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Girls, Guns, and Zombies: Five Dimensions of Teaching and Learning in *The Walking Dead*

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ABSTRACT

Rooted in sociocultural theory, this article utilizes a conceptual framework derived from Alexander, Schallert, and Reynolds' four topographical dimensions of learning: *who of learning, what of learning, where of learning,* and *when of learning*. Situated learning (Lave and Wenger) is presented as a fifth dimension to address how learning occurs in communities of practice absent of formal schooling. Content analysis (Elo and Kyngass) is used to analyze a teaching and learning event from an episode of *The Walking Dead* based on the five topographical dimensions of learning listed above. Findings provide insights for pedagogical application for grades 7-12 by addressing the potential benefits of contextualized and scaffolded situated learning activities, gender equity, and authentic high-stress high-risk tasks in secondary level curriculum design.

KEYWORDS

Popular Culture, Teaching Methods, Gender Equity, *The Walking Dead*, Socioculturalism, Situated Learning, Apocalyptic Media, Interdisciplinary Research, Communities of Practice, Contextualized Curriculum

The television series *The Walking Dead* (Darabont et al.) has become a phenomenon in American pop culture. Set in a post-apocalyptic Southeastern United States, the series follows a small group of survivors as they strive for existence on a zombie-infested planet. The zombies, referred to as Walkers, are relentless in their pursuit of human flesh, with the unfortunate soul who falls victim to their attack becoming a Walker himself. With characters living in a world devoid of any formal schooling and yet totally dependent on the development of skills for survival, *The Walking Dead* is ripe with examples of teaching and learning outside of the traditional classroom setting. In this article a teaching and learning event from *The Walking Dead* will be analyzed through a topographical interactive framework comprised of five dimensions of learning.

Prior to addressing the conceptual framework on which this article is built, it is critical to discuss what learning is in order to contextualize how learning occurs within a society absent of formal schooling. It is difficult to define *learning* due to the existence of a broad spectrum of theoretical explanations for the concept. While many learning theories share overlapping elements, there are also numerous irreconcilable differences among these frameworks. Thus, rather than attempting to produce a universal definition for learning, Alexander, Schallert, and Reynolds provide nine principles to describe the concept as derived from commonalities among salient learning theories.

The first principle the authors propose is that learning is change. From learning how to crawl to analyzing complex mathematical theories, humans are constantly changing, adapting, and evolving. This change not only influences individuals but also the entire system in which they exist. Next, the authors contend that learning is inevitable, essential, and ubiquitous. To state it simply, to live is to learn. Whether one learns not to touch a hot stove or how to quickly analyze traffic patterns on the highway, humans are kept alive by their ability to recognize and decipher environmental stimuli. The inevitability of learning does not, however, suggest that learning is irresistible. Consider the alcoholic who receives multiple infractions for driving under the influence. Despite his awareness that driving under the influence of alcohol may result in negative outcomes (e.g., court dues, imprisonment, loss of license), he continues to drive while intoxicated. The previous example segues into Alexander, Schallert, and Reynolds' proposition that some learning may be disadvantageous. Although learning is generally viewed as a positive endeavor, in certain contexts the object of learning may not be beneficial (e.g., the experience of overdosing on drugs).

Next, the authors propose that learning can either be tacit and incidental or conscious and intentional. For example, there are contexts in which learning occurs without conscious awareness (e.g., recognizing that stubbing a toe hurts), while in other contexts learning is an intentional and active pursuit (e.g., learning to fly fish). The sixth principle in the model proposes that learning is framed by our humanness. The authors contend that the biological features of our bodies (e.g., senses, cognition, psychological attributes) make learning central to the human experience.

Alexander, Schallert, and Reynolds present learning as both a process and a product. As such, learning is an active event that also has some type of output. Consider the student who goes through the process of learning to play the guitar. In addition to her procedural efforts (e.g., practicing scales, researching chord variations, developing hand dexterity), she will be able to produce a product as evidence that learning has occurred (e.g., the ability to play a song). The eighth principle presented by the authors is that learning is experienced in diverse ways, depending on the time and context in which it occurs. What and how one learns can be shaped by social, cognitive, and biological factors throughout his or her life (e.g., age, level of maturity, life experience, sociocultural environment). Finally, Alexander, Schallert, and Reynolds contend that learning is interactional. Learning does not occur in a vacuum, but rather as a scenario in which "learners are influenced by, and at the same time push back, take from, change, control, and create the environment in which learning is situated" (180).

