POSITIONING THE TEXTBOOK AS CONTESTABLE INTELLECTUAL SPACE

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As teachers and scholars in composition and rhetoric continue to reread and reinvent our discipline, we cannot afford to neglect the dynamic role textbooks play in conserving, challenging, and transforming the academic culture, the discipline, and the tradition of teaching writing.
  —Xin Liu Gale and Fredric G. Gale, *(Re)Visioning Composition Textbooks*, 12-13

Compositionists have long recognized the ideological nature of the composition classroom and the significant role textbooks play in the politicization of education. In *Fragments of Rationality*, Lester Faigley argued that textbooks are "embedded in a long history of institutional practices and discourses that, as Foucault has demonstrated, are themselves mechanisms of power working quietly across social hierarchies and traditional political categories" (133). In 1996, Mona Scheuermann fueled the debate about the role of textbooks in the writing classroom by claiming teachers intentionally use readers to indoctrinate students with their personal political beliefs (77-78). Extending compositionists' skepticism toward textbooks are their concerns about whether textbooks work against our discipline's goals of fostering students' inquisitiveness and intellectual development. In her 1987 groundbreaking *CCC* article, Kathleen Welch argued the "textbook-bound classroom as it now often exists . . . promotes passivity" because of an emphasis on rule-based "technical rhetoric" (279). Additionally, Kurt Spellmeyer contended that though textbooks are theoretically intended to incite inquiry, in practice they "help suppress questioning" because they detach knowledge from where it originated and present it to students as

something that "comes from somewhere else–and from someone else" (45-47). Unfortunately, while many scholars work to make textbooks challenging and stimulating, they are produced within a profit-driven context that privileges sale-ability and accessibility over educational benefits (Olson; Otte; Garnes et. al).

Despite writing teachers' awareness of the ideological and intellectual boundaries created by textbooks, for many students textbooks constitute a tacit discourse in the classroom and define what knowledge is deemed valuable and uncontestable. Even when teachers encourage students to read critically the other texts they assign, textbooks themselves are rarely presented as intellectual spaces that students help create and to which they contribute. Consequently, textbooks in the writing classroom can counter classroom practices designed to promote critical thinking and intellectual exploration. Recognizing these challenges, I sought to reposition the course textbook in my classroom as a space for students to collaboratively discover and contest knowledge.

This article reports the results of my attempt to combat the boundaries textbooks create by replacing the commercially-published readers I had previously used in my writing courses with a "textbook" the students would create by researching and selecting the course readings. My hope was that by positioning the course content itself as flexible and contestable knowledge, students would become more critical readers, writers, and researchers. I also hoped giving students the power to select the course readings would engage them in their own learning and encourage them to see knowledge as accessible and contestable–as something they could seek out and critique as individuals and collaborators.

Positioning the textbook as a collaboratively-composed and contestable intellectual space is a teaching practice informed by the liberatory, student-centered pedagogies valued by our discipline. It enacts James Berlin's argument for teaching students to critique and resist the discourses working to influence them (52). It adds to the list of pedagogical practices responding to Ira

Shor's call to empower students by not treating knowledge as a commodity to impose on students, but rather as something to be investigated and debated (11-16). And it helps students become, in Mike Rose's words, "agents in their own development" (416). Further, this practice embodies the "pedagogy of possibility" advocated by Kay Halasek because it is "student-generated" and not just "student-centered," situating students as "co-authors" of classroom pedagogy (180-184). More importantly, this pedagogical practice helps us reexamine the relationship among our teaching methods, the location of boundaries and contestable spaces in our classrooms, and the goals of our discipline.

In what follows, I outline the design, execution, and results of my experiment with teaching students to research, select, and interrogate the course readings in my English Honors 151 class.[1] I share the successes and challenges of this practice, drawing on both my own observations and reflections and on those of my students.

Constructing and Contesting the Textbook

On the first day of class, I told my first-year composition students that because the primary objectives of this course (the second of a required three-course sequence) were to help students further develop their critical reading skills, their analytical writing skills, and their academic research skills,[2] they would indeed read and write several college-level essays that critiqued, integrated, and documented research.[3] I also told them that the course textbook was "up for debate"–literally. Part of their work this semester, I explained, would be 1) to collectively create the course "textbook" by researching and selecting our course readings, and 2) to collaboratively evaluate and question those readings by composing and presenting a series of thought-provoking discussion questions along with contextual information about the author and text. Based on their reactions that first day, the students seemed a bit surprised, but interested.

