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Brently Johnson
Pacific University

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Reading Across the Pond: ATTEMPTS AT A US-BRITISH CYBER EXCHANGE LITERATURE COURSE



by **Brently Johnson**

English Department, Pacific University

"England and America are two countries separated by a common language"
— George Bernard Shaw

Ricky Gervais, the British actor and comedian, raised the hackles of many Americans a few years back for his “disrespectful” and “mean-spirited” sense of humor as host of the Golden Globe Awards. He took jabs at Hollywood, poked at producers, and was bleeped a healthy number of times. Michael Russnow, despite claims that he is “not a prude”, went on to write for the Huffington Post that it was Gervais’ “lapses in judgment that resulted in so-called jokes that were in severely bad taste.” [1] Russnow spoke for many American critics it seemed (“the opposite of dull and deferential is not snotty and abusive”—LA Times; [2] “Are we at war with England? If not, then why have we been subjected to two years of Gervais hosting the Golden Globe Awards?”—Washington Post [3]) appalled at how shock standup might pass for primetime humor. In the UK, The Telegraph ran these headlines on Gervais’ act: “Golden Globes 2012: Ricky Gervais Falls Flat.” At first glance, it might have appeared that the Brits, too, were equally dismayed, but, reading on, the article faulted Gervais not so much for his ability to insult, but for the “missed open goals” to lampoon poorly made films and the actors receiving awards for them, Madonna being a particularly glaring oversight. [4]

Granted, Gervais was invited back two more times as host, perhaps because many Americans “got” his sense of humor after all, or perhaps, as I am more prone to believe, shock and abuse are synonyms for better ratings. Gervais upset both the US protocol for humor as well as our protocol for imagined Brits: eloquent, demure, deferential, i.e. Colin Firth’s elegant acceptance for his award for the King’s Speech.

When I polled my students on which version of *The Office* they found more humorous—Ricky Gervais’ British original versus the American adaptation with Steve Carrell—they generally resisted ranking one over the other, but smartly compared how they processed the varying ways humor was present-

ed. Gervais' character, David Brent, was "angry" and "vindictive," which was "guiltily funny," while Carrell's Michael Scott was "awkward" and "slightly dim," just as misguided as Brent's character but in a more doltish, loveable way. While they resisted claiming one was superior to the other, a majority of them remarked that they preferred Carrell's adaptation because he was more relatable in his fallibility and childishness, that "he was easier to forgive and attach to." Gervais, similar to his Golden Globe routine, turned out to be "mean" more than funny, resulting in the lack of a "need to root for him."

Ultimately, what was missing from Gervais and his British version was a cultural value system that my students could relate to and cheer for. As one particularly astute student put it, "Regardless of how funny I find the British Office, ultimately I do want to walk away feeling better; I could watch several episodes in a row and guffaw with the best of them but eventually I would want to see some triumph, some salvation, some redemption."

I found it interesting that my students resisted commenting on humor per se, but more on the results of that humor on their well-being. It seemed from their comments that they sought a humor that served them positively, not one that might compromise a more optimistic outlook on life. Their responses mirrored a review from *The Atlantic* comparing the two versions of *The Office*: whereas both were commentaries on the existence of modern office life, ultimately, "where the British found despair, the Americans found hope. Where the British saw pain, the Americans saw joy." [5]

How great of an influence does our culture hold over how we respond and interpret language and its meanings—whether in the form of a joke or a serious work of extended literature? Depending on where and when a person is born, how much will their understanding of the same written work differ? This relationship between writer and reader and the cultures they hail from, particularly those from Britain and the United States, formed the basis of a literature course I taught at Pacific University in the spring of 2013 in which I asked and examined the question: "How is literature understood as a cultural product?" The course attempted to answer this question through both cross-cultural and blended classroom strategies, crossing the Atlantic via information technology and web-based tools. In conjunction with a faculty member and her students attending York St. John University in York, England, we read and shared viewpoints on common texts through video conferences, online forums, and group chat rooms. The course was divided topically, ranging from humor to nature, nationalism, class and the American Dream, with the hope of engaging cultural consciousness towards why we interpret a text in the ways we do. And once we more actively engage the process of reading a text through a cultural lens, how do we begin to understand ourselves as cultural texts as well? If I, for instance, relate to a certain character's motives and another student does not,

how much of that relationship is borne out of a national identity unbeknownst to me? Furthermore, once I begin to recognize where my opinions and connections stem from, how do I move closer to a keener awareness of how I am a cultural product too? The goal of the course, then, was to gauge the influence culture holds over the construction of literature, as well as our individually constructed selves.