The authors' last principle allows the act of learning to be anchored within a sociocultural

framework. Socioculturalism, a theoretical framework of learning and development based on the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, proposes that higher level mental functioning finds its origins in the shared experiences of society. Vygotsky contends that only after a concept exists outside of the individual (i.e. externalized) can it exist within the individual (i.e. internalized). One way in which this process (externalization ↔ internalization) can be illustrated is as a continuous spiral referred to as the Vygotsky Space (Gavalek and Raphael; Harre). The Vygotsky Space uses two overlaying dimensions, public ↔ private activity and social ↔ individual activity, to represent the externalization ↔ internalization process. When observed as a series of quadrants, these dimensions show that the construction of knowledge originates within the sociocultural context, is then transformed by individuals within society, and is ultimately reintroduced to society for the cycle to begin again. As described above, the foundation of Vygotsky's theory is that learning cannot be decontextualized from one's sociocultural surroundings because learning does not occur in isolation.Socioculturalism proposes that social interaction influences development because novice learners are dependent on the assistance of *more knowledgeable others* for sociocognitive progression. Vygotsky supports this stance in his writings on the zone of proximal development. The zone of proximal development refers to the distance between one's ability to complete a task on her own (i.e. actual development) and her ability to complete a task with the assistance of a *more knowledgeable other* (i.e. potential development). As learners are continually challenged to work with others beyond their own current level of development, Vygotsky suggests that their zone of proximal development will continually shift so that "What a child can do with assistance today, she will be able to do by herself tomorrow" (87).

Drawing from the literature of Alexander, Schallert, and Reynolds this article is built on a topographical interactive model of learning that seeks out common ground among multiple salient learning theories. The model proposes four dimensions of learning (i.e. *who of learning*, *what of learning*, *where of learning*, and *when of learning)* that are in constant interaction and provide context for describing a teaching and learning event.

The first dimension, *who of learning*, explores the agents involved in a teaching and learning event. This dimension contends that learning is directly influenced by the biological, cognitive, experiential (e.g., individual and cultural), and affective (e.g. motivational and emotional) characteristics of participants (Alexander, Schallert, and Reynolds 184). The *who of learning* is critical to understanding learning because, as Lakoff and Johnson argue, the learning process is highly influenced by the learner involved. The second dimension explores what is being learned. Within this dimension the authors propose an interweaving of the types and levels of learning that occur during a teaching and learning event. These may range from unconsciously acquired habits and tacit knowledge (e.g., recognizing that dropping a bowling ball on your foot is painful) to intentionally pursued higher order knowledge and skills (e.g., an aspiring carpenter learning to cut dovetail joints). The third dimension addresses the ecological context in which learning occurs. While some aspects of the ecological context are concrete and easily recognizable (e.g., physical setting and tools used to mediate learning), others require greater investigation due to their abstractness (e.g., historical and cultural context). Alexander, Schallert, and Reynolds place the *when of learning* as their fourth dimension. By understanding the interrelatedness of timing, duration, and cultural shifts that occur during a teaching and learning event, one can provide critical insights into the context of the event itself. In other words, skills and knowledge that are seemingly irrelevant today may be critical to one's very survival in the future. For example, the ability to start a fire using only sticks and grass may be considered an inconsequential skill until one is unexpectedly shipwrecked on an island.

Although Alexander, Schallert, and Reynolds do not include a dimension to address the *how of learning,* it is important to discuss because it describes the process by which learning occurs. In this article, Lave and Wenger's situated learning framework explains the *how of learning*. In Lave and Wenger's model, a novice advances knowledge through varying levels of participation with more knowledgeable others in a community

of practice as opposed to learning through decontextualized means (e.g., direct lecture or reading a textbook). Situated learning can manifest itself in two ways: participation and apprenticeship.

