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Backwards By Design, Summer 2013 Retreat Assessment

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Background

At the 2013 TLA retreat, the main task I set for myself was building a new course around the film and television of the Pacific Northwest. The main challenge of this course was how to create a syllabus centered on the media of a 'region' rather than a particular concept or genre. The guiding question for developing this course was what aspects of the Pacific Northwest films and television were able to contribute to. Since our retreat was focused on 'threshold concepts,' and this course was primarily focused on content rather than skills (studying media of the region as opposed to creating media, although like most English courses this was a writing skills-based class), I used Paul Feyerabend's *Against Method* as a conceptual skill-set through which to approach the material. The intended goal was to use Feyerabend as a methodology, and to treat this methodology as the threshold concept.

Feyerabend's *Against Method* acknowledges the discourse-centered natured of knowledge creation. Every 'method' for Feyerabend both privileges and excludes certain types of information, or even makes certain conclusions possible while obfuscating others. In a course on the media of the Pacific Northwest, should the focus be on what we might learn about the people of the Pacific Northwest? The environment of the Pacific Northwest? The film and television industries of the Pacific Northwest? The history of the Pacific Northwest? A possible 'style' of film from the Pacific Northwest? The role women play in the industry and films of the Pacific Northwest? My conclusion was that, as students of said media, we should revel in all of the possible things we might learn from the region through its media and acknowledge that the rhetoric of the media itself will privilege some of these configurations while ignoring others depending on the form it takes. So my hope through this course was that we would learn not only about the types of media in the Pacific Northwest, but also what a 'place-based analysis of media' might look like.

I have since developed this course through faculty observation, directed midterm evaluations, informal conversation with students, and my own research/writing. One of the end goals of this aspect of the course was to get students to 'take up' several methodologies and reflect on how they interact/inform one another through their final written project (a 10-15 pager... which I'm told is quite large for this type of class - more on this in the last section of my reflection). While I haven't had the opportunity to teach this particular class again, I used these reflections to develop assignments in both my English 335: Postwar Global Film and English 464: Film and Contemporary Politics. I will address my observations regarding this assignment in English 312, discuss what I would do differently, and then provide some examples from these other classes of how I modified assignments to continue aiming at this basic aspect of getting students to 'take up' a topic.

Results/Observations

I first implemented this methodological approach from *Against Method* by having them read excerpts from this text during the first week of class and using it as an opportunity to discuss

how we might approach 'place-based media.' It became clear early on to me that while many students 'understood' Feyerabend, they did not see the immediate relevance of this piece to our course. There was also some resistance to Feyerabend, which I expected, because his ideas are pretty theoretical and they were getting hit with them right off the bat in a 'film' class. This wasn't all bad, because I planned on bringing Feyerabend back into the course throughout the quarter through Canvas assignments and discussion. For example, in their midterm I asked them to use two of the readings/theories to inform their answer to the question I posed. Some took up this project in earnest, citing Feyerabend in their midterm (as it was open note/open book), most performed this task without any reference to Feyerabend, and some missed the intended goal entirely, using two 'ideas' from the same perspective. These results weren't all bad, except that *Against Method* quickly disappeared from the class entirely as students focused in on the aspect of the media that interested them the most.

In my midterm evaluations, which I gave after the midterm, I provided three questions: What is one thing you appreciate about this course? What is one thing you would revise about this course? What is one question you have about this course? These questions served a dual purpose in that I was looking for material to construct a teaching portfolio for job applications, but in hind sight I would have liked to ask questions that were more focused on particular assignments/readings in the course (perhaps: what reading would you keep, what reading would you get rid of, etc.). One thing that stood out in these evaluations was the word 'variety.' Some examples (my bolding in these):

"I appreciate the open-mindedness of the instructor. His willingness to accept and discuss a **diverse array** of interpretations, and his aptitude for constructive teaching."

