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Reflections on Building a Popular Writing Course

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ABSTRACT

Composition pedagogy has typically employed traditional academic texts in the instruction of first-year writing courses. In this article, three first-year writing instructors reflect on their experiences employing popular culture artifacts in lieu of more traditional academic texts in writing classrooms at a small, private, historically black institution (HBCU). By retrospectively analyzing the intersections between theory and practice, the instructors' autoethnographic reflections explore the utility of popular culture artifacts as tools for teaching and learning writing, with an emphasis on rhetorical knowledge and transfer. Though preliminary, their conclusions point to the potential of popular culture for integration into traditional best practices in first-year writing pedagogy.

KEYWORDS

Teaching, Pedagogy, Culture, Writing, Transfer, Learning, Inquiry, Analysis, Popular, Composition

A typical class of Critical Writing Seminar: Concepts in Popular Culture does not look much like a typical writing class. Walk past and you may catch a glimpse of students engaged in discussion of Beyonce's "Partition" or the "first Ebola victim" viral hoax photo. Or, they might be writing about Sweet Brown "Ain't Nobody Got Time for Dat" memes, car commercials, political cartoons, documentaries, Disney movies, or remixes of Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit." Upon first glance—as students scroll Instagram during class (as research), sing along to Miley Cyrus's "Party in the U.S.A.," or debate the difference between protests and riots based on videos of Ferguson, MO—it may seem as though some of the more traditional rules of classroom etiquette have been tossed out the window. However, inside the classroom, the students are engaged. They are attentive to the subject matter, critical in their thinking, and passionate in their writing; they can carry on a discussion for twenty minutes at a stretch without much instructor input.

This level of classroom engagement was exactly what was envisioned when the Critical Writing Seminar was developed in 2012. The course took its shape—structured, but with protean edges—primarily as a result of an imagined ideal (of students, excited about writing) rather than applications of theory. The curricular need at our small, private, historically black university (HBCU) was clear: students, many of whom were already "behind" upon arrival, were not necessarily "catching up" adequately under the existing curriculum. After completing the required sequence of composition courses (two semesters worth), students were advancing into disciplinary courses that demanded a level of writing for which they were still largely underprepared. They needed more practice. While the need was clear, the path toward a useful response was more nebulous. How could another writing course be different from—and still successfully build upon—the existing set of Composition I and II writing courses? How could another course emphasize rhetorical skills in a way that would help students transfer their first-year writing experiences beyond the traditional composition classroom?

Administrators turned to the people "on the ground," the writing instructors, for guidance in designing a new course. While, in an ideal world, such a curricular development would be the work of long planning, backed heavily by theory, the reality owed more to the necessities: a narrow window of opportunity and the need for input from instructors who had plenty of observations born of teaching but few spare hours in which to theorize. We asked ourselves a question similar to the one Cary Moskivitz asks in *The Duke Reader Project*: "If we had the opportunity to design an ideal writing in the disciplines [WID] program unencumbered by the assumptions and conventions of normative practice, what might we do differently?" (48). Our institution does not have a writing program (WID or otherwise) but aspires to one. Even in the absence of a formal program, we still needed a "stepping stone" course that would help us develop a more robust sequence of writing courses (with the idea of a fully-developed writing program down the road), and we also needed a way to engage students in learning concepts that could help them transfer their writing knowledge and practice as they matriculated and took on more advanced, discipline-specific writing tasks. Following our instincts, we took our observations about what worked to get students excited, the learning outcomes we wanted them to achieve, and we designed a writing course.

If we are to be honest, we must admit: it is only now that we are connecting our teaching practices to theory. We do so now to reflect on its successes and failures in light of current writing theories and pedagogies and to contribute to emergent popular culture pedagogy.

Critical Writing Seminar: Concepts in Popular Culture is explicit in its aim to present "a variety of cultural texts in an effort to broaden [students'] frame of reference for academic inquiry and thereby facilitate their ability to transfer the reading, writing and thinking skills that they acquire" ("Critical Writing Seminar Syllabus" 1). Its instructors use artifacts of popular culture as course content and ask students to engage their critical inquiry, thinking, and writing skills in responding to those artifacts. The expanded notions of text in this course were intended to act as a kind of catalyst, challenging students to adapt their understanding

of writing with the understanding (or perhaps, the hope) that such an adapted understanding would prove useful later on as students worked to respond to the extensive array of genres, subjects, and conventions they collectively encounter in their disciplinary coursework. By interpreting "expanded notions of text" to mean popular culture artifacts, specifically, this course offers instructors a unique, timely, and appropriate tool for teaching rhetorical skills and concepts that encourage transfer. It seeks to meet and engage students where they are and both broaden and deepen their experience with writing in an academic context.

