

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Publications and Research

Kingsborough Community College

2011

Basic Writers and the Echoes of Intertextuality

Cheryl Hogue Smith

CUNY Kingsborough Community College

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/kb_pubs/249

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

Basic Writers and the Echoes of Intertextuality

> Cheryl Hogue Smith

Instruction that fosters intertextual awareness in basic writers can help them overcome their tendency to compartmentalize what they learn from academic texts and thereby help them make rich connections among the texts they read and write.

In a recent basic writing class, I assigned to my students a paper built, in part, around a 2009 article titled “Love in 2-D,” wherein Lisa Katayama describes the phenomenon of Japanese men falling in love with prepubescent 2-D animated girls, illustrated in a style known as *anime* or *manga*. These men openly “date” the *manga* girls, as Katayama details through her main example of a Japanese man named Nisan who escorts around Tokyo a body-sized pillow covered in a pillowcase that is emblazoned with a full-bodied, scantily-clad image of Nemutan, his “love.” (The article includes an image of Nisan hugging Nemutan.) This basic writing class was linked with an art history class, so the art history professor and I each had the same set of students, and we made sure our assignments crossed over to each other’s classes. In order to connect the “Love in 2-D” assignment to the study of art history, we asked our students to look closely at another “text” that represented a man falling in love with an inanimate female: Jean-Léon Gérôme’s painting *Pygmalion and Galatea*, which depicts a man embracing a female statue as she is in the process of becoming human. (The story of Pygmalion is, of course, the story of a sculptor—Pygmalion—who creates and falls in love with a statue of his ideal woman, who, thanks to Venus, slowly metamorphoses into a human being while Pygmalion is caressing her. Gérôme’s painting depicts Galatea in the process of changing. See Google Images for an image of this painting.) Eventually, students would be asked to compare the painting with the essay and explain the feelings and ideas that the essay and the painting evoked.

To teach the unit, I decided to start with the painting first so students would get the idea of an inanimate statue metamorphizing into a human woman before they read and compared to it Katayama’s report of men falling in love with 2-D anime characters who came to life in these men’s worlds. In order to prepare students for the painting, I decided that they should first become familiar with the myth of Pygmalion so they would understand the scene in Gérôme’s artwork. So

on the first day of teaching this unit, I handed my students Ovid's "The Story of Pygmalion."

Initially, my students grappled with some of the language of Ovid, but after a while, they started talking about how "sick" the story was and about how "messed up the dude was for loving a statue." But after working closely with the text, their discussions began to turn to the metamorphosis of the statue and about how this man was looking for a perfect love. After an hour of actively engaging with the myth, my students were discussing Galatea's metamorphosis with such authority that I took their discussions as my cue to move on to the next step in the unit, which was to provide these students with the image of Gérôme's painting.

After I projected the painting on the wall, I asked my students, "What do you think this painting might be titled?" They stared at me uncomprehendingly as though they didn't understand the question.

"Okay, what do you see in the painting? What is going on in the painting?" I asked.

"A dude is kissing a statue," they responded.

"Is the statue alive?"

"Part of her is."

"So what might this painting be called? What might its title be?" Blank stares were the only response. "Well," I asked, "what did you just read?"

"We read Ovid," they answered.

"And what was the piece by Ovid about?"

"A guy who fell in love with a statue," they quickly responded.

"So what might this painting be called?" I asked more hopefully. Alas, silence.

"What is the title of the myth?" I asked.

"The Story of Pygmalion," they answered (without having to look, I might add).

"So what might the title of this painting be?" I asked so hopefully since I had all but provided them with the answer. But, again, blank stares. "Perhaps it's called *Pygmalion*?"

A communal "Oooooohhhhhh!" filled the room, with a seemingly synchronized dance of their heads as they collectively threw them back and in slow motion brought them down in a single nod.

"Its full title is *Pygmalion and Galatea*. Which one is which?" I asked.

"The dude is Pygmalion," they replied.

"How do you know?"

"Because this thing we just read," they said. And from this point on, they were able to apply details in the "thing" to the painting.

