Popping Pedagogy:
Making Your Classroom (Traditional and Virtual) Pop With Pop Culture
By William Visco

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Abstract: Today's students are surrounded and inundated with pop culture at almost all times every day. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exasperated this influx of pop culture saturation as students stayed home, learned online, and for better or worse turned to television, the internet, and other popular applications to deal with isolation and have some form or normalcy. As we move forward into the 2021-2022 school year, there will still be students choosing to stay home and the virtual learning community will still be one that will need to be catered to and taught in the same manner as face-to-face students. As such, using pop culture as a bridge to both in-person and online students can lead to significant learning gains and a building of positive relationships with both sets of students (Visco, 2021). The coronavirus pandemic was a shock to the country and the school system, but it may not be the last pandemic we will have to face. By utilizing these pop culture strategies now (no matter the delivery method of the classroom), teachers will be better prepared in the future if this happens again.

Keywords: pop culture, media, pandemic, virtual learning, film

This Is the Way

Approaches to teaching and learning have looked and felt different this past academic year for both teachers and students. In today's COVID-19 world, teachers must find interesting and innovative ways to deliver material in various virtual and face-to-face formats. Teachers, to their credit, have been adapting their lessons and cultivating creative assessments in order to help their students learn in this new virtual environment. Now, this will not always be the case, we hope, but the realization is that virtual learning is most likely here to stay in some form. In this new virtual classroom world (or hybrid world), many teachers are using numerous applications to help collect assignments, deliver lessons, and assess. The question then becomes how teachers can do things now that can be done both virtually and face-to-face so if or when something like this pandemic happens again in the future, lessons are easily transferable to an online model while also being fun and engaging. I know this time of the coronavirus pandemic has been a struggle; however, it has also provided teachers and students with potential alternatives for course and curriculum delivery. Furthermore, it is imperative to keep using these new practices not only in our current virtual settings but to continue using them in our classrooms when we eventually return to face-to-face learning. This continued use of technology can easily tap into the students' love of pop culture, not only because it will engage the students in the lesson (which many of you already know), not only because it can help build positive relationships, but because if used properly, it can provide learners voice, choice, and ownership of their learning, all while providing teachers more tools for curriculum delivery and assessment.

The use of pop culture in the English classroom has become a significant topic for researchers and teachers alike. I have written a few articles on this topic already (e.g., Visco, 2018, 2019, 2021). Leigh Hall (2011) suggests "understanding how youths integrate pop culture texts into discussions about academic ones can help teachers more effectively use them to deepen students' reading comprehension and curriculum knowledge" (p. 296). This argument is something teachers have heard before: Using pop culture (TV, music, etc.) to engage students and enhance curriculum is important. This article is not meant to reiterate that point. Rather, I am hoping to address ways to continue to implement pop culture/technological practices both during and after COVID-19. The hope is to help teachers see how linking their curriculum to pop culture and using online applications is not only beneficial in helping students learn concepts they can use in and out of the classroom while building positive relationships, but it can also help teachers organize materials and assess their students in a fun and efficient manner.

Before I continue, let me take a moment to define pop culture. According to educational researchers Alvermann and Xu (2003), attempting to give a complete and accurate definition of popular culture is "like nailing gelatin to a wall," (p. 146). The reason for this is because what pop culture "is" is always changing. Most researchers defined pop culture as something that is currently popular: this would include the most popular music, movies, comic books, graphic novels, slang, TV shows, and the internet (Beach & O'Brien, 2008). Fiske (1989) attempted to define pop culture as almost anything consumed or experienced in our daily lives (e.g., a school, a billboard, or even a supermarket). While current movies, music, TV shows, social media applications, athletes, and even commercials are readily accessible to students, pop culture phenomena can transcend time. In addition, it is important to note the varying view of what pop culture is and could be to both teachers and students. Personally, I believe that pop culture is a set of beliefs, practices, or objects that are prominent or ubiquitous in culture and can in many ways transcend language, race, ethnicity, and religion. No matter what your definition, the main idea is that pop culture can and should be used in your classroom to help engage students, to give students ownership of their learning, and to cultivate positive relationships.