Because students likely were not used to selecting their course readings, I prepared them to research and select the readings by

assigning in the first two weeks a few model articles they could use as a kind of benchmark or starting point. Having chosen "Reading Popular Culture" as our course theme, I assigned the following essays: Mark Miller's "Getting Dirty,"[4] a perspicacious and playful essay analyzing a 1980s Shield soap commercial; Aeon J. Skoble's "Lisa and American Anti-intellectualism,"[5] an essay critiquing the message *The Simpsons* sends about education and intellectualism; and Dianne Williams Hayes' examination of the narrow portrayals of black college students in film, titled "Athletes, Outcasts, and Partyers."[6] I presented these texts to students not only as examples of the types of readings they should search for because they exemplified the academic reading students should be encountering at the college level, but also as models of the type of analytical writing and thinking the first writing assignment required of them (analyzing a popular culture artifact, focusing on the messages it sends about a social, cultural, political, or economic issue). These three articles were also ideal models for course readings because my former students had found them accessible, interesting, and provocative.

On Day Three of the course, a campus librarian gave students the orientation to the campus library and its services, generously tailoring the session to helping students locate scholarly readings on popular culture. To further assist students, I gave them a list of the types of publications I recommended (including academic journals and reputable magazines like *The Journal of Popular Culture*, *The Journal of American Culture*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The Nation*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Atlantic*), as well as those of the ilk I did not recommend (i.e., *People*, *Us*, *Glamour*). I asked them to think about what forms of media and what social, cultural, and political issues they were most interested in reading and writing about, and I encouraged them to think about these as possible search terms (see Appendix A for the assignment prompt). An additional resource for students was an online "Research Guide" the librarian had created just for our course. The Guide contained links to relevant journals students had access to at the college, to pertinent (and reputable) websites and internet resources, to the most

useful research databases for this assignment, and to the library's specialized encyclopedias related to popular culture.

Students had one week from the library orientation to find and select one or two articles to nominate for our course "textbook." During that week, we spent time in class working on the crafts of writing summaries and citing sources. At the end of Week Three, students submitted to me a brief self-composed abstract (four-to-six sentences long) along with the citation information for the articles they were nominating.[7] I compiled the information provided by students, distributed it to the class, and collected their votes for their top seven choices at the beginning of Week Four. The ten articles (out of the twenty-four submitted) that received the most votes became the semester's readings. Students whose article was selected by the class as a course reading were automatically assigned to co-present and lead the discussion on that reading. For those whose article was not selected, I assigned them to present on an article for which they had voted so everyone was able to present on an article in which they had expressed interest.

For the presentation assignment, I asked students, in pairs, to research and share with the class background information on the article's author(s) and the publication source. The purpose, as I explained to the students, was to provide the class pertinent contextual information that could assist us in reading the text critically. Kathleen Welch criticizes composition readers for presenting readings out of context, sending the message to students that writing occurs absent context (273). This assignment, however, repositions the text in its original context. As we discussed in class, knowing the authors' educational background, job history, publication record, race, gender, and political leanings and the publication's date, reputation, editors, and political affiliations could enrich our readings of the texts by shedding light on the author's motivation, audience, and purpose.

For the second part of the presentation assignment, students collaboratively composed a handout that contained an original one-to-two-paragraph summary of the piece (essentially an

expanded version of the abstract submitted by the nominator), the background information they gathered on the author(s) and publication, and five-to-seven questions they generated to facilitate and guide our class discussion of the piece. To aid students in creating thoughtful questions, I encouraged them to compose questions that would assist the class in doing the following: interrogate the quality of the article's argument, organization, support, and style; consider the contemporary application of the article's argument; connect the argument to other media forms; put the piece in conversation with any of the other course readings; or connect it to a current (or past) political, social, or economic issue. I provided them a handout with sample discussion questions for each category (see Appendix C), and I modeled this activity by generating the discussion questions for the first three articles I assigned. We also practiced these cognitive skills (interrogating and connecting texts) as a class throughout the semester.