Bruce Cohen's *Being Cultural* helped us delineate the relationship between artifact and text: "In cultural studies, 'text' is not only books or magazines, but all cultural artefacts (including, for example, works of art, YouTube clips, adverts, items of clothing, iPods, posters, television programmes, the *haka*, podcasts, SNS sites, frozen food, football, and soon)" (7). In designing the course, we drew our definition of popular culture from Deana Sellnow's *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture*. "Popular culture," she writes, "is comprised of the everyday objects, actions, and events that influence people to believe and behave in certain ways" (3). We have seen the growth of popular culture's influence and importance in society today. In *Signs of Life in the USA*, Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon argue that "pop culture has virtually *become* our culture, permeating almost everything we do. So if we wish to understand ourselves, we must learn to think critically about the vast panoply of what was once condescendingly referred to as 'mass culture'" (v). Popular culture artifacts allow students to engage with content that is familiar and recognizable to them ("permeating almost everything we do"), while also allowing instructors to introduce concepts and questions that are new to the students: in effect, using familiar things to introduce unfamiliar ideas. Students are asked to take the world around them—the popular world they have long been living and believing in and negotiating with—and to merge it with the world of the academy, in which they have only recently arrived and which they are only beginning to learn how to navigate.

In fact, part of the value in using popular culture artifacts as texts to be analyzed and responded to is that doing so can—somewhat paradoxically—convince students to attribute greater value to the artifacts of high culture that they are often introduced to while in college, the canonical great works that Victorian thinker Matthew Arnold called "the best that has been thought and said" (as quoted in Ousborne 1). Over the length of the course, students are challenged to see the similarities and connections between artifacts of high and popular culture, between the texts discussed in this course and the traditional academic texts and art forms used as content in most other courses. The use of popular culture as text also gives instructors an opportunity to present course content that is highly situated and contextualized. In the same way that textbooks are chosen for their suitability for particular programs, in particular schools, with particular students, cultural artifacts can be tailored to fit and respond to a specific institutional culture and student population. Cultural artifacts also allow for a course that is highly pliant and relevant; textbooks can be updated each semester, but new cultural texts can be chosen each week, practically overnight, in response to current events and unfolding discussions in the larger culture.

Using popular culture in a first-year writing course has also helped us to mediate (read: bypass) our students' preconceived ideas about academic texts. Among those preconceived ideas is a sense that they do not know enough about an essay by Frederick Douglass, or a chapter on child psychology, or a biology lab report to adequately discuss them (much less, be critical of them). Students look to the teacher for the "right" answer or the "correct" opinion when it comes to these texts, which carry with them assumptions of expertise and educational achievement. But few people feel unequipped to have an opinion on Kim Kardashian's fashion choices. In our popular culture writing classrooms, we try to encourage students to feel that they have just as much of a stake in the conversation as the next person (even when that next person is the instructor). Popular culture democratizes the weight of opinions in a way that helps students to learn to reason confidently, to express critical ideas with clarity and precision, without the intimidation factor involved when the content

consists of staunchly academic texts. Yet, building the capacity to analyze and respond to popular culture texts may prepare students for performing similar activities on more advanced-level disciplinary academic texts. As students decode cultural texts, they are invited to think about academic discourse in a broader sense—less strictly tied to content and more bound up in methodology, in ways of thinking and inquiring. In this way, the course builds on the foundational rhetorical skills that students develop in the traditional composition course sequence.

In teaching the course, instructors must confront the fact that the analysis of cultural artifacts is not an exercise intended to only engage the students. We are all impacted by culture. Instructors are asked to not only lead the students in discovery and inquiry but also to be active participants in those activities themselves. A mutually inclusive space for learning can be created by acknowledging the influence of cultural relativism, which posits that individuals must be examined through the lens of their own culture. Deep discourse in the classroom is created when all members understand that each individual responds to and participates in culture in ways influenced by his/her unique background. Beginning the course with this understanding means that the instructor can help students suspend bias in order to gain a deeper critical insight and can also use students' own backgrounds to help broaden and deepen the conversation and analysis. This negotiation and interplay is not about moral decision-making. It is about creating bridges that both students and faculty can use to enhance learning, curriculum development, and scholarship.

