



*About  
the  
Author*

Denis Mercier, whose Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania is in the area of Folklore, Folklife, and Popular Culture, is an Associate Professor of Communications at Glassboro State College. He currently teaches courses in Mass Media and Popular Culture, but through the years, he has taught courses ranging from remedial English to graduate writing.

He is widely published, and his reworked doctoral dissertation, *Representations of Blacks in American Popular Culture: An Analytical Sourcebook of Artifacts and Memorabilia*, will soon be released by Greenwood Press.

## *God: "I'm not Merely Using Journals, I'm Saving Society"*



*Denis Mercier*

The Glassboro State College 1989 Summer Faculty Workshops—especially the capstone lecture on critical thinking by University of Indiana's Craig Nelson—really fired and inspired. The workshops revealed a way to resolve one of my major pedagogical dilemmas: though successfully encouraging students to discover and use their "voices" in written assignments, my "voice" boomed in classroom discussions. To put it kindly, I dominated. Students, used to spoonfeeding and regurgitation, passively accepted "the word," and I, never known for restraint or subtlety, warmed to the god role. This god, tempted by the demon "Dualism," allowed the schizophrenic role-switching between written and spoken discourse to poison classroom interaction. Could God have made a mistake? Yes, He could. But first—background.

The course I teach, *Mass Media and Their Influences*, deals with issues that are as controversial as they are dynamic. It's a core curriculum course for Communications majors, a related elective for others, and an oft-chosen free elective for still others. The mix of students with different perspectives guarantees a multiplicity of viewpoints on the influence of sanitized violence on children, corporation-induced self-censorship of media

content, and literally hundreds of such issues. Most Communications courses teach techniques, but Mass Media does not. Never do we explain how to write the perfect press release, the perfect ad campaign, the perfect yuppie-oriented primetime TV show. We concentrate on the structure and priorities of the American mass media and then attempt to gauge their effects or impact on us individually and culturally. It's not exactly a math course—two and two are not always four. Reality in this class is almost never black or white: everyone must pick a shade of gray. If I could only let them choose their favorite shade before I blurt out mine!

Certainly this course is ideal for encouraging student “voices.” I'd been proud of the regular assignments I'd created. They had encouraged “critical thinking” before it became an education buzzword. My “Fingerpointer” asks students to find and evaluate an article or statement that derogates some aspect of media influence. A major assignment, the Reaction Paper, asks for honest, personal, informed feedback on a body of material that is by turns factual and propagandistic. The final exam, a single question, requires students to state an opinion and to construct (from personal experience, class material, and knowledge of other fields) an airtight defense of the opinion.

Students' written “voices” spoke clearly in this course—with one exception. To lure students into at least the pretense of reading their texts, I gave almost-daily quizzes with “objective” answers in black and white. The students called them inconvenient. I called them “grade-school” and blamed the need for them on the students. The workshop leaders had called them the ultimate dirty word: dualistic. They reinforced the authority of the texts and teacher and reduced the role of the students to passive receivers. It was clear that God had to step down from His throne and suffer the children to come unto Him. But how?

Journal writing. No quizzes with fill-in-the-blanks, true/false, and multiple-choice questions. I would ask open-ended questions based on the readings. If there were no “one right answers,” they would move beyond recall and think—critically. And there'd be other benefits: they'd read for a holistic understanding of the

material and know their journal entries would be a “test” of their logical thinking and powers of persuasion. (When I collected them I’d be looking for arguments that indicated at least a passing familiarity with the texts and clear evidence of thought about the subject.) Because they’d be using their journal entries initially as “prompts” for classroom discussion on the day they wrote them, they would read the texts for understanding. They would be focused and serious learners because their commitment to the material would be made public on a regular and predictable basis.

I had a chance to try it almost immediately. A section of Mass Media I’d been assigned for the first Summer Session was the perfect opportunity. I would choose the questions, require the students to buy separate notebooks, and devote fifteen to twenty minutes of each class to journal entries. In addition, I determined to start every class discussion with their unique answers to the question of the day. They’d paint their shades of gray before I tipped my palette.