Academic Intertextuality as Experience

After this short interchange, I quietly asked myself why it was so difficult for my students to see that the man in the painting was Pygmalion. It appeared to me that my students were compartmentalizing each "reading" in that each reading was isolated somewhere in their minds. I then had to ask myself, "If my students are isolating

and compartmentalizing their readings of both Ovid and Gérôme, how will they ever see the connection between ‘Love in 2-D’ and the painting?” I then wondered if their tendency to isolate texts went beyond this unit, so I had to ask myself why my students were compartmentalizing in the first place. Were they incapable of seeing intertextual connections? The answer, of course, is, “obviously not,” since I have often seen my students relate songs or TV shows to their life experiences or connect songs and TV shows to other songs and TV shows. But since most of the basic writers who cross my path admit to having read so few academic texts in the past, I’m not sure whether the notion of “intertextuality” with academic texts is something they knew that they were supposed to experience. Academic texts seem so foreign to them and require such formal and unfamiliar responses that students wanting to do the right thing and give correct answers seem to “cancel out their native intelligence” and lose touch with their natural ability to make connections (Blau 101–3). Students also compartmentalize academic texts, I would conjecture, because they aren’t invested sufficiently in them. It’s also possible that students aren’t aware that it’s standard practice in the academic community to look for and make connections between and among texts, and therefore they do not think to connect texts in ways that they successfully do outside of school with their music or other elements of pop culture. This means that we as teachers need to help our students activate inside of school the kinds of consciousness they employ outside of school so they can pay attention not just to texts as they read, but to echoes of and references to other texts that have to be resonant in the recesses of their own minds. Until students learn to listen to the echoes, the texts that they read are in danger of remaining compartmentalized in their heads.

After I helped my students make the initial connection between Ovid and Gérôme so that they would recognize Pygmalion as the subject of the painting, they were able to cite several lines from Ovid that demonstrated their ability to connect his text to Gérôme: “He made, with marvelous art, an ivory statue, as white as snow” (ll. 6–7); “And he kissed her, and she seemed to glow, and kissed her, and stroked her breast, and felt the ivory soften under his fingers” (ll. 46–48); “The lips he kisses are real indeed, the ivory girl can feel them” (ll. 55–56). So the problem wasn’t that students were incapable of making intertextual connections between these two academic texts; they just seemed to be blind to the crucial *initial* association—in this case, seeing that the image in the painting mirrored the Pygmalion story as told by Ovid. I had thought that by starting with Ovid’s “Pygmalion,” I was overtly making this association for my students, but clearly I was wrong.

My students’ apparent inability to immediately see that Gérôme’s painting was a visual representation of the myth of Pygmalion made me realize that simply providing students with the necessary textual background information for references in other texts isn’t the first step we should take in helping students make connections between and among academic texts. Instead, we need to first show them that academic texts speak to one another, that as readers they should take what they’ve learned from one text to help them understand another. In other words, they need to learn that there *are* connections to be made and to be found in the first place. It’s such an obvious piece of the puzzle—so obvious, in fact, that

I didn't even realize it was a piece to begin with. Our students do not simply lack textual background knowledge that might help them comprehend, interpret, and analyze texts (Smith, "Diving" 670–71); they lack, at least in academic contexts, the fundamental knowledge that one text can lead them to understanding another, that they will be expected to see and to make such intertextual connections, and that intertextual thinking is a part of the reading process for college-level readers.

Though I know my students have the capacity to make intertextual connections in non-academic contexts, the students in this particular basic writing class seemed unable or unwilling to connect the image in the painting with a similar representation in the text they had just read. For this generation of students who are flooded with visual images, I assumed having a visual image as one-half of an intertextual equation would be enough to spark the initial connection between the text and the painting. Yet, as Walter Werner claims, it is hardly unusual for students not to see connections between images and words because even in high-school social studies textbooks, where authors strategically place an image and words together, "providing context for and implying comment upon each other" (73), none of the books "explicitly alerted readers to the concept" of the words and images connecting (77). The authors of the textbooks seemed to take for granted that the students would look at the images and read the words and then use the connection as a tool for analysis—much as I believed that handing my students Ovid would provide them the context to analyze *Gérôme*. These authors probably assumed, as did I, that students would connect the images in the textbooks to the words because students have what may seem to academically trained minds a natural instinct for making such connections. But as Werner explains, this just doesn't happen: "Intertextuality slips by unnoticed" (78).

