



SCHOOL OF ROCK

Using Music to Engage Students, Connect Curriculum and Enhance Literary Analysis

By William Visco

William Visco is a Teaching Fellow in the Curriculum and Instruction Department of the College of Education at the University of North Texas. His research interests focus on teachers' uses of popular culture in the classroom as well as social media usage to facilitate learning and engagement, in addition to the miseducative uses of pop culture by teachers. He may be reached at William.visco@unt.edu or Liam279@yahoo.com and can be followed on Twitter @The_Visco.

Abstract: Today's students are inundated with popular culture and pop culture texts in their daily lives. One such form of pop culture is that of music. This medium is one that teachers must use as a way to connect to students and build a bridge to the curriculum. This article will discuss uses of music in the classroom from capturing students' attention when they enter class, connecting to the curriculum, and to literary analysis. By using popular music of the present and of the past, you can change your classroom dynamic and help your students attain skills that will help them both in and out of school.

Keywords: music, pop culture, literary analysis, reading, poetry, Shakespeare

Our students are inundated with popular culture and a variety of pop culture texts in their daily lives; one of which is music. Music is something universal that can connect and inspire us. So the question is, how can teachers use these pop culture texts to help our students learn? How can we create critical readers of all texts that they encounter and transfer that ability beyond the classroom? My answer: Take the music my students enjoy and some of my own personal favorites and infuse them into my curriculum, bridging the gap between pop culture texts and classroom texts and providing a more engaging lesson for learners while still developing the skills needed for critical literary analysis that can be used both in and out of school.

I love popular music from all genres and all time periods. Growing up with parents who loved music and siblings who memorized all the videos on MTV (when they still showed videos), it is natural for me to listen to music all the time, even between classes. One day I was listening to music while creating a journal prompt focusing on the students' current novel, *1984*, when the bell rang. For some reason, I could not close the music application on my computer, so the music kept playing as students walked in. "Somebody's Watching Me" by Rockwell started playing as students began working on their journal about how surveillance today is similar to that in the novel *1984*. The students were quiet; they were writing; and more than that, they were listening to the song. When the song

ended, one of the students spoke up saying that he liked how I had “made the music match what we were writing about.” That is a great idea I thought to myself, and since then I will more often have music on when students are coming in to class, selecting music that will connect in some way to the texts we are reading, the texts we are about to read, or the topics we are about to discuss.

One way I choose specific songs for my class is from my own extensive knowledge of the medium. However, I also take into consideration music that my students enjoy and try to find songs from modern artists (though that does not have to be the case) that students have told me they like through a getting-to-know-you introduction video they create for me during the first week of school. Using music that the students are familiar with makes sense as students are more appropriately motivated when the content is relevant to them and makes connections with their outside interests like pop culture music does (Adams, 2011; Vera, 2011). This increased interest promotes an environment where students feel freer and able to actively participate which in turn helps them get a deeper understanding of the works they are reading. I have used students’ selected music as a catalyst to discuss *Frankenstein* by playing “Me, Myself, and I” by G-Eazy, or to discuss *Beowulf* by playing “Glorious” by Macklemore (the edited version). I usually print the lyrics and have them readily available for the students to look at while they listen. Analyzing this text, I explain to them, is similar to analyzing the works that we are reading throughout the

each pointing out similarities in theme, word choice, and figurative language. Their job is to find their own *Carpe Diem* poem and connect it to a song of their choosing. They are asked to create a presentation (and present) in which they discuss the connection to the idea of seizing the day as well as discuss the use of figurative language, the rhetorical devices the author and songwriter use, and the indirect and direct characterization in each work. The intent is that these skills of analysis can then be used with other texts both in class and in their daily lives. This activity helped students with future analysis of other poems and provided a novel way to prepare students for their AP examinations where they are usually asked to analyze texts for figurative language and rhetorical devices.

