

Composition Weekly



September 23, 2011

Let's discuss "difficult" texts in the classroom.

I'm about to make a broad generalization using "we all" – get ready.

We all know what difficult (problematic) texts are – and we probably all have certain ones that immediately jump to mind. They generally deal with the body – gender, race, disability to abled body, marked, unmarked, privileged – and for some reason they're the texts that really get our students riled. Our students become engaged, whether positively or negatively and, oftentimes, students can get carried away with their use of language. Students express opinions they may have never expressed if we hadn't brought a certain text into the classroom. Perhaps their opinions would have lay dormant for the duration of the semester, and we wouldn't have had to deal with them. What an ideal world that would be.



When compared to apathy, most forms of student engagement (even those that push the bounds) are pretty appealing. I think it's important to acknowledge this and to discuss various ways in which we can encourage student

ideas and expressions while avoiding uncomfortable moments in the classroom.

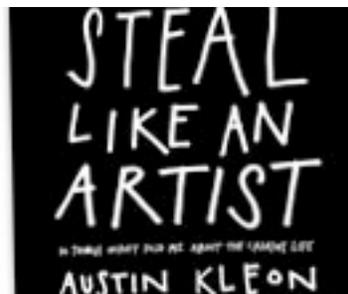
Of course what I have just stated is no great insight. This is something teachers strive to do with every class, even when there is no great risk that a student will say something inappropriate or offensive. It's important that our students feel comfortable in the classroom. At the same time, students need to challenge the way that they think, and texts that focus on the body are usually very effective in accomplishing this. Texts that fall under this include Deborah Tannen's "There is No Unmarked Woman," "Asymmetries: Men and Women Talking at Cross-Purposes," and Brent Staples' "Just Walk on By" (among many, many others).

There are various ways of handling these texts. In the past, some teachers have put a constraint on their students by giving them a few index cards that students can "cash in" when they want to speak. This method skirts interruptions, which at times are too passionate. For texts that address issues your students may suspect align with your own interests or "agenda," (let's say – female teacher assigning a

"feminist" text) if you're worried that students will misread your intentions in assigning a reading, balance it with something that contradicts, muddies, or draws attention to something else. For example, a clip of the South Park characters Stan, Kyle, Cartman, and Kenny could be paired with Tannen's "There is No Unmarked Woman" to illustrate how men are also marked, in which the discussion would transform into something generative about students' perceptions of the genders. Sneaky? Perhaps, but students appear to be much more open-minded when they don't suspect that their teacher is "attacking" them or trying to "convert" them in some way.

There are many classroom-management methods that a teacher can take when approaching a difficult text, but it's important to share ideas with other teachers and to engage in conversations about teaching. Remember your support group within the department and online – Write Alaska, that is.

Austin Kleon



I came across Austin Kleon's site a couple of weeks ago, thanks to Lisa Balvanz. Kleon is a writer and an artist who "steals" words from newspaper articles to create poems. His method (slightly tweaked) may be an interesting

activity in a first year composition classroom when discussing choices at the sentence level.

Brown Bags



If you're interested in participating in a conversation on teaching and pedagogies, come to the brown bags, which happen once a month on First Fridays. The time will be rotating every other month (12PM and 3PM) in order to accommodate more people's schedules.

I'll be sending an email out to remind teachers of the time and location for that month along with the reading we will be discussing. If you wish to propose a particular article or topic, or if you'd like to talk about what's going on in your own classroom, this is a perfect place to do it.

Weekly Challenge

Go to Write Alaska's "Teaching Forum" page and share how you handle mediating student language in the classroom when you're discussing a "difficult" text. Read about what other teachers are doing, and which texts appear to be the most problematic. Certain texts may be much more controversial to your students than you had been expecting - be aware of this before bringing it into the classroom.

Have a good classroom activity?

If you have an activity that your students responded well to, be proud and advertise it. Tell other teachers about it. Tell me about it. Put it up on Write Alaska. It's impossible to be gauche about your own teaching brilliance when a good activity comes along.