While the primary investigation of the course peered into the relationships between reader and text via cultural placement, a secondary aim focused on how technology might enhance this relationship. By its very nature, this type of course would be extremely limited if not for web-based tools, which allow for immediate correspondence and reaction across great distances. Our first order of business was to establish a common platform for students to communicate through, and since both institutions used Moodle as their course management system, it became our virtual learning environment. Here we could post announcements, readings, surveys, forum questions, chat rooms, and web conference tools. With the purpose of self-expression through various mediums, groups consisting of three to four students from both classes could pose questions to one another, both within their classes and with those abroad, through a weekly online forum. Additionally, every other week, these groups would meet using webcam technologies for more informal discussions of culture and daily life. Finally, at the end of each major unit, class would be held simultaneously as a web conference, meeting at 10am PST and 5pm GMT. Here, students from both sides of the pond would share their perspectives on that unit's topic and readings with the instructors acting as guides.

Given the constraints of time zone differences, diversity in educational models and student experiences, the flexibility of a blending learning curriculum worked to dissolve some of the traditional frameworks of pedagogical culture. Partially based in Elbow's "decentering" theory, online forums and chat rooms were meant to allow students to teach one another. [6] I found it important to step into the discussions occasionally, not only to encourage complexity of thought but also to let the students know I was listening.

The first forum post asked students to comment on a text and reply to one another. We quickly realized this format was too open ended, resulting in an overwhelming string of individual posts, a room of many mouths but no ears. Borrowing from Caroline Persell's work in "Using Focused Web-based Discussions to Enhance Student Engagement and Deep Understanding" we assigned roles to the group members, and asked them to post and reply by a certain hour.[7] Tweaking Persell's categories, one student was designated the "Poser" and by 5pm had to pose a question to the group, at which time everyone would type a reply. The "Contrarian" had to propose, by 8pm, a counter viewpoint that had not been raised, and everyone had to post a second reply

to this new point. Finally, two other group members were appointed as “Reporter” and “Spy,” charged with summarizing and reporting back to the class their own group’s general discussion (reporter) as well as doing the same but for another group’s discussion (spy). While these two roles held a certain sex appeal (who doesn’t want to be a spy?), the students found summarizing the conversation confusing and tedious. It felt like busy work to them and I never fully established its parameters before we dropped these roles in favor of more responders.

With such variation of viewpoints on display, students were encouraged to see one another as “texts,” viable sources they could refer to when grappling with their own interpretation of more formal works. In order to assess how students put these various perspectives into a formulated whole, they were asked to write a mini-essay of 500 words for every longer piece of work we read, interpreting it from a cultural point of view. As a 200 level literature course, these essays, the daily readings and postings on line, as well as a reflective final project represented the bulk of their intellectual and written work.

Raymond Williams’ work *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* chants the mantra, “Culture is ordinary.” His thoughts and writings influenced the formations of cultural studies, insisting on a more complicated relationship between high and low culture. “A culture is common meanings, the product of a whole people, and offered individual meanings, the product of a man’s whole committed personal and social experiences.” [8] As he wished to dismantle the walls placed around various groups within a culture, he worked towards a more inclusive view on culture, where local and individual culture mingled with national identity as well. The question of “what is culture?” became a mantra in my course similarly, with students curious as to where their individual choices were part and parcel of a culture at large. It wasn’t my intention to answer this question (if one exists) but to encourage exploration of its varieties through face-to-face and digital exchange. I touted the course as “study abroad,” (without the exorbitant costs) where, in fact, it was just as much about “study within.”