From my perspective, the various steps of these complementary assignments would exercise students' reading, writing, and research skills. More specifically, they would provide practice conducting and reading scholarly research, summarizing others' ideas, citing sources, researching contextual information, and questioning texts–skills central to the primary objectives of the course as defined by the college and to the outcomes of first-year composition sought by the Council of Writing Program Administrators ("WPA Outcomes Statement").

From the outset, I had only two concerns. First, I knew that teaching the articles students selected would be more time consuming for me than teaching articles with which I was already familiar or had already taught. Second, and more importantly, I was concerned that giving up control of the course "textbook" could have unpredictable–perhaps negative–consequences. What if all the students picked poorly-written and poorly-researched articles? What if they picked poor articles but thought they were good? What if I didn't like the articles they selected? What if they all picked articles on the same subject or from the same magazine?

Would I really just go with the choices they made, or would I "take control" if the selection and voting process went poorly?

Because of these concerns, I initially considered not giving students complete control, but rather giving them *some* power. For example, I could let them select from several readings I had picked ahead of time, or allow them to select only two-to-three weeks worth of readings, or have them select readings from a handful of contemporary magazines I would require them to purchase. Ultimately, however, I decided to see what students– and I–could learn by genuinely positioning the course readings as an intellectual space they would create, contemplate, and question.

Lessons Learned

Despite my initial concerns about students' choices, students did select a variety of texts, both in terms of the content and in terms of the purpose, audience, organization, writing style, and overall quality of the texts. Some authors supported their claims at length and by citing scholarly research while other pieces were under-developed and under-supported. Some were written in a traditional academic voice while others employed a more conversational style. The authors included scholars, journalists, cultural critics, and a graduate student, and the publications varied from academic journals like *Policy Review* and *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, to magazines like *Newsweek* and *The New York Times Magazine*, to general web articles. The readings covered topics as varied as violence in video games and music, class issues in the Harry Potter series, body image and advertising, TV's influence on intelligence, and the relationship between American superheroes and politics (see Appendix B).

In an end-of-the-semester survey asking students to reflect on their experiences researching, selecting, and evaluating the course content,[8] several students mentioned this diversity in articles as beneficial for their critical reading skills. One student wrote,

> We read a large variety of articles with respect to length, quality, topic, source, type, etc. . . . Having articles that varied so widely. . . allowed me, as a student, to become more trained in criticizing articles in many different forms. For example, looking at title/body 'agreement,' evidence of claims, sources of research, or biases.

Additionally, as I observed in class, after reading a few of the more well-written and well-developed pieces, students seemed to notice and compare to these stronger essays the effects of other authors' different writing styles, vocabulary, organization, and use of sources and support.[9] In one case, on the day we discussed "Violent Video Games: Myths, Facts, and Unanswered Questions," students pointed out that while the author cited several sources in his bibliography, they were all authored by him or a collaborator of his, a quality they thought weakened his credibility in comparison to the stronger articles that cited several reputable sources by other authors. Students were also critical of the way he organized his essay, which led to unnecessary repetition. Overall, they commented in class, they were surprised that someone with a Ph.D. could have published such a poorly-written article in *Psychological Science Agenda.*

Students also expressed in their surveys what they learned about writing from reading this collaboratively-selected diverse set of articles. One student commented, "I really feel that certain articles influenced my own writing style and believe it or not I think having the occasional 'bad' article is constructive for the class to see what not to do or to avoid in their own writing." Another student wrote, "Even though some of the readings were a bit undeveloped or stylistically unintriguing, I think it actually helped by giving us examples of what not to do and allowed us to see both sides." This was clear to me in several of our class discussions of the articles. For example, when we analyzed the *Newsweek* article "I'm a PC: Keep the Change," students said that though they agreed with Daniel Lyons' argument, they thought the sarcastic tone and the lack of development of the piece hurt his

case. We discussed as a class how students themselves might avoid such criticism of their own writing.