One of the aims of the popular culture writing classroom we have developed is to create a reciprocal learning environment. Students should be encouraged to not just actively participate in the course, but, as they come to understand the nature of the course, to contribute to its direction. This opens up opportunity for the students to introduce their cultural understandings, their vernacular, and their interests to their peers and the instructor. The instructor provides the connection and context. The students apply their nascent rhetorical and creative tools in response to a variety of topics. The course becomes an incubator for interdisciplinary learning, multimodal composition, and participatory analysis. The discussions are made relevant and tangible by the cultural artifacts. Students come to understand the value in academic, professional, and public genres of writing.

Up to this point, we have been focusing on the ways in which popular culture content and pedagogy operate in Critical Writing Seminar, but it is first and foremost a writing course. It is important to discuss how writing pedagogy operates in the course. The course is influenced by both popular culture studies and writing studies, and its pedagogy emerges in conference with the two. As mentioned earlier, the course was designed with an eye toward eventually developing a writing program. However, that writing program does not (yet) exist, and so the course currently functions outside of the composition sequence (though it was designed with the outcomes of those courses firmly in mind). Given our specific institutional context and also given the direction in which more and more English departments and writing program administrators (WPAs) are taking first-year writing courses, we propose that popular culture constitutes a fitting and appropriate form of alternative content for an additional first-year writing course.

The "WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (v3.0)," last updated in July 2014, establishes the current position of writing studies regarding the expected outcomes of first-year writing programs. It categorizes those outcomes according to four primary principles: rhetorical knowledge; critical thinking, reading, and composing; processes; and knowledge of conventions (1-2). These areas of focus reflect the degree to which first-year writing has moved away from a heavy concentration on literature-based essays and the remediation of inadequate grammatical and mechanical skills. Instead, many first-year writing programs have shifted (or are shifting) focus toward what David Smit, in *The End of Composition Studies*, calls "the heart of the matter in learning to write": transfer (119). Increasingly, instructors and scholars are working to prioritize what students can learn to do in writing classes that can transfer across different contexts (Carter,

Diller and Oates, Petraglia), trying to discover what writing strategies (if any) can "travel" effectively to new tasks and discourse communities. Some scholars have explicitly designed Teaching for Transfer (TFT) courses to support students' ability to develop writing knowledge and practices that can be repurposed and adapted to new settings (Yancey, Robertson, Taczak). Others, like Elizabeth Wardle and Douglas Downs, have designed Writing About Writing (WAW) courses that "present the subject of composition, discourse, and literacy as [their] content" (*Writing About Writing* v). More broadly, most composition courses now emphasize (at least to some degree) the connections between what students have learned already and what they will need to write in a new genre or context by centering on rhetorical concepts themselves, such as "purpose, audience, context, and conventions" (Council of Writing Program Administrators 1).

Wardle and Downs have identified "several important misconceptions about writing and writing skills transfer" that they sought to resist in their courses, including "that academic writing is generally universal, that writing is a basic skill independent of content or context, and that writing abilities automatically transfer from FYC to other courses and contexts" ("Teaching about Writing" 554). Speaking frankly about the lack of scholarship regarding transfer in writing studies, they acknowledged: "Our field does not know what genres and tasks will help students in the myriad writing situations they will later find themselves… We do not know which genres or rhetorical strategies truly are universal in the academy, nor how to help FYC students recognize such universality" (557). However, while specific and transferable genres and tasks have not been clearly identified, the general conditions that promote transfer have been. David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon found that students need to reflect and be mindful of their own actions and environments and they also need "thorough and diverse practice . . . of the performance in question." It has been our experience that popular culture as course content lends itself to creating these conditions in a course, allowing instructors to challenge students to analyze a wide range of audiences and purposes, genres and conventions (providing that "diverse practice") as well as to reflect on themselves as consumers/creators of popular culture and leave the classroom with a greater sense of themselves as active, mindful participants in that culture.

Another educational theory that has had a major impact on first-year writing is the notion of "threshold concepts," described by Jan Meyer and Ray Land in the introduction of *Overcoming Barriers to Student Understanding*, which posits that there are specific ideas, situated in specific disciplines/epistemic communities, that function as thresholds—portals through which learners must travel and "without which the learner cannot progress" (1). In other words, there are certain concepts or ideas that students must master in order to advance to more sophisticated or complex ways of thinking and writing. Threshold concepts "open up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking" and "represent a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something" (Meyer and Land 1). Threshold concepts also challenge the learner to reflect on tacit knowledge of which she is "only peripherally aware or entirely unconscious" (Perkins 40).

