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SIGNIFICANT LEARNING: EFFECTIVELY USING TARANTINO'S *RESERVOIR DOGS* IN A CRITICAL WRITING CLASS

Chad Rohrbacher

Using film in class is nothing new. Film in higher education has been used to explore content, ideas, context, social or political issues, highlight discussions and model certain behaviors, among other things. For years I have used film to highlight rhetorical appeals, audience awareness, and logical fallacies, or to set up critical thinking discussions and writing assignments. We might watch *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, for example, and highlight the various logical fallacies that are present; however, there seemed to be a lack of “deeper learning.” While these types of assignments focusing on one specific student learning outcome like logical fallacies are positive in many respects, I always felt they were superficial and the lesson was forgotten as soon as students left the classroom. Students were not carrying their recognition of fallacies over to other texts or their own writing. That changed when I found a clip from Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs*.

Reservoir Dogs can be considered an odd choice of film to show first-year students in a basic writing class. *Reservoir Dogs* is about six strangers hired to commit a diamond robbery. Mastermind Joe Cabot (Lawrence Tierney) assembles the crew and uses only colors to differentiate them. The plan backfires, forcing the survivors, who have gathered at an abandoned warehouse, to figure out if one of them is, in fact, a police informer. The crew—Mr. White (Harvey Keitel), an aged veteran thief; Mr. Orange (Tim Roth), a wounded newcomer; Mr. Blonde (Michael Madsen), a psychopathic parolee; Mr. Pink (Steve Buscemi), a

bickering weasel; and Nice Guy Eddie (Chris Penn), Joe's son—begin to unravel as the pressure becomes too much for them to handle (Rottentomatoes.com).

The particular clip I use is Chapter 16 at 7:49 in the Anniversary DVD. It describes how an experienced undercover detective, Detective Holdaway (Randy Brooks), trains the neophyte Mr. Orange to get accepted into a gang to rob a jewelry store. They do this by discussing an “amusing anecdote” that would ingratiate Mr. Orange into the criminal's world, and thereby into the gang. Mr. Orange learns the script and finally presents it to the gang and is subsequently accepted as “one of them.” While the language is extreme at times and the content difficult, both areas highlight a number of difficult rhetorical concepts that students understand and apply to later writing assignments. This exercise is engaging and asks students to process multi-modal material in complex ways. As Daniel Wild notes, “(I)f a composition class is to serve as an introduction to academic thinking, our pedagogy must always return to an understanding of how difficult this kind of thinking differently is for students” (23). By using a movie in this way, I see it acting as a bridge for students, allowing them to feel a certain competency as viewers of film while giving them opportunities to organize and shape their thoughts in a directed and focused way, ultimately developing their critical thinking skills.

First I will share a brief description of the assignment. Following the assignment's description, I will explore the significance of how students engage and analyze the film text and the pedagogical underpinnings of both. I will conclude by looking at the practical applications of the assignment and how it actually leads to a more significant learning experience.

The Assignment

The assignment works within the context of one of my students' first essays, a narrative about a specific social issue. In preparation for this assignment, we will have read a number of first-hand accounts relating to the issue. Though this assignment

focuses on socio-economic class issues, it can be adapted to investigate race, gender, and education issues. Students read narratives by Barbara Ehrenreich, Sherman Alexie, Gary Soto, bell hooks, and discuss the content and rhetorical strategies used to deliver the content. Therefore, students have some limited understanding of the myriad of complex issues that go into exploring social class in America in a narrative format.

I then share a personal moment concerning class from my experience and describe it in the broadest terms. I tell students that I am a first generation college student and there was a lot of pressure from my family to succeed, which ultimately meant that I must be able to make money. While a graduate student at Louisiana State University, I lived on a farm, and in exchange for rent I did a number of jobs for the owner. When my mom visited me there, I had expected a joyful reunion; instead, she cried. Her first words to me were, “You’re living in poverty.” This example is used to both connect with my students and to model particular writing techniques that will be explored later.

I then ask students to consider a question: “What was one moment in your life when you realized or saw how important the perception of having or not having money was?” Students generally freewrite for 3-5 minutes contemplating that question. Freewriting is a non-stop timed activity where students just get ideas on the paper. They do not allow the “editor” to stop them. They do not worry about grammar, mechanics, or even coherence. If they can’t think what to say, they write “I don’t know what to say” until something pops into their minds. The key I stress is not to stop.

