-visual presentation. As Hagood, Alvermann, and Heron-Hruby (2010) found, activities that draw upon students' visual literacies enhance motivation and performance (p. 28). The assignment generates content for students for their final essay as they write a script for the PowToon. PowToons also permit another opportunity for students to exercise their research skills in that they find and cite sources. In terms of scaffolding student writing, the more tasks that inexperienced writers are required to perform, the more mistakes they make. Hence, by simplifying and practicing writing skills, the better their writing becomes. Lastly, as students narrate their presentations, they literally develop their voice on the topic. Through scaffolding and anchored media instruction based upon images, music, and video, students are able to recontextualize new information in order to produce cogent, reasoned writing.

Throughout the unit, we generated Depression-era background knowledge. The primary learning outcome of the unit is to generate historical knowledge of the Great Depression in order to write a five-page essay; however, the lessons would make a natural bridge for the teaching of Depression-era literature such as *Of Mice and Men*. For example, I find that the largest problem students face when reading literature is that they cannot fathom the plot because they cannot visualize

the setting; historical events are much too alien to them. According to Oaul & Verhulst (2007), 90% of the knowledge used to comprehend a text comes from a student's schema (p. 208). "Prior knowledge about a topic," they contended, "makes it possible for readers to fill in gaps, read between the lines, and make sense of what they are reading; a developed schema can result in reading ease and increased comprehension" (p. 208). Fortunately, our Dust Bowl troubadour can help students navigate the past via schema development. Terkel (2005) commendably articulated Woody Guthrie's status in music history:

Woody Guthrie was, is, America's balladeer. During the epoch of our deepest despair, the Great Depression, his were the songs that lifted the lowly spirits of the "ordinary," the millions of the dispossessed. They may have lacked for bread, but he offered them something else: self-esteem, hope, and a laugh or two along the way. (p. 6)

Woody was and is a troubadour of his time. He is a tour guide, helping our students visualize a long ago era so they may connect it with their own perspectives. He is a standard for writing with passion, energy, and empathy. Woody Guthrie offers much in our high school English classrooms and he is a perfect fit for connecting the millennials to the Great Depression.

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“TALKING DUST BOWL BLUES” LESSON PLAN

Instructional Goal

Students will critically read two Woody Guthrie songs, “Talking Dust Bowl Blues” and “Dust Storm Disaster” in order to complete a graphic organizer which analyzes compares and contrasts thesis, ethos, imagery, and word choice of the two songs.

Standards

1. The student identifies, analyzes, and applies knowledge of theme in literary works and provides evidence from the works to support understanding. The student
 - a. Applies knowledge of the concept that the theme or meaning of a selection represents a universal view or comment on life or society and provides support from the text for the identified theme.
 - b. Evaluates the way an author’s choice of words advances the theme or purpose of the work.
2. The student carefully reads (musical and written) text to determine what the texts say explicitly and make logical inferences about the meaning of texts.
3. The student assesses how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
4. The student draws evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Introductory Hook

Review these questions with students to connect back to the previous lesson:

What was the Dust Bowl?

How much of the country was affected by the Dust Bowl?

Could the Dust Bowl happen again?

Teacher Tasks

Provide a written copy of song lyrics for each student and play a video version of each song.

“Talking Dustbowl Blues” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkAxuqrVNBM>

“Dust Storm Disaster” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vc0FzJdxK1o>

Also, provide a copy of the “Song Analysis Graphic Organizer” (see below). Review any new terms students may need to know in order to complete the activity (e.g., ethos).

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CRITICALLY READ GUTHRIE VIDEOS

Allow students to watch to the songs once while reading the written lyrics. Teachers who have a web site or learning management system might consider posting YouTube links so students can re-watch them as needed.

Then play the videos again, instructing students to highlight or circle words/phases that are essential to understanding the song's meaning.

Activity 1

Complete the two first two columns of the Song Analysis graphic organizer using evidence from "Talking Dust Bowl Blues" and "Dust Storm Disaster" to answer the questions about:

- Song's thesis or message
- Woody's ethos (how he demonstrates concern for his topic/audience)
- What images enhance or deny the message?
- List two or three words that enhance or weaken the message?

Activity 2

Reflect on the songs. Then complete the "Your Reaction" column of the graphic organizer.

Activity 3

Get with a partner and discuss your graphic organizers. Record his or her answers in the fourth column of the graphic organizer.

Activity 4

In the last column, students select one of their favorite songs and compare it to Woody's. This column follows the utilitarian model for the recontextualization of pop culture by providing students an opportunity to bring their musical interests into the classroom. Since music reflects the spirit of the times through lyric, instrumentation, and rhythm, students' comparison and contrasts of musical texts, therefore, increases their historical schema.

Activity 5

Now that students have had time to analyze and discuss the songs with a partner, bring the class together for a whole class discussion of their finds.

Either draw or project the graphic organizer on the chart and display their answers to highlight student answers.

“Song Analysis Graphic Organizer”

Questions	Evidence from “Talking Dust Bowl Blues”	Evidence from “Dust Storm Disaster”	Your Reaction	Colleague’s Reaction	Your Song Compared to Woody’s
Your Song Title					
Song’s thesis or message					
Woody’s ethos (how he demonstrates concern for his topic/ audience)					
What images enhance or deny the message?					
List two or three words that enhance or weaken the message?					