In first-year writing classes, threshold concepts have little to do with hard-and-fast rules of formatting, grammar, or how-many-sentences-go-in-a-paragraph. Instead, they are connected to students' beliefs about the nature and function of writing, their abilities to understand "composing" in an expanded way (beyond the flatly alphabetical "words on paper" sense), and their knowledge of the way in which writing adapts to the demands of audience, purpose, context, and conventions of genre. In "Threshold Concepts for Writing Classes," Wardle and Downs offered a tentative list of threshold concepts that reflect this shift in pedagogical emphasis in first-year writing. They list the following:

- Conceptions of writing matter, come from somewhere, and various conceptions of writing are more or less accurate and helpful.
- Text [sic] mediate human activity; people don't write in a vacuum. People use texts in order to mediate meaningful activity. There are some lenses that can better help us understand how this happens.
- Texts make meaning in context. People interpret texts in ways that depend on their own histories and

contexts.

- People create texts using a variety of processes; these processes change depending on the context, audience, and purpose, and some processes are more or less effective than others. In addition, these processes start long before words are put on a page.
- "Composing" goes far beyond our usual conceptions of it as related to alphabetic/print-based writing. What counts as composing changes as our world and technologies change.

The above list of concepts does not necessitate that the texts that students encounter while learning be traditionally academic. In fact, we have found that popular culture artifacts can be used to impart/model these concepts with ease and clarity. The rhetorical diversity of popular culture alone—its many shapes and modes and purposes—makes its use a compelling example of the expanded notion of "composing." Furthermore, students' familiarity with the context in which popular culture is created and received (i.e., the context in which they already are comfortable and familiar, because it is one in which we all already participate to some degree) puts that particular concept—"texts making meaning in context"—in closer reach through popular culture than it might otherwise be for texts that operate in unfamiliar contexts (like an annotated bibliography).

Below, we take an opportunity to reflect individually on assignments we have used in *Critical Writing Seminar: Concepts in Popular Culture*, in order to showcase our experiences and the ways in which popular culture combines in our classes with writing pedagogy to meet important student learning outcomes and threshold concepts.

SAMPLING HISTORY: STRANGE FRUIT – CECILIA SHELTON

Like many teachers, I create my most interesting assignments in response to that frustrating moment when I just can't seem to convey a concept or skill to my students in a way that is meaningful or relevant to them. I would venture to say that almost any writing teacher can relate to the disappointment that follows a class session about using and documenting sources responsibly. As much as we want to convey the importance of the mechanical details of the practice—commas go here, this in italics, that in quotation marks—we are even more invested in students' ability to understand how texts interface with one another. We want them to understand intertextuality—the idea that integrating sources into your own writing is more than borrowing words; it is borrowing meaning, and context, and subtext. For these reasons, sources should be chosen carefully, quoted thoughtfully, and integrated meaningfully. We've all experienced that moment at the end of such a rousing lecture, when a lone student raises her hand and asks, "So, exactly how many quotes do we need to have?" as all the other students nod and pick up their pencils for the first time in the whole class session.

"Yes! That's what I was going for—the exact same prescribed number of those careful, thoughtful, meaningful interactions between texts—for everyone," said no (writing) teacher, ever.

After one too many classes like this, I decided that my sources and documentation activities should follow a writing assignment, where I might first work to convey the significance of meaning that travels across and between texts. It occurred to me that my students were much more familiar with the "borrowing" of meaning in the context of music. Who doesn't love a good remix?

And so, I created an assignment called "Sampling History?: Appropriation(s) of Cultural Artifacts." The overview on my assignment sheet reads as follows:

In class, students will analyze two related cultural artifacts: the lyrics of the poem turned protest song, "Strange Fruit," famously performed by Billie Holiday, and *Without Sanctuary*, a photo documentary of American lynching (to be used as an illustration of social context that inspired the song). After their analysis, students will consider the ways that the original text of "Strange Fruit" has been re-purposed through various musical (re)appropriations (covers of Billie Holiday's rendition) which recontextualize the lyrics and

their message again and again. Students should comment on the impact that these "revisions" have on the significance of the original text in a critical response essay.

My background research about Strange Fruit graduated this assignment from a simple, theme-related, in-class reflection activity to a full-blown writing assignment. Of course, my class prep included listening to Billie Holiday sing "Strange Fruit," and the easiest method of access was YouTube. A quick search revealed a multitude of covers and samples of her rendition of the song—I was blown away. I thought it curious that such a somber and haunting (though beautiful) song was being so heavily sampled by artists in a variety of genres. It was a perfect opportunity to talk about what was happening to the original meaning of those lyrics as it travels through those samples and covers.