Conversely, the stronger articles became the subject of class discussions on what students could do to strengthen and improve their writing and their essays. In fact, several students tried to emulate the tone or writing style of their favorite authors or used an author's organizational structure in their own paper. Students' favorite articles ("Beauty and the Patriarchal Beast," "Eminem is Right," and "Watching TV Makes You Smarter") were the strongest of the student-selected course readings, and students encouraged me to use the essays as model articles in subsequent semesters. Notably, "Watching TV Makes You Smarter" has been included in several commercially-published composition readers, including Pearson's *Beyond Words: Cultural Texts for Reading and Writing*, Bedford/St. Martin's *Fields of Reading: Motives for Writing*, and a reader I helped create several years ago, *Reading Popular Culture: An Anthology for Writers.* An additional (and unexpected) outcome of students' selections was that these three articles served as excellent models for students as they researched and wrote their final paper–a research paper examining a "representational trend" in popular culture.[10] "Beauty and the Patriarchal Beast" pointed to a trend in the representation of men and women in contemporary sitcoms. The author of "Eminem is Right" investigated the trend of violence in rap and hip-hop music. And, Steven Johnson revealed a trend of narrative complexity in television dramas.

Further evidence that students became more sophisticated and reflective readers as the semester progressed is the quality of the discussion questions they generated for their presentations. As one student noted in class a few weeks before the semester's end, the lists of discussion questions were getting progressively longer as the semester went on. From my perspective, this showed students' growing investment in *and* confidence in their ability to read the course texts critically. The two sets of discussion questions below (one generated by the first group to present, and the other composed by the final group to present) demonstrate

more concretely how students' ability to question and contest the texts developed over the course of the semester.

First Group's Discussion Questions

"Beauty and the Patriarchal Beast: Gender Role Portrayals in Sitcoms Featuring Mismatched Couples" by Kimberly Walsh, et al.

1. The authors attempt to prove their point by listing names of sitcoms. How relevant and how effective were the shows they used in proving their argument?
2. What is the author focusing on in his [sic] analysis and comparisons?
3. Can you think of any other shows that use Satellite and Kernel narratives to depict power struggles?
4. Are these types of shows responsible for the "post-feminism" trap?
5. How is this article similar to "Athletes, Outcasts and Partyers" and "Getting Dirty" in its' [sic] message?

Final Group's Discussion Questions

"The Politics of Superheroes" by Jesse Walker

1. What are the overall strengths/weaknesses of the article?
2. Walker talks about a lot of subtle imagery that he feels the common viewer will not notice. For example in Spider-Man 3, he compares Venom and Sandman to oil and sand, and notes how Spiderman briefly pauses before an American flag to go fight them. However these villains have been around for a very long time in comic books, long before the War on Terror. Do you think these possible metaphors were placed there on

purpose, or are politicians looking for imagery that simply isn't there?

3. With the exception of a very brief reference to comics at the beginning of the article, Walker only compares superhero movies to politics, [sic] could he have perhaps strengthened his argument by comparing other elements of pop-culture (other movie genres, video games, etc.) to politics as well? If so, which ones?

4. Walker opens his article by talking about how some politicians were ruined by a failed political program, but the fictional superheroes used in the program were not. He then goes on to speak about how politicians see political symbolism in comic book films. Does his intro lead into the main argument of his essay well? Or does it seem to have little relationship to his argument?

5. If the films mentioned have these political metaphors and continue to be very popular movies year after year, does this in turn suggest a widespread increase in political interest among viewers?

6. In what specific films, shows, and other forms of media do you see political aspects present? How are these examples the same or different than those mentioned in this article?

Representative of the types of questions students generated early and then late in the semester, these lists show how students' questions became more specific, more layered, and more contextualized. They also became more sophisticated in their understanding of the authors' rhetorical strategies and the effect of those strategies on readers. For example, the first group asked their peers in a simple "yes/no"-structured question if they knew of any additional shows that employed the narrative types discussed in "Beauty and the Patriarchal Beast" (Question 3). Similarly, in Question 5 they asked their classmates very generally if they could connect this article to two previous articles we'd read. The final group made a similar move with Question 6;

however, they asked students for *specific* related examples and asked them *how* those examples related. Demonstrating their recognition of the benefits of comparison and of writers' choices, this group's third question asked the class to consider whether comparing other forms of popular culture to politics could have strengthened Walker's argument. Once again, they asked for *specific* examples in a follow-up question.