Perhaps in this case "intertextuality slips by unnoticed" because students do not care about the texts we teach. To help struggling students notice intertextuality, maybe we have to first provide them with texts we know they will be more likely to care about and have them analyze those texts before we give them academic ones. In other words, if we ask students to compare two pop-culture texts that we know have resonances in the academic texts they will soon be reading, perhaps students will remember the commonalities of the pop-culture texts and apply them to the academic texts. For example, what I might have done (and will do the next time I teach these texts) is not start with Ovid but begin with a discussion about intertextuality and then introduce someone like Common, a rapper whose song "I Used to Love H.E.R." is about a man who continues to love a woman whose personality constantly changes. I can pair Common's song with the rock/pop song "Better Together" by Jack Johnson, which has shades of *Katayama* in the way one man thinks life is always better as long as he is with his significant other. Undoubtedly, any conversation students might have about the connection between the two songs would subsequently help them discover links to Ovid and then to *Gérôme* and *Katayama*. Let's face it: my students care about and connect to hip-hop, rock, and pop. Ovid? Not so much. If we can help our students connect to the texts that we teach by bringing those texts into conversation with texts they already know and care about, they may be able to engage more actively and deeply with

academic texts, which includes recognizing common themes, ideas, and images that run through and across those texts. Readers are not likely to readily remember texts or experiences that have no personal meaning for them; hence, academic texts that have little or no personal meaning for students are not likely to register in their memories. And the recognition of intertextuality is fundamentally an act of memory.

Academic Intertextuality as a Function of Memory and a Habit of Mind

But intertextuality is also a habit of mind. That is, students need to be told about and to have repeated experiences in the discovery and generation of intertextual connections—at least the discovery of that initial connection between texts. Using my students as an example, we can see that once they made an initial connection between the two texts, they were able to remember the Pygmalion myth at least well enough to apply some of Ovid’s text to what they saw in Gérôme’s painting. But they needed me to make that initial connection for them because they, for whatever reason, were not able to think of the Ovid text in relation to the Gérôme painting. Richard Vacca argues that by the time students reach middle school, a great number of them “appear *skillful* in the mechanics of reading but aren’t *strategic* enough in their ability to explore and interpret meaning. They often just go through the motions of reading and writing—saying the words or putting the words on paper” (9; emphasis in original). In many ways, students are so used to going through the motions of school that they, as Denny Palmer Wolf suggests, merely complete one assignment before moving on to the next, disallowing any real learning—and therefore remembering—to take place (35). In other words, many of our students view reading as something to get through rather than something to learn from (Smith, “Diving” 671–72). When students enter each academic reading task as though it exists in isolation, they can do little more than compartmentalize what they read for the sake of recitation. Intertextuality and compartmentalization are intellectual antagonists, and as long as students create barriers that prevent them from linking texts, they will never make those initial connections that are crucial to academic learning.

We know our students are capable of listening to their intertextual memories when they want to. Thus they must have echoes of other texts reverberating in their heads as they read, and they are therefore capable of creating pathways to and from the textual compartments they create in their heads; they just do not seem to stop long enough to allow the thoughts to take hold. My students’ collective “Oooooohhhhhh!” didn’t seem an exclamation of amazement or surprise after all, but rather a recognition that a connection was somewhere in their minds and was suddenly thrust into their consciousnesses. Only when they learn to listen to those instances when their minds tell them that something they are reading seems familiar will they ever become consciously aware of the textual memories that their mind is trying to connect. In other words, if students can learn to think about their thinking as they are reading, that is, if students can think metacognitively about texts as they read, they can begin to de-compartmentalize, remember, and connect

the texts we assign and recognize the rich intertextuality that academic texts have to offer. So if we want our students to think metacognitively, perhaps we need to help them see that intertextuality is a form of metacognition, and the echoes that they so often ignore are occasions for real learning.

Providing engaging texts like Common or Jack Johnson, however, isn't enough to help students develop the habits of mind that will allow them to effectively remember and apply relevant information from one text to the next. And, besides, we can hardly change our entire curriculum to always include popular culture that *might* engage our students' interest. We must also help them change the way they view reading so that the act—not just the text—doesn't become an isolated event. Wolfgang Iser argues that each reading of a text builds upon former readings of that same text (441), and the logic of his argument extends beyond any single text to all the texts we read in their intertextual relations: every reading of a text builds upon readings we've already experienced with other texts. All our previous acts of reading are implicated and imbricated in moments of new reading. This systemic process is the basis of intertextuality. When readers read actively, they carry with them a conscious or even unconscious memory of previous readings and build knowledge by recognizing how texts they are reading relate to texts they have read. But when readers read passively, they tend not to engage or interact with or think metacognitively about texts (Simpson and Nist 367–68). In the case of many basic writers, they *do* read actively, but their active engagement often consists of mining texts for what they hope is the “right” answer that they assume their teachers want and that more successful students already know (Smith, “Perversity” 23). So if we are to ever help basic writers do more than “go through the motions,” we must first change the way they approach academic tasks: Instead of compartmentalizing their reading by focusing on the product as though there is a right (and therefore wrong) answer to find, they must learn to think intertextually by thinking about their own reading process while they are reading.