In class, we spent one class period discussing the social context of the two cultural artifacts. I asked them to come to class ready to report their own research about the inspiration for the lyrics of "Strange Fruit," knowing that a quick internet search would reveal Abel Meerpol, a white, Jewish, high school teacher from the Bronx as the original composer of the lyrics in the form of a poem. His intention was to express his horror at the lynching of black Americans during the Jim Crow period in which he was living. He published the poem in 1937 and later set it to music. It gained popularity in and around New York and eventually, Billie Holiday recorded it as a song in 1939.

My students fell along a fairly broad spectrum of awareness of those details, and eventually we were able to piece the story together. Next, I worked with great care and sensitivity to connect the lyrics to the images that inspired them for Meerpol. *Without Sanctuary* is a musarium, which features a collection of postcard photographs of American lynching. Many of the photographs are accompanied by notes that allude, or sometimes speak more directly, to the racist state of mind that was prevalent at this time. Their initial reaction was one of awe, disbelief, and eventually reverence for the significance of the song and the circumstances of its composition. I am certain that they were all prepared to write very poignant essays about the historical significance of Abel Meerpol's lyrics and Billie Holiday's song. I instructed them to suspend their ideas, while they completed a homework assignment, and we would regroup during our next class period.

Their homework assignment was to listen to five covers/samples of "Strange Fruit," recorded by the following artists: Common, featuring John Legend, Tori Amos, UB40, Jeff Buckley, and Kanye West. They were required to listen to the covers on YouTube via links I provided and then to review the comments section for each song. They were clearly intrigued about why I was asking them to take this step before writing—I didn't assign any formal response to be submitted for the homework. They were simply asked to come to class prepared to talk.

And talk we did. The students made some quick and unanimous observations during our next class meeting. First, the covers sound completely and totally different—different from the original *and* from one another. We all lacked music expertise but shared interest. I stepped into this space to invite that reciprocal learning environment and level with my students as fans of music. We agreed that a good portion of the differences could be attributed to genre; still, we had already identified the music to which Meerpol's lyrics were set in Holiday's rendition as complementary to the meaning. Changing the music mattered, we agreed, but we couldn't come to a consensus on how it mattered, in what ways. Knowing what the lyrics were about and debating the degree to which the covers match or deviate from the tone of the original song was a great opportunity to talk about how the meaning of the song was located in the layers of the songs—not solely in the lyrics, or the music, or the arrangements.

My students and I also discussed the comments that users left for each of the songs. Those comments revealed that most of the people listening to the covers seemed to be listening because they were fans of the artist and had no awareness of the original context of the lyrics. We agreed that it was fair for people not to know about the origins of the sample; most people listen to music as fans of artists and don't do

research about samples and covers to understand them. The students had made these inferences about the background knowledge of listeners because of the disruption that occurred when a commenter contributed to the discussion to reveal the source of the sample and its significance. When someone would "educate" the YouTube commenters in this way, heated arguments would ensue about race, lyrics, significance, and interpretation of meaning.

Our most interesting conversation happened with the students' responses to Kanye West's sample of "Strange Fruit" in his song "Blood on the Leaves" which was newly released at the time. At first, their interest seemed to be related to their relationship to the artist. They were fans of Kanye—at least, more than they were fans of the other artists. They listened to that sample in the same way that other fans listened to the other covers and samples we'd discussed. But the room was split regarding the location of meaning associated with Kanye's sample. His song, titled "Blood on the Leaves" samples "Strange Fruit"in the middle of an auto-tuned, hip-hop record that recounts the challenges of fame, drug (molly) use, and an adulterous hook-up with painful consequences. Some students felt that the music most closely resembled the tone of the original work and that Kanye was using the sample with intention, though they couldn't initially comment on how this was happening (these students went on to find sources that supported this theory). Other students felt strongly that the juxtaposition of West's profane lyrical content with Holliday's rendition of Meerpol's sacred lyrics was offensive (these students found support for this theory too).

This in-class debate about meaning and where it was and how it moved between these songs actually was exactly what I was going for with this assignment. At this point, after two full class discussions, I distributed my essay assignment sheet, which included the overview above and links to all of the songs we'd discussed as sources for further consultation. Students responded to the following prompt: "Choose one sample or cover of 'Strange Fruit' and discuss how the new song borrows from or departs from the meaning of the original song. Discuss the significance you see in this choice."

Students followed these instructions and came to different conclusions in their critical response essays. Still, in retrospect, I see clearly that those responses demonstrated my newfound understanding of one of writing's threshold concepts: "Texts make meaning in context. People interpret texts in ways that depend on their own histories and contexts." They were a bit better prepared to absorb that lecture on using and documenting sources responsibly than the class before them had been. And I was happy with that.