Questions 2, 3, and 4 in the second set of questions also reveal the students' tendency to contextualize their questions by briefly summarizing or explaining something about the article before asking the class to apply or question those ideas/examples. One weakness in this set of questions is that some of them lead the reader to a specific response or imply the composers' opinion. For instance, Question 4 seems to imply that the presenters think the introduction has little connection to the argument. What these leading questions show, I think, is students' confidence in their critical reading of the text. By the end of the semester, students instinctively read the texts critically, and, evident in our class discussions, they were better able to articulate and justify their criticisms. For this particular group, their criticisms of the text were transparent in their questions. These questions (and those generated by all groups) rival—and perhaps far exceed—the quality of the discussion questions generated for students in pre-assembled textbooks, further supporting this method of teaching. Additionally, the act of generating the discussion questions (in contrast to responding to pre-packaged questions) allows students to determine the perspectives and critical orientation that guide the class' reading of the texts.

When asked what they had learned about research from this process, several students said that finding well-written and well-researched articles that were also interesting was the most challenging part of the assignment. Ultimately disappointed by some of the readings they had selected, a number of students admitted that they hadn't read their articles closely before nominating them, and that consequently, they had learned the importance of reading texts carefully and not judging them based

on a cool-sounding title and a quick skim. In their new role as "co-authors" of classroom pedagogy, a few students suggested to me that to help avoid poor choices in the future, I should show students more model articles at the beginning of the semester; some suggested I give students more time to find an article. Both of these suggestions reveal students' investment in the process and their understanding of learning by modeling. I also believe that this challenge is a good one for students to face. It is important for students to learn that though they have access to a lot of information, they must be careful, critical researchers to locate quality sources and texts.

   Students' research into the background of authors and publication sources also enriched our critical examinations of the course readings because they shed light on the audience, purpose, and motivation for the pieces. During our discussion of "Beauty and the Patriarchal Beast," students' realization that all three authors were women led them to contemplate the authors' investment in arguing that, despite their portrayal of women as smarter and more attractive than their husbands, contemporary sitcoms send a patriarchal message. In addition, when we critiqued "Eminem Is Right," students took into account the information their classmates presented that *Policy Review* is a conservative journal and the author is the consulting editor of the publication. To what extent, they wondered, did Eberstadt's political beliefs and the publication's political standing play a role in her interpretation of the reasons contemporary youth appreciate violent music? Getting students to consider the importance of this contextual information can make them more sophisticated readers and can help students to reflect more critically on the context in which they write their own essays.

   In their final reflections, a number of students further highlighted as successful the collaborative nature of this learning experience. One student wrote, "It made it feel more like the class was a collaboration, then [sic] you just talking at us." Others wrote about how they were more motivated to read the articles because they knew their peers had selected them. In one student's

words, "It definitely made me feel more interested in the readings because I thought if one of my classmates found this interesting, maybe I will too." Students' positive reactions to the collaborative nature of these assignments accords with anthropologist Susan Blum's recent findings about contemporary college students. Based on interviews with 234 students, Blum notes that because of students' numerous and early experiences with collaboratively-created and remixed texts like blogs, social networking sites, *YouTube* videos, etc., they are collaborative by nature and they think differently about boundaries, originality, and individuality (3-5). In fact, she states, "[t]he preference for working with and around others" is, for today's student, instinctive and inherent (68).

Related to students' recognition of the collaborative nature of this project was their sense of responsibility for the class's learning. For example, a few weeks before the end of the semester the two students in charge of presenting on and leading our discussion of the final course reading ("Batmanalyzed") expressed to me after class one day their embarrassment about the quality of the article that one of them had nominated. After reading a number of well-written, well-researched articles over the course of the semester, they seemed–in preparing to present on their reading–to recognize it as weak in substance and writing. Struck by their concern, I told the students that if they wanted to research a few other options covering the same or related topic (superheroes), I'd be happy to switch out their new selection for the previous one. The students jumped at the opportunity and later that day sent me links to two other articles they found. The class agreed to replace the original article with a different article the two presenters felt was stronger. This seemed a great educational moment for students: it showed they had learned to read the texts critically, were invested in the course content, and saw the course as collaborative because they knew their choice affected others.

