



Adventures with Text and Beyond: Challenging Genre, Medium, and Text—Students as Authentic Readers and Writers

Author(s): P. L. Thomas

Source: *The English Journal*, Vol. 101, No. 4 (March 2012), pp. 90-93

Published by: National Council of Teachers of English

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41415480>

Accessed: 28-09-2017 14:55 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

National Council of Teachers of English is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The English Journal*

Adventures with Text and Beyond

Challenging Genre, Medium, and Text— Students as Authentic Readers and Writers

In many courses that I teach, as an introduction to interacting with text and confronting the act of composing, I present my students with a writing exercise based on a chapter from Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, "A House of My Own." First, after handing out the chapter to the class, I read the brief passage aloud:

Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after.

Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem. (26)

Then, I ask the students to write a new version of this passage, substituting their own choice for "house" and creating a passage exactly like Cisneros's except for content (I purposefully offer few guidelines to see what they produce and to gather a writing sample).

After we share our passages aloud in class, we discuss each other's attempts at modeling the craft,



© Elena Elisseeva/Photos.com

grammar, mechanics, syntax, and diction (for example, one student will notice that another student incorporates alliteration in the sixth sentence while others have not), and then, I ask the students to revise their first attempts, being more purposeful with all aspects of this brief but complex passage. Invariably, a few students send me their revisions and refer to the passage as a poem, despite the passage being a chapter from a novel and despite their handout showing a clear paragraph indentation, and thus that the passage is prose, as above.

This repeated response to the Cisneros passage has occurred in other situations as well. In the introductory education course for our department, we require students to read two supplemental texts along with their primary synoptic textbook, one of which is Jonathan Kozol's *Letters to a Young*

Teacher. Parallel to the students' misidentifying the Cisneros chapter as a poem, students often refer to Kozol's epistolary nonfiction work as a novel.

Many of these patterns of mischaracterizing texts (in terms of genre and medium) have come from elite students, students from Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate backgrounds, students with As in nearly all their English courses and on the essays written for their classes. What has struck me over almost three decades of teaching English and writing is that despite years of reading and writing instruction and experiences in school, many, if not most, students have misguided, incomplete, or jumbled perceptions of genre, medium, and text (Thomas).

Two dynamics—traditional transmissional approaches to text as well as composition and the high-stakes accountability era driven by standards and testing (Schmidt and Thomas)—have created students with these misconceptions, and as a result, students who are not challenged to examine and develop their critical literacy as readers and writers, thus not challenged to read and reread the world, write and rewrite the world (Freire, *Pedagogy, Teachers*). Here, I want to reboot this column—formerly known as "Challenging Texts"—to expand the focus on

text and critical literacy, offering *English Journal* readers “Adventures with Text and Beyond” by exploring multigenre units and unit-driven adaptations to challenge students as emerging readers and writers against the highly scripted reality of 21st-century education in the United States.

Challenging Genre, Medium, and Text in a High-Stakes Accountability Era

I began teaching high school English in the early 1980s, at the cusp of the release of *A Nation at Risk* and in the fall of 1984 when my home state of South Carolina joined in with the first states to embrace high-stakes accountability, including state standards and testing that determined whether or not high school students graduated. My high school committed fully to the process, and part of our required writing curriculum included quarterly writing samples prompted and assessed based on the state standards and the exit exam assessment of writing. This mandate included teaching students four types of writing identified by our state standards—argument, narration, description, and exposition (with the inauthentic implication being that these are the only types of writing).

As a novice teacher and writer, I implemented the mandates and watched my students simultaneously find fulfilling the scripts relatively simple (“Write a descriptive essay about your room at home”) and produce writing that was lifeless, inauthentic, and rote. My journey as an English teacher, specifically as a teacher of writ-

ing based in the texts explored in class, found the guidance I needed when I participated in a summer institute of the National Writing Project (NWP), offered by the Spartanburg Writing Project, in the late 1980s, initiating a relationship with NWP local affiliates that lasts until this day. What I began to embrace and implement in my classes was a move away from scripts and templates for texts and writing assignments (acknowledging that the mandated “four types of writing” were conducive to efficient classrooms but in no real way connected to authentic texts or writing), a move away from transmissional teaching of literacy, and toward inviting students into a rich examination of texts chosen by the students and offered by me as a way to ask questions about genre, medium, and text—and about the nature of reading and writing.

I want to reboot this column—formerly known as “Challenging Texts”—to expand the focus on text and critical literacy, offering *English Journal* readers “Adventures with Text and Beyond” by exploring multigenre units and unit-driven adaptations to challenge students as emerging readers and writers.