Completing the Pygmalion Unit

To help our students make the shift away from compartmentalization, we might begin by creating units that rely heavily on intertextuality. I cannot say for certain that my students better understood intertextuality or were thinking metacognitively after this unit. But I can say that the discussions for the remainder of the semester seemed less focused on one single text and that the students seemed to find intertextual connections in the texts we were reading in class. Perhaps I also got better at helping students recognize the connections they could make between texts. After that first day when students did not associate the man in Gérôme's painting with Pygmalion, I started thinking (ironically) more consciously about the intertextual nature of my assignment and decided to slow down the way I would teach the rest of the Pygmalion unit. My original plan was to hand students Ovid, whereby they would immediately and enthusiastically connect the myth with Gérôme's painting, and then hand them Katayama's article “Love in 2-D,” whereby they would imme-

diately and enthusiastically connect the Japanese men with Pygmalion. And then, of course, they would write brilliant papers that discussed the connections they found. I learned from the first half of this unit, however, that I couldn't just hand them a text (Katayama) after they spent several class hours analyzing Pygmalion's love for Galatea and expect them to immediately (and enthusiastically) say, "Look! Nisan is like Pygmalion!" So in order to help them write those brilliant papers, I became much more deliberate with the way I introduced Katayama.

Included with the article "Love in 2-D" is a picture of Nisan holding a body-sized pillow emblazoned with the image of Nemutan (the prepubescent *anime* character with whom he was in love). I had not initially planned on calling attention to the picture when teaching this text, but it seemed a natural and intermediary piece to teach since I was moving from the Gérôme painting to the Katayama text. I thought back to an in-class workshop I conducted earlier in the semester whereby I provided students with five pairs of artworks and asked them to identify five obvious similarities or differences and then ten not-so-obvious similarities or differences.¹ This exercise is designed to help students see that it's relatively easy to compare and contrast visual items we immediately see, but it's more difficult to really peer into the pairs of artworks to find something not so obvious. This exercise transfers nicely to a discussion about reading since we want our students to analyze texts beyond the obvious so they'll have something substantive about which to write effectively. As Patrick Sullivan argues, the "most important hallmark of a college-level writer [is] an eagerness to engage readings patiently and thoughtfully" (245), and this workshop as an exercise in close reading is a way to have students patiently think about texts.

Since analyzing two images side by side is an easier intellectual endeavor than analyzing an image and a text, I built on the workshop I had conducted earlier in the semester and provided students with a pair of artworks, only this time the images were Nisan/Nemutan and Pygmalion/Galatea. Again in groups, students then closely "read" the two images for obvious similarities or differences and for not-so-obvious similarities or differences. During this exercise, students of course noticed immediately that both images had men and inanimate objects and that one was a photograph and one a painting. After working closely with the pair of images, students then noticed that one showed a girl while the other showed a woman (they had not yet read the text to know who Nisan and Nemutan were); that one had as its background a street, while the other had as its background Cupid, some masks, and art; that one was a 2-D girl, while the other suggested a 3-D woman; and that one had a cartoon girl, while the other had a realistic-looking woman who was coming to life (which they knew from Ovid). After discussing these similarities and differences, which took the entire class time, I asked my students to consider what they'd learned from their discussions of the two images as they read "Love in 2-D," which they were to do for the next class.

I do not know whether the extra step of comparing the two images helped my students make connections among Ovid, Gérôme, and Katayama, but I do know that the discussions about Katayama during the next class meeting were filled with

comparisons to Pygmalion. Did I still lead them to make the initial connection between Pygmalion and Katayama? Yes, in part. But they were also able to make other, new connections on their own between this academic text and popular culture, as evidenced by the one student who asked me if I'd seen the *30 Rock* episode in which James Franco is in love with a Japanese *anime* figure on a pillow and by another student who asked me if I'd seen the Ryan Gosling movie *Lars and the Real Girl* about a guy who has a relationship with a blow-up doll. Maybe next time they see a TV show or movie about a man loving an inanimate woman, they'll instead think to themselves about Pygmalion and Katayama. Incidentally, all of the students' papers for this midterm assignment showed how these three texts could interanimate each other in the mind of a thoughtful reader. The papers were, of course, executed with varying results, but the one constant was that they all talked about Nisan and Pygmalion as loving in similar ways.