In participation the novice learns through situatedness within a community of practice. For example a person who grows up in a farming community, although not a farmer himself, may gain knowledge regarding the norms and practices of farming that far exceed an individual who lives in an urban environment. Thus, participation can be viewed as learning by proximity. The second classification of situated learning is apprenticeship. In this article, apprenticeship is defined as a dyadic relationship between a more knowledgeable other and a novice for the purpose of sharing wisdom and promoting skill development through active co-participation (Lave and Wenger). This framework suggests that the optimal avenue by which one (e.g., a novice plumber) learns a skill (e.g., replacing a rusted pipe) is not through decontextualized instruction on the topic (e.g., classroom lecture), but rather through active participation with one who is more experienced with said skill (e.g., assisting a master plumber with such a repair).

Situated learning is provided as the fifth dimension of learning in this article for two reasons. First, this framework aligns itself with socioculturalism in that it focuses on the learner having membership in a community of practice as opposed to existing in a vacuum (Lave and Wenger). Through participation in a community of practice, the learner develops an identity of membership by which she is socialized to the jargon, norms, and skills associated with the community. This development of identity within a community of practice is critical to situated learning because learning "implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations" (Lave and Wenger 53). Second, situated learning is a contextually appropriate framework for analyzing *The Walking Dead*. *The Walking Dead* takes place in a world absent of formal schooling. As a result, the characters in the show are co-dependent for survival and help each other develop essential skills through active participation in communities of practice.

Through content analysis, a research method in which various forms of media are organized into concepts or categories for the purpose of deriving new insights and inferences about a given phenomenon (Cole; Elo and Kyngas; Krippendorf), this study explores a teaching and learning event in Season 2: Episode 6 of *The Walking Dead*. The teaching and learning event being analyzed is situated within an ongoing storyline regarding a worldwide outbreak of unknown origins that has turned the majority of humans into Walkers. Human survivors discover early in the series that the only way to stop a Walker is to destroy its brain. Although there are a variety of tools that can complete this task (e.g., ax, sledgehammer, hunting knife), risk of death makes the possession of and skill set to effectively use a firearm a valuable commodity. In this post-apocalyptic setting, a gun not only represents increased likelihood of survival but also is symbolic of power within the social hierarchy.

After several mishaps with firearms occur on the survivors' farm, the two primary community leaders, Rick and Shane, declare that any individual who has not been formally trained to use a firearm must surrender their weapon until formal training has been completed. As a result, very few individuals in the community are permitted to possess a firearm. For community member Andrea, the ability to once again wield her revolver has two levels of importance. First, it is an opportunity to break the gender roles that have been constructed in the community (i.e. men are community protectors and women maintain domestic responsibilities). Second, the gun serves as an artifact linking Andrea to happier times before her sister Amy was killed by Walkers.

The teaching and learning event being examined in this article focuses on the training Andrea undergoes in order to reclaim the right to possess her weapon. Andrea's training occurs in four stages: (1) small group instruction at a makeshift firing range, (2) private instruction with Shane in the woods, (3) cooperative action on a search and rescue mission with Shane, and (4) supported action on the search and rescue mission.

Having addressed the context of the episode, findings will now be presented as they emerged during

analysis of the teaching and learning event. The constant comparative method of coding (Corbin and Strauss; Boeije) was followed during analysis to seek out emerging elements from the teaching and learning event as related to the five topographical dimensions listed above (i.e. *who of learning, what of learning, where of learning, when of learning, how of learning*).

Dimension 1 — *Who of Learning***,** addresses all who are affected by the teaching and learning event in this episode (i.e. learner, teacher, and community at large). Designated as the primary learner, Andrea is portrayed as an attractive young woman who was a successful lawyer prior to the outbreak. Intelligent and headstrong, Andrea is initially an asset to the community, showing leadership skills and the ability to think on her feet. After the loss of her sister Amy to a Walker attack, Andrea becomes introverted and severely depressed to the degree that many perceive her as suicidal. This perception is one of the catalysts that lead to Shane and Rick's decree that only those who have been formally trained may possess a firearm. Although the firearm is presented as the predominant tool for survival in the earliest episodes of *The Walking Dead*, possession of this tool does not appear to be as significant to Andrea until she is no longer permitted to wield one. Initially opposed to the decree, Andrea eventually accepts the mandate and agrees to undergo formal training, having been forced to use a screwdriver to protect herself during a Walker attack.

