





Digital Asia

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DIGITAL ASIA

A Multimedia Approach to Teaching Japanese Popular Culture

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In this essay, I discuss how the introduction of creative multimedia assignments can enrich the classroom experience. Using the concepts of critical making, asset-based learning, and universal design for learning (UDL), I demonstrate how these assignments enable students to utilize their strengths to develop analytical skills and achieve the goals of the course.

Keywords: Asset-based learning; universal design; critical making

Introduction

Many students enter the study of Japanese language and culture due to early exposure to Japanese popular media in the form of *anime, manga*, films, and video games.¹ As such, demand for Japanese popular culture classes has continued to grow. Using the course "Japanese Popular Culture in Fiction and Film" as a model (which is taught in English and open to all students), this essay introduces the challenges inherent in these classes and demonstrates how non-traditional assignments done using various forms of media can help overcome some of them, while also achieving the goals of the course.²

While the demand for courses on Japanese popular culture has increased, these courses can be tricky to teach as instructors must manage the students' sometimesobsessive interest in the topic while also trying to achieve content- and skill-related goals for the course. Having taught popular cultural courses multiple times over the past decade, I designed "Japanese Popular Culture in Fiction and Film" with the following challenges in mind:

- How could I make the most of the potential knowledge gap between "*otaku*"³ students, who have a deep and narrow but highly developed understanding of certain aspects of the study of Japanese popular culture, and the other students in the class?
- How could I universalize class discussion to avoid having the class taken over by that small group of passionate students?
- How could I create a classroom environment in which all students have opportunities to demonstrate strengths as well as weaknesses, as a way of making the course more accessible to all students?

¹ See Douglas McGray's 2002 article "Japan's Gross National Cool" for a discussion of this.

² See Deborah Shamoon and Chris McMorran' *Teaching Japanese Popular Culture* and Deborah Shamoon's article "Teaching Japanese Popular Culture," in *ASIANetwork Exchange*.

³ The word "otaku" refers to a young person who is obsessed by some form of Japanese popular culture and who also lacks skills for social engagement. For a critical look at the otaku phenomenon, see Hiroki Azuma's *Otaku: Japanese Database Animals*.

• How could I effectively get students to engage with and be critical of their roles as consumers?

In other words, I sought to create a course which would help students develop a more analytical understanding of Japanese popular culture while also ensuring (as much as possible) that they would encounter the materials and engage with the course goals from the same general starting point.

As the makeup of the college's student body is becoming more and more diverse with an increase in international students, first-generation college students, students with declared disabilities, and faculty and staff strive to employ an equity-asset based teaching-and-learning model. In his article "Changing Pedagogies," John Saltmarsh describes asset-based learning like this:

(Asset-based teaching/learning) looks at students as assets to the educational process, challenging the deficit thinking that accompanies a traditional epistemological perspective. The student's assets are embraced because the experience and knowledge they contribute to the learning process, and the authority of knowledge that they possess, contribute necessarily to the construction of new knowledge. This is the essence of learner-centered education.⁴ (Saltmarsh 2010, 342)

When the focus of teaching is on assets students bring to the course instead of perceived deficits, no student is singled out because they represent a non-traditional experience. Instead, all students are believed to bring a unique set of skills and proficiencies which can be tapped for the good of the class learning community. While the asset-based approach has been employed in community projects (Asset-based Community Development, or ABCD) as well as in the K-12 classroom,⁵ this

⁴ See also Missingham.

⁵ See Alison Mathie and Gord Cunningham's "From Clients to Citizens: Asset-Based Community Development as a Strategy for Community-Driven Development" in *Development in Practice* to learn more about the asset-based approach in community settings, or *Reaching Out to Latino Families of English Language Learners* by David Campos, Rocio Delgado, and Mary Esther Soto Huerta for an example of how this has been practiced in the K-12 setting with ESL learners.

approach to instruction has been less well-studied in the undergraduate classroom. In asset-based teaching, the professor recognizes the various strengths of each student and works to incorporate into classroom instruction the wide range of backgrounds students possess.

Thinking in terms of the assets students bring into the classroom can be particularly useful for thinking about students with disabilities, first-generation students, and international students who may not "present" in expected ways but who have much to offer. An international student from Japan might not feel comfortable jumping into a debate about a well-known Japanese novel using English, for example, but that same student can provide great insight into a text if given a less stressful, more non-traditional, and/or visual means of engagement. By emphasizing student strengths, the equity-asset based teaching-and-learning model provides affirmative and supportive space for students' development as learners. More importantly, however, this approach also paves the way for a richer classroom experience for all.

While Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a slightly different concept focused on reducing barriers to learning by providing a flexible environment allowing for variety in the ways that information is presented, and the ways in which students are expected to demonstrate knowledge, there is some overlap in the goals and resultant classroom environment that have been helpful when thinking about the questions outlined above. In general, UDL offers students flexibility in the way information is presented and in the ways they are expected to demonstrate knowledge. In "The Benefits of Universal Design for Students with Psychological Disabilities" Al Souma and Deb Casey note that Universal Design "puts high value on full inclusion, accessibility, and usability for all students.... Through the application of UD principles in classroom and clinical environments, faculty help all students without having to make major modifications to curriculum or clinical experiences for individual students." (Souma and Casey, 2015).

How do course and assignment goals align? How can they be achieved using different types of assignments and assessment? How can choice of assignments and assessment tools draw out student strengths and help them develop while also conveying meaningful content and meeting course goals? When we approach the creation of assignments and subsequent assessment with asset-based learning and UDL as guiding principles, these are the types of questions we start to ask. Both of these approaches to teaching challenge us to think about how our assignments may or may not privilege certain types of learners, and to focus on the pedagogical goals of the course.

As I considered the types of assignments that would leave room for flexibility while facilitating full inclusion in the classroom experience, the practice of critical making offered opportunities for the kinds of engagement and assessment I hoped to facilitate in my class. In his article "Critical Making: Conceptual and Material Studies in Technology and Social Life," Matt Ratto explains that critical making has three distinct but important stages. In the first stage, students become familiar with various concepts pertinent to the course. In the second, they create "prototypes" intended to "extend knowledge and skills in relevant technical areas as well as to provide the means for conceptual exploration." Finally, in stage three, students engage in the "iterative process of reconfiguration, and conversation." (Ratto, 2011) In "Japanese Popular Culture in Fiction and Film," students engaged in a similarly iterative creative process as a means of helping them better understand the themes of the course while also engaging with course materials in new and potentially more flexible ways.

A significant part of critical making comes in the post-production stage when students have a chance to question one another and to discuss the act of creating and interpreting. As Ratto explains:

"The final prototypes are not intended to be displayed and to speak for themselves. Instead, they are considered a means to an end, and achieve value through the act of shared construction, joint conversation, and reflection. Therefore, while critical making organizes it efforts around the making of material objects, devices themselves are not the ultimate goal. Instead, through the sharing of results and an ongoing critical analysis of materials, designs, constraints, and outcomes, participants in critical-making exercises together perform a practice-based engagement with pragmatic and theoretical issues." (Ratto, 253)

Over the course of the semester, students in this class not only gradually perfected the use of various digital platforms, but they also developed more articulate analytical skills as they figured out how to talk to one another about their creative processes and their understanding of the various course readings they engaged with on these assignments.

Before I analyze the specific ways in which class assignments in "Japanese Popular Culture in Fiction and Film" used a critical-making approach to move toward the equity-asset based teaching-and-learning and Universal Design for Learning models described above, I will provide an overview of the course itself. The course had three main goals. First, it sought to help students become more familiar with and able to analyze primary source materials and historical sources as a means of understanding the development of Japanese popular culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Second, the course sought to help students become more familiar with several subgenres in the study of popular literature and culture in Japan and to think about how these genres have changed over time and how they can be seen in contemporary popular culture. Finally, the course aimed to help students become better able to critically analyze through creative projects (critical making) the role that media and interpretation play in their understanding of popular culture.

To achieve these goals, the course was divided into four sections. In the first, "What is popular culture?" students began to understand through a series of readings and discussions how much socio-cultural context influences our understanding of what popular culture is. Second, as a way to help students delve into these questions of context, content, and consumption, we examined in depth two specific forms of popular fiction in Japan—historical/period fiction and detective/mystery fiction, the second and third sections of the course—and looked at the various precedents and antecedents to those forms. Finally, we looked at the rising role of the fan in late 20th- and early 21st-century Japanese popular culture. Throughout the course,

students read fiction and academic articles or book chapters that helped them analyze the various "spin-offs" related to each sub-genre.