THE NEW NETWORK ASSIGNMENT – CHRISTOPHER MASSENBURG

I discovered Lisa Barone's article for Outspoken Media.com entitled, "Creating Your Own Brand Network Like Oprah Winfrey" that discussed Oprah and the development of her television network, OWN, as a model for personal branding. I immediately saw an opportunity to develop a unique assignment for my students. My goal was to talk about branding, to have the students envision the responsibility that comes with delivering a message to a group of people, to involve a presentation tool (without using Microsoft's *PowerPoint*), and to challenge students to practice their presentation skills. I developed an assignment that I hoped would push my students to consider the rhetorical situations and textual conventions needed to develop an effective argument. I wanted to emphasize visual design through the use of Piktochart, an online infographic design application, so I asked students to develop a Piktochart presentation for a new network that they would create and then pitch to the class.

The students had lots of questions. They weren't familiar with Piktochart and wanted to know why they had to use it. I explained that it was another means of composition and that the templates provided would make it easier to add visual appeal to their presentations. We looked at various examples of the use of infographics and discussed the effectiveness of infographics as both an expressive and a persuasive tool. I told

them that it would take a few minutes to get used to developing the infographic, but that their final results would look better than their initial attempts. I wanted the relationship of the concept they were developing and the visual aid they would be creating to be different so that they would have to think more about how they would put it together.

In keeping with the assignment's focus on visual design, I instructed students to dress according to their proposed network. I wanted them to really consider what a consistency between the design of their infographic and their personal appearance might mean. What type of dress would be appropriate? Why would it matter? They asked for clarity quite a few times. They were used to just being told to dress professionally. I wanted them to see their dress as part of the visual design of their presentation and to recognize that there are a number ways to dress professionally, just as there are various modes of composition. They hadn't been made to think about the variety of ways professionalism could manifest or that the "text" being read by their audience might even include them.

The learning curve for the Piktochart infographic took longer than I anticipated. I had to help them understand how to manipulate the templates. They wanted more direction on what the presentation should include. I told them to base the network off of something that mattered to them, using their own interests to guide the development of the network and their decisions about their target audience. Soon they were able to grasp the concept and started putting their infographics together.

After that, I had to tackle their concern over the oral presentation. I gave them tips for getting over the anxiety of presenting in front of people. I kept the time length of the presentations short so that it wouldn't seem too overwhelming. In an effort to give value to their perspectives and their ability to articulate their interests, I let them know that their familiarity with the network was the most important element of the presentation.

Many aspects of the assignment went well. The students enjoyed developing the infographic, choosing themes for their networks that reflected their interests, identities, and aspirations. Some based their presentations on future careers, some on their involvement in athletics, and some on practical skills that might be needed to navigate adulthood. Each person felt good about the theme he/she selected and the contents of the infographic. Often, they used models of networks with which they were familiar, and which they had researched in order to develop creative names and slogans for their own networks. I had them create drafts and submit them to me so I could give feedback before they presented the final versions. Most were able to highlight the value of the network and the type of programming. They also were able to recognize the impact of social media in connecting with people, articulating which social media sites they would use and how. The one detail that many students failed to identify in the infographic was the specific location where the network would appear. I assumed they would choose a location based on their home service and selection of channels, yet that didn't happen.

They had greater difficulty with the pitch. Even though they had created these networks, each with their own unique identity and value, they weren't confident in explaining their creations to the audience. While they did reasonably well in deciding on a mode of persuasion (ethos, logos, or pathos) to use in the pitch for their networks, they struggled to apply that mode comfortably and convincingly. Many even chose to dress just as they would for other school presentations, no matter how distinct their network was (i.e. sports or entertainment); in doing so, they missed the opportunity to use another visual appeal to pitch their network. I wanted each student to see his/her presentation as a chance to sell what he or she knew in a unique way, determined by their own strategy rather than the traditional rules for presentations, but not every student saw it that way. Many students couldn't escape the feeling that there was a particular standard for how to make a class presentation and that if they couldn't fit their presentation into that standard their grade would suffer. So what I ended up with were some amazing ideas and some not so good sales pitches. To me, this assignment

further affirmed the need for this course, which provides students with experiences outside of standard conventions, but within solid pedagogical frameworks. This type of writing course could help students to trust their own evaluative instincts and value their own cultural understandings.