Somewhat cocky and self-assured at the beginning of the teaching and learning event (i.e. small group instruction at a firing range), Andrea displays advanced proficiency by successfully shooting targets more difficult than those assigned to her. As a result, Andrea is extended the opportunity to move beyond group instruction into a dyadic apprenticeship under Shane's guidance.

However, it becomes evident during her first lesson with Shane (i.e. private instruction in the woods) that when placed in a more contextually realistic scenario (e.g., moving target, heightened stress levels), Andrea is not as skilled a marksman as she previously believed. Frustrated by her inability to master the skill of shooting a moving target (i.e. a log suspended by rope from a tree), Andrea is easily flustered by criticisms from Shane. Although she portrays herself as outspoken and independent, it is evident that Andrea is psychologically scarred by the loss of her sister. The mere utterance of Amy's name during private instruction with Shane causes Andrea to cease participation in this phase of the teaching and learning event.

Despite her conflict with Shane over the use of her deceased sister as an instructional tool, Andrea shows that she is dedicated to advancing her firearm skills by agreeing to assist Shane on a search and rescue mission to find a missing child. This mission is Andrea's first opportunity to assume the role of community protector since arriving at the survivors' farm.

The instructor during this teaching and learning event is Shane. A former sheriff's deputy, he serves as the proverbial alpha male and first community leader. The appearance of Rick, who was long assumed to be dead, leads to multiple internal and external conflicts for Shane. To understand Shane's mental state during this teaching and learning event, it is imperative to examine his trajectory throughout the series. Prior to the outbreak, Rick and Shane were partners and best friends. During an altercation with a fugitive criminal, Rick is shot and falls into a coma, resulting in long-term hospitalization. Optimistic his friend will make a full recovery, Shane stays at Rick's bedside until Walkers overtake the facility. Assuming that Rick's unconscious body will be consumed by Walkers, Shane flees the hospital to collect Rick's wife and son and to seek safety. In the months that follow, Shane and Rick's wife Lori develop an intimate relationship. When Rick miraculously appears at the settlement, Lori returns to her husband, leaving Shane both heartbroken and jealous.

While publicly Shane helps maintain the community and follows Rick's leadership, in private his persona becomes much more neurotic. Although Shane contemplates leaving the community to fend for himself, he ultimately stays due to his love for Lori. As a result of this emotional turmoil, Shane becomes increasingly combative, which is evident in his lessons with Andrea. During the teaching and learning event, Shane displays both sides of his personality by being hypercritical of Andrea and yet aware of socioemotional

boundaries (e.g. "I crossed the line when I brought Amy into it. So yes. It's an apology" (Darabont et al.)). While Shane is experienced, exhibits a high degree of leadership, and is adequately skilled to survive when Walkers attack, he is, like Andrea, emotionally unstable, which adds an interesting dynamic to their apprenticeship.

The third *who* to be considered in this teaching and learning event is the community at large. The majority of the community is neither formally trained survivalists nor experienced combatants. They are average men, women, and children with no spectacular attributes, aside from the fact that they are still alive. For this reason, former sheriff's deputies Shane and Rick are well credentialed to serve as the more knowledgeable others who provide firearm training. Knowing that such training can improve chances for survival, a large proportion of the community participates in the initial training session at a makeshift firing range on the farm.

The second topographical dimension, *What of Learning*, addresses Andrea's intended learning objectives in the episode. Actively participating in increasingly contextualized settings (e.g., firing range, woods, suburban neighborhood invaded by Walkers), Andrea seeks to develop her intended skill set within an apprenticeship model. At its most basic and overt level, this teaching and learning event focuses on Andrea expanding her skills with a firearm. There is also a deeper level of abstract learning that occurs within the episode.