While the structure of the class helped students begin to broaden their understanding of Japanese popular culture, the primary way that the course helped students develop as scholars and as critical consumers was through the creative/critical-making assignments they were required to complete. In all, students were asked to complete five creative assignments that had them engaging with the process of making the same type of media we were studying. The combination of creative making when paired with theoretical scaffolding and much practice in developing analytical skills, helped students delve deeper into the meanings of the various "texts" (novels, manga, anime, video games) we encountered in the class while also helping them better grasp the limitations of the various forms of popular culture they often consume. Below are the prompts for the course assignments that required students to be critical makers. Though I briefly describe all of them below for context, in this paper I will focus on only two types of creative-making assignments: manga and music.

· One-to-two-minute video-"What is pop culture?"

For this assignment students submitted a video of one or more people answering the question "What is pop culture?" The style and form of the video were left up to the students to determine. The only real limitation was length—videos could be no less than one but no more than two minutes long.

· One-to-two-page manga-Musashi manga assignment

In the first manga assignment, students were asked to create a one- to two-page manga using the software "*Comic Life*". They were asked simply to analyze the "Withered Field chapter" of *Musashi* by Yoshikawa Eiji by using the manga format. Students were told that manga that simply summarized the chapter would receive fewer points than those that engaged in an analysis of the chapter that drew upon themes or ideas discussed in class.

· Single-panel manga-Shipwrecks single-panel assignment

The second manga assignment was similar to the first except that students were

required to fit their analysis into a single panel. In that panel, they were asked to illustrate what they determined to be the main theme of the novel *Shipwrecks* by Yoshimura Akira.

Theme song—Edogawa Rampo theme song

For this assignment, students were asked to choose one short story from Edogawa Rampo's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* and create a theme song for it. The song was supposed to reflect the theme, style, or mood (or some combination of these) of the short story. Students were given a lot of latitude for this assignment and were told they would be graded on their timely completion of the assignment and on their ability to articulate for the class what choices they made and why, and how their song reflected their analysis of the story.

• Final project – choose your own media

For the final project students were asked to use one of the media forms we had investigated in class this semester—anime, manga, video games, film, or music—to create an analysis of Edogawa Rampo's *Japanese Tales of Mystery and Imagina-tion* and Kirino Natsuo's *Out*.

Because the creative assignments spanned the semester starting the first week of class and continued on to the final weeks, they were an integral part of the learning the class did, and the repetition in assignment types enabled students to subsequently apply lessons learned in previous assignments.

Each time students created the original works required by these assignments, they were also expected to write a one-page reflection/analysis paper that described why they made the choices they made. On the day assignments were due, we used the class meeting for presentation, explanation, and analysis. The presentation sessions ran the same way each time. First, students would present their work—if it was a manga, they would read it aloud and point out the most notable aspects of their chosen images. If it was a song or video, they would merely play it. Next, time was given for classmates to ask questions and offer analysis. During these first two steps, the student presenting was asked to listen without responding to the class's analysis of their work. In the third step of the process, presenting students were given a chance to respond to the comments and questions of their classmates and instructor (me). At this point, students had the opportunity to offer a description of their intention and their process, something they had already thought about when writing their one-page reflections. This part of the presentation often led to great discussions (with a lot of give and take) among the student presenting, the instructor, and the rest of the class. In the final step, with instructor facilitation, students were asked to make connections to the ways that the creation process and created works engaged with the themes of the class. While having each of the twenty students present briefly was time consuming, the payoff in terms of class discussion and textual analysis was great.

Technology

For this class, students needed to be able to use three different digital creative platforms: the film-editing software iMovie, the music editing software GarageBand, and the comic design software Comic Life (or other similar platforms in the case where students were already well-versed in those). While students are adept at adopting various new and complicated electronic platforms, many faculty express reservations about requiring students to "master" various types of technology. Every time I have introduced these platforms, however, students quickly figure out how to use them adroitly. Further, on average, about half the students in any given class have experience with these already, so when given opportunities to peer-tutor their classmates with less experience, experienced students are happy to support others through the creative process. In order to ensure that all students have had some training with these platforms, however, I set aside 15-30 minutes of class time for the introduction of each new assignment type (with brief sessions organized by our Instructional Technology Services staff). The tech tutorials were less well-received by students who already knew how to use the various platforms, but these visits from our IT support office gave students an opportunity to meet a person who would be available to help them troubleshoot as they completed their projects. In this class students learned to use software and apps that enabled them to create manga, make movies, and compose original music, and the total instruction time for all of these was less than two hours. All of the platforms except Comic Life were readily downloadable for students, and Comic Life was available to them on a number of computers in the library computer lab.