I had to acknowledge with my students that writers incorporated all sorts of craft and modes in many different genres; narrative techniques were common and effective in both fiction and nonfiction, for example, as were description or persuasion. As well, I had to reimagine the nature of text, genre,

and medium in the authentic texts experienced in class and the original work students composed. Addressing this, The New London Group presented a bold and important charge 15 years ago:

[W]e attempt to broaden this understanding of literacy and literacy teaching and learning to include negotiating a multiplicity of discourses. We seek to highlight two principal aspects of this multiplicity. First, we want to extend the idea and scope of literacy pedagogy to account for the context of our culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalized societies, for the multifarious cultures that interrelate and the plurality of texts that circulate. Second, we argue that literacy pedagogy now must account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies. This includes understanding and competent control of representational forms that are becoming increasingly significant in the overall communications environment, such as visual images and their relationship to the written word—for instance, visual design in desktop publishing or the interface of visual and linguistic meaning in multimedia. Indeed, this second point relates closely back to the first; the proliferation of communications channels and media supports and extends cultural and subcultural diversity. As soon as our sights are set on the objective of creating the learning conditions for full social participation, the issue of differences becomes critically important. How do we ensure that differences of culture, language, and gender are not barriers to educational success? And what are the implications of these differences for literacy pedagogy?

While the real world of “text” has expanded and challenged us with a variety of media, format, and genres including but not limited to print texts, our classrooms have remained relatively static in terms of the texts we challenge and the explanations we offer for “text,” “medium,” and “genre”—primarily because our classrooms have been abdicated to raising test scores instead of fostering autonomous and literate students.

This column will now explore avenues to challenging both the texts we bring into the classroom and our collective assumptions about what counts as text by expanding the works we invite our students to explore and experience. Within a critical literacy context, this column will confront and share classroom practices that address questions such as, What constitutes “text,” “medium,” and “genre” (what conventions lie beneath these labels)? How do comics, graphic novels, film, and electronic media challenge and inform our traditional assumptions about print-only text?

One avenue to authentic literacy for our students is to shift our classes away from transmissional practices and toward students exploring the complexities of reading and writing by questioning the parameters and characteristics of published texts—text medium and format as well as genre.

Adaptation Units: Students as Authentic Readers and Writers

When *The American* starring George Clooney began running on cable TV, I found the film fas-

inating—especially when I discovered that it is based on Martin Booth’s *A Very Private Gentleman* (although the book publishers have inexplicably changed the novel’s title to match the film’s title, despite the American of each work being *different* due to the changes the film made when adapting the novel to the screen). The film is also fascinating to me because it holds a powerful hint to the purpose of the adaptation: during a scene when Jack/Edward (Clooney) is leaving an Italian café, the owner nods to a film playing on the café’s TV and acknowledges the Sergio Leone Spaghetti Western, starring Henry Fonda, playing there. Once this nod to the Spaghetti Western genre was made, I recognized director Anton Corbijn’s film as a non-Western (as in “the Wild West”) homage to Leone’s work, creating an adaptation of the novel that differs significantly from Booth’s work—the main character is philosophical and loquacious in the novel, stoic and nearly wordless in the film like the Clint Eastwood character that brought Leone and Eastwood international fame.

I read Booth’s excellent novel after viewing the film several times, and here is where I have begun to challenge my students through asking them to choose and examine adaptation units (see the sidebar and my comics/graphic novels blog for adaptation units I recommend: <http://comic.sasliterature.blogspot.com/>). I ask students, as both readers and writers, to consider the nature of adaptation; the interplay among what counts as text (print, film, graphics), genre, and medium to produce meaning; and how choices

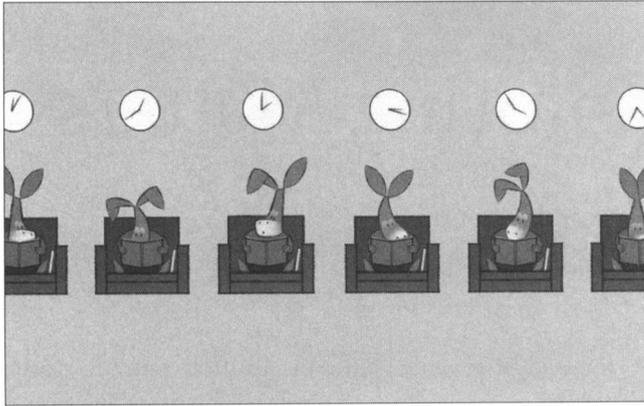
about text, genre, and medium work within and against conventions in order to produce meaning.