CONFUSED CATS AGAINST FEMINISM – EMILY HOWSON

In class, we'd just finished watching Jean Kilbourne's documentary, Killing Us Softly 4, about the advertising industry's depictions of women's bodies. I'd themed and centered the semester around sex and gender roles in American society and the documentary had presented students with an argument to consider: images of women in advertising are a toxic influence on and contribute to gender inequality and stereotyping. Eventually, students would be completing a more traditional, formal essay assignment in response to that argument, but before we got there, I felt that I needed to provide some smaller, lower-stakes scaffolding assignments to help them develop and deepen their thinking. While our discussions about Kilbourne's premise had been impassioned—some students agreed with her, some disagreed, but just about everyone felt strongly either way—I wanted a chance to challenge and complicate the responses I was hearing, and to do so in a way that blended our rhetorical analysis with more "nuts and bolts" writing skills and practice.

Blending those two facets of the course together—the critical thinking and the critical writing—is consistently a struggle of mine in teaching. For me, the opportunities to invite critical thinking overflow; I can scarcely check my Facebook feed anymore without coming across a new magazine article or YouTube video that would prove highly applicable and interesting to analyze in class. My ability to come up with creative ways to work through the more practical elements of writing is considerably less generative. While students are active and participating when watching Key and Peele's "I Said Bitch" skit, analyzing its constructions of femininity and masculinity, and debating the difference between public and private performances of gender, they are considerably less enthused when we shift to writing about it. Should we transition to a more traditional classroom practice—say, generating thesis statements based on their conclusions about the ideal audience for the skit, and discussing factors that contribute to stronger or weaker theses—the students' engagement begins to wane. To prepare for the larger essay students would write in response to Kilbourne's documentary, I wanted to reinforce the building blocks of well-defended argument—claims (arguable and specific), evidence/reasoning (concrete and compelling), and warrants (the explanations and interpretations that connect evidences to claims)—but I didn't want to lose the students, and I didn't want these ideas to separate from the questions we were considering with regard to Killing Us Softly.

This is where the elasticity and responsiveness of pop culture as a teaching tool really shines through. In our discussions of the documentary, a few trends had emerged and one of them centered around a lack of consensus regarding the definition of "feminism;" students were using the term in all kinds of ways, applying many different meanings and connotations, bringing their unique backgrounds and perspectives to bear. The resulting confusion was revealing to me but mostly, well, confusing to the students. We needed some common ground so we could more clearly contextualize our differences. The next class, we watched Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TEDTalk, "We should all be feminists," as a way to launch our inquiry into the term "feminism." We also read and compared two different editorial-style articles—one from the right-wing Fox News, the other from the left-wing The New Republic—that reported on Beyonce's 2014 VMA performance (in which she stood in front of a huge "FEMINIST" sign, all lit up). Adichie's talk gave us a shared foundation and vocabulary, and we made some real strides with the articles. Many of the students had little trouble identifying claims and evidence made by each of the writers and in making some assertions about the success or failure of those claim-evidence pairs. What the students struggled with was the concept of warrants. Because warrants—the logical connections between ideas—can function implicitly and go unspoken, students had a harder time

pinpointing their use in the articles.

At the same time, I was noticing a refrain in our discussions that I wanted us to investigate further. The refrain positioned the concepts we were examining as largely external to the students' lives—as something above or outside their experiences, something that affected (and was affected by) the famous and talented Beyonce and Jay Z, or the scholarly and accomplished Adichie, but not them. I wanted to push them to consider what impact these ideas circulating in our culture had on them, and also what impact they might have on these ideas. In addition, I wanted to consider the ways in which warrants manifest outside of straightforward article writing. I turned to Tumblr.

On the "Who Needs Feminism?" page, users upload photos of themselves holding signs, usually handwritten, that follow a general template: "I need feminism because [fill in the blank]." Sometimes the photos include the authors' faces; sometimes they don't. Sometimes they include more than one "because;" sometimes they include just one. We scrolled through examples, with students exclaiming over or commenting on submissions that stood out in particular ways. Then, we switched over to a different Tumblr, this one called "Women Against Feminism." On this site, users upload photos of themselves holding signs that follow the opposite template: "I don't need feminism because [fill in the blank]" (emphasis mine). We scrolled examples of these also, pausing and examining submissions that caught students' eyes. On both sites, students found reasons to be confused and dissatisfied. "I don't need feminism because I love my boyfriend?" read one student aloud, eyes narrowed. "What's loving her boyfriend got to do with it?" Another photo, which read, "I need feminism because a friend of mine says feminism is pointless," left students scratching their heads (metaphorically speaking), thinking in circles, and eventually concluding that it "just doesn't make any sense."