By acquiring a new skill set, Andrea is revising her identity within the community. Throughout the series, Andrea expresses a desire to circumvent the community's socially constructed gender roles (i.e. men are community protectors and women maintain domestic duties). Andrea views the possession of a firearm as a gateway to transcending her prescribed role in the community. Rather than washing clothes or preparing food, the possession of a firearm allows its owner multiple options including the ability to leave the farm on supply gathering missions, participate in Walker hunting expeditions, and serve as a night watch. Thus, success in this endeavor may not only provide Andrea with a new identity in the community but could also serve as a catalyst for sociopolitical shifts in power for all females on the farm.

Within the psychosocial realm, Andrea is also learning how to accept the death of her sister Amy. Since the loss of her sister to a Walker attack, Andrea has fallen into a manic, often suicidal, state. Andrea resists talking about this element of her psyche and temporarily abandons instruction with Shane due to his use of Amy's death as a motivational tactic (e.g., "You're too damn emotional. You need to shut it down. Take all that guilt, that fear, that being pissed off...That's the Walker that got Amy. Now you shoot that son of a bitch! You shoot him!" (Darabont et al.)).

Dimension 3 — *Where of Learning*, examines the physical and sociopolitical environment in which the teaching and learning event occurs**.** The setting of this episode is a community of survivors living on a farm outside of Atlanta, Georgia. The survivors have temporarily settled at the farm after experiencing numerous Walker attacks in other temporary settlements. Hopeful they will find a larger community unaffected by the outbreak, the survivors are semi-nomadic, settling in areas considered safe for habitation. The farm offers community members a sense of life as it was before the outbreak due to its various amenities such as clean drinking water and private bedrooms. At the farm, survivors live communally, sharing food, supplies, and various responsibilities.

In addition to the setting of the teaching and learning event, it is also important to examine its timing and duration; thus, the *When of Learning* is designated as the fourth topographical dimension. Although the characters involved in this episode bring a lifetime of experiences to the teaching and learning event, the event itself occurs within the span of a single day. This is displayed through several pieces of evidence within the episode. First, at the firing range Rick arranges for Andrea to receive personal instruction from Shane after the conclusion of the day's group lesson. Next, after Andrea becomes angry and abandons her private lesson, Shane finds her walking down the road and invites her to join him as backup on a mission to locate a missing

child. The teaching and learning event concludes as the two narrowly escape a Walker attack.

On a broader scale, this teaching and learning event occurs within the context of a post-apocalyptic world. Prior to the outbreak, the skill set being learned (i.e. mastery with a firearm) was critical only for those whose career put them in harm's way. After the outbreak however, it is essential for survival in a Walker-infested world. For Andrea this event occurs at a psychosocial crossroads between wanting to end her life and desiring to transform her identity within the community.

Having explored the context in which the teaching and learning event is situated, focus will now shift to analyzing the pedagogical approach Shane utilizes to guide Andrea's development in this episode. Dimension 5 — *How of Learning,* emerges in a series of four scaffolded stages during the teaching and learning event: (1) small group instruction, (2) private instruction, (3) cooperative action, and (4) supported action.

In the first stage of learning, small group instruction, Andrea is an active participant in a community of practice at a makeshift gun range. Taking aim at bottles and old road signs, participants receive constant feedback from more knowledgeable others (i.e. Rick and Shane) regarding their technique and marksmanship. Of the four instructional stages in the episode, Stage 1 is the least contextualized, exhibits the lowest level of stress on participants, and is the most risk adverse. Although the firing range is a situated learning activity (e.g. participants are shooting firearms instead of reading a book about shooting firearms), the targets are stationary and nonthreatening. Hence, this phase of instruction does not accurately simulate the context of a Walker attack. The no stress-no risk environment of Stage 1 births in Andrea a false sense of self-confidence regarding her ability to use a gun.

