

In this day and age, what is literature?

Time to update what 'literature' means to pedagogy

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The author begins with the positive effects he has found using the television drama, *Battlestar Galactica*, helping Japanese students work on improving academic discussion skills. He then asks whether or not discussing television dramas is appropriate in a journal devoted to literature in teaching. Next, the article explores what constitutes literature, looking at prototypical characteristics associated with literature, comparing them to the drama. Though it meets most conditions, the difference in medium cannot be ignored. He argues that no matter how many criteria it does or doesn't meet, the show accomplishes the ultimate purpose of literature, helping us explore the human condition, which is the only consideration that really counts when deciding how inclusive this journal should be. The author promises a future article exploring the use of this drama in his classroom and invites others to submit more papers on the use of high quality television dramas in the L2 classroom.

As an instructor in the School for Policy Studies at a major university in the Kansai area of Japan, I have been privileged to observe second-language learning students engaged in discussions in English on serious contemporary topics such as torture, gender roles, 'just war' theory, and the limits of democracy in times of crises. Debates that were as expressive and academically rigorous as anything I have ever witnessed with native English speaking university students. Isn't that what any EFL instructor strives for?

These discussions took place in an elective course I teach called "*Galactica - Using Drama to Explore Issues of Policy, Philosophy, and Society*". Students practice making verbal arguments, taking a point of view and explaining their reasoning. The main goals of the course are to enhance academic discussion skills, improve university-level English reading and listening skills, and the acquisition of academic vocabulary in context. Topics come from watching the first season of the TV drama, *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009), a remake of a corny, family-oriented, *Star Wars* rip-off from the late 1970's. The remake is a very different animal from the original. The

newer version is a post-postmodernist¹ take on the epic genre – a grand dystopian tale of humankind's attempt to stave off its own genocide, a story of a vision-quest of an entire people that goes beyond the irony and cynicism of postmodernism but retains its critical approach. The drama earned a Peabody Award in 2006 and the Program of the Year Award from the Television Critics Association in 2009. The show was also listed on *Time Magazines' 100 Best TV Shows of*

1 By 'post-postmodernist' I am trying to encompass a range of concepts such as *performatism* (Esherlman, 2000) and *metamodernism* (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010) – paradigms that attempt to reposition themselves between (and beyond) the modern and the postmodern. The term *postmodern* itself has become kind of a catch-all umbrella term for critical perspectives that stake positions in opposition to modernist concepts such as positivism, dogmatism, and structuralism. In the case of *Galactica*, its frequent use of *cinéma-vérité* filming techniques, its dystopian cynicism, and its treating concepts such as 'enemy', 'terrorist', and 'race' problematically, would at first seem very postmodern; however, its use of elements of the epic genre, and its reoccurring themes of faith, loyalty, and courage demonstrate modernist ideals. Overall, I think *Galactica* is both modern and postmodern; something that ultimately transcends both – hence the label 'post-postmodern'.

All Time (Poniewozik, 2007).

Inevitably, when I talk to other teachers about my class, a number of them roll their eyes; you can't blame them really. Let's be honest: classes that utilize film or TV have an often deserved image among educators as 'teacher-lite' courses – classes that mean not only decreased workloads for instructors but also for students. The kind of classes where students are free to daydream during the showing of the material and only after are expected to produce some product such as an essay or a staged discussion, something feeling like an afterthought to justify use of the media in the first place.

After all, most instructors use television or movies only sparingly, usually as rewards to the students for a heavy project completed. So when some teachers hear of classes that routinely utilize such media, it is easy to understand why they might not take the course very seriously. However, if done conscientiously, film and television can be used in EFL/ESL classrooms to motivate, inspire, and teach in ways that traditional textbook-based approaches rarely achieve.

I have been using seasons of *Galactica* in the classrooms of Japanese high schools and universities now for over eight years: in genre-approach writing courses (primarily argumentative and persuasive essays) and in discussion and debate classes. Over those years, I have seen a consistent level of motivation and effort by L2 learners unmatched in most comparable courses taught using more traditional approaches.

Though the use of classic literature has a long history in L1 education, it is more rare in L2 educational contexts. Yet, the very creation of this SIG is proof that there are many of us who believe that the use of literature in L2 classrooms is very valuable – both as the focus of study and as a tool for students acquiring another language. I'd be willing to wager that few reading this article would disagree. What is more controversial, however, is the validity of using cutting-edge television dramas in much the same way that many L2 instructors might employ traditional classic literature.

However, I am not alone in advocating the educational potential of shows like *Galactica*. John Birmingham (2008), tech columnist for the *Brisbane*

Times, had the temerity to suggest that Shakespeare be replaced by *Galactica* or one of the few other television dramas with literary aspirations when he wrote, "... if Shakespeare endures for any reason beyond his snappy turn of phrase it's because he deals in the base coin of human frailties, as do Ronald Moore [show runner²] and the writers at BSG or a host of other top line TV shows for that matter. Old Will would have recognized and loved Doc Baltar at first glance, for a more conflicted, driven and elemental character appears nowhere in his plays, and he would have recognized the dilemma of Adama contemplating the Cylon skin-jobs as the very same predicament that faced Hamlet: who do you trust?"