I learned from this pedagogical experiment that teaching students to select the course texts not only fostered their

engagement with the readings and their willingness to critique them, but also challenged them to evaluate and reconsider their choices in light of what they were learning about reading, writing, and research as the semester progressed. In my experience, my students have never expressed as much interest or investment in, nor have they been as critically reflective about, the course readings as they were when they were given the power–and responsibility–to search for, select, and contest the course content. Several students commented on their end-of-the-semester survey on the freedom and control this methodology gave them. One student wrote, "It was somewhat of a challenge and it gave a certain amount of freedom, which is not that common in college. Personally I thought it was successful overall because it gave us as students some control." Another wrote, "[I]t's engaging and fun to have a class discussion about something we've opted to read." In response to my query about whether I should use this method in the future, one student wrote, "I would definitely do this again in the future. It gets the students involved in their coursework, taught us how to research and read in a critical manner, and gave us some concrete examples of a well-written piece." In fact, all but one student encouraged me to use this method in the future.[11]

Conclusions

My reflections and my students' reflections above tell us something about what students (and their teacher) in a first-year composition class can learn about reading, writing, research, and student engagement when we present course content as flexible and contestable. What, then, can the field of composition and rhetoric learn from making the course textbook a flexible, contestable intellectual space? What does this experiment tell us about the relationship among our teaching methods, the location of boundaries and contestable spaces in our classrooms, and the goals of our discipline?

As Xin Liu and Fredric G. Gale argue in *(Re)Visioning Composition Textbooks*, writing teachers cannot ignore the influence

textbooks have on "conserving, challenging, and transforming" teaching and learning (13). We must recognize and work to challenge the intellectual and ideological boundaries textbooks create in our classrooms, boundaries that often counter the liberatory and "student-centered" pedagogies we employ in our classrooms. As my experiment shows, positioning the course textbook as an intellectual space that students co-create and collaboratively question can help us contest the boundaries a pre-packaged textbook creates. The result was a "pedagogy of possibility" that, by granting students some authority and freedom in their learning, fostered students' inquisitiveness and intellectual growth while also achieving the more concrete course objectives of developing their critical reading skills, analytical writing skills, and academic research skills.

We can infer, further, that the improvement in students' ability to question and read critically was due not only to the practice they gained over the semester, but also to their recognition that because the teacher had not selected the course readings, the knowledge presented in these texts had not been already predetermined valuable (or uncontestable) by the teacher. Having selected the course texts themselves, my students engaged with the readings differently than my students have in the past when I assigned the readings. Gone from our discussions was the assumption that I had selected these readings because I agreed with them, because I wanted to indoctrinate students with the ideologies they promoted, or because I wanted students to reproduce their writing style. Students were left to contemplate for themselves the quality of the content and writing in these texts.

In addition, the collaborative nature of this pedagogy not only works with contemporary students' interest in collaboration, but also, as much research has shown, cultivates "metacognitive awareness" (Cockrell et al. 358), increases motivation (Williams et al. 48), and demonstrates to students the principle that knowledge is "actively derived and constructed" through "discourse and negotiations among group members" (Cockrell et

al. 354). This principle is a central one in addressing compositionists' concerns about the political, academic, and intellectual consequences of their classroom texts. It is also foundational for cultivating in students an interest and confidence in their own and others' intellectual development.

Notes

[1]While this was an honors section of first-year composition, I believe this pedagogical practice could have the same outcomes with a non-honors section of composition.

[2]The College of Staten Island's official catalog description of the course is "English 151 builds on English 111 to develop students' abilities to read, write, and do research. The course emphasizes close, critical reading of a variety of texts and analytical writing about these texts. Significant attention is given to the development of academic research methods and skills" (CSI Undergraduate Catalog 2011-2012).

[3]The four major writing assignments for the course were 1) an analysis of a popular culture artifact, 2) a close, critical reading of one of the course readings, 3) a summary of two sources speaking to the same issue and a personal "weigh in" on that issue, and 4) a research-based paper analyzing a representational trend in popular culture.

[4]Miller, Mark Crispin. "Getting Dirty." *Boxed In: The Culture of TV*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1988: 43-50. Print.

[5]Skoble, Aeon J. "Lisa and American Anti-intellectualism." *The Simpsons and Philosophy: The D'oh! of Homer*. Eds. William Irwin, Mark T. Conrad, and Aeon J. Skoble. Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2001. 24-34. Print.