During this stage, Andrea receives direct feedback from community leaders Rick and Shane. At first Shane believes Andrea has missed her assigned target (i.e. a glass bottle). Upon closer inspection he realizes that she was not shooting at the bottle, but rather had placed three bullets through the *O* in a *No Trespassing* sign. Impressed by Andrea's apparent proficiency at the firing range, Rick proposes that she receive advanced training from Shane. With her acceptance, Andrea becomes an apprentice under Shane's guidance. No other participants in the episode, male or female, are extended an invitation to enter an apprenticeship.

The second stage of Andrea's learning occurs via dyadic private instruction with Shane in a wooded area on the farm. As Shane seeks to further situate the training within the context of a Walker attack, he increases the difficulty of the task by requiring Andrea to shoot a moving target (i.e. a log suspended from a tree). This task proves to be beyond Andrea's current ability level and leads to numerous complaints from the learner. In response to Andrea's grumblings, Shane takes on an aggressive drill sergeant-like tone and interlaces instruction with statements explaining that the task is designed to simulate real life combat (e.g., "Now you stand here. You point your weapon. Point it like you point your finger. Do not think about it. I'm talking about muscle memory girl. Muscle memory!...You think a Walker is gonna' hold still for you?" (Darabont et al.)).

Although this pedagogical strategy does not appear to progress Andrea's shooting ability (i.e. she is still unable to hit the moving target), Shane continues his tactics by employing gender negative criticisms (e.g. "God you shoot like a damn girl...You're too damn emotional" (Darabont et al.)). At this point, Andrea not only challenges Shane's methods but also his abilities as the *more knowledgeable other* (e.g., "Stop badgering me...Right, and you're so calm?" (Darabont et al.)). Shane responds to Andrea's critique by effortlessly shooting the log and expressing his ability to separate emotion from task completion (e.g., "See? I can be pissed off, I can be whistling Dixie, and I always hit the target." (Darabont et al.)).

After reaffirming his role as the *more knowledgeable other*, Shane orders Andrea to try again. Shane continues his harsh tone and places Andrea under heightened levels of stress until she ceases the lesson due to his mentioning of Amy's death (e.g., "That's the Walker that got Amy. Now you shoot that son of a bitch! You shoot him!" (Darabont et al.)).

Although there is no risk involved in this stage of instruction, the stress level is significantly higher than that of Stage 1, which results in Andrea's choice to abandon the lesson prior to successful task completion.

After their altercation at the end of Stage 2, Shane finds Andrea walking down the road alone and seeks to make amends by explaining that his pedagogical method in the previous stage of instruction was both strategic and intentional (e.g., "Hey look. I'm just trying to get you rattled. Alright? Just giving you an idea of what it's like when the shit starts to fly." (Darabont et al.)).

Despite her failure to show mastery of the intended skill in the previous stage, Shane does not suggest that the two return to the woods or shooting range for further training. Instead, he extends an invitation for Andrea to join him on a mission to search for a missing child, thereby moving into a third stage of instruction based on highly contextualized cooperative action. Shane takes on a new pedagogical approach by ceasing the aggressive tone and placing Andrea in a high-risk situation in which her ability to hit a moving target (i.e. a Walker) could determine whether she and Shane survive the mission.

After a short duration of exploring the neighborhood where the missing child is assumed to be, Andrea and Shane are attacked by a herd of Walkers. Shane acknowledges that the two must work cooperatively in order to successfully reach their vehicle (e.g., "You cover that street. I'll clear the car." (Darabont et al.)). Although Shane has taken on the more difficult task by assigning himself an area with a greater number of Walkers, the two are ultimately co-dependent for a successful escape.

Quickly clearing his designated area, Shane notices that Andrea is still unable to shoot her targets in the head, the skill he was attempting to teach her in Stage 2. Shane provides Andrea with backup, allowing her to practice shooting at Walkers. This stage is high stress, as both Andrea and Shane's lives are endangered; however, Andrea's risk is fairly low due to Shane's active support.

