Using Joss Whedon in the Composition Classroom

ERIN WAGGONER

“How did your brain even learn human speech? I’m just so curious.”

-Wash, “Objects in Space”

Introduction

In her conclusion to Faith and Choice in the Works of Joss Whedon, K. Dale Koontz asks the question, “will college come to Buffy?” (187). Several schools offer classes on Buffy the Vampire Slayer as well as Joss Whedon’s works as a whole—one of my own independent study classes included. When I first started teaching English composition, I wasn’t entirely sure how to incorporate Buffy, or any television shows for that matter, into the classroom. I knew, however, that I wanted to use the shows as supplemental in-course “readings.” After some trial and error, I came up with a method for utilizing television shows as texts. When I assigned students texts and essays to read, most seemed uninterested, and that showed in their writing assignments. However, when I used television or other media-related tools, the students’ writing demonstrated increased interest through better responses—because the rhetorical imagery appealed more to students than constant reading. This prompted me to find a way to utilize television as my main text for teaching. With my love of Buffy and all things Whedon, it was only natural that once I figured out how to use television, I would focus my lessons on episodes from Whedon’s shows. What surprised me was the overall positive response my teaching methods received, both from students and colleagues. Using Whedon’s work as a supplemental text in the composition classroom has proven a successful teaching tool.

Research and Television

The irony of using television shows in my curriculum is that I rarely watched television. I was the person who was always reading books, short stories, and scholarly essays. While at my first Popular Culture and American Culture Conference in 2008, however, I picked up Popular Culture Studies Across the Curriculum, edited by the father of popular culture studies, Ray B. Browne. In this anthology, there are essays referring to teaching methods using popular culture in several disciplines. In “The Value of Teaching Popular Culture in the Community College,” Lynn G. Bartholome states that “Community colleges have educational environments and missions that are uniquely different from four-year colleges and universities, because these two-year bastions of higher education cater to the lifestyles of the learners” (148). She then explains the student dynamics of the community college and offers a few suggestions in conjunction with readings, specific lessons, and subject areas. When I drafted my lesson plans, I chose to use mostly television
shows instead of supplemental texts to accommodate any two-year college students who are employed and/or haven’t been in school anywhere from five to fifty years.

Everybody has different reading speeds and comprehensions, but “reading” a television show allows students to finish in the allotted time that an episode runs. This permits students, who may take several hours to read and understand a text, the chance to use their study time more efficiently, lessening both stress levels and the cacophony that often arises from students who have finished reading earlier. Surprisingly, using television as text has been my most successful teaching tool because students enjoy this method and have more fun learning, so they focus more on the subject matter.

The Schools

I have had the pleasure of teaching at different schools with completely different dynamics. ITT Technical Institute, for instance, strictly focuses on an adherence to lessons specifically designed to give students the technical training required for their fields (IT, Criminal Justice, computer engineering, etc.) and also provides them with a liberal arts education. The classes meet for 11 weeks, one day per week, three-and-a-half hours per class. Instead of semesters, the school uses the quarter system and students can take only three classes per quarter. I could have used feature-length films in these classes, but I chose to use television for several reasons—the main one being that students can get restless if they don’t get a break. However, the lesson plans for each course offered are already laid out, designed for easy transfer to another ITT location should a student move mid-quarter. My freedom in choosing lessons wasn’t as defined, but after my first quarter, I discovered that, as long as all the lessons are taught, I could vary the schedule. When I revamped my course curriculum, my use of television shows as texts became much more logically arranged.

The students at Maysville Community and Technical College (MCTC) seem more focused collectively than students at ITT Technical Institute. From my experience teaching Developmental English at MCTC, I knew the dynamic was different; the class met twice a week for sixteen weeks for one hour and fifteen minutes and allowed me complete freedom in developing my lesson plans. At ITT Tech, I focus on one major project that has smaller related projects throughout the quarter, while I have four different major projects at MCTC. Even though there is overlap in the material I teach, there is a difference in how I teach it. Since there are “more” class sessions at MCTC, I can focus and give students more examples to help guide them through their overall project.

Why Whedon?

When I think about pop culture and the impact it has on me, Joss Whedon’s name instantly comes to mind. I grew up watching the shows and movies Whedon created, including the 1992 film version of Buffy the Vampire Slayer in the theatre with my mother when I was eight or nine. When developing my lesson plans, I found it natural to first look to the shows Whedon has created in the past fifteen years. Considering I have spent a large chunk of my teenage and adult life watching these shows on television and DVD, I was not only familiar with these texts, but felt confident that I could successfully prompt discussions that followed my daily lessons.