[6]Hayes, Dianne Williams. "Athletes, Outcasts and Partyers." *Black Issues in Higher Education* 12.23 (1996): 26-28. Print.

[7]I did not grade the "selecting the course readings" assignment because I wanted students' incentive to be their interest and investment in the course content. I also wanted to give students practice researching, writing abstracts, and citing sources without worry about a grade for that work.

[8]The four questions on the end-of-semester survey were 1) What, if any, were the benefits of being able to choose the course readings?, 2) What were the challenges of this assignment?, 3) Do you think I should let students choose the course readings in my future classes? Why or why not?, and 4) Did you like the "reading popular culture" theme? If not, what other themes do you suggest I use in the future?

[9]I confess here that I had intentionally scheduled our reading of some of the "stronger" pieces early on with the hopes students might do what they in fact did: use the strengths in these pieces as benchmarks for their reading of the later pieces.

[10]The representational trend research paper I assigned to students is based on an assignment designed by the first-year writing program at The Ohio State University.

[11]This student indicated on his or her evaluation that he or she did not like most of the readings the students selected and consequently thinks the teacher should choose the readings.

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APPENDIX A:
ASSIGNMENT PROMPT FOR "SELECTING COURSE READINGS" ASSIGNMENT

In order to give you some control over the course content and give each of you experience locating information through the library system, for this assignment you will research and select 1-2 articles addressing the course theme–American popular culture–to submit as possible readings for the semester. You will learn how to use the college's library databases and locate the current holdings on the shelves to search for relevant articles.

On **Thurs., Feb. 11th,** each of you will turn in a document citing and briefly summarizing (in your own words) the 1-2 articles you've selected as possible course readings on popular culture. The document should contain the following information: the article title, author, publication title, date of publication, volume and/or issue number, page numbers, and a brief (4-6-sentence) summary of the article. You must also state where you found the article–on the shelves at CSI or in a particular database.

On **Tues., Feb. 16th** the class will vote on what articles you'd like to read and discuss this semester. Those articles not selected by the class may still be used for your other papers, especially the final research paper.

Suggestions for the types of publications to search for college-level articles about popular culture: *The Journal of Popular Culture, The Journal of American Culture, Time, Harper's Magazine, The Nation, The Atlantic, Dissent, Newsweek, The New Yorker, The New York Times, The New Republic, The American Prospect.*

Avoid such popular magazines as *People, Us, Glamour*, etc., as they do not contain the caliber of articles we're looking to read and analyze for this course.

You may locate the articles through the CSI Library databases OR by perusing the hard copies of these publications on the library shelves.Be sure not to select a book review. Be sure you can find the article in full text.

Example key terms to search:
- race and movies
- homosexuality and tv shows
- eating disorders and advertisements (or ads)
- reality tv and gender (or race, or class)
- music and stereotypes
- sports and the news
- If there's a specific tv show, film, song, or musical artist you're particularly interested in, you could search the title along with an issue. For example: "Gossip Girl" and gender.

APPENDIX B:
STUDENTS' SELECTIONS FOR COURSE READINGS

Anderson, Craig A. "Violent Video Games: Myths, Facts, and Unanswered Questions." *Psychological Science Agenda.* American Psychological Association, Oct 2003. Web. 8 Feb. 2010.

Dawson, C.J. "Literary Analysis: Social Class Prejudice in Harry Potter." *Helium* (Jan. 2009): n.p. Web. 7 Feb. 2010.

Derenne, Jennifer L., and Eugene V. Beresin. "Body Image, Media, and Eating Disorders." *Academic Psychiatry* 30.3 (2006). 257-261. HighWire Press. Web. 6 Feb. 2010.

Eberstadt, Mary. "Eminem is Right: The Primal Scream of Teenage Music." *Policy Review* 128 (2004). 19-33. *Academic Search Complete.* Web. 8 Feb. 2010.

Hardin, Marie, and Erin Whiteside. "Maybe It's Not A 'Generational Thing': Values and Beliefs of Aspiring Journalists About Race and Gender." *Media Report to Women* 36.2 (Spring 2008): 8-16. Web. 7 Feb. 2010.