Another wonderful way to bring music into the classroom is by having students create soundtracks to longer works. One of the projects I give my students when we read *Macbeth* is to create a movie soundtrack, complete with cover art, for a film version of the play (see Appendix A). The students find ten songs that fit with key scenes from the play and justify their choices by writing a paragraph (or two) that details why they chose each song for that part of the play. In addition, they include lyrics from the song and dialogue from the play as support for their decision. This allows students to analyze the song and the play, to practice citing sources, and to develop their ability to use text evidence to support an argument, all while sharing music they enjoy. This promotion of learning through active engagement and participation (Adams, 2011; Alvermann &



year. These songs that are chosen speak to deeper meanings within the traditional classroom texts and allow students a new layer of analysis and access into those works.

In addition to facilitating discussions, a fun activity is to have students find a *Carpe Diem* song and connect it to a *Carpe Diem* poem. This cross analysis of texts fits with the TEKS focus on analyzing literature and is a creative way to have students make connections to popular texts, like music, and the works being read. I link the poem “To His Coy Mistress” by Andrew Marvel and the song “Let’s Get It On” by Marvin Gaye for my students as an example. I print the lyrics and the poem and we go through

Xu, 2003) is essential in classrooms, and the conversations that it promotes can allow all students to feel involved.

Research shows that youth benefit when they see themselves as having something of substance to contribute to conversations about content to be learned (Alvermann, 2002). Using music, especially popular music, in the English classroom has enabled my students to make connections to literature that I had not even thought about. It gives the students choice and keeps them engaged, even outside of the classroom. Many students have found songs on the radio, come in with them the next day, and explained to me how they fit into what we are talking about or reading about in class.

This not only provides me with songs I can use in future lessons, but also provides students the opportunity to explain to the class the connections they made and can inspire their peers to look for connections in their daily lives to the texts we are reading in class.

My students like sharing their music with me, but more than that, they like when I share my music with them. When I play a song at the beginning of class, I talk about it for a few minutes first. I tell why I chose that song, what are the important lyrics, and how the song connects to what we are doing or learning. Having this open dialogue with students and allowing them to hear my thinking process as well as to ask questions provides a model that helps students understand the goals of the tasks and helps students when asked to share purposeful music themselves.

Music is everywhere in our society. It is in movies, on TV, in school hallways, even at the grocery store. It is part of our culture and part of our history and always will be. Helping students become critical readers of music texts, become conscious of the words being used, and make insightful connections between music, culture, and literature are all valuable skills. As influential and caring teachers, we should be fostering these skills through our lessons to help students achieve scholastic success and to help them use these skills effectively the rest of their lives. We can do this in a fun and engaging way by making music a central and essential part of the classroom.

References

- Adams, C. (2011). Lessons in pop: Does pop culture belong in the classroom? *Instructor*, 121(3), 37-40.
- Alvermann, D. E. (2002). Effective literacy instruction for adolescents: Executive summary and paper commissioned by the National Reading Conference. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 34, 189-208.
- Alvermann, D. E., & Xu, S. (2003). Children's everyday literacies: Intersections of popular culture and language arts instruction. *Language Arts*, 81(2), 145-154.
- Vera, D. (2011). Using popular culture print to increase emergent literacy skills in one high poverty urban school district. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 11(3), 307-330.



Appendix A

Macbeth Soundtrack Project

You are the producer of a new version of *Macbeth*. I am asking you to create a soundtrack (at least ten songs) for this new movie version.

1. You must choose songs that correspond with ten plot points in the actual play and mark down the act and scene after the title and artist of the song.
2. You must write one to two paragraphs stating where each of the songs would be used and why this song in particular is appropriate.
3. You must make connections to the original work by Shakespeare for each song (citing correctly at least one quote from the play) and the lyrics from your chosen song (also cited correctly at least one quote from the song).
4. Please use school appropriate songs (edited versions are okay) as well as songs that are appropriate to the scene in which you are writing about. While "I Just Can't Wait to Be King" from *The Lion King* is cute and may actually be what Macbeth is thinking, that sort of fun/happy song is not in any way relatable to what we are reading and the mood of the play overall.
5. Create original cover art for your CD cover. Be interesting and innovative. Think of the covers of albums that you have bought in the past and ones that have been shown in class. You may use digital images and so forth to create your cover art, but it must be something that you think up and make yourself.