Both Tumblr blogs gave us rich ground to cover, both in considering what the pages were doing as a whole—what individual people, often young people just like the students, were doing to participate in a broader social conversation—and in considering how each individual photo worked rhetorically. What the Tumblr pages also offered was a powerful encounter with arguments that possessed both claims (I need feminism or I don't need feminism) and evidence/reasoning (because x, y, and z), but that lacked warrants. On both sites, we found plenty of examples where unspoken assumptions and explanations left holes in arguments and diminished their effectiveness. We agreed that in the boyfriend example above, for instance, the author was working off a definition of feminism that assumed feminists are women who do not love men/boyfriends, or don't have significant others, and that for her argument to be effective, she'd have to first prove why that is true.

When we transitioned over to the third and final Tumblr, "Confused Cats Against Feminism," students were already halfway in on the joke. This blog parodies "Women Against Feminism" by hosting photos of cats posing with signs that read things like, "I don't need feminism because I need tuna. Where is the tuna?" and "I don't need feminism because what I need is to bite you." Students were laughing or smirking as we scrolled through. I asked them to ruin the joke by explaining why it's funny. Stumbling at first, but eventually gaining traction, students were more or less able to articulate the ways in which the cats had provided reasons that had nothing to do with feminism, and how this mocked the "Women Against Feminism" page by suggesting that those reasons also had little to do with feminism, or were based on misunderstandings of feminism.

For homework, the students were to make their own photo contributions and submit them to me via email. They could choose which claim they wanted to make (needing feminism or not), and provide whatever reason they wanted, but they would need to be prepared to discuss the image in class and unpack the underlying warrants. I also emphasized the ways in which students would need to think carefully about their composing choices, and that those choices extended beyond the words they put on their signs. I asked them to pay attention to how other elements of the photo impacted their message, to consider if they wanted their face or body in the picture, what they might wear, whether the photo would be in black and white or color, and so on. As expert Instagrammers and selfie-takers, many of the students responded to this element

of the assignment with a comfortable fluency. They were already practiced in the art of curating their own image; what they hadn't yet done was connect their own activities on a conceptual level with those depictions in advertising that we had just finished discussing.

Responses poured in on both "sides" of the debate (some students even sent two or three photos, having come up with more than one idea and wanting to share them all). We could have probably spent the rest of the semester discussing some of the ideas and rhetorical appeals contained within their images, for they were both broadly ranging and complex. I compiled all the images and we went through them one by one, focusing our discussion on a brief analysis of the rhetorical "moves" made by the author and on the missing or hidden warrant implicated in his/her argument.

When students began work on their formal essay, responding to Kilbourne's documentary and the relationship of image and advertising to constructions of gender, they still struggled to connect claims and evidence in clear and precise ways, but there was a notable increase in the attention paid to the logical connections between ideas. The ratio in the previous essay between claims (of which there were many), and evidence and warrants (of which there were fewer) became less dramatically uneven. So, the students' writing did suggest that they were slowing down, trying to make their interpretations of their evidence clear to the reader. And perhaps more importantly, a surprising number of the essays concluded on an optimistic note, sounding a little more confident that there was something to do be done—something they could do—to influence advertising one way or the other.

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Our first two years of implementation of Critical Writing Seminar have been characterized by experiences like the ones outlined above—propelled forward by a productive tension between instinct and experimentation. Our distinct narratives collectively demonstrate how teaching this course can be fraught with challenges, but pregnant with potential. We have learned that pop culture is a uniquely effective tool for applying writing pedagogies and theories in the classroom.

We acknowledge that our comments thus far have significant limitations—most notably, the absence of empirical evidence. There is work to be done to verify that our students' increased engagement, enthusiasm, and responsiveness translates meaningfully into increased rhetorical dexterity. We readily acknowledge that we have not proven concretely, in what ways (if any) that Prof. Massenburg's students understand composing more broadly, or Prof. Shelton's students understand intertextuality in a way that they can apply to other papers, or Prof. Howson's students can articulate warrants more clearly. But, as we alluded to earlier, we are not the only writing teachers grappling for answers to questions of transfer. Examining the genres, tasks, texts, strategies, and conditions that actually facilitate transfer has become a mainstream research topic in the field of writing studies. Scholars are still theorizing about how students develop rhetorical skills across assignments and courses and throughout their matriculation.

We recognize that our reflections are purely anecdotal, and therefore, perhaps still at the margins of the empirical work being done on this topic in writing studies. While we cannot offer data that responds to these inquiries definitively, our narratives can help writing scholars consider the complex dimensions of the research questions that drive their inquiry. Our reflections also offer the emergent dialogue regarding popular culture pedagogy a courage-bolstering set of experiences to confirm that the risk of bucking tradition and resisting the rigidity of the academy is worthwhile—that popular culture can be integrated into traditional best practices in service of disciplinary theories and pedagogies.

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