"I appreciate the **variety** of films we watch, and how they directly connect to the Canvas readings. The readings provide the films with more interesting meaning, and make it easier on the viewer to analyze them."

"There is a really good **variety** of types of films and shows that we view and talk about."

While there seems to be an appreciation of a 'Feyerabendian' approach, Feyerabend was mentioned by several students in terms of them "not understanding" its place within the course. So whereas it seems the general aim of Feyerabend's methodology became clear to the students, the actual reading itself was not. This leads me to believe a more appropriate way of integrating Feyerabend into the course would be through paraphrasing his ideas and either introducing the reading itself in the second half of the class, so we could reflect on the different approaches we had taken over the quarter, or by providing it as an optional reading.

Briefly, another aspect of the course worth mentioning is the final written project. Again, in this final written project I asked students to take up several approaches from the readings and extend them through an analysis of 10-15 pages. While this worked pretty well, I think I missed an opportunity here to provide some 'scaffolding.' I staged this writing assignment by having students submit a thesis and then workshop drafts, whereas I could have had them choose a film-text, apply one theory and develop its conclusions, apply another theory and develop its

conclusions, and then perform an analysis of these conclusions based on what theoretical models were being applied in **three stages.** Which brings us to...

The Future

I have already mentioned some of the things I would do differently next time I teach this course, such as tabling Feyerabend until at least halfway through the course and explaining this methodology in my words rather than Feyerabend's. I also mentioned the way I would like to sequence the final written assignment, because scaffolding is crucial for threshold concepts. The threshold concept is already a precipice just out of reach, so it only makes sense to build a ladder to get there (even if the more acrobatic students get there with a flying leap).

The future is, actually, the past now, because I have implemented some of these conclusions from Fall quarter in both Winter and Spring, but as Henri Bergson argues, time moves both forward and backwards so there is still more work to be done. I will briefly mention how I applied my reflections from English 312 to 335 and 464.

My English 335 class was a T/Th class, which requires a '5th hour' assignment in the English department. I used this as an opportunity to develop my 'Current Events Connection' assignment. Through this assignment, I fully embraced the 'sequenced' model, where students contributed to a longer writing project every two weeks, which was compiled and revised at the end. Part of the goal of the Feyerabendian approach is to find what discourses inform one another and which works for a particular student/project. The Current Event Connection asked students to connect global films to more familiar contexts as a way of building personal connections to unfamiliar material/cultures. I believe this assignment was more successful because my writing prompts, while allowing students a large degree of freedom through what material they chose to focus on, were much more directive. The first assignment asked them to explicate a theory, the next asked them to apply this theory to a film, the third asked them to apply this theory to a current event, and the last asked them to reflect on potential connections between current event and film (with the theory providing the theoretical glue). I published a short article for the *Cinema Journal Teaching Dossier* on this, which can be found here: http://www.teachingmedia.org/new-approaches-teaching-world-cinema-cinema-journal-teaching-dossier-vol-21/

In English 464, a capstone film course, I again addressed this idea of building personal connections with material, and exploring a 'context' through a number of different perspectives through my 'Context Profile' assignment. This course focused on 4 global contexts: certain periods of time in Algeria, Argentina, Iran, and the United States. Since these contexts were mostly unfamiliar to students, I created a group-based assignment where students would build the classes contextual understanding of the time/place by having each group member pick a unique aspect of this time/place in order to research, contribute to a 'wiki' on Canvas, and present to the class. Through this, students helped each other build the necessary knowledge for understanding global films while allowing them a degree of agency in choosing what aspect of the context they chose to focus on (leaving me to fill in the gaps I thought necessary to understanding the films).

While both of these assignments, the 'Current Event Connection' and 'Context Profile,' need to be revised further, each was also informed by what I perceived as a lack of scaffolding in my English 312/Feyerabendian approach to media in the Pacific Northwest.

Thank you to the Teaching Learning Academy for providing a framework through which to think about my pedagogy in this/these courses and I look forward to next year's summer retreat!