Jazz and the American Spirit:
Utilizing Various Disciplines and Teaching Approaches in an English Expository Writing Unit

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To teach writing skills in an English Expository class, I utilize a variety of mediums and modalities. This multi-dimensional format allows for enhanced and integrated learning. The unit I presented on at the Tri-State Best Practices Conference, 2013, centered on the theme of Jazz in relation to the American spirit. It took five classes to teach, and each class was an hour fifteen minutes long. In creating this unit, which the text assigned, *The Norton Sampler* 6th edition, lent itself to—containing several essays on Jazz—I knew that my lifelong love of this musical genre and my library of Jazz CDs would provide me the chance to share with the class the music of Jazz musicians mentioned in the reading selections. I do, however, almost always bring in material from various disciplines (always including something of the arts) to enhance the teaching of expository writing. I decided to have students focus on Jazz in relation to the American spirit, since Jazz is a uniquely American music and its aspect of exemplifying the American spirit is one prevalent throughout the texts we would consider. It also proved to be a theme allowing students to reflect upon the meaning of diversity and embrace it, since Jazz takes from many influences, is loved across the globe and is comprised with, to a degree, musicians of diverse backgrounds, races and ethnicities. To make the learning focused and cohesive, all the materials we covered were considered in relation to this theme. The materials studied were as follows:

3. “Sonny’s Blues,” a story readily available by James Baldwin
4. “Three Musicians,” a painting by Pablo Picasso
5. Piece of scholarly research chosen by students for their paper on the unit
6. CDs of either Jazz musicians or songs referred to in the essay and story including:

   Dizzy Gillespie’s “Swing Low Sweet Cadillac”
   
   o John Coltrane’s “My Favorite Things” juxtaposed with Julie Andrew’s version of the song from the movie, “The Sound of Music”
   o Charlie Parker’s “Ornithology”
   o Louis Armstrong’s “It’s a Beautiful World”
   o Herbie Hancock’s “straight ahead” version of his composition, “Watermelon Man,” juxtaposed with Mongo Santamaria’s Latino version of the song
   o Billie Holliday’s “Strange Fruit”
   o John Coltrane’s Jazz and Carlos Santana’s rock versions of “A Love Supreme”
Writing Exercises to Teach these Texts

Since I like to give a warm up writing assignment that enables students to make connections between their own lives and the texts covered in class—which allows students to draw on their own schema, helping them transition out of the personal realm and into the contextual one—I started this unit with an icebreaker that had students write what kind of music they liked and what they liked about it. I gave the students 5 or 6 minutes to respond to the following prompt, which was presented to them on a worksheet I distributed:

Warm up: write what kind of music you listen to and what you like about it

I then asked for volunteers to read what they had written and called on about 8 students to share their responses. Next I asked if any students were familiar with Jazz and if so, how they felt about it. Most were not really familiar with this musical genre and if they were, felt, at best, lukewarm about it (at the end of the unit, I again asked students how they felt about Jazz and most responded that they now enjoyed and understood it far better).

Reading and Discussion

We then moved into reading and discussing sections of the essay students were assigned to read at home, Hentoff’s “Jazz: Music Beyond Time and Nations.” We focused on the universal appeal of Jazz and ways that it exemplifies the American Spirit, such as that it embraces diversity, breaks down conventional boundaries that are restrictive and rigid, involves dialoguing and reciprocity, appeals to the emotions and possesses a spontaneous, innovative element.

Group Work

Students then broke into groups of 3 in which they identified, in writing, these defining characteristics in the selection and provided supporting detail for them, either in quotes or paraphrase, both in MLA format. This was then followed with an interpretation or response to the evidence given. Students also made a list of some of the musicians mentioned and wrote a defining characteristic of each of those musicians alongside their names. This way when the students heard the CDs played of these musicians, they could look over what they had written and discern if what they heard in the music corresponded to these character markers they studied. This helped them articulate what they heard and interpret it. The following is a hyperlink to excerpts from Hentoff’s essay:

http://books.google.com/books?id=0A6RJ1FY2XcC&pg=PA94&lpg=PA94&dq=hentoff:+Music+Beyond+Time+and+Nations&source=bl&ots=MvCxpZX3tq&sig=VbE6tJGrqbQye00e5hWVdP8t8Jo&hl=en&sa=X&ei=RY5VUfPhFcvj4AOny4DYAg&ved=0CC0Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=hentoff%3A%20Music%20Beyond%20Time%20and%20Nations&f=false

Next Essay Examined in Comparison to Hentoff Essay

After reading the Hentoff essay, students studied African-American poet Langston Hughes’ essay, “Bop,” which conveys, through a dialogue between two characters, that an origin of Jazz was the fact that
African Americans were abused and oppressed by American society. They were bopped on the head by cop’s clubs, which gave rise to their calling one popular type of Jazz “bop.” Students compared and contrasted the two essays, identifying the different perspectives of the two authors (the first perhaps more idealistic, the second grimmer) and they considered if both positions could be assimilated or if they contradicted one another. The essay also allowed students to consider the function of art and the nature of growth—which growth is often propelled by discomfort, such as is made apparent in the lines of the Wallace Steven poem, “Sunday Morning;” that I put on the chalkboard: “Death is the Mother of Beauty; hence from her/Alone shall come fulfillment to our dreams/And our desires” (63-65). They then wrote in response to these notions and shared their findings.