Critical Making in Practice

For the first Comic Life assignment, students were told to analyze a chapter from Yoshikawa Eiji's epic historical fiction novel *Musashi* in one or two pages of manga. The Comic Life software enabled students to experiment with various comic and manga layouts and made it easy for them to create a wide range of panels and word/speech bubbles. This software does not provide images, however, so students who use it need to import images they have created or found online. For this assignment, students generally took one of three approaches-they either hand drew all of their images, attempted to create images using online drawing software, or looked online for appropriate images in the public domain.⁶ Below are examples of all three of these. As students presented their work, it became apparent to the class that each approach had its pros and cons. Students able to draw (Figure 1) could generally depict exactly what they wanted in the analysis this assignment required. This creative work turned out to be highly time-consuming, however. Students using online drawing software (Figure 2) found that because they could duplicate all or parts of previous panels, they did not need to spend as much time drawing their images as those who worked by hand, but they were dissatisfied with the overly simple images that resulted. Students who lacked the skill to do any kind of drawing relied on images they could procure from the internet (Figure 3).⁷ Generally, these students spent the least amount of time in the creation process, but many of them were frustrated by their inability to find images that mirrored exactly what they wanted their manga to depict. Student reflection papers highlighted these frustrations which we later discussed in class.

⁶ As part of the preparation for these assignments, students were given a lecture on internet fair-use laws and how to determine whether something was considered part of the public domain. They were also instructed on how to properly cite materials obtained online.

⁷ The examples used in this article are from work created by Beloit College students in the spring of 2015. All included examples are used with permission of the authors/creators who wish to remain anonymous.



Figure 1: Hand-drawn manga of a student's analysis of a chapter of Yoshikawa Eiji's novel Miyamoto Musashi.

The class presentation and resulting discussion highlighted the value of critical making as a pedagogical strategy that supports asset-based learning and UDL goals. First, because the ways in which a student could approach the assignment were multi-modal, it allowed for flexibility that met a wide range of student needs. Second, as students introduced their manga, the ways that student assets played into their completion of this assignment became clear. The first thing the class noticed was how the oral presentation of the text carried meaning that influenced interpretation. Sarcasm and humor that may not have been apparent on the page, leapt out during presentation. During the group analysis phase, places where meaning was unclear became evident and highlighted the areas that needed clarification. Most interesting, however, was the way that students talked about overcoming what they perceived to be their limitations in completing the assignment. Each student made choices based on these limitations that affected the way their classmates interpreted their texts. The student in the first example (Figure 1) was not happy with her manga because after 10 hours working on it, she ran out of time and had to cut corners that led her to oversimplify the depiction of her characters. The student in the second example

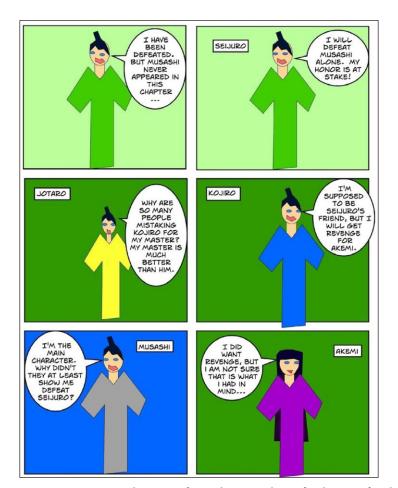


Figure 2: Computer-generated manga of a student's analysis of a chapter of Yoshikawa *Eiji's novel* Miyamoto Musashi.

(Figure 2) used an online drawing program and highly-simplified graphics to deal with the time crunch the assignment presented for her, but she felt the resultant manga was too simple and she was embarrassed to talk about it in class, even though her classmates thought her choices made for an interesting take on the themes of the chapter. The third student (Figure 3) felt limited by what she perceived to be her lack of creativity (she could not draw and did not know how to use online illustrators). She finished the assignment much faster than the other two students by using open-commons online images, but she had a vague notion that the images, some of which are quite famous, carried meaning that she did not entirely grasp.

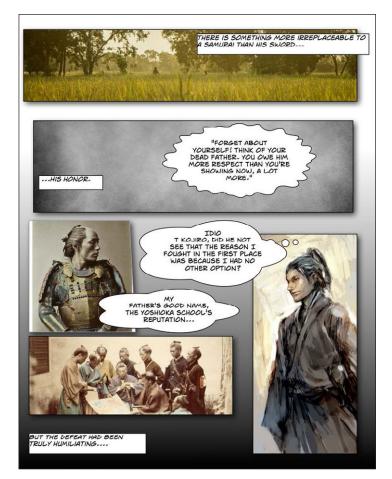


Figure 3: A student's analysis of a chapter of Yoshikawa Eiji's novel Miyamoto Musashi using common license images.

