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We need to have relevancy to connect to students. That is a given. But before we all begin to watch too many hours of MTV or VH1 just to understand who Christina Aguilera is or what in the world *South Park* is about, we need to understand the relevancy of relevancy. While the word itself can have a wide variety of meanings, it is perhaps best stated by John Fiske in *Understanding Popular Culture*. He incorporates the notions of "productivity" and "functionality" along with "relevancy," but the combination is a suitable definition: "Pleasure comes from this mix…, which is to say that the meanings I make from a text are pleasurable when I feel that they are *my* meanings and that they relate to my everyday life in a practical, direct way" (57).

But, how far is too far when it comes to making lessons and topics relevant in the classroom? Are we to compromise the teaching of Shakespeare, Frost, or Hemingway because we don't think that they have as direct relevance to students' lives as *The Real World* or *Survivor*? I don't think there has to be an either/or. The problem is that to every generation, what they grow up with is considered relevant, and what came before and after is *not* relevant, until that one time when something clicks and they "get it." There comes a time when those select few understand the relevance to current issues when they read a work such as *For Whom the Bell Tolls* or any other "classic." They "get it" when they see the need to teach this material so that others can see this connection. However, this only happens to some people. After all, you, dear reader, are one of the

ones who "got it." But, teachers are in the minority; the number of people who can appreciate a Shakespeare sonnet (or even *know* what makes it what it is) is quite small. Therefore, the "I got it, and with the right teaching, they will get it, too" approach just won't cut it.

So what then is it about relevancy that we need to grasp? Just as we try to teach our students to look at the underlying themes of a text, we must practice what we preach. We must confront the culture and find out what our students live with day to day. Just as we are surrounded by our texts—books and journals and poems—so too our students are surrounded by texts which must be understood—music, film, or television. This is important, but we've tricked ourselves to miss the point. Take parent teacher conferences, for example. We want to talk to the parents of the students who are having trouble in class (but often, those we need to talk to are those who don't show up). We believe that the parents play a major role in the formation of a student's character—and rightly so. We must also realize that pop culture has an impact on the lives and characters of the students we teach. That can't be refuted. Just look at your own life and see how much songs, books, movies, and television shows have shaped your understanding of the world and your enjoyment of it. Just because we are older now and have found our "selves," we can't forget that the students today are the same as we were when we were in school. Fiske claims, "Distinctions among texts are as invalid as the distinctions between text and life" (126). If this is true, as teachers, we do a *dis*service to students when we separate Shakespeare from the latest James Bond film, suggesting that one is somehow "better" than the other. What we read, watch, listen to, and interact with—no matter what it is—somehow becomes part of who we are as social individuals.

I am not advocating that teachers surround themselves with pop culture and throw out anything that is more than ten years old. However, I am advocating keeping up with what the current pop culture is (without necessarily agreeing with what

the culture is saying). There are numerous ways to do this.

First, it may do teachers well to get a list from the students of what television shows they are watching, what music they are listening to, and what movies they are renting and going to see. This list will help teachers understand what their students are exposed to every day, before they come to school and as they are drifting off to sleep. Are they falling asleep on the bus rides to track meets while reading the best edition of Hawthorne short stories they can find (some are, but those are the future teachers and academics—again, in the minority)? Chances are they are listening to the *8 Mile* soundtrack, or listening to a CD of Linkin Park they burned while chatting online with their friends. Let's use a scenario for an example:

Matt, 16, is on the football team. He's on his way with the team to play a game against a rival two hours away. On the ride he talks a lot, but he also gets ready for the game by listening to a burned copy of P.O.D.'s re-issued *Satellite* album.

What can we glean from this situation? Here are some ideas for relating the material of class to what Matt is surrounded with:

1) Use P.O.D.'s song "Youth of the Nation" in a unit on violence, youth alienation, school shootings, or life choices. Along with this, the class can read a YA novel on what it's like to be an outsider, or what it is like to be surrounded by violence and guns growing up. Even a book about the choices a teen makes that determines how the rest of his life will be lived could work. Matt and the other students may walk out of class not only humming the song, but also knowing about self-worth, acceptance, and the horrors of being a social outcast. Many books may work for these kinds of topics, such as Hinton's *The Outsiders*, Anderson's *Speak*, King's *Carrie*, or Cormier's *The Chocolate War*.