Johnson, Steven. "Watching TV Makes You Smarter." *The New York Times Magazine,* 24 Apr 2005. 54-9. *InfoTrac Custom Newspapers.* Web. 9 Feb. 2010.

Lyons, Daniel. "I'm a PC. Keep the Change." *Newsweek,* 13 Apr. 2009. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 6 Feb. 2010.

Poyntz, Stuart. "Homey, I Shot the Kids: Hollywood and the War on Drugs." *Emergency Librarian* 25.2 (Nov/Dec 1997): 8-13. *ERIC*. Web. 8 Feb. 2010.

Varney, Allen. "Batmanalyzed." *The Escapist Magazine,* 2 Feb. 2010. Web. 5 Feb. 2010.

Walker, Jesse. "The Politics of Superheroes." *Reason* 41.1 (May 2009). 46-50. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 15 Apr. 2010. (Replacement article for "Batmanalyzed.")

Walsh, Kimberly, et al. "Beauty and the Patriarchal Beast: Gender Role Portrayals in Sitcoms Featuring Mismatched Couples." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 36.3 (Fall 2008): 123-132. *Humanities Full Text*. Web. 6 Feb. 2010.

APPENDIX C:
ASSIGNMENT PROMPT FOR STUDENT PRESENTATION

The aim of this assignment is to advance our collaborative readings of each text and to give you the opportunity to help guide these collaborative discussions. In pairs, you will give a short 5-10-minute presentation on one of the assigned readings and develop a list of 5-7 open-ended discussion questions that will help the class collaboratively analyze, complicate, and apply what we learn from these readings.

The Presentation

The short 5-10-minute presentation should consist of the following:

- biographical information on the author of the publication
- background information on the original source of publication (Find out what you can about the magazine, newspaper, or book the article was originally published in.)
- a short 1-2 paragraph summary of the article, highlighting the author's main points. (You should compose this summary collaboratively and not simply copy an abstract written by the author or a reviewer.)

The Discussion Questions

Generate a list of 5-7 discussion questions to hand out to the class. The following categories and sample questions should help you in generating these questions.

- **Questions that help the class critique the article.** For example, In what ways is Aeon Skoble wrong about intellectualism in American culture? Are there any weaknesses in Miller's argument about the Shield commercial? Or, What is Hayes leaving out of her argument?

- **Questions that "update" the author's argument.** For example, If Hayes were to write "Athletes, Outcasts, and Partyers" today, how might it be different? Or, Does Skoble's argument still apply?

- **Questions that connect the author's argument or main points to other media.** For example, Do modern American films use pseudofeminism in the same way Miller argues the Shield commercial does? Or, Do we see evidence of anti-intellectualism in political advertisements?
- **Questions that help us put the article in conversation with (or in comparison with) any of the other articles we've read as a class.** For example, What might Skoble say about Hayes' argument in "Athletes, Outcasts, and Partyers"? Or, Would Hayes agree with Skoble's argument?
- **Questions that ask the class to connect the author's argument or main points to a current (or past) political, social, or economic issue.** For example, How might our political views regarding intellectualism influence popular culture's representations of intellectualism? Or, Are contemporary advertising techniques reflective of the current economic crisis?
- **Other types of questions you think will help spark a discussion** that will ultimately help the class understand, complicate, analyze, and apply the ideas presented in the article.

The Handout
You and your partner should collaboratively create a handout for your classmates that you provide the day of your presentation. The handout should include your short 1-2-paragraph summary of the article (in your own words), a bulleted list of the biographical and source information you found, and the 5-7 discussion questions you generated. Your handout should be carefully proofread.

Grading Criteria:
- *Completion of assignment.* Do the presenters provide some background information on the author(s) of the article and on the publication in which it was published? Do they provide a brief 1-2 paragraph summary of the article (in their own words)? Have they generated 5-7 discussion questions? Have they composed a handout containing this information?
- *Thoughtfulness of the discussion questions.* Do the discussion questions help the class understand, complicate, analyze, and/or apply the ideas presented in the article?
- *Preparedness of the presenters.* Do the presenters appear prepared and organized?
- *Quality of the handout.* Is the handout readable? Does it contain the required information? Is the summary written by the presenters? Is the handout carefully proofread? Do the presenters have enough copies of the handout for each member of the class and the instructor?