At conferences, I discovered other fans and scholars who were using Buffy, Dollhouse, Firefly, and Angel in their classroom lessons. Becoming immersed in my discipline and Whedon studies, I attended several panels explaining ideas and lessons that others have used in the classroom. There are even two essay collections specifically aimed toward teaching Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Buffy Meets the Academy and Buffy in the Classroom) and one textbook-style
collection in progress devoted to all of Whedon's oeuvre. In the most recent catalog for Pop Culture Books from McFarland Publishing, the manager of the Sales and Marketing Department, Karl-Heinz Roseman, denotes that *Buffy* has “long since transcended its cult-comic and television roots to spawn a full-fledged academic movement, as have all things Whedon . . . This unusual vehicle offers not just entertainment, but observations—subtle and otherwise—on society” (2). It is only natural, then, that I teach what I know, and I know Whedon's works.

**Dr. Horrible's SingAlong Disaster**

First, I'd like to talk about my attempt to use *Dr. Horrible's Sing Along Blog* as an introductory tool in both the Comp I and II classrooms at ITT Tech. A basic summary of the musical comes from Dr. Horrible himself: "Wow, sarcasm! That's original!" *Dr. Horrible* is a three-part web series that Joss Whedon created during the 2007-08 Writer's Guild of America Strike. Dr. Horrible (Neil Patrick Harris) runs a blog about his evil activities and his attempts to get into the Evil League of Evil. While doing so, he finally starts talking to his longtime crush, Penny (Felicia Day), battles his superhero nemesis, Captain Hammer (Nathan Fillion), and sings along a few songs with the entire cast.

While the lesson did work, the students did not respond well to the musical dialogue. Their response made me nervous, especially since this was my first day in the classroom and my first big teaching appointment. Yet using *Dr. Horrible* in Comp I allowed me to learn something about each student's thought process. It was perfect to use also because it offers a three-part text with recognizable chapters but an unconventional ending. Whedon is the master of surprises, so *Dr. Horrible* was the obvious choice for a Whedonite like me. I would stop after each act and the students would write predictions for what would happen next. I told them I would give them bonus points if they guessed correctly. Only one student out of the two sections I taught had seen the film, so none of the predictions were right. This activity did cause students to take the show more seriously, despite their audible groaning every time a song would start. The result of the lesson was successful, even if one student claimed he wanted to “stab [his] eye out with a pencil.”

I also used *Dr. Horrible* in Comp II that quarter as an introductory tool. The students were much more responsive (though there was one student who made sarcastic comments, even if he followed the lesson and contributed to the conversation). Comp II is oriented more toward argument than Comp I, so I presented the show without stopping between segments. When we were finished watching, I gathered the students into groups of three and instructed them to come up with a few arguments. To help guide them, I wrote two names on each of the whiteboards: Captain Hammer and Dr. Horrible. The students argued about which character was actually heroic, and who they would like to see killed off instead of Penny. I had students get into small groups to discuss these points as well as the pros and cons of each character, and then I had them use different colored markers to represent each group (the one that came up with the most got bonus points). Although the general consensus sided with Dr. Horrible, Captain Hammer had quite a few pros.

In retrospect, both lessons worked, but the use of *Dr. Horrible* may have been a little shortsighted for a new teacher. I knew I wanted to use it, due to the success of the lessons, but I wasn’t sure that I would use it again—at least not at ITT Tech. After a year, I decided to revisit the series in Comp II, since it was the more successful lesson of the two, and a student who had completed my Comp I course requested that we watch it. The new class was more responsive to the lesson than my first classes had been, and several students commented that they actually enjoyed it, even though it was strange. I have thus decided to use *Dr. Horrible* again, but only in the Comp II classroom and only for those students I suspect will respond to it positively.
Visual Rhetoric and “Hush”

For their first major project, students at MCTC were asked to write a five-paragraph essay analyzing how the three elements of visual rhetoric (ethical, emotional, and rational) help define a film. Since MCTC has class sessions lasting one hour and fifteen minutes, I would use an episode from a different show each meeting for four weeks. I started with half-hour comedy and sitcoms, in order to leave me more time for discussion and general lessons on how to build the paper. I then segued into longer shows like Firefly and Dollhouse. Since I noticed my students relied heavily on each show’s dialogue, I decided it was time to lose the talking. As a final lesson, I used the Buffy episode “Hush” to push students to realize that not all logic, ethics, and emotions are shown through dialogue.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer is a revamping of the original movie, albeit darker and much more literary and intelligent in design. The show follows Buffy, who is the Slayer, the one girl in the world who is the chosen one. She alone wields the strength and skill to fight the vampires, demons, and the forces of darkness, to stop the spread of their evil and the swell of their numbers. The episode “Hush” explores the theme of communication and the difficulties caused by oratory language. Of course, Whedon turns this theme into the “creature feature” of the week, so The Gentlemen (fairy tale monsters) arrive in Sunnydale to steal the voices of all its citizens. They float around Sunnydale in an attempt to steal seven hearts, which they cut directly from the chests of their victims, who cannot scream or shout because their voices are gone. The episode is framed with dialogue, but the majority of the action takes place without any speech, causing all kinds of mayhem, misdirection, and miscommunication. The main characters must find a way to successfully communicate without voices: this theme is reinforced in the episode through the use of imagery and visual rhetoric.