Lights, Camera, Assignment

My classroom was not always a pop culture classroom. While I knew I wanted to use it, a lot of the time I was nervous, unsure, and afraid to do so. I didn't know how the students would react; I was afraid what other teachers might think, and I was nervous about changing the culture of learning in the school I was working in. However, after a really frustrating class working with *Beowulf,* I knew changes needed to be made. I decided to utilize what at the time was a fairly new and popular movie, *Captain America: The First Avenger,* to help explain archetypes. My heart raced as I pressed the play button to show a few video clips from the movie, but to my relief, the students became actively engaged. During the clips, I stopped periodically, asking questions about why characters were dressed a certain way, what were the beliefs of the characters and the author, and why the main character was named Captain America. To my surprise, not only were the students answering questions, but some students who never spoke up in class were in the thick of our discussions. It really helped the students as we began reading *Beowulf* again later in the class period. "When we turned back to *Beowulf*, they started to form connections they had been struggling to make. For example, the concept of archetypes became clearer when one student dubbed Beowulf 'Captain Anglo-Saxon'" (Visco, 2019, p. 84). I used my own DVD in class but have moved to using YouTube clips. I would suggest using Padlet to house a playlist of videos for easy access and to save time. Having everything in one place for your students in this time of virtual schooling is extremely important, so making sure those clips are easily accessible to them at all times and not just "class time" is paramount. Plus, it allows you to add and subtract videos while keeping things organized.

Now, did every student actively participate in the above activity? No, of course not. Nevertheless, a lot more students were engaged in the lesson than had been the day before. This is because "students with low motivation are more willing to think, talk, and write about film than about books (Vetrie, p. 40, 2004). If we give the students something they are interested in, they will want to be engaged. In a virtual classroom, this can be difficult. Bunce et al. (2010) posit that in-person lecture from an instructor who is highly engaging can lead to multiple student interactions, which increases engagement. Conversely, even some of the most highly engaging and bombastic instructors tend to see student disengagement at about the six-minute mark in a virtual setting, regardless of lecture length (Ozan & Ozarslan, 2016). So how can we fix this? Some students feel uncomfortable speaking in front of class normally; a virtual setting gives them nowhere to hide.

A great application to use for making quick videos is Flipgrid (an online video application). This app allows students to make a video expressing their thoughts and beliefs on the reading and video. This is an assessment tool that can help learners show what they know

without doing it in front of their peers. My students have loved using Flipgrid, and allowing them the ability to express themselves without their classmates watching has helped students to really dig into the material in a much more personal way. In addition, this app can be used to send out questions to the students from the teacher or even serve as a get-to-know-you tool at the beginning of the year.

The use of *Captain America* was my choice. As I started using pop culture, I was the one making all the decisions. Yet, what I learned was that my pop culture and my students' pop culture wasn't always the same. So, I listened to their pop culture suggestions and found out that some of them actually made excellent connections. Plus, by allowing them to have input, it gave them agency and ownership of their learning. One of my favorite examples of this is a project I would do with students on epic and romantic heroes within literature. Originally, I used clips from *Captain America* (as mentioned above) to link to *Beowulf* and clips of the *Harry Potter* movies to give visual representations of the traits of a Medieval romantic hero like Sir Gawain. Again, videos can be found online and uploaded into a Google slideshow, PowerPoint, Padlet, or whatever you choose. From there, my students were asked to watch a movie with a hero. My choice originally was *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Personally, I liked to choose a more ambiguous hero while also using a movie selected as one of the top 100 of all time by the American Film Institute. After the movie, the students complete a chart that shows whether the hero is epic or romantic, and they must create a graphic organizer and present it to the class (see Figures 1 and 2). Over the years, I have received some amazing graphic organizers—from a model of the Ark of the Covenant to the ten commandments of epic heroes. For virtual learners, there are numerous ways to create a fun graphic organizer. I would suggest Prezi to create a fun and free-flowing graphic organizer they can personalize that can hold video clips, pictures, and commentary easily and creatively. I found this virtual online process actually allowed me an easier way to assess having all of the

links submitted via a Google form and an easier way for the students to present using the same form to bring up their presentation.