An ideal adaptation unit, for example, exposes students to a seminal narrative (consider Shakespeare creating drama from other people’s stories, or dozens of recreations of myths and legends by countless authors) that spans traditional print, film, and comics/graphic novel formats. For example, Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* presents students with a sci-fi novel, thus an exploration of the sci-fi genre against their assumptions about novels. Dick’s novel was adapted by director Ridley Scott into the 1982 film *Blade Runner*. The film was controversial due to conflicts between Scott and the studio as well as tensions created by fans of Dick’s novel and the significant changes made in the film adaptation. In 2009, BOOM! Studios began serializing Dick’s novel, keeping every word of the novel intact, as a graphic novel, with the individual comic book issues eventually collected as a set of graphic novels.

Multigenre and adaptation units, then, become explorations of the complexity inherent in text, genre, and medium—against the traditional and standards-based view of transmitting to students inauthentic scripts defining text and composition.

It’s a Book: So How Do We Know?

I have begun using a new first-day-of-class activity: reading aloud the picture book *It’s a Book* by Lane Smith. The story presents the rise of electronic media/com-



Artwork © 2010 by Lane Smith from *It's a Book* (Roaring Brook Press)

puters against the traditional print-only book format. I find using a so-called children's book helps introduce students to the complexity of genre, medium, and text as well as the ever-changing nature of reading and text. The narrative is smart and humorous, but one of the most important places in the book is the "Shh . . . I'm reading" spread that shows six slightly changing pictures of the Jackass reading with a clock moving above each different graphic (see above).

The spread has no words so I ask students what is happening, and they always say time is passing. Then I ask how we know this, and they point to the six clock faces and the changing hands denoting time. And here is where I ask them to consider graphics as text and the conventional nature of interpreting texts of all types.

As readers, we learn to negotiate a tremendous amount of arbitrary symbols (the letter "a," the word "cat," wavy lines drawn above an object to denote "stink"), and as our experiences grow and expand, we become more adept and autonomous, thus empowered and authentic, readers and writers.

When students become aware of the overlapping nuances among genres, media, and text; when they recognize that those distinctions are tenuous, complex, and shifting; when students come to appreciate that a narrative shared among a film, a novel, and a graphic novel are each distinct but can also inform each other as well—these students are coming to know text and their worlds in ways that support their autonomy and their own pursuit of lives lived as free people among free people. This exploration and discovery are

the paths to students as authentic readers and writers—not scripts or templates that impose and distort expression. 

Works Cited

- The American*. Dir. Anton Corbijn. Perf. George Clooney, Violante Placido, Thekla Reuten, and Paolo Bonacelli. Universal Studios, 2010. Film.
- Blade Runner*. Dir. Ridley Scott. Perf. Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer, Sean Young, and James Olmos. Warner Brothers, 1982, 1991, 2007. Film.
- Booth, Martin. *A Very Private Gentleman*. New York: Picador, 2004. Print.
- Cisneros, Sandra. *Vintage Cisneros*. New York: Vintage, 2004. Print.
- Dick, Philip K. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* New York: Del Ray, 1968. Print.
- Dick, Philip K., Tony Parker, et al. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Vols. 1–6. Los Angeles: Boom! Studios, 1968, 2009, 2010, 2011. Film.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum, 1993. Print.
- . *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare to Teach*. Trans. Donald Macedo, Dake Koike, and Alexandre Oliveira. Boulder: Westview, 2005. Print.
- Kozol, Jonathan. *Letters to a Young Teacher*. New York: Three Rivers, 2007. Print.
- The New London Group. "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures." *Harvard Educational Review* 66.1 (1996). Web. 4 Sept. 2011. <http://wwwstatic.kern.org/file/blogWrite44ManilaWebsite/paul/articles/A_Pedagogy_of_Multiliteracies_Designing_Social_Futures.htm>.
- Schmidt, Renita, and P. L. Thomas. *21st Century Literacy: If We Are Scripted, Are We Literate?* Heidelberg, Germany: Springer, 2009. Print.
- Smith, Lane. *It's a Book*. New York: Roaring Book, 2010. Print.
- Thomas, P. L. "Diving into Genre—A Case for Literature as T(t)ruth." *Notes on American Literature* 19 (Spring 2010): 4–12. Print.

More Resources

For adaptation unit ideas, see P. L. Thomas's "Adventures in Genre!" blog: <http://comicsasliterature.blogspot.com/p/adaptation-texts.html>.