The students, although mystified at first, managed to identify how facial expressions, body language, music, actions, and even scenery helped to define the plot in terms of visual rhetoric. Of all the Buffy episodes I have used for the visual rhetoric assignment, this was one of the more successful in persuading students to think beyond what is literally said. However, episodes like “Conversations with Dead People” and “Him” have also worked well for this assignment. Since “Hush” helped students at MCTC learn to “read” a television show and its textual details, I have also started to use this strategy at ITT. Even though I watch this episode an average of twelve times per year, students still manage to point out details I have missed, which further justifies my rationale for using television as supplemental text.

Visual Rhetoric via Firefly and Serenity

While MCTC’s Visual Rhetoric project was just one of the four for the semester, I use this paper as the major project for my ITT Tech Comp I classes. Since the classes are longer, I show a full-length film during the second class after the students have received their lesson on the three elements of visual rhetoric. During my latest quarter, I decided to show the Firefly episode “Shindig” for one section and “Our Mrs. Reynolds” for another as the first session’s lesson on defining the ethical, emotional, and rational elements. Firefly is a sci-fi western set in the year 2517, following an oddball group of main characters as they form a family on the spaceship Serenity through their different (mostly illegal) transporting jobs. In the documentary Relighting the Firefly, found on the Serenity DVD bonus features, Whedon notes that “nothing will change in the future: technology will
advance, but we will still have the same political, moral, and ethical problems as today.” Since Firefly does exactly what Whedon says, it is a particularly appropriate show to use in the classroom.

While I have integrated Firefly episodes into other lessons, I decided to apply the series in the class introduction for using television as a text to set up watching Serenity in its entirety during the second meeting. Though I found that this method of introducing the film doesn’t really help or hurt the students’ understanding of the text, it is still fun and effective as an entire lesson. This approach also gives me a chance to introduce students to thinking about comparison and contrast as useful modes for explaining visual rhetoric.

**Visual Rhetoric via Dollhouse**

I also used episodes from Dollhouse during our visual rhetoric discussions at both schools. Dollhouse is the latest Whedon creation, revolving around a literally underground operation that hires out “dolls” to perform any fantasy or job needed or desired, returning them to blank slates after a job is finished. The episode I most commonly used is “Spy in the House of Love,” as the episode appears the middle of the show’s first season and is relatively easy to read in terms of ethical, emotional, and rational visual rhetoric. I have shown episodes of later seasons of Buffy and Angel for the same reason, but “Spy in the House of Love” is easy to tie into the “Patterns of Development” lessons: narration, comparison-contrast, definition, argumentation-persuasion, cause-effect, and division-classification. I teach this lesson in Comp I at ITT Tech, but also review it in Comp II and discuss it at MCTC. In trying to get students to think in terms of all six PoDs, the episode’s chronology is broken by focusing on one character at a time, making it more effective than other episodes at trying to introduce students to the way stories are being told and preparing them for the singular lesson on narration.

At ITT Tech, I also teach the Bachelor’s level composition class, “Written Analysis.” As an opener to the critical and creative thinking approaches, I decided to use the season two Dollhouse episode “Stop-Loss.” I prompted students to watch for problems and how each of the characters solved them. When the episode was over, we discussed the students’ findings and our own solutions to the episode’s problems. I chose this show, and this episode in particular, because I did not think students would be familiar with Dollhouse, an assumption that proved correct. Before and during the episode, I offered a brief introduction to the show’s premise and wasn’t surprised that the upper-level students willingly engaged in more extensive discussion, even though they found the show strange. Even so, they speculated about what might have been done to prevent its cancellation. Overall, the discussion was successful, but I did err in picking a later episode in season two when I should have chosen an episode from season one that would have been more accessible yet serve the same purpose.

**Narration and “Storyteller”**

I use an obvious episode from Buffy’s seventh season, “Storyteller,” to showcase narration. The humor, action, and emotion in this episode make it easy to explain how the story is being told, especially since Andrew (a former villain trying to redeem himself by helping Buffy defeat the new villain) narrates most of the episode. Even though this episode is found in the last season, Andrew gives background explanations the action, which makes it a more accessible Buffy episode to use from the later seasons.