Once the timer goes off, I introduce the clip, giving context and describing the main characters. Before we watch the clip, I ask them to write down another broad question: “Why are we watching this clip in writing class?” This question directs their thinking from being merely entertained by the film to a specific intellectual activity; by my posing the question, they implicitly understand there is more to the clip and that they should make connections. This particular part of the clip, approximately five

minutes long, is the scene in which Mr. Orange receives the anecdote that he will present to the gangsters, with instructions on how to present it credibly. Students jot down ideas as they watch and invariably they highlight the key concepts including:

- Show versus tell in your narrative
- Know the details
- Make the narrative your own

When the clip is finished, I give them a minute to collect their thoughts and reflect on the question. When they are ready, I ask for their insights and record their observations on the board. Generally, they are excited and engaged, finding the connections to rhetoric.

Taking their notes, I then revise my sample narrative for them, adding more details, showing the experience, and ultimately making it mine through those details. I describe the dust floating up behind my mother's rental car as she churns up the gravel driveway, her thin fingers pushing a tear from her eye, as she points with her other hand toward my house with its tin roof, rotting wood siding, ivy growth, and guinea fowl in the front yard. I tell how she quivers, "You're living in poverty."

When I ask my students to review their original narrative, keeping in mind the lessons they highlighted from the clip, they are ready to retell it with more detail.

The next scene is approximately two minutes and deals with the cop practicing the anecdote. Again, students are focused with the "why are we watching this" question, and they adeptly highlight ideas like revision, editing, and clarifying concepts. They recognize that the character goes over and over his story, making specific rhetorical changes to better affect his audience, and when I ask them to once again revise their freewriting, they see it as part of a process. This acknowledgement of process is extremely important, and I reinforce the idea throughout the semester reminding them of "Mr. Orange," who spent hours upon hours working on his craft.

In the last clip, they watch Mr. Orange tell his final version to the gangsters. While he relates the story, the gangsters interrupt, asking for even more details. Directorially, Tarantino juxtaposed Mr. Orange's final narrative to that of another cop, who is telling his partners about a common traffic stop and how it almost turned disastrous because the motorist wasn't following orders. This juxtaposition works well in the assignment because the cop's story is absent of details and contains bland and sexist language, unlike Mr. Orange's "good" story, which has been through a significant process before presentation. Meanwhile, students recognize those concepts of tone and focus further on audience awareness and the importance of collaboration (getting feedback from the audience).

The last focused freewrite requires students to look at the concepts they highlighted from the final clip (tone, audience awareness, collaboration) keeping in mind that they will be getting into groups to share the paragraph with their peers. If time allows, I ask them to complete a peer edit; indeed, I tell students they should pretend to "be the gangsters" and ask questions of each other if they need details. This is the "human dimension" that L. Dee Fink, an expert in teaching and learning, underlines in his seminal text *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses*. It occurs when students learn something important about themselves or others and emphasizes a change in how they see themselves and their vision for the future. With this new vision of relevance and feeling of power, students will have become vested in their work and *care* more about what they are doing—something that educators have often cited as lacking in today's students (49). As a result of this experience students will have practiced a model of learning that they can continue to use for life—they will have learned how to learn.

Engage

It may be worthwhile to discuss the significance of engagement for today's students. In the essay, "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century," the authors argue that

. . . teens are actively involved in what we are calling *participatory cultures*. A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. (Jenkins et al. 7)

If one agrees with their premise, then one is obligated to meet students where they are and get them “engaged,” get them to participate in the material.

Further, key findings and recommendations from the National Research Council's report, *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*, support Fink's taxonomy. Teachers need to discover, draw out and challenge the understanding of their students' world—the one that they bring with them into the classroom. For the National Research Council, “the teacher must actively inquire into students' thinking, creating classroom tasks and conditions under which student thinking can be revealed” (19). When building upon this foundational knowledge, in-depth learning of the course concepts and subject matter must occur. This does not mean that students can possibly become experts in all areas of the course, but they need to dig deeply into some area of it. Last, students need to learn metacognitive skills so that they can practice how learners learn and thinkers think. Through this assignment, the exercise of recognizing the process of writing and thinking is at the forefront, and students individually are the ones who make those connections.

Gee's book on student learning, *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling*, asks why people learn more, participate more actively, engage more deeply with popular culture than they do with the contents of their textbooks. While it is important to ask why, it is equally important simply to understand that they do. Teachers need to model certain behaviors about reading and interacting with popular culture and textbooks, and about connections to other “texts” that can lead to

profound insights and understanding concerning the popular culture students are immersed in. If we can look at film texts in new ways that transcend the medium and get students involved and personally invested in the material, students may ultimately have a more significant learning experience.