Of course, this wasn't a perfect exercise. I quickly found my students love of *Indiana Jones* wanning at best. I tried using the movie *The Mummy* with actor Brendan Fraser, but again, that was quickly seen as "old" or "lame." This is where your students are so valuable and where the ability to work in this COVID world becomes easier to an extent. In the classroom, I could simply ask the students for input on what movies they liked or who were some of the characters they thought were heroic. Still, when students aren't sitting together in a classroom, or when the school policy or schedule won't allow teachers to use full-length movies in the classroom, students can select their own movie for this project. This offers them ownership of the assignment, but you do have to offer guidelines for the movie selection process. Guidelines might include: The movie had to be one they had not seen (which is why we prohibited Marvel or DC movies as we assumed most had seen them), it had to be school appropriate, and the students had to write up a justification for why they chose that movie for this particular assignment.

Takeaways from this assignment were that students were excited to get to choose something they wanted to watch and that the students enjoyed seeing that their teacher took an interest in these movies students selected as well. This sense of ownership and relationship is so critical and might unintentionally get lost in our classes, especially during a pandemic. Too often students and teachers can get caught up in a cycle of assign and assess during this extended online experience. There is a loss of connectivity and school ends up feeling like a job rather than a learning experience. This lack of community could be part of the reason students feel disengaged (Song et al., 2004). Connell & Willborn (1991) posited that positive student-and-teacher relationships directly impact the engagement of the students. This, in turn, can lead to more positive outcomes in student achievement (Roorda et al., 2011).

Twitter Me (Using Tweets and Memes)

Another pop culture activity that can give students a sense of ownership of their learning is creating a class Twitter Feed. Now, there are, of course, roadblocks to this class activity as some students do not have a Twitter account, some are not allowed to be on Twitter, and so on. These problems can be overcome. Rather than require the use of the social media platform, I created a "Twitter board" in my classroom using butcher paper, and the students were responsible for updating the continuous feed. For example, when reading sonnets, students were required to choose a sonnet and then create a tweet encapsulating the entire 14-line poem. They had to create at least one unique hashtag as well. One student, for *Sonnet 75* by Edmund Spencer, wrote, "@myladyonthebeach 1 day we will be gone, this tweet deleted, but the world will know how perfect you are through my art, and through that our love will live eternally #toinfinityandbeyond." It was short, sweet, and explained the whole sonnet. Notice how this student linked pop culture in the hashtag by using a line from *Toy Story* to help explain long-lasting love.

The original concept of using butcher paper eventually became a problem: not enough wall space in the classroom, and no walls at all in a virtual space. The fix was to create a Google doc for the students to "tweet" in. This is easy to set up and easy for the students to navigate. There are more interactive online formats that can be used as well. There is Jamboard, which is an interactive whiteboard

Epic Hero		Romantic Hero		? Hero	
Quality	Beowulf	Quality	Sir Gawain	Quality	Indiana Jones
Superior physical strength		Strength			
On a quest		On a quest			
Distant journey		Courageous			
Self-confidence		Humility			
Acceptance of violence		Skill at arms			
Risks death for glory		Fairness to enemies		X	X
Struggle determines fate of a group or nation		Respectful to women		X	X

Figure 1. Hero Chart

HERO PROJECT

You and a partner of your choice will create a graphic organizer to show what type of hero (epic or romantic) Indiana Jones is in Raiders of the Lost Ark.

Your organizer will need to contain five (5) qualities of the epic or romantic hero and corresponding examples (3-5 sentences) of each quality from the film. Depending on the characteristics you find, you will determine which type of hero Dr. Jones is: epic or romantic. Your organizer must also feature a recurring theme or motif.