2) Matt doesn't care about lyrics, but the beat? In a class discussion, talk about what "feeling the beat" means to the students. Let them bring in some music to sample to demonstrate what they mean. Then, show a clip of the film *10 Things I*

Hate About You (a movie loosely based off Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*). In the clip, the English teacher raps a Shakespearean sonnet (in case you're writing making note of this, the teacher does utter a profanity after the brief rap). Work with the students to re-write a sonnet into a rap form and "perform" it for the class.

3) Matt burned his CD. When working on a research paper, talk about plagiarism will eventually come up. Help the students understand plagiarism by using the example of burning CDs. If plagiarism is "stealing" someone else's words without giving them proper citation, then according to law, burning a CD is also "stealing." How is this the same or different? Who owns the rights to the music? What other things can we take for free? What do we claim as "ours" that hasn't been rightfully given to us (History buffs, this can then also relate to units on Native American rights, imperialism, Manifest Destiny, etc.)? If we take music for free off the Internet, or take someone's words and use them for our own (taking them for "free"), then aren't we stealing, too? Accordingly, more questions than answers may arise, but this will get the students to think critically about topics close to their lives.

The main concern at hand is the separation of "school life" and "real life." As educators, we need to do all we can to help destroy the bounds of "school" and "real" life. Just as the logical positivists and language philosophers believed, our definitions of ideas/concepts define future problems that we may encounter with them. For example, the way we define the word "lie," as in not telling the truth, will dictate how many problems we see with lying. If it is defined as "not revealing the *whole* truth," then many, many things are defined as a lie. If we define it as "purposely deceiving someone," then we will have different, and perhaps fewer, problems.[1]

The same is true for how we personally define "school" and "real" life. When we create lines between the two worlds, then problems are created in education.[2] We need to be aware of how we ourselves are helping to propagate the misconception that school and non-school life are somehow different or separate. As Quine reminds

us, it is the "facts about *meaning,* not entities meant" that will determine our behavior (310). The focus should not be on *where* the lines of "school" or "real" life are drawn, but *that we even draw them at all.* Understanding this tendency to "draw lines" will naturally affect our behavior. It is wise to note that Fiske cites a 1986 study where students found vast similarities between their life in school and the lives of convicts in a TV show called <u>Prisoner</u> (131).

When these lines are erased, trying to figure out how to incorporate relevant lessons into the curriculum will become easier. For a while, it will appear like we are bringing the "outside" world into the classroom. And we will be. But when our definitions are redrawn, the classroom expands to the surrounding community and world. Materials available for classroom use will be as varied as what we can get our hands on. And here's the exciting part. The materials most readily available to us are those things that the students are already reading, watching, and listening to. Now open to our instructional coverage are topics as varied as MTV, CD burning, the lyrics of a local coffee shop band, Britney Spears paraphernalia, clothing trends, etc.

In addition to doing our part to bring down these walls we've created, we also need to remember an important point: the students themselves must have some investment into the lessons you are planning/using. The students may not burst with excitement when you introduce pop culture elements into the classroom. Instead, they may look at you like they do when their parents are trying to sound "hip." They must become personally invested in the material you use. The student-generated list, suggested above, is one way to do this. If the students are excited about an artist, a movie, or a song, the introduction of the material is more *their* initiative than yours. At least, it may look that way to them. Something must be at stake for the students to be involved with the material. Destroying the "school life" and "real life" walls will aid in this. When the students understand that they are getting duped by Britney Spears' "innocent" image as compared with her "dirty" image, they may

appreciate the knowledge that can help them with their pocketbook. Whatever the method/issue, the students must be personally involved and must be active participants in the material taught, whatever it is, in order for it to be fully relevant to them.

Relevancy is not something that is easily grasped; it is something we must work hard to achieve. For classroom instruction to be completely relevant, a few steps must be taken. Teachers need to redefine the circles of school and non-school so they are no longer opposed. Teachers need to be aware of what the students are doing, listening to, reading, watching, etc. When we understand what's going on in students' lives, we can better serve them in our instruction. Relevancy in the classroom is a goal that can and must be achieved to strengthen the integrity of our classrooms and the public school system.

(Footnotes)

[1] Please see Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* section 4 and 6.5-7; Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations,* sections 5-6; W.V.O. Quine's *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* and *Ontological Relativity.*

[2] Did you catch it? When I even *call* "school" and "real" life "two worlds," then I've already made the mistake. We're so unaware that we're making the fatal step we can't notice it when we use it.

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