In their study of secondary and higher education, Barbara McCombs and Jo Sue Whisler's *The Learner Centered Classroom: Strategies for Increasing Student Motivation and Achievement* concludes that it is the educational system that has failed to motivate students. They cite attendance rates for students who are underperforming, lower achievement and graduation rates for poor and minority students, and a lack of student motivation as evidence. McCombs and Whisler identify four student "opportunities" that help students become more motivated and positive about academic work: "(1) the opportunity to *demonstrate competence and success*, (2) the opportunity to *become curious about and develop a desire for a deep understanding of new subject matter*, (3) the opportunity to *exhibit self-expression and originality in learning activities*, and (4) the opportunity to *feel connected to and involved in relationships and others in school achievement*" (52). In this assignment students direct the learning by bringing their visual literacy to the table. They have many questions about why we are doing what we are doing, and are proud when they find the answers. Essentially, they are in charge of the lesson because they make the connections to rhetoric, reposition the assignment in the context of a charged social issue significant beyond the confines of academe, and share their experiences. They are invested with the material and connected with their peers; in sum, they are engaged.

Analyze

Fink, in the previously cited *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*, cites the limited effectiveness of lecture instruction (even "good" lecturing) because students rarely retain information for the long run; they have difficulty applying learning to new problems and situations; they do not practice and develop critical thinking and problem solving skills; and they are left without the

motivation to push themselves toward additional learning (their attitude toward learning has remained unchanged, or worse) (3). When lecturing about such specific rhetorical skills as using details, knowing one's audience, revising, or even verbalizing the idea that writing is a "process," often students' eyes glaze over. They have heard it, or if they haven't, it doesn't have concrete substance for them; the abstract ideas are not anchored to anything "real," thus they are buoys floating around in some ocean of terminology which they may or may not grab hold of.

As students read the text, in this case the film, they are forced to look for deeper meanings and make connections between the film and rhetoric and then to their own writing. When they recognize it or their peers point it out, they have a very real moment to make sense of it. They have the image of the film and the moment of the class to use as anchors for these concepts. I contend that if they have something to anchor these abstract ideas to, they will more likely remember and apply them to future pieces.

Consider D. Sandy Hoover in her text "Popular Culture in the Classroom: Using Audio and Video Clips to Enhance Survey Classes," where she uses clips in her history courses. She highlights an online student survey concerning visual learning developed by Barbara Soloman and Richard Felder for North Carolina State University. Approximately seventy-five students completed the survey, and the results indicate that the students were overwhelmingly visual learners, as opposed to verbal learners. Of those who completed the questionnaire, over seventy-nine percent were visual learners, which means that almost four out of five students "remember best what they see—pictures, diagrams, flow charts, time lines, films, and demonstrations" (474). In her own class, Hoover explores how video clips were used to teach difficult concepts, and sixty percent of her students indicated that the video clips were indeed helpful learning devices (474). Additionally, when asked to rate the helpfulness of the clips, none believed that the video clips were without merit (475). Further, in a review of ten studies concerning whether multimedia instruction

is effective, Mayer concluded that there is consistent evidence for a contiguity effect. Students generated a median of over 50% more creative solutions to transfer problems when verbal and visual explanations were integrated than when they were separated (8). In other words, when there were visual and verbal tools integrated into the lesson, students were able to creatively take and transfer that knowledge and those skills to other situations.

Ideally, then, students analyze this film text, comprehend it, and make concrete connections to rhetoric and to their own or their peers' writing, and those skills transfer beyond the classroom's walls.

Apply

Students oftentimes find it easier to recognize, analyze, and comprehend rhetorical concepts than to apply these concepts to their own writing. I've noticed my students generally struggle with confidence concerning this defined skill and can easily be overwhelmed with the daunting nature of fully developing an academic essay. This assignment "breaks down" the process, allowing them to see possible steps of construction, from brainstorming an idea to revision and final completion.

As I previously noted, students identify key concepts from the clip, then focus specifically on those concepts and revise their individual paragraphs in a focused freewriting exercise. Again, freewriting is a no-holds-barred, timed writing where the "editor" is not allowed. Even when revising this paragraph, the same rules apply, and ideally this allows students to focus on applying the concepts without worrying about grammar or mechanics until they get to the final version. Hinkle and Hinkle (1990), psychologists at Miami University, studied the effect of focused freewriting on lecture comprehension and found that it may produce increased comprehension of content, develop writing skills, and increase student interest in the subject matter (33). Thus, if we can remove the real stress of the "editor" sitting on our students' shoulders and give them ample tools to work

through a process in a simplified and concise way, students may be more apt to apply this strategy to other assignments and areas.