I do not advocate throwing out the classics, but I do believe that a wider L2 curriculum must include newer, more cutting-edge narratives – ones that speak to students of the post-9/11 era. *Galactica* is just one of a few television dramas that can affect us in the same way that traditional literature always has. Since that is the case, I would further argue then, that like literature, high-quality TV drama be used in the classroom

TV as Literature?

It is reasonable to question whether a publication dedicated to literature in language teaching is an appropriate place to discuss the use of any television program (beyond adaptations), whatever the quality of the production. Obviously, I feel it is. Others however, will disagree. 'Literature' is one of those terms in our language that means different things to different people. Linguists, teachers, writers, literary critics, and classicists would all have very different understandings of what is included and excluded from that label.

For many of us, it is hard to apply the term 'literature' to films, let alone to television. Yet Cardwell (2011) makes a valid point when she writes "television exhibits a closer relationship with nineteenth-century literature than does film, for much of the literature of that period was written

2 'Show runner' is a term most in use in North American television studies for the chief creative director/producer of any serial or episodic drama on television.

and published in installments. When audiences gathered to hear Dickens read the latest installment of one of his tales aloud, they took part in a form of ongoing, communal engagement with the work that is most clearly approximated today by the audience of a television serial” (p.172). Though Cardwell was speaking in terms of television adaptations of classic literature, it is nonetheless true that there are a lot of similarities, both practical and functional, between the creation and the consumption of literature in the 18th and 19th centuries and that of television dramas today.

Back to the question at hand – can *Galactica* be considered literature? To answer that question it is first necessary to define what we mean by the term, *literature*. Meyer (1997) suggests that using ‘prototypical’ examples as a baseline, texts should meet certain conditions for a work to be considered literature: they must be written; demonstrate distinct use of ‘careful’ language; are written in what is traditionally considered a literary genre (e.g. drama, comedy, tragedy, epic, etc.); can be – and are meant by the author to be – read aesthetically; and contain many weak implicatures.³

Galactica meets these conditions. Like most non-reality-show programs, it was first scripted in written form well before the any cameras were turned on. As for the second condition, though appreciation may only exist in the eye of the beholder, I argue that the show indeed demonstrates the artistic effort that Meyer (1997) looks for in the form of well-turned phrasing, creative metaphors, and at times, elegant syntax. As the show has features that firmly put it into the dramatic and/or epic genre, the third condition is also met.

Regarding something *aesthetically* means to engage with it in a way that brings enjoyment from the artistic merit of the piece. After viewing even just one or two episodes, I think most would agree that they were designed to be viewed aesthetically. Finally, the program also meets the last condition, the

existence of many weak implicatures: the four-year run of the series is replete with examples of scenes that are open to many, sometimes contradictory, interpretations forcing the viewer to find his or her own meaning to events big and small.

It is this very power that Rosenblatt (1978), in contrasting aesthetic stances with efferent stances, describes as the ability of a text to inspire a unique reaction in an individual reader, asserting that this ability forms the basis of all great literature. It is in the transaction between the reader and the text that meaning is made (Rosenblatt, 1986). Works that are full of such weak implicatures encourage the reader more actively to engage with the text. When compared to many other television dramas, *Galactica* has a very high ratio of weak implicatures to explicatures, but can it be considered a ‘text’?

When taken as a whole, from the miniseries in 2003 to the end of the 4th season in 2009, *Galactica* can be ‘consumed’ as any text could be. What do I mean by ‘text’? The term ‘text’ originates from Latin word for weaving, *texare*. A ‘text’ is simply a linguistic structure of some kind. Saying something is a text implies it is made up of words, phrases, and sentences that are not randomly arranged but have been created with intent (Ryan & Ryan, n.d.). In scholarly studies, we use the term to mean a piece of written or spoken discourse that can be ‘read’ or analyzed to create shared meaning. Depending on the academic discipline, movies, television, and other performance art are treated as ‘texts’ that can be studied and analyzed as any written work could be.

Television dramas like *Galactica* seem to meet in spirit, if not literally, most of Meyer’s conditions for a literary work. Some might argue that, unlike Shakespeare’s or Euripides’ plays or any other theatrical drama, the written scripts for *Galactica* episodes have never been read and appreciated by a wide audience. Like most television programs, most episodes of *Galactica* have never been formally published. Therefore, the argument goes, it is hard to call *Galactica*, or for that matter any high quality television drama, literature in any traditional sense. This argument fails to recognize that most theatrical pieces were first and foremost created to be viewed

3 ‘Weak implicatures’ are characterized by an open interpretation of what is written, as opposed to ‘explicatures’, where statements contain a direct and literal meaning understood by all.

by audiences, not read. It is only in the modern era that plays could be widely read by large numbers of people. Sophocles and every successive playwright have fashioned their characters and plots with the stage in mind, never intending that large numbers of readers would be able to read their scripts.