Using Williams as an initiating text, we applied his theories to contemporary novels that inferred an interchange between individual and national identities. Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*, Jon Krakauer’s *Into the Wild*, Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty*, and Tony Harrison’s extended poem “V” commented directly and indirectly on how the individual self might be understood through a broader culture. Initially, students in my classroom were resistant to seeing themselves as cultural products, an interesting cultural point in itself—is this resistance particularly American, where we pride ourselves on individuality? But, as we examined *Fight Club*’s protagonist, a figure so consumed by a material culture that packages identities for sale that he has literally and figurative-

ly created an alter-ego or self in response, students grappled with the book's commentary on modernism's effects of creating the "other" within ourselves. The point of the class was to measure various reactions to narrative events, characters, and themes in order to better understand how we bring to a text a priori value systems and assumptions on truth. One resultant point that surfaced from our discussions on *Fight Club*, first within our own class then with our British counterparts, was the mixed interpretations of the American Dream. Because the novel parodies an apocalyptic fallout from a capitalist regime, certain students recognized Palahniuk's intentions while others truly wondered, "Why is the narrator so unhappy?" Of course, each student came to the text with different experiences. One student was clearly proud that her parents were the epitome of the American Dream, having started out with little means or education and "made something out of themselves," proven by sending three children to college. Conversely, another student, an African-American female, seemed genuinely confused by the concept of a communal dream, both for what it stood for, and for whom. On a forum post, she wrote, "Whose dream is this? This is not my dream. This was never my dream to have." As students dissected the novel's commentary on the authentic self's struggle against the influences of culture, they simultaneously analyzed themselves and the cultural narratives they had been told, asking, "How much am I the author of my own life's story?"

Another crucial theme raised by *Fight Club* revolves around the sacredness of the individual and promotion of self against the various "clubs" to which one belongs. In this case, cross-examining the self against British notions of community helped bring about more complexity on how we understand ourselves within national cultures. For instance, when our classes met jointly for our web conference, the British students voiced an identification with the narrator's struggle for identity, but deferred more often to the sacrifice of self if for the greater good. (This paralleled discussions of place and space later in the semester, particularly to what extent the physical landscape determined emotional horizons, but more on this later.) Students from Britain were less likely to consider moving away from their communities to pursue a life on their own; American students were nearly the opposite, seeing hometowns as oppressive and stilted. Of course, there were exceptions from both sides of the pond, but, overall, a clear divide existed between the two groups.

After forum posts and in-class discussions as well as our cross-cultural web conferencing, the essay assignment asked students to put it all together, seeing a specific theme in *Fight Club* through a cultural lens. Students were encouraged to include discussions into their essays where appropriate, linking the processes of reading to a more thorough interpretation of a text. Several students claimed they came into a greater awareness of how they assumed a

set of values based on the American Dream as soon as the question was asked, "Is there no equivalent British Dream?" They understood how a national story had been scripted more clearly, and how they were defined by it or in opposition to it.

At this point in the semester, headway was being made towards a blended learning, cross-cultural literary exchange, but would be slowed by several factors. First, coordinating technologies was proving difficult. My colleague had difficulty locating the proper equipment and, sometimes space, on her end, resulting in a scenario where I literally asked her if she would "translate" for us what her students were saying. Looking back through my notes from our first webconference, I wrote, "It was as if we were trying to communicate underwater." Unless we were seated next to the laptop's built-in microphone, the voice came through as garbled; thus, a great deal of a fluid discussion was symbolically "lost in translation," as we struggled to summarize our students' thoughts and questions and maintain any semblance of a conversation.

So, while we dealt with technological issues, a more serious setback occurred when I was made aware, three weeks in, that the British students were not actually receiving credit for the course. The international webcam groups we had assembled, the forum groups as well, eventually dissolved completely, as the British students became busier during their term, and lacked the motivation to communicate with any consistency.

These developments changed my approach and expectations for the course. I eventually became content with knowing the majority of our shared experience would come through the various webconference class sessions only, which were still well attended. My colleague was active in joining in forum postings, but I knew that it would be necessary to drive the course inward, examining each unit more from the various American perspectives available in the class, revising, in my mind, our aim to "literature as a micro-cultural product."