Each of the struggles these students faced and the way they overcame them allowed us to talk about how they played to their strengths. These conversations opened up opportunities to talk about intertextuality (**Figure 3**) as well as how choices made on the production side can lead to much different interpretation by consumers. Comparing these three manga and these three students' experiences also allowed us to talk about the choices that are made when something moves from text to image or image to text and the ways that interpretation and meaning can change as a result.

Perhaps the best example of how critical making helped students internalize course goals while also demonstrating the benefits of asset-based teaching and learning is the manga below (**Figure 4**). Created by a student who was asked to analyze the main theme of the Akira Yoshimura novel *Shipwrecks* as part of the second Comic Life assignment, it is a picture of a lone boy looking out over the horizon standing on dirt that covers and hides a pile of dead bodies that appear to be not far from the surface. The prompt required students to distill their analysis of the novel into a single manga pane. Again, many students did an excellent job on this assignment and were able to articulate quite clearly not only their process for creating the manga but the ways in which their process necessarily influenced the way they were interpreting the text. This helped them better understand the kinds of choices that go into the creation of different types of popular media and the ways in which meaning is gained or lost in the process.



Figure 4: Hand-drawn manga of a student's analysis of Yoshimira Akira's novel Shipwrecks.

When the class discussed the manga above, many noted the wistful quality conveyed by the fact that the protagonist's back is to the reader. Classmates pondered and discussed at length how the boy's gaze into the distance represented his desire to escape the village and the degree to which he seemed stuck there with the ghosts of his dead and disgraced ancestors. As the discussion went on, however, I noticed the creator of this manga becoming more and more uncomfortable. When I asked the student why the discussion was making her uncomfortable, she admitted sheepishly to the class that her choice to draw a character with its back to the reader was a purely utilitarian one—she had not yet mastered the skill of drawing people's faces. This admission shifted the class discussion away from what students saw in this single panel, and to a much broader one of how an artist's limitations, be they creative ones or logistical ones, directly influence not only the product but also the way that others interpret their work. Discussing these kinds of choices as a group helped students understand the unintended consequences of practical choices that go into creating popular culture, in ways they had never considered before.

While the manga assignment played to the strength of the class's visual learners, the theme song assignment was more well-suited to an entirely different group of students. For this assignment, students created a one-to-two minute song to play for the class. Students were asked to choose one of the nine stories in *Japanese Tales of Mystery and Imagination* by Edogawa Rampo and provide a musical analysis of it in the form of a "theme song". As with the manga assignment, the prompt was purposefully vague enough to allow students a number of different possible in-roads based on their creative abilities. Students were told they could do anything from finding an already extant song and making an argument for why that song should be the theme of a particular story, to writing and performing their own music, to quilting together various sound effects and sound files available to them online.

This assignment highlighted the ways in which moving away from the standard approach (of close reading, class discussion, and essay writing) has the potential to open up the class to exciting and new discoveries. When presenting their music, students were asked to not reveal which short story was the inspiration for their creation until the rest of the class listened and posited guesses. Once several members of the class had a chance to speculate as to the source story and explain why they analyzed the song in the way they did, the presenting student then revealed whether their classmates got it right. This part of the discussion entailed replaying the song as the student pointed out specific moments in the piece and what they were meant to represent. Through the course of the class period when students gave these presentations, I heard some of the best analysis and descriptions of close reading I have ever heard in a literature class. Students were able to engage in deep exchanges about theme, tone, and narrative arc in ways I previously had not seen in an undergraduate classroom. Perhaps most interesting, though, was that the students themselves did not seem to realize how involved they had become in the process of listening and analyzing.

While several good compositions resulted from this assignment, the two described below came from the two quietest students in the class, highlighting another strength of these alternative assignments-access. For students for whom engagement in class discussion can be uncomfortable and anxiety-provoking, giving them a way into the discussion that played to their strengths gave them a voice in a setting where they previously had difficulty accessing one. One of the students, a cellist with a diagnosed social anxiety disorder, composed and performed her own interpretation of Edogawa Rampo's "The Twins" (Sound File 1), and wowed her classmates with her musical savvy. The second student, a firstyear student who had not spoken unless required to for the entire semester, used a wide range of instruments (including an "otamatone" and online sound files to create a quirky theme song for the short story "Hell of Mirrors" (Sound File 2) and revealed to his classmates a creativity and willingness to stand out from the crowd. While I knew this assignment had the potential to make some students grapple with the reality of their limitations and make other students discover heretofore untapped or under-utilized strengths, I did not fully anticipate the ways in which it could help certain students begin to find their voices as members of the scholarly community.