You will need to turn in your hero chart via Google Drive on the same day you present your graphic organizer. Each member of the team is expected to turn in a chart. The first two columns of the chart will need to be completely filled out and the last column will need to have five (5) of the seven (7) completed.

You may make an actual Graphic Organizer if you are an in-class student. Virtual Students: I recommend Prezi, Popplet, Google Slides, or other online Graphic Organizer of your choice.

This project is due _____September 30th_____.

RUBRIC

Title (indicates Epic or Romantic)	_____ out of 10
Five hero characteristic examples from the film (labeled and thoroughly explained)	_____ out of 50
Graphics/Visuals + Theme/Motif	_____ out of 30
Overall Effort (color, neatness, mechanics)	_____ out of 10
No Hero Chart	- 10
Total:	_____ out of 100

Figure 2. Hero Project Graphic Organizer Assignment and Rubric

that works quite well. In addition, you might want to use Padlet for this if you and your students are already comfortable using it to house video clips. Another alternative is having the learners use the chat feature within Zoom (or whatever platform your school uses) to write their tweets. I chose Google Docs because it was free, many students already have a Google account, and students seemed to know their way around the platform. This prior knowledge of a platform can save time and frustration. Regardless of what application you choose to use, this activity again allows for a quick formative assessment tool for teachers (even in a virtual setting)

to use while helping students learn to analyze their readings and to make the readings their own in a way. The application/Google method was a success because I was able to track things better, organize things more efficiently, and assess the students quickly.

Speaking of assessment and this assignment's mutability, this Twitter exercise works for novels, short stories, poems, and even plays. Students can be assigned a character whose Twitter feed they need to write. This is where your assessment can develop further than simple understanding of plot or poem. True, by

using the students' "Twitter" posts, teachers can tell if students are understanding the material, the themes, or even just following the plot of the story. However, this assignment helps students dig much deeper and develop their character and literary analyses while also helping them learn about character mindset and motivation. For example, when reading *Macbeth*, one student wrote, "Does anyone know how to get red stains out of a nightgown, asking for a friend #outoutdangspot." This is pure Lady Macbeth, bold and yet not wanting to take full responsibility. Lastly, this activity allows teachers the ability to instruct students on proper online etiquette, a much-needed soft skill in the 21st century and our virtual classrooms.

Another formative assessment alternative is having students create memes that connect to whichever work they are reading. Popular memes range from SpongeBob to Willy Wonka to a frustrated Ben Affleck. A site like imgflip.com houses thousands of pictures to help create a meme. I find that using memes allows students to express themselves in a different way while showing what they have learned in class. In my lectures, I use memes to model what I expect of students when they create their own while fostering relationships with the students, something that not only increases engagement, but as Cornelius-White (2007) posited, positive teacher-student relationships tend to lead to higher student achievement.

Listen Like Thieves (Using Pop Music in Your Class)

When my students came to my classroom (real or virtual), I would always have music playing that had something to do with what we were about to learn. In a virtual classroom, I might have a bellringer up, but have music playing in the background that students will be able to hear. It might not be exactly the same as coming into my classroom and hearing INXS over the speakers, but it is fairly close. Either way, it is fun to watch students realize the songs are linked to the lesson, and soon they start to predict what we might be learning. It is more rewarding when they start offering up songs of their own to link to the learning. I write down their suggestions so I have songs to use the following year and might be more aligned to the students' interests. This use of student knowledge is one of our best tools. Students like sharing their knowledge with their teachers, and we should enjoy sharing our knowledge (even of pop culture) with them. With those songs at the beginning of class, I do not just hope students notice the meanings; I take time to discuss each song with them: Why did I choose that song? Which lyrics are important? How does this song connect to the work we are reading or what we are learning today? This open dialogue allows students to understand my thinking process, to ask questions, and to have a model to help students excel when asked to do something similar with music themselves.