However, from a pedagogical standpoint, should we define 'literature' as a text that meets a set of arbitrary characteristics or that conforms to a set of conditions found in prototypical examples? Or should we define it by the purpose it serves and the effect it has on those who consume it? Ryan and Ryan (n.d.) observe that "...literature is something that reflects society, makes us think about ourselves and our society, allows us to enjoy language and beauty, it can be didactic, and it reflects on the human condition." High quality television dramas like *Galactica* essentially function the same as literature has throughout modern history. It entertains us while making us reflect on issues central to our self-concept as human beings.

The Power of Stories

There is an old Indian proverb that says, "Tell me a fact and I'll learn it. Tell me the truth and I'll believe it. But tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever." Storytelling is a part of our makeup as human beings. It is one of the oldest and most important forms of communication. An old Siberian saying goes, "If you don't know the trees you may be lost in the forest, but if you don't know the stories you may be lost in life."

Communication theorist Walter Fisher developed the 'Narrative Paradigm' – a theory of communication that has at its basis the human instinct for storytelling. He argued that people are, in essence, storytellers who formulate a world view made up of a set of stories chosen to create (and recreate) both our individual identities and our shared cultures (Fisher, 1985; 1987).

Author Patti Davis wrote, "Stories live in your blood and bones, follow the seasons and light candles on the darkest night. Every storyteller knows she or he is also a teacher". There is a movement in pedagogy (see for example: Capecchi, 1997; Deniston-Trochta,

1998; Green, 2004; and Woo, 2010) to harness the power of storytelling for education in a variety of disciplines. Green (2004) argues that stories can serve multiple functions in classrooms, including: creating interest, providing structure for remembering class materials, and developing a familiar and accessible form of information sharing. "Storytellers, by the very act of telling, communicate a radical learning - a learning that changes lives and the world: telling stories is a universally accessible means through which people make meaning" (Cavanagh, 1998).

The very best of storytelling seems to become, with the benefit of time, what we usually refer to as 'literature'. At the University of Utah, Lela Graybill and Anne Jamison teach a course called "*Smart TV: Television and Art and Literature*" that takes an interdisciplinary approach to studying television dramas. Jamison (2011) writes, "By applying techniques of both visual and literary analysis, we aim to explore elements such as formal nuance, complex patterning and narrative density that characterize popular shows like the highly-acclaimed drama '*The Wire*.' The show—which is focused on the drug scene in Baltimore—is recognized not only for its realistic portrayal of urban life, but also its literary ambitions and uncommonly deep exploration of sociopolitical themes". At Weber State University, Scott Rogers periodically teaches a course called "*Television as Literature*". In talking about the course to the university newspaper, he said, "The point is to demonstrate that we can apply the skills of literary analysis to the analysis of some television series.... we are living in the middle of a renaissance of television as an art form, and it seems ridiculous to ignore it" (McKay, 2012). These are just two examples of a growing trend. The reason why many universities have connections between their literature and media studies programs is that, ultimately, the best of film and television functions the same as the best of writing – it helps us to explore and better understand the human condition.

As I mentioned earlier, I have found focusing on one great television drama, *Galactica*, very useful as an English-language teaching tool in my in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course at a School for

Policy Studies. As Birmingham (2008) writes, “In [*Galactica*] you get a four season education in civics, gender roles, the sorrows of resistance politics and the grim necessities of power, all of it wrapped in an utterly compelling genre guise that couldn’t fail to lure and trap the vast majority of viewers. Can anybody seriously suggest that there is nothing to be gained from studying it and shows like it?”

As second-language teachers, I don’t think we can afford to ignore potential teaching material that may affect students powerfully enough to be a positive force in their path toward second-language acquisition. Therefore I would like to propose that this SIG journal accepts and publishes articles on the uses of kinds of television series that, like *Galactica*, have what Rogers calls ‘literary pretensions’ (2009).

To get the ball rolling, in the next issue of this publication, I will offer up a more detailed article on

my use of *Galactica* in my classroom. I would like to suggest that others follow in future issues with other television dramas or films that they have found useful in the L2 classroom.

Literature has been an essential part of L1 curricula for generations – deservedly so. This SIG now exists because we believe that literature, with its focus on the trials and tribulations of the human condition, can reach second-language students in ways that many contemporary ESL/EFL methods sometimes cannot. However, if we limit what we consider to be ‘literature’ to the so-called ‘classical canon’, we do a disservice not only to many cultures throughout the world that are excluded from that canon but also to a growing body of work in film and television that functions in many of the same ways as the very best of literature always has.

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