Assessment

Students in this course were assessed on participation (they were expected to be present, prepared, and actively engaged in classroom discussions), reading quizzes, and creative-making assignments. For the creative-making projects, students received a completion grade. In other words, I focused not on the quality of the product but on the quality of the process. As a result, students' one-page reflections and their engagement in classroom discussion were as important as the product itself. My comments and assignment grades focused on how students were able to think through the challenges and articulate their decisions. Because students had an opportunity to work creatively and then do self reflection and analysis in writing as well as verbally, fewer students struggled to keep up with assignments or to remain engaged in class discussions than in other classes I have taught.

Over the course of the semester, manga and theme-music assignments all required students to tap into their creativity in spaces often outside of their comfort zones, but the public presentations of these works and the underlying thought and creative processes involved fostered a supportive, generous, and generative learning community. Student responses to the course (below) emphasize the way that these alternative projects ultimately enriched their classroom experience:

- "The projects (manga, music, etc.) really helped me look at literature in a different way and really think about things."
- "I really felt challenged with the artistic projects because I am not a creative person but was glad I did it because it forced me to look at the material in a different light."
- "I liked how we used pop-culture media to analyze pop culture. It was much easier than writing essays but required the same (if not more) thought and analysis. The projects really helped my understanding of the different media."
- "[The class] did a really good job engaging different forms of media. Even though trying to create substantial analysis through songs or manga was initially very difficult, it really helped support what we were studying."

Beyond the positive student feedback, however, this focus on multimodal and accessible assignments and asset-based approaches to learning is one that has been adopted by other faculty across campus and is one I have continued to use successfully in other classes. In a team-taught course, students created a digital database of class notes to share. In a field-study orientation course, students used geographic information system (GIS) mapping and deep digs into Gap Minder (gapminder.org) to better visualize the situation on the ground at their rural Akita research site. In Japanese-language classes, students used their developing language skills to create short films for a campus-wide Japanese film festival. Students studying abroad in Japan conducted short participant observations assignments and blogged about their findings so that their peers at institutions in other parts of Japan could engage in conversations with them about their findings. In other words, my experiences with the course "Japanese Popular Culture in Fiction and Film" confirmed for me the value in using hands-on, interactive engagement with the course materials as a way to enrich the overall experience of any given class; this is a practice I have carried into my other courses. These assignments (and the resultant assessments) that focus on process more than end product, have enabled my students to be more intentional about their learning and have helped them develop confidence not only in their coursework but also in their interactions with others in their classes.

Conclusions

The process of critical making (of manga, of movies, of music) and the written reflections, together with the presentation of resultant projects, followed by in-class group analysis led to across-the-board deeper and more thorough analysis not only of the projects but also of the texts being discussed and the larger themes of the class. As a result, these creative-making assignments led to a much more generative and instructive experience for students. Assignments that require students to draw on a wide range of skills allowed for multiple means of expression and engagement. The result was that students who typically never talk or who hesitate to engage in close reading or deep analysis found themselves able to use their diverse skill sets to do these things in meaningful ways.

Given my goals of increasing opportunities for all students through the implementation of UDL practices and the creation a classroom environment that focused on student assets, the critical-making assignments were even more successful than I initially imagined they would be. By offering students alternative and creative approaches to assignments, I was able to see students who might not normally engage in the classroom or who might struggle when asked to write an essay, create some top-notch analysis, demonstrating that not only were they keeping up with readings and assignments but also that they were engaging deeply with the critical content of the course. Further, as students began to see the strengths and talents of classmates who normally appeared detached, the members of the class as a whole became more engaged with one another. Concepts of asset-based learning and UDL applied in this class demonstrated clearly that approaching assignment design and assessment with a focus on learning goals instead of on traditional approaches to literary analysis has the potential to open up the classroom experience to a wide range of benefits that may otherwise be lost.

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Additional Files

The additional files for this article can be found as follows:

- · Sound File 1 "The Twins" DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.272.s1
- Sound File 2 "Hell of Mirrors" DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.272.s2

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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