

The 21st Century Television Classroom: How, Why, & Why Not

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The Pitch: For media students today, “talking back” is the norm—often at odds with more formal expectations of “discussion” and analysis. *Watercooler Journal* is student-run and radically multimodal, pulling from the classroom and beyond; accepting academic papers, multimedia, and social media as valid forms of analysis it can provide students agency and insight into what it means to view and communicate critically. The “Journal classroom” pedagogy is rooted in the premise that an assignment should never just be an assignment, but a step toward sharing constructive thoughts with a broader community using forms with which 21st Century student viewers are conversant.

Conner/Student: With excessively wordy print journals, pretentious articles, and an over-emphasis on the paper as the sole way to “academically” analyze texts, extremely visually-based students can get stuck. Let’s face it: inaccessibility shoots creativity and agency dead. The idea that has dominated the academic paper—that the professor is always looking for a particular answer—has sapped students of their autonomy.

This is everything that fandom flies in the face of. Fandom is about discussion, interaction, and poking each other in the ribs. Drafting a tweet or sharing a gif engenders conversation, fuels and propels it, pokes at the current discourse’s intricacies... Isn’t that what periodicals, journals, and academic publications are supposed to do? For some baffling reason, we’ve separated fandom’s approach to such analysis from the world of academia. Embracing fandom’s many forms in the university classroom can break down barriers of inaccessibility, provide students their agency, and reiterate that the “examined life” follows them into the “real world.”

In fact, it’s very possible that such interactive communities are the reason that your students signed up at your university to study television. For a while, I said that I wanted to study television because of how *Lost* impacted my life. But that was only partly true—I left out the fan community aspect of my relationship with the show, the hours spent on wikis and listening to podcasts and writing and calling in to those podcasts. I was enunciative about my fandom before I even knew what that meant. Thanks to the accessibility of content creation and the avenues of response that the Internet provides, this is already the case for most prospective communications students. No matter how you cut it, the *work* these active fans are doing is the work of practicing media scholars and developing critics.

At *Watercooler Journal*, we believe that the radically multimodal, student-sourced publication is how we can break the divide between online fandom and the

university classroom. This kind of publication functions as a proxy for online communities themselves--you can throw anything at the wall, and the striking stuff will stick, regardless of form. The goal is to create an autonomous space for media dialectic.

We are not here to present the idea that the classroom is irrelevant, quite the opposite. Now, the TV classroom has an even more focused responsibility than it did before the time of enunciative fan production: to *challenge* its students, to paradigm shift their perspectives, to be the spark that students can take back to their talking back. Now the classroom can be a part of the community itself and not just a place to talk about it.

Sharon/Instructor: Admittedly, we're talking about trickier work here as a teacher when it comes to assessing a variety of forms in student work. My starting suggestion is to have students reflect on process. Why is the point they're trying to make important? Why are they choosing the form they are? What difficulties of expression arose? Are you showing and telling, or are you moving beyond into explaining and arguing? We should also "go meta" and be willing to discuss why academic papers hold the classroom value they do (and consider when they might not hold value).

Then have students assess each other, pointing out that this is peer-review: Did your intended meaning come across? Why might there have been multiple interpretations or assessments and what does it mean if people didn't "get it?" Are your ideas sound and true to the theories/approaches at work? Is your evidence selective? (Could someone easily counter your point?)

The overall point is to explore a variety of ways in which students can communicate ideas. Writing—yes—they'll need it all their lives. Hopefully they're learning this in the right places. But when you stop to think about teaching critical media analysis, the real "trick" is getting students to appreciate its value—performing analysis, partaking in others'. Allowing for alternate forms can help achieve this, particularly if you start with what many students already are engaging with outside of the classroom. This isn't about being "hip"—it's about being relevant to what so many current media users are in the midst of.