YA Lit, Music and Movies:

Creating REEL Interest in the Language Arts Classroom

Dark hair swinging, black hoodie zipped half way, John entered my room with a nod and a "Hey" before taking his place in the back of the room. Intelligent and articulate outside of class, he had little patience for *To Kill a Mockingbird*, no matter how relevant I tried to make it to my students' lives. John's world consisted of the religious rock band he played in on the weekends, the various roles his older brother had for him in film-making endeavors and the looming shadow of his parents' recent divorce. He simply had no interest in school of any shape or size, particularly if it involved classical literature.

With John's grade hovering just above 50 percent, I approached him after class, asking him to bear with me another week: I was positive he would relate more to our next unit. Quickly, I explained that he would have a choice of several young adult novels, revolving around our "Coming of Age" theme. A spark flickered in his dark eyes; previous English classes had never offered the prospect of choice in reading, and few novels had featured teen protagonists. His attention captured, I continued to describe the assignment that would accompany the unit, a project that involved two of John's passions: music and film. A smile slipped across his face.

Although unique in many ways himself, John's feelings about English were not unique at all. Every day, students shuffle in and out of classrooms modeled after realities that are now just faded memories of their parents and grandparents. In a world that spins faster and faster every day, a world created by an impatient society crammed with conflicting ideas presented in songs, on film, and through advertisements, studying the traditional literary canon no longer prepares our students to be the critical thinkers we desire them to be. Students suffer, frustrated with class content and ill-prepared for the workplace, and teachers grow exhausted after hours of attempting to "teach" to unwilling students.

Fortunately, for both teachers and students, a new canon of young adult literature already exists, combining the teacher's desire for finely crafted works with the student's need of relevant characters and topics. After a review of research conducted on the use of young adult literature in the classroom, Santoli and Wagner (2004) consistently found that its use "promotes and encourages lifelong reading habits," a goal that all language arts teachers should list at the top of their priorities. Beyond this benefit, however, remains the fact that young adult literature revolves around the themes found within the pages of the classics and offer the same literary elements (Santoli and Wagner, 2004).

But this only answers one aspect of the problem.

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Although students must be able to analyze traditional texts, the reality of today's world revolves around texts that our students' grandparents could never have imagined. The novel no longer remains a sacred part of the home. Instead, televisions and computers litter every room. Literacy can no longer be defined by a single definition of text. Rather, today's literacy possesses a fluidness that encompasses a mixture of music, images and htmls. And this literacy is constantly changing as technology continues to race forward. If teachers want to mold literate students, it has become critical that educators broaden the definition of literacy. One way to do this is by embracing the very media that so successfully garners our students' attention. Embedding media within the language arts curriculum will not only teach students the critical thinking skills needed to interpret the onslaught of media messages, but will also allow teachers to use the media to teach and motivate students in the areas of reading and writing.

This reality is not a new one. Educational researchers have been studying the impact of media since it became prevalent in students' lives. In their 2000 article, Donna Alvermann and Margaret Hagood argue that if educators want students to perform well in both the world and on new assessments, "they will need to develop a critical understanding of how all texts (both print and nonprint) position them as readers and viewers within different social, cultural, and historical contexts" (para. 2).

One element to adequately preparing students rests upon ensuring that students fully understand the subject's concepts. Many students fail to understand why they are sitting within their classrooms, and, therefore, lack the motivation required to fully explore the ideas presented to them. For some, however, it is their low self-efficacy that leads to low motivation. O'Brien (2003) asserts that the instructional programs designed to identify and label students who are lacking in the reading areas of decoding, fluency and comprehension have led to intensely negative perceptions about students' abilities even as the programs strive to correct their reading deficiencies. Because students develop these feelings early in the education process, O'Brien further argues that these students begin to see failure as something beyond their control and to develop a learned helplessness. Others argue that the school curriculum can lead to low motivation

by stifling children's choice in reading and continually setting limits on reading, which can permanently affect how students see themselves as readers (Alvermann, Moon and Hagood, 1999). Whatever the origin, low motivation can seriously hinder a student's progress within the language arts classroom.

Alvermann (1999) and O'Brien (2003) assert that understanding the more popular media texts that engage student interest can help educators not only understand their students, but also motivate them. As technology continues to expand, today's students differ greatly from students of the past, requiring a broadened definition of text and learning if educators want to keep their students motivated about learning.

For me, the idea of incorporating media into my classroom was intuitive rather than research-based. After witnessing the success of young adult literature in my classroom, I developed a project that built upon this interest by tapping into teenagers' natural interests: movies and music. Students would create a project that enveloped all the aspects of movie production: movie scripts, a trailer, soundtrack, movie poster and character sketches. That first year's success prompted me to explore the use of media in the language arts classroom, leading me to research that not only validated what I had discovered in my own classroom but also provided a wealth of other strategies that would enable me to motivate students and accomplish my curricular goals. Since that first year, I have continually refined the project, creating an assignment that motivates students to read and teaches them how to work with plot, characters, and theme in a much more meaningful way than ever before.

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To help equip students with the tools needed to adequately tackle the project, we begin by becoming film scholars. Together, we actively view a movie that corresponds with the theme we are discussing in their novels. Rather than sitting back and simply watching the movie, students are taking notes over the events of the plot, making observations about characters and their motivations, noting the effect music has on each scene, and writing down various other observations. At the conclusion of the movie, students map the story and characters and then reflect on how the theme was developed in the movie. We listen to the soundtrack, examining whether the songs are used to reinforce the ideas in the plot or whether they are used to help set the mood. When students finally have a good understanding of how all of the elements of the movie work together to create the final product, they then turn to their own novels.