With a revised methodology in place, we continued the blended learning applications of online forums within groups of students from our class only. I surveyed my students six weeks into the course on where their learning was taking place and both the in-class discussions as well as online forums ranked high, although class discussions consistently scored better than online forums. While one student claimed that "once you sit and stare at a screen and expect someone to discuss a topic it won't happen easily," another student remarked that s/he "liked how we can each say what we need or want to say if we didn't get the chance or courage to share in class." In terms of the international group exchange, more ambitious members connected with one another via Facebook. One student was active with a Youtube international group exchange outside of class. We even investigated the idea of joining an online pen pal site as well,

but it never came to fruition. These revisions in approach with the resulting feedback suggest to me that an online learning component enriches a course, but cannot replace face-to-face class time; likewise, an international perspective enhances how we comprehend a text more fully, but that diverse positions abound in a typical class alone.

As we did with *Fight Club*, the question of cultural consciousness and its impact on how we make meaning informed our discussions with Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, a journalistic investigation into the life and death of a young man, Chris McCandless, who similarly rejected notions of upward mobility and contentment through material accumulation. With this text, though, we aimed our lenses more on place and its influences on McCandless. As evidenced in this work, to what degree does the spatial relationship between external landscapes determine the interior paths we take?

Barry Lopez's ruminations on landscape enforce the power our physical environment holds over our identities. In his essay, "Landscape and Narrative," he writes, "I think of two landscapes—one outside the self, the other within." The relationship they share, according to Lopez, greatly determines who we are and how we participate with land. "The interior landscape responds to the character and subtlety of an exterior landscape: the shape of the individual mind is affected by land as it is by genes." [9]

Take the weather, for example. How much influence does a temperate British climate exact on its population's demeanor, values, and outlook, its archetypal polite and reserved individual? How much influence does the extreme weather of the western United States exact on its inhabitants, the archetypal individual who is rugged, resilient, innovative, and hard working? In the case of weather, perhaps more than anything, it isn't so much whether a mild versus wild climate reflects one's true nature, but that an awareness of a perceived relationship does, indeed, exist. As our peers in Britain would later point out, certain characters, ironically, were their truest selves when they were "performing identity."

The unit focused on McCandless's physical journey, a familiar one to Americans, as he hit the road, seeking the mystical landscape of the open West. His Thoreauvian quest to shuck all material holdings and to embrace the romantic appeals of nature and simplicity flowed out of a long current in American nature writing and national mythos, from Manifest Destiny to the modern environmental cathedral in the woods. William Cronon's essay, "The Trouble with Wilderness," provided a frame from which to view McCandless's journey, especially in terms of our notions of nature as culturally constructed. As Cronon claims, "we too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires." His essay sets out to deconstruct how our nation has utilized nature as metaphor for

renewal, progress, and independence. That pioneer spirit, then, is held up to wilderness and mirrored back to us as evidence of its existence. From the days of westward expansion to the hallowed aisles of REI today, we see the American values of freedom, trailblazing, risk taking, and hard work operating still.

The argument can be made that McCandless embodied these ideals. His longings and desires centered on independence, renewal, reinvention of the self (he even takes on the moniker Alexander Supertramp), and spiritual freedom that arrived through empty spaces, such as Alaska, no less ironically named, the last frontier. Tragically, his journey ended in his death, which called into question his associations with nature as romanticized and misguided, as false constructions of reality he knew little of. Regardless of whether one deems McCandless a hero or fool, his narrative speaks to an American sensibility, one where we have subconsciously sought a wildness within through a wilderness outside.

While I anticipated a greater awareness of how space affects identity through our cross-cultural discussions (the mere fact that England is a small island tipped me off) I was not expecting the variety of attitudes towards nature within my own class. As several students expressed distaste and distance from all things nature—from deep woods hikes to flies in the park—I began to question the assumption I held that Americans define themselves by a wilderness credo: go west, young man, that is where the future lies. Initially, I suspected the learning moments would stem from students' growing awareness of the cultural influences on their perceptions of nature and wilderness. But, quickly, I realized I had been guilty of holding my own assumptions, particularly in terms of how the class defined nature in American terms to begin with. While McCandless is a flawed character in many ways, I was surprised by the number of students who did not identify with his desires to seek a certain brand of authenticity from nature. Why would someone seek answers from a place as frightening and as lonely as Alaska and not their own community instead? Why would someone think that giving up material possessions would provide enlightenment in the first place? He wasn't testing out his independence, he was being selfish and rude. I was not expecting these reactions and was delighted by what I was learning too: while this course focused on comparative national culture to provide a deeper understanding of literary and real lives, the lines of culture within one country are nearly limitless, drawn across gender, age, class, race, and the like. Circling back to what we had learned from *Fight Club*, to claim there is a national Dream or Destiny risked appropriation, and failed to see that nature as recreation and re-creation (as in reinvention of the self) is just as dependent on race, class, and history as it is on reality.