Odds are some of your virtual (or even face-to-face) students are listening to music while you are teaching, thanks to earpods and other technological advances in headphones, so let's use that love of music. Again, I want my students to take ownership in their learning and they can do this with music. I first did this with carpe diem poems by having students choose a song that embodied the carpe diem mindset (modeling it first, of course, to show what is expected). They were asked to choose lines from the song and pair them with lines from a carpe diem poem and present their song to the class. As I continued to do this assignment, I made additions asking for specific literary devices used, figurative language, indirect and direct characterization, all to enhance the project while teaching them in coordination with our state standards. The best part is that they were learning how to read their pop culture while making substantial and relevant connections between their pop culture and their schoolwork. Virtual learners could use the application Explain Everything or Educreations as a way to create a virtual presentation that allows them to film and edit while marking up screen captures of their chosen poem and song lyrics. This allows students to show their work and allows you to create an online gallery (perhaps in Padlet) of their presentations for all of the students and even their parents to see. You can even take the time and create a playlist of songs via YouTube that you can share with the students and put the list of songs and poems in the comment section. I plan on continuing to use these applications in the future to allow students to make presentations as it gives them an alternative to standing up in front of the class and gives me the opportunity to share their presentations (if they allow) with our school community.

Keeping with music, but going back to *Beowulf,* I created a project where pop culture and the students' lives were linked to the concept of a hero. The students were asked to think about a hero in their own lives (parent, grandparent, uncle, coach). I usually complete the assignment alongside them and share my hero, but this isn't required. Part of the assignment is to use song lyrics that relate to your personal hero. I provide some song lyrics in case my learners do not know a lot of songs about heroes. This can take some of the pressure off of trying to pick something "cool" or "unique." However, this personal piece does a lot to not only use pop culture effectively but also to help the students engage in the assignment; the link to family members makes the assignment relevant to their lives and allows them the freedom to use their pop culture in an academic way. As Gay (2010) points out, using pop culture or other forms of culturally sustaining pedagogy is validating and affirming for students and can build meaningfulness between their school and home life and experiences. Plus, since *Beowulf* is taught early in the school year, this is a wonderful way to get to know your students and in turn, by sharing your hero, a way for them to get to know you.

X's and O's

As stated throughout, pop culture usage in the classroom (virtual or otherwise) gives students a feeling of ownership, understanding, and community within the classroom. It is imperative that our students understand that being able to read classic works of literature and the media they consume are both of equal importance. It is also important for us as teachers to provide choices. Another way I do this is by using the Tic-Tac-Toe method. Essentially, I create a Tic-Tac-Toe board and each of the spaces is filled with an activity the students have to do. Usually I have them broken up into groups, and you can still do this in a virtual environment as well. The students use the Tic-Tac-Toe board and must do three of the assignments to "win the game" (i.e., make a tic-tac-toe) (see Figure 3).

This works well in a classroom or virtual space. For example, with the novel *1984*, students can write a blog (an actual blog using Blogger) as Winston or Julia or O'Brien. They are asked to create a website for Oceania or just for the novel overall using sites like Wix or WordPress.

In addition, students are asked to use WWII propaganda posters and reimagine and recreate them as propaganda for the novel. You can have students use numerous photoshop sites; Google, Adobe, and Vistaprint all have applications that can help with this. The Tic-Tac-Toe approach can be applied to any novel, or you can take one part and make it a standalone assignment. Because of the variety of options, students have choice in the way they want to demonstrate their knowledge, which gives them ownership of their learning and usually makes for a more actively engaged student.

Infinity and Beyond

Is pop culture usage in the classroom for everyone? No. Do you have to use it as much as I have in the past? No. Nonetheless, it is becoming increasingly more apparent that using examples and creating assignments that are relevant to the students and their lives is beneficial not only to student engagement, but also to success (Jimerson, Campos, and Grief, 2003). This connectivity piece, so important in building relationships with students, is becoming