**Considering Jazz in Relation to the American Spirit in a Piece of Fiction**

Next we read, discussed and wrote about “Sonny’s Blues,” the James Baldwin short story about, on one level, how a musician struggles to express and find himself through his Jazz piano playing, and how the music is inextricable from the pain his African American ancestors as well as nuclear family with which he grew up experienced. Yet the music, born in part of pain, takes on a life of its own as art does. Due to the fact that Expository Writing is not a class about fiction, I had students focus on the ending of the story, and helped facilitate their understanding of the beginning of it. Yet reading this story, although quite challenging for some students, not only deepened their understanding of Jazz and its relationship with the American spirit, it enabled them to consider how fiction addresses themes differently than do essays, thus providing an introduction to the reading of literature, which students take a course in called Writing about Literature after completing the Expository Writing course.

After some discussion, and writing exercises including an icebreaker and triple-journal entry format assignment, students were asked to focus on the following passage from the end of “Sonny’s Blues” and work in pairs to analyze its meaning and connect the passage to some strands of what we explored about Jazz:

> Then they all gathered around Sonny and Sonny played. Every now and again one of them seemed to say, amen. Sonny's fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others. And Sonny went all the way back, he really began with the spare, flat statement of the opening phrase of the song. Then he began to make it his. It was very beautiful because it wasn't hurried and it was no longer a lament. I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, and what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did. Yet, there was no battle in his face now, I heard what he had gone through, and would continue to go through until he came to rest in earth. He had made it his: that long line, of which we knew only Mama and Daddy. And he was giving it back, as everything must be given back, so that, passing through death, it can live forever. I saw my mother's face again, and felt, for the first time, how the stones of the road she had walked on must have bruised her feet. I saw the moonlit road where my father's brother died. And it brought something else back to me, and carried me past it, I saw my little girl again and felt Isabel's tears again, and I felt my own tears begin to rise. And I was yet aware that this was only a moment, that the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger, and that trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky. Then it was over. Creole and Sonny let out their breath, both soaking wet, and grinning. There
was a lot of applause and some of it was real. In the dark, the girl came by and I asked her to take drinks to the bandstand. There was a long pause, while they talked up there in the indigo light and after awhile I saw the girl put a Scotch and milk on top of the piano for Sonny. He didn't seem to notice it, but just before they started playing again, he sipped from it and looked toward me, and nodded. Then he put it back on top of the piano. For me, then, as they began to play again, it glowed and shook above my brother's head like the very cup of trembling (Baldwin 148).

The story in its entirety is available in PDF on the following hyperlink: http://swcta.net/moore/files/2012/02/sonnysblues.pdf

Listening to Jazz on CDs played by musicians Students Read About

Now armed with some knowledge of Jazz and its defining characteristics and origins, I played for students CDs of musicians that were mentioned in the reading selections we examined, and that expressed some aspects of Jazz they had learned about. I started with Dizzy Gillespie’s “Swing Low Sweet Cadillac,” which is a tune, one could say, not only signifying (see Henry Louis Gates’ text, The Signifying Monkey) on the classic version of the song it is predicated upon (signification a concept I briefly introduced to students as well), “Swing Low Sweet Chariot,” but a tune that reflects vocal and musical conversation, spontaneity and improvisation. Students always respond with laughter when I play this tune for them, thereby expressing the pleasure one derives from surprise, as the tune embodies that element.

I then moved on to play the other tunes I mentioned in the list above, and as the students listened, they wrote their impressions of the music in the framework of the defining characteristics of Jazz, and how each piece might reflect one or more characteristic of the artist who is playing, or artists playing. Especially enjoyable to and illuminating for students is when they hear various versions of the same tune in juxtaposition, such as Julie Andrew’s pop, upbeat version of “My Favorite Things” (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=33o32C0ogVM) with John Coltrane’s effusive, spiritual, somber, improvisational version of it (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0I6xkVRWzCY). Or Coltrane’s beatific, gentle version of “A Love Supreme” with Carlos Santana’s heavy, intense rock version of the tune. Listening to songs in different musical genres also gives students the chance to reflect upon the various objectives of these genres. Likewise enjoyable and illuminating – and opening a space for discussion of cultural differences – is the playing of “straight ahead” Jazz versions, such as of Herbie Hancock’s “Watermelon Man” – one that reveal musical dialoguing amongst the musicians and retains a cool demeanor – with the uninhibited, fun-loving version Mongo Santamaria plays of the tune.

Final Text Studied in this Unit: Pablo Picasso’s Picture, “Three Musicians”

The final text studied in this unit was Pablo Picasso’s “Three Musicians,” available on the following (and numerous others) hyperlink: http://www.pablopicasso.org/three-musicians.jsp

I passed around color copies of the picture and students worked in pairs to write their interpretation of it. I first asked students to write down as many things as they noticed in the copy they held before ascribing meaning to what they saw, therefore rooting interpretations in evidence. It is interesting to note that all the pairs of students saw, in the picture, that Jazz knew no bounds since it united people of varying social classes and styles of living, allowing the three musicians to join something greater than themselves as individuals, and have a good time in the process. Students commented that all they studied before responding to this picture enhanced how they perceived it.

Assignment Required of Students at End of this Unit
At the culmination of this unit, students had to draw on what they studied and add to that a piece of scholarly research in order to write a 3 to 5 page essay on one aspect of what was studied, such as how Jazz embraces diversity, or signifies the American spirit. In the process of writing, students used peer review and cited MLA format. I have taught this unit several times and students always enjoy it. Several have come back to me to inform me that they purchased Jazz CDs as a result of the unit.

For more information on this unit, feel free to contact me at ezucker@hostos.cuny.edu.

Works Cited