Conclusion

Intertextuality is a vital component of college reading and writing. In order to write a paper that requires the synthesizing of readings, students must recognize the intertextual connections among all their sources. The trick is getting students to first recognize that they must do with academic texts what they already do with pop-culture texts: they have to listen to their thinking when the echoes of other texts are reverberating in their memories. As my assignment shows, students are disinclined to connect texts together when we simply hand them a text that we think will provide them with necessary textual background information to understand another text. If we want our students to immediately and enthusiastically recognize the connections between and among texts, we have to first help them know that texts most often connect back to prior texts. We have to teach them about intertextuality as a form of metacognition. The *Davids* that I teach in the close reading workshop are based upon the biblical story of David and Goliath. And Pygmalion is very much the basis for something like the Julia Roberts movie *Pretty Woman*. Intertextuality is a feature of all texts—whether they are texts that we are reading or writing or whether they represent the culture of the academy or of Hollywood. In fact, *no* text exists in isolation. In order for our students to succeed in their academic reading (and therefore writing) tasks, we must help them develop the habits of mind that will allow them to consciously stop and listen to the echoes when their minds are making pathways to other texts. We must help them to reach, on their own, such epiphanies as “the dude is Pygmalion.”

Note

1. The pairs of artworks I use in class are Pablo Picasso's *Three Dancers* (1925) and Edgar Degas's *Prima Ballerina* (1876); Claude Monet's *The River* (1868) and Georges Seurat's *Bathers* (1883–84); Martin Johnson Heade's *Approaching Thunder Storm* (1859) and John Steuart Curry's *The Line Storm* (ca. 1900); James Abbott McNeil Whistler's *The Little White Girl* (ca. 1860) and Pablo Picasso's *Young Girl*

at the Mirror (ca. 1910); and Andrea Del Castagno's *David* (1450–57) and Michelangelo's *David* (1501–04).

Works Cited

- Blau, Sheridan. *The Literature Workshop: Teaching Texts and Their Readers*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2003. Print.
- Common. "I Used to Love H.E.R." *Resurrection*. Relativity Records, 1994. MP3.
- Gérôme, Jean-Léon. *Pygmalion and Galatea*. Ca. 1890. Oil on canvas. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Visual Art.
- Iser, Wolfgang. "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." *The Implied Reader*. Trans. David Henry Wilson. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974. 274–94. Print.
- Johnson, Jack. "Better Together." *In Between Dreams*. Brushfire, 2006. MP3.
- Katayama, Lisa. "Love in 2-D." *New York Times Magazine* 26 July 2009: 19–21. Web.
- Ovid. "The Story of Pygmalion." *Metamorphoses*. Trans. R. Humphries. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1955. 241–43. Print.
- Simpson, Michele L., and Sherrie L. Nist. "Encouraging Active Reading at the College Level." *Comprehension Instruction: Research-Based Best Practices*. Ed. Cathy Collins Block and Michael Pressley. New York: Guilford Press, 2002. 365–79. Print.
- Smith, Cheryl Hogue. "Diving in Deeper: Bringing Basic Writers' Thinking to the Surface." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 53.8 (2010): 668–76. Print.
- . "The Perversity of the Basic Writer." *California English* 15.4 (2010): 22–23. Print.
- Sullivan, Patrick. "What Can We Learn about 'College-Level' Writing from Basic Writing Students? The Importance of Reading." *What Is College-Level Writing?* Vol. 2. Ed. Patrick Sullivan, Howard Tinberg, and Sheridan D. Blau. Urbana: NCTE, 2010. 243–64. Print.
- Vacca, Richard T. "From Efficient Decoders to Strategic Readers." *Educational Leadership* 60.3 (2002): 6–11. Print.
- Werner, Walter. "'What Does This Picture Say?' Reading about the Intertextuality of Visual Images." *International Journal of Social Education* 19.1 (2004): 64–82. Print.
- Wolf, Denny Palmer. *Reading Reconsidered: Literature and Literacy in High School*. New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1988. Print.

Cheryl Hogue Smith is an associate professor of English at Kingsborough Community College—City University of New York.