The third stage of the teaching and learning event segues directly into Stage 4, supported action, when Andrea's pistol jams with Walkers quickly approaching. Initially, Shane provides coverage and supportive guidance (e.g., "Focus now. Clear the jam. Focus" (Darabont et al.)); however, as Andrea becomes more frantic and panicked, Shane lowers his gun as a sign that he is allowing her to engage in a sink or swim moment. Although he offers words of encouragement, Shane allows a Walker to get just outside of arm's length from Andrea without raising his gun to stifle its progression. At this point, Shane transitions from being an active co-participant to supportive observer in the teaching and learning event. It is worth noting that Shane places Andrea in this high-stress high-risk situated learning environment after she has failed to successfully hit a moving target during the previous two stages. Andrea, aware of Shane's instructional decision, questions his method while continuing to attempt the task (e.g., "Are you kidding me?" (Darabont et al.)). At the climax of the scene, Andrea successfully clears the jam and shoots a Walker moments before it attacks her. In this stage, Andrea's inability to execute the skill would have meant certain death, making it the most high-stress and high-risk of all four stages of instruction. After eliminating her most immediate threat and successfully completing the task, the stress associated with the learning event rapidly dissipates, as shown by a regained air of confidence.

The teaching and learning event in this episode of *The Walking Dead* provides multiple insights for improving curricular and pedagogical design in formal classroom settings. First, this teaching and learning event shows that contextualized active participation in a community of practice is critical to learner development. If Andrea had simply read a book about shooting a firearm or attended a lecture on clearing a jammed gun, she may not have survived the Walker attack during the mission with Shane. As shown in this episode, contextually appropriate experiential knowledge can allow learners the opportunity to reach their potential development more rapidly than decontextualized instruction. Thus, in classroom instruction it is critical that teachers forego decontextualized drill-and-kill style assignments and instead provide students the opportunity to be active participants in situated learning activities.

Second, the analysis shows that it is possible to scaffold knowledge within a situated learning activity. Actively participating in the act of shooting during each stage, Andrea moves through four scaffolded stages of instruction in the episode. Throughout the teaching and learning event, Andrea transitions from a controlled group setting that emphasizes basic skills with a firearm to personalized instruction meant to refine those skills. Andrea then assists Shane in a cooperative activity that requires her to display mastery and task completion in an authentic context. Likewise, classroom teachers can work with students on scaffolded learning activities. As students gain experience and master lower level skills, the teacher can allow students to assume greater autonomy in future endeavors. By way of illustration, a computer science instructor can facilitate a situated learning activity with a class of novice programmers in three scaffolded stages. During the first stage, the teacher could utilize a computer-mediated activity to help students learn a programming language (e.g., Java, C++, Python). After the students have shown proficiency with the programming language, the teacher and students could cooperatively write code for a program that was designed by the instructor. Finally, the teacher could challenge students to design and write their own programs, providing assistance as the *more knowledgeable other* when needed.

Third, the teaching and learning event displays the empowerment and motivation associated with gender equity in the learning environment. From the pilot episode to this one containing the teaching and learning event, Andrea becomes increasingly depressed and neurotic, resulting in the destruction of numerous interpersonal relationships. Despite her psychosocial troubles, an interest in becoming a community protector motivates Andrea's pursuit of formal training with a firearm. Regardless of her aspirations, there are sociocultural norms that have to be overcome for Andrea to transcend the community's socially constructed gender roles. As Andrea receives training and assists Shane on a mission, she is able to take steps toward obtaining the identity of community protector. The receipt of appropriate credentials (i.e. formal training with a firearm) allows Andrea's role in the community to transform where she is no longer expected to participate in tasks she considers demeaning and menial (e.g., preparing meals and washing clothes). As a result, Andrea experiences a renewed sense of purpose via a meaningful contribution to the community.

This example is important to classroom teachers in two ways. First, while socially constructed roles may be prevalent in society, gender marginalization does not have to extend into the classroom. By promoting equity in the learning environment, students of all demographics can have the opportunity to experience empowerment and motivation that otherwise may not be available in other social contexts. For example, teachers can enrich social studies curriculum, which traditionally emphasizes the contributions of dominant populations (e.g., wealthy, whites, heterosexuals, males), by intentionally incorporating content that gives prominence to the pivotal roles played by historically underrepresented populations (e.g., females, people of color, LBGTQ). By doing so, teachers not only disrupt dominant narratives that undermine the salience of these populations but also encourage diverse students to embrace their heritages and identities.