Inform	Create	Adapt
From the two options choose one. Create a brochure using Smore to advertising Oceania as a popular vacation destination. Share the link on the class webpage. Or Create a video commercial of at least 30 sections advertising Oceania or The Chestnut Tree Café. Upload to YouTube and share link on class website.	Create a model of either Winston Apartment or the Room where Winston and Julia meet above Charrington's Shop. In person can do this in the form of a model or a painting on something larger than standard printer paper. Virtual students can still do this, but must take pictures and upload to our class webpage.	Think about how you would make 1984 into a movie. Make a Google Slide Show or Prezi of seven actors and the parts they would play in your adaption of 1984. For each actor you must provide a paragraph discussing your choice and what qualifications the actors have that make them a good fit for the role. Cite your sources please.
Written Expression	**Soundtrack**	**Produce**
Using Blogger, write a blog post from the perspective of Winston. Write as if you are Winston trying to reach out to the resistance or anyone who may listen. You need 5 entries coinciding with 5 parts of the novel. Each at least 2 paragraphs long.	Create a CD for a soundtrack to the novel 1984. Create a ten-song CD with cover art. Write a five-to-ten sentence explanation of why and where the song fits; you must use quotes from the song and book in your explanation. This can be done via Prezi, Google, Padlet, Haiku Deck or other presentation platform of your choice. You can create an actual playlist to share with the class via YouTube.	Use old WWII propaganda posters and alter them to ones that could be used in Oceania. Make sure to use slogans and ideas from the novel in your posters. Use Google, Adobe, Vistaprint, or another photoshop app to help you and upload at least 3 posters to a presentation platform like Prezi or Google. Or Create a commercial trying to get younger kids to join the Junior Spies. Use the persuasive techniques discussed in class and the propaganda from the novel to help guide your commercial. Upload videos to YouTube.
Create	**Model Expression**	**Written Expression**
Create a website for Oceania and the novel as a whole. Use Wix or WordPress to create their site. You must discuss and have tabs on your site dealing with: Characters, Themes, Literary Devices, Setting, and a brief Summary of the novel.	Make a model of what you believe the Monster looked like—not a painting, not a drawing, a model or sculpture.	Using Blogger, write a blog post from the perspective of Julia or O'Brien. Write as if you are that character and delve into their emotions and feelings about what is going on in the novel. You need 5 entries coinciding with 5 parts of the novel. Each at least 2 paragraphs long.

Figure 3. 1984 Tic-Tac-Toe Project

harder to create in a virtual world, but pop culture could help make that connection. In addition, using the applications mentioned and some of the assignments suggested (see also Figure 4) allows for some fun, some quick and some easy assessments for teachers while also organizing and streamlining the process for submission and presentation. All benefits to both students and teachers. You do not have to be a pop culture junkie or a lover of Star Wars in order to integrate pop culture or technology into your class. What you do need is a good set of ears to listen to your students and to build positive relationships, confidence in their ability to use voice and choice, and the desire to continue to innovate (which I know you do). With those things I know you, your classroom, and your students will surely go to "Infinity and Beyond."

Assignment	In Class Application	Virtual Application
Pop Culture Videos for Literary Comparison/Analysis	DVDs, YouTube Clips, Amazon, Hulu, etc.	Google Doc of Links to Clips, YouTube playlist of clips, Padlet
Student-made Videos to Answer Questions/Getting-to-know-you Video	Flipgrid, Camera Feature on School Technology uploaded to school's management system	Flipgrid, Video feature on home technology uploaded to Google (or school's management system)
Graphic Organizer	Tangible Creation, Prezi, Google Slides, PowerPoint	Prezi, Google Slideshow, PowerPoint
Classroom Twitter	Google Docs, Jamboard	Google Docs, Jamboard, Zoom or virtual chatroom
Memes	Imgflip.com	Imgflip.com
Music Playlists	YouTube, Amazon, Padlet, Google Doc with links to songs	YouTube, Amazon, Padlet, Google Doc with links to songs
Presentations	Google Slides, Prezi, PowerPoint	Explain Everything, Educreations
Blog/Website	Blogger, Wix, WordPress	Blogger, Wix, WordPress

Figure 4. Assignments and Applications

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