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Students are generally so excited about the project they want to jump in without any planning. To slow this down, it helps to remind them of the writing process. There needs to be brainstorming; preliminary ideas must be revised; and all of these steps need to be taken before publishing the movie. To begin the brainstorming process, I begin by asking students to individually reflect on their novels' themes and events. When you think of your book, what first comes to your mind? If you were going to recommend your book to a friend, what specific parts would you describe to convince your friend to read it? What is the underlying theme or message of your book? Questions such as these help students differentiate the important scenes from the less important scenes and help them examine the important ideas within the pages of their books. It is at this point that students really begin to understand plot and character develop-

ment and how they work together in the novel:

> "The art room scene shows the beginning of Melinda's journey in finding herself. Throughout the book she keeps her emotions inside. This scene shows the beginning of the simple project that taught her to express herself."

So writes Kelsey, a junior in my fifth-period class, as she reflects over Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*. Melinda, a teenage girl, has committed a major social faux pas by calling the police from a high school beer party the summer before her freshman year (although no one knows she has just been raped by a fellow partygoer). As the events unfold, the reader finds that there is more to this than anyone realizes, but Melinda refuses to speak up. Through her art class, she begins to understand more about the event that led to the phone call and about herself. Through her reflections, Kelsey began to focus on the importance of the art class, which helped her shape the final movie project.

Another part of the brainstorming stage involves determining the eight to ten most important scenes of the novel and then creating a list of songs that would enhance these scenes. Students are encouraged to think of lyrics that are similar to the events of the plot, music that sets the mood and various genres that could be included. This activity requires students to become critical thinkers as they examine not only the ideas in their books, but also the lyrics of the music they hear on a daily basis. This synthesis of ideas helps create a deeper understanding of what is happening in the book and the impact the events have on the characters. One of the songs Kelsey chose to use for *Speak* was *My Immortal* by Evanescence. Kelsey writes:

> The song is very powerful for this scene in the book . . . Melinda goes back to the night of her rape. They are awful memories and she wants to get the thoughts out of her head. The incident cannot be turned around. The song says this girl went through many pains and her wounds won't heal. She will have to live her whole life repeating the moments that haunt her . . . Just like Melinda.

Once students have individually identified the important ideas and themes of their novels, they break out into groups with students who read the same novels. At this point, they begin sharing ideas, assigning responsibilities and creating the products that make up the final project. This is the time they can build upon their individual learning styles, using their own talents and intelligences to convey their

interpretations as readers. Some students take charge of writing a script for a trailer and then capturing their scripts on film. Other students look at the characters, writing detailed character sketches about each of the important characters and suggesting potential actors for the roles. The more musically inclined tackle the soundtrack, compiling a song list and creating a cover that reflects the theme of the movie. And the artistic develop a slogan and movie poster designed to entice viewers to watch their movie.

Although it is amazing to watch their creative ideas emerge into final products, what is even more amazing is the learning that takes place simultaneously. One of the most important aspects of this project is not the actual trailer or poster (and some have been phenomenal), but the reflections they write upon the completion of each product. For the learning process to be complete, students must take time to understand the reasons they made their decisions regarding scene selection, song choices and visual images.

After completing the project, students share their trailers and ideas with the class. This has always been the highlight of the assignment for them because it gives them a platform to showcase their talents, and most of them are proud of the work they accomplished. Students pour themselves into the project, creating portraits of themselves as active readers and thinkers. An added benefit is that the audience grows interested in the books they did not read and can be frequently seen toting library books around weeks after the unit has concluded. Their literary world has been greatly expanded as students become aware of the quality literature available to them, literature that features teens facing similar problems they encounter daily.

As for John, that smile stayed on his face. Rather than slumping in his desk, he could be seen reading his novel, *Rats Saw God* by Rob Thomas, which featured a young male reflecting upon how he had slid down the slippery slope from a straight A student his sophomore year to a student in danger of failing the last semester of his senior year. John could relate to Steve, the protagonist, because he, too, was facing life changes that stemmed from his parents' divorce. No longer focused solely on his brothers' most recent projects, John concentrated on ideas for his own movie. Students from his own class and from different

hours consulted with him on ideas for their trailers. His CD collection became an important part of my classroom. John was engaged, and the insights I had previously overheard by accident in the halls were evident in all aspect of his project. His transformation as a language arts student showed me that there was significantly more to John as a student than he had ever realized. As a reader, John's film showed he could identify and classify the character traits and motivation featured in his novel; he deftly illustrated his understanding of themes; and he expertly translated the mood of the book into song. As a writer, John finally understood the importance of getting his ideas down on paper before attempting production and how to analyze his own thought processes. As a listener, John stepped outside of his own miseries and began communicating with others, suggesting techniques that might help them portray their own novels' ideas on film.

Now, two years later, John is the student who leaps to mind when I examine the philosophies behind this project. There is no question that John emerged from the experience a better student, not just a better reader and writer. But he is not alone. Kelsey, who was already an A student, was propelled out of her traditional comfort zone as a student, and was able to tap into her musical and artistic interests, creating a project with deeper critical thought than I had witnessed in her previous papers. Tom, a very capable student who took very few assignments seriously, spent hours outside of school, intent on creating the perfect movie. This list could continue, but the reality that would materialize in its telling is that uniting young adult literature with music, movies

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and other popular media engages students, giving them the opportunity to expand their ability to analyze texts and succeed in the classroom.

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