Second, like many students, Andrea suffers from severe psychosocial scarring that results in social isolation and decreased motivation. After being offered the opportunity to participate in an activity relative to her interests and goals, Andrea is able to work through her emotional issues and experience a renewed sense of community membership. This finding displays the importance of allowing students to have a voice in curricular decisions. Instead of assigning students tasks that do not align with their interests, which may result in decreased motivation and psychosocial health, teachers could utilize strategies that increase their knowledge of students' personal goals and affinities (e.g., interest inventories). By helping teachers craft curriculum that corresponds with students' passions and aspirations, the information gained from these activities can increase the meaningfulness of classroom instruction.

Finally, this episode shows that concurrently increasing stress and risk levels may be beneficial to student development. In the four stages of *Dimension 5 — How of Learning*, Andrea reacts to context as a

catalyst for her development. During the three initial stages, as Andrea faces no stress or risk or unbalanced levels of stress and risk, she is unable to move beyond her actual development level with a firearm. In the final stage however, Shane places Andrea in a high-stress high-risk scenario where survival is determined by the ability to exhibit skill mastery. Although Shane could help Andrea fend off the Walkers, he lowers his weapon symbolizing that Andrea is responsible for completing the task, making both the risk and stress levels of the activity high. When Andrea is placed into this concurrently high-risk high-stress environment, she not only successfully completes her given task (i.e. shooting a Walker in the head) but also replicates task completion by slaying numerous other Walkers in the vicinity.

While many primary and secondary level education programs seek to decrease the risk and stress associated with learning, this episode provides a case in which development does not occur until risk and stress are concurrently high. From this example it can be said that learning outcomes devoid of stress and risk may fail to motivate students' advancement beyond current development levels. Likewise, when there is an imbalance of stress and risk, students may rebel, act out in class, or fail to successfully complete assigned tasks. However, if a student is challenged to complete a task beyond her current development level and is informed of consequences attached to failure, she may be motivated to successfully complete the task. For instance, a student who aspires to become a published poet, but does not write consistently, might propose an assignment to her teacher requiring submission of an original poem each day prior to recess. The two may negotiate a consequence that requires the student to write during recess, rather than play with friends, on days in which she fails to complete her task. By incorporating stress (i.e. submission deadline) and risk (i.e. loss of play time) the student may be compelled to incorporate writing into her daily routine, a critical habit for any aspiring author.

It is worth noting that the author of this essay does not consider the term *high-risk* to be synonymous with *high-stakes* (e.g., state mandated standardized exams that are used as quantitative measures of student learning) for two reasons. First, *high-risk* assessments are relative to individual goals established and voluntarily pursued by the learner. Second, *high-risk* assessments are authentic in that they are contextually bound by an individual learner's aspirations. To correspond with a student's goals, consequences should be mutually negotiated by the student and teacher to encourage dyadic ownership of tasks and learning outcomes (Anderson). Inversely, *high-stakes* activities utilize decontextualized, often quantitative, means to measure a population's competency regarding topics chosen by legislators and administrative officials (Giroux and Schmidt). Differing from *high-risk* learning endeavors, *high-stakes* activities mandate the participation of a broad student population and offer learners no voice in what or how content will be assessed.

Although some critics dismiss popular media as a mere cultural novelty that stifles the intellectual progression of today's youth (Bauerlein), it has proven to be an invaluable tool for exploring best practices in teaching and learning. Gleaning insights from an episode of *The Walking Dead,* this article contributes to extant literature on the use of apocalyptic media as an instrument for analyzing instructional practice. Ripe with examples of teaching and learning in communities of practice, *The Walking Dead* is a valuable resource for examining the construction of knowledge in a society absent of formal schooling. As a result, future research may identify and analyze skills pursued by other characters in the series or perform longitudinal studies of characters' development throughout the series at large. Additionally, researchers may choose to explore teaching and learning in various popular television series, films, video games, and other media through the five topographical dimensions of learning presented in this article. Regardless of the direction taken in future studies, the continuation of research on teaching and learning in popular culture is essential to the evolution and proliferation of the field.

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