For me, there are two key concepts that inform this structure of watching then writing with specific purposes in mind. First, Pennebaker et al. note that writing usually promotes greater self-reflection and the taking of broader perspectives than does oral expression (qtd. in Wade 126). Second, constructivism in learning posits that through a complex process, learners construct their own meaning to develop personal representations of knowledge. Here I would argue that with this assignment, by connecting very specific rhetorical concepts to a very real experience and using these defined steps in the process, students allow themselves the mental space needed to explore the concept in action and what it might mean for their particular piece. Further, I believe they actually retain that knowledge. For this learning to take place, Cross stipulated that learners must make the connections on their own and that the structure of the assignment must allow them ample opportunity to do so (8).

I have noticed that while students may struggle at times to apply the concepts well, a simple word or phrase (e.g., *Reservoir Dogs*) on a passage in a later essay draft allows them an opportunity to remember a series of complex rhetorical tools that they have in their writing toolbox.

Collaborate

Active learning and collaboration are integral to this entire process. Students collaborate to identify key rhetorical concepts, they direct the conversation as we discuss those concepts, they write and revise and write some more, and they finally work together, refining and sharing their products.

There is a great deal of research, including that by Slavin and Annis, that suggests students who teach or who repackage their knowledge for other students significantly improve in their understanding of the subject matter; indeed there is great value for students who articulate their knowledge to the class (Slavin 48; Annis 43). Students see that writing is both a solitary and a

collaborative effort. By peer editing in groups with a condensed piece rather than a complete essay, they have an opportunity to challenge (be the gangsters) and assist in the development of each other's work.

Indeed, in 2007 Hafeez and Mardell in *College Student Journal* found that students' active involvement with learning had positive influences on academic achievement (wilsonweb). This study further supports the importance of students' active engagement in the learning process. The beautiful thing about this assignment is that I don't teach anything in the traditional sense of the word. Students analyze, comprehend, apply, collaborate, and begin the difficult process of writing a complex essay in an enjoyable way. Thus, I facilitate an opportunity where learning can take place, and they do all the hard work.

A More Significant Learning Experience

First, I would like to highlight that I use this assignment in the narrative essay for a couple of reasons. I previously noted students may feel inadequate as writers or unable to complete an academic essay, but I believe that using the narrative format with a focus on a social issue relieves some student anxiety. The students are experts of their experience, thus the troubles they face are not content-orientated, but rather problems of rhetorical presentation. Second, the use of a personal experience threaded throughout the assignment is purposeful. It is widely understood that emotional events are often remembered with greater vividness and accuracy; therefore, if students can tap into that emotional memory and connect it to this visual, engaging exercise, it may have more of an impact and lasting impression than if they just complete the exercise (Reisburg and Hertel 313).

In reviewing a considerable body of research on student learning, Ramsden notes:

Surface approaches (to learning) have nothing to do with wisdom, and everything to do with aimless accumulation . . . (in contrast) deep approaches are connected with the

qualitatively superior outcomes which we associate with understanding a subject (qtd. in Bryson 350).

This deeper learning is integrated within the entirety of the assignment. Students are asked to complete complex thinking skills in small steps that lead to a coherent whole. Biologists Bissel and Lemons note in “A New Method for Assessing Critical Thinking in the Classroom” that many students communicated that they never understood how to think critically because they were never shown what it meant (71). It is helpful for the student when the instructor makes a point of verbalizing the critical thinking processes that took place during the assignment. Making the student aware of these processes allows them to recognize or at least be aware of the complex processes taking place. Here I explicitly show my students Bloom’s taxonomy and the six levels of thinking and ask them to tell me how many of the thinking processes they covered. They are generally shocked when they realize they moved through all six in some form during this two-day exercise. They recognized they had to define or label the rhetorical concepts; they had to comprehend by identifying and explaining them. Applying the concepts to their own writing and analyzing their writing, the film, and their peers’ work cover the third and fourth levels of intellectual behavior. Further, through composing a narrative work focused on a social issue and assessing each others’ final products, they worked through the final levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy.

The impact on their writing is immediate and significant. In the next set of rough drafts, I see students using more details, and they are generally more aware of tone and more willing to “buy into” the process of writing. Similarly when I review students’ peer-edited essays throughout the rest of the semester, I often see comments like “show vs. tell,” “remember your audience,” or simply “RDogs” in the margins.

At the end of the semester in the course evaluations I always have a few students say that the *Reservoir Dogs* assignment was the “most meaningful” or “worthwhile” exercise they did and that it

made them “look at writing a different way.” Some students share that the assignment was unexpected and they had never experienced writing that way. Others mention the assignment was the first time they enjoyed writing. And for me, getting students to look at writing in a non-threatening, fun way is integral to the transition into the academic world.

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