In addition to meeting with my colleague in York the summer prior to the course, I took a week long hike through the North York Moors National

Park. Showing pictures of the countryside to my class, the villages and farms operating within the park's boundaries, challenged American notions of wilderness as separate from civilization. Again, this worked to show how our notions of space are dependent on place. Despite the diminished participation from our British collaborators, the webcam class sessions proved useful, even as we were still challenged by audio equipment. It amused me to watch my students from rural areas of the Northwest puff with pride when they considered how "removed" they were from "civilization," especially compared to our British peers. When the YSJU students did not understand camping in a tent far removed from a car or a hike where you might not come across another human being, my students embraced the Western persona that McCandless had sought as well. They had left themselves open for deconstruction: how might their pride be reflected in the American legacy of landscape and identity? Our British peers, conversely, did not seem ashamed of their notions of space, nor their lack of need to explore it. Traveling home on weekends, returning to their hometowns after graduation, seemed desirable; returning to one's hometown in America after college would be often perceived, however, as a step backwards in the individual's attempt to better him or herself. One student in my class put it this way, "When I learned that English people don't have the drive to better their positions in life--that they're content to just have what is allotted to someone of their station--that was a cultural shock to me. I wonder if that explains their acceptance of their physical environment, too?" Regardless of the problematic generalizations, what is inherent in her assumptions is that not wanting to "get out" of one's home place in the name of self-improvement is seen as worsening one's condition. Her comment strikes me as both restless and ambitious; the thought of staying put as a possibility to betterment is nearly impossible to see because of a deeply entrenched American value that equates movement with upward mobility, that likens an unlimited landscape with unlimited opportunities. Thus, the intent of the course is primed for realization: through a text, we increasingly become more conscious of the cultural influences on a literary narrative, which, in turn, leads to greater examination of how our individual narratives are shaped by culture too.

Considering place through a historical consciousness dovetailed with our final unit and text by Ian McEwan's book *Atonement*. Because the novel contemplates the distinctions between fiction and reality, especially during WWII, through metanarrative techniques, it provoked discussion on the accuracy of historical interpretations we see our national identities within. What past events define our nations and what values of identity are to be learned from their infusion into the culture? Here, collaboration with my colleague was essential, as we utilized Moodle to post historical interpretations relevant to our countries. She gathered comparative national symbols culled from histo-

ry—John Bull v Uncle Sam, Britannia v Columbia, The Statue of Liberty v The Angel of the North—and asked, “What national stories are told by these symbols? Who tells the story and who is the speaker’s audience?” Naturally, we could then begin to deliberate notions of patriotism and nationalism, how they define both collective and individual selves.

The novel calls into question historical truth through its protagonist Briony Tallis, a precocious young girl who claims she has witnessed a crime when, in fact, she has not. The repercussions of her misperceptions—her inability to detect that truth might exist beyond her myopic interpretation—speaks thematically to perspective and how the accuracy of events depends greatly on one’s point of view. Without giving the ending away, the book’s entire narrative itself is rendered suspect, and we are left wondering what is fact and what is fiction and where do the two cross paths. Or, as one student wrote in her mini-essay, “To end the book in this way was a further example of how our lives and environment shape us to hope and want to believe in certain things. It goes to show that even our sincerest attempts to understand the truth can be misconstrued in the haze of our cultural blindness and that the smallest misconception can have dire consequences.”

Thematically, *Atonement* became summative for the objectives of the course: when we consider the exactitude of our interpretations of a text, how often do we fail to see it through multiple lenses? The more perspectives we can imagine while viewing a text, however, the closer we come to understanding that the meaning we make of it is one of many. Once this awareness is achieved, we become better readers of literature, while deconstructing ourselves as well.

Notes

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