I have used “Storyteller” for this lesson in a few different ways. The first time, I prompted students to write in a narrative style, telling me stories from their lives. Although the personal narrative assignment was successful, the next quarter I decided to have them write a narrative
using the concepts of visual rhetoric to explain the episode to someone they know. Again, it worked, but the lesson was still not helping the students to really understand the difference between narration and definition. The next time I used the episode to teach narration, then, I decided not to have the students write at all, but to discuss how the story is told and to focus on what is being told, an approach that helped them differentiate between narration and definition. Since the discussion method was so successful, I now encourage longer discussions after having my students write in response to a prompt.

Angel versus “America”

For the required lesson at ITT on comparison and contrast, I decided to bring in Allen Ginsberg’s “America” for students to read; this was meant to help students both develop an appreciation for poetry and fulfill the lesson’s requirement. Since I had been doing research on the parallels between the Angel episode “Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?” and the Beatnik school of writing, specifically Ginsberg’s poetry, I decided to test my findings and see if students could determine the similarities and differences between a written text and an episode of a televised series.

Angel is a spin-off of Buffy and follows the un-life of Angel, Buffy’s former boyfriend, a vampire with a soul. During its five-season run, Angel often fought for the “Powers That Be” in an attempt to redeem himself for all his past deeds, sometimes losing his soul in the process. Angel is a much darker, masculinized part of the Buffyverse, so the show relies on more action and serious drama without offering the comic elements that partly define its predecessor. As the essay collection The Literary Angel confirms, however, the show nevertheless represents the Whedon brand, and its literary aspects and influences are just as numerous.

After reading “America,” we discussed the meaning of the poem, even though students were worried they wouldn’t understand. Not surprisingly, my students understood it better than they initially thought. Once that was done, I showed them the “AYNOHYEB?” episode of Angel, prompting them to pay attention to the problems in America we had just discussed in relation to the poem: intolerance, racism, and popular obsessions with Hollywood and the media. The episode flashes back to 1952, when Angel was living in a Hollywood hotel that is also inhabited by a paranoia-demon. Angel is shown as a recluse, only starting to connect to the character Judy when she needs help. This type of connection is one of the major themes within the show.

After viewing the episode, we focused on analyzing the similarities and differences between the two texts. The two different Comp II classes in which I taught this lesson presented me with very different audiences. One was full of students who were already Whedonites, while the other only had one or two fans of any of the Whedon shows, including Dollhouse, which was still airing on Fox at the time. The latter class, however, was the one that prompted me to use this comparison method, since one student had requested to see an episode of Angel as a side comment on one of his previous homework assignments. Even though the class of students new to Whedon inspired me to use these two texts, the class of Whedonites was, unsurprisingly, more responsive. But the lesson proved successful in both classes, especially in encouraging class discussion; I had several students who didn’t usually contribute finally join in the conversation, which both surprised and excited me.

Conclusion

Even though the earliest episodes of Buffy may seem dated to some students, they still relate to experiences students may have had or are having. I don’t teach solely using Whedon’s works as
supplemental in-class texts, but my students do recognize a pattern when I bring in other shows like *How I Met Your Mother* (starring Whedon alums Alyson Hannigan and Neil Patrick Harris), *Castle* (starring Nathan Fillion), and even *The Guild’s “Do You Wanna Date My Avatar?”* (starring Felicia Day). Because students read at different levels and speeds, I use television and pop culture as educational tools; songs and television episodes always end at the same time, making it easier to minimize the disruption some students cause once they’ve finished in-class reading.

One of the first things students in Comp I say when they introduce themselves is that they don’t like to write or they aren’t very good at reading. My response is always, “You’ll be surprised.” Of course, I don’t strictly adhere to the “to read makes our speaking English good” manifesto that Xander mentions in “I Robot, You Jane,” but nor do I follow the “I don’t think students should have to do anything educational in school if they don’t want to” ideal Cordelia mentions in “Some Assembly Required.” While my students at both schools are required to read quite a bit of text, especially in Comp II, I focus more on the quality and thought process behind the writing. I don’t drill grammar and mechanics every lesson; I don’t grade every assignment based on whether students can spell or put commas in the right place. Instead, I highlight how students can build logical arguments that follow both the lessons taught and the organizational principles that structure effective papers. In doing this, television helps students break from the mold of seeing English and composition classes as a place where they are required only to read and write a lot. Students are still reading and writing, but they don’t necessarily resist it because they’re also having fun.

I focus on Whedon’s work because it is both familiar to me and provides clear examples of visual rhetoric that make teaching easier. I still use the required textbooks and assign homework and writing responses, but I believe that teaching students to see beyond what they literally “read” helps them interpret and analyze other texts and experiences. No matter which class or which school, I can easily incorporate Whedon’s shows and movies into every lesson. Though I try to appeal to all students’ interest by also opting for variety, I suspect that ten years from now, I’ll still be using Whedon’s work in the composition classroom.

ITT Technical Institute

Maysville Community and Technical College

Works Cited