It worked marvelously. The students didn’t need to memorize footnotes anymore and gladly expressed opinions that were treated with even-more-than-usual respect as they voiced them in class. They were surprised to discover that, once they’d thought these opinions through enough to develop them and write them down, they really were valuable. I became more of a moderator than a Godlike authority. Class discussions were relaxed and lively. I reveled in them—probably because I wasn’t trying to fill every second of silence with my erudite views on the discussion subject. I enjoyed the students’ “voices,” literal and figurative. They enjoyed having legitimate ones.

Here are three examples of good entries that combine text reading with personal feelings and opinion. (Incisive, informed pieces like these keep both quality and morale of classes high. The entries exemplify the more spontaneous and informal writing style characteristic of journals.)

*Topic:*

*Choose a media content issue (pornography, free press, fair trial, privacy, censorship, etc.) and express your views about it. (Remember: you must live in the world you define!)*

*Student Journal Response*

*An Argument against Censorship*

First, censorship violates the First Amendment. Censorship, in any way, shape or form opposes the basic principle of freedom of speech. Therefore, it is unconstitutional and should not be tolerated.

Second, our government could become too powerful if it is given censorship rights. As it is, we sometimes question the validity of the information the government provides. With the power to censor, the government could neglect to inform the public or mislead them by not representing all of the facts. As a result, the media would lose their "watchdog" power over the government and consequently, the government may try not to serve the interests of the people.

Third, censorship should not exist because ultimately the viewer, the reader or the listener chooses who to give attention to. Something shouldn't be censored because some find it vulgar or distasteful, because others may view it as artistic or beautiful. Who should be given the authority to determine what is obscene? As Hollis Alpert says, "Yesterday's obscenity isn't necessarily today's." This was evident in our reaction to the prudishness of the Victorian period when the mere sight of the legs of furniture was regarded as vulgar.

Censorship could also repress artistic expression. Think about the librarian who wanted to take classics off the shelves because they contained certain words which she considered indecent. This attitude could stifle creative expression and deny us many of the invaluable works of literature and art.

*Topic:*

*List and discuss some of the major "bottom-line considerations" (guarantees of boxoffice/Arbitron ratings) that seem to be driving the film and radio industries.*

*Student Journal Response*

The bottom-line consideration in radio or film is making a profit. Hence, Arbitron ratings and boxoffice sales have become themselves the major concerns of the radio and film industries respectively.

For example, in the radio industry, stations are run by businesspeople and not broadcasters. The stations are interested in numbers, formats and consultants more than innovation. As a result, programs have become boring and predictable. Programs are designed not to upset, challenge, or startle anyone or anything. Therefore, new music and variety are limited. Stations also limit themselves in breaking new artists because they are more concerned with track records of artists than potential. As a whole, the bottom line in the radio industry is generating advertising revenue, and originality is the expense....

*Topic: Media Schizophrenia and Pop Music*

*SOME say popular music is obscene/sexist/racist/a tool of Satan. OTHERS say popular music is a tool of big corporations—a "sellout." What do YOU think?*

*Student Journal Response*

As is the case with any issue, there are usually not any clear-cut right or wrong answers. What drives me crazy is when people try to group everyone into one category. I believe this is the case with pop music. Oftentimes avant garde theatrics are misinterpreted as evil. This is the case with such groups as Ozzy Osbourne and Alice Cooper. People misjudge their antics and say they are devil worshipers or deviants. In my opinion they are no more so than a writer like Stephen King. The common

ground here is that all of these people use shock as part of their schtik; it's all part of the show.

Racism is another big issue in the record "biz" today. Groups such as "Guns'n'Roses" have come under fire for using racial remarks. The first thing we must consider here is the use of music as a form of artistic expression which reflects certain attitudes. If one can understand that when Archie Bunker uses racist remarks as a form of satire, then why can't he understand the use of racist remarks to express a point in a song? One must be able to separate the thrust of a song from the writer of a song. In other words one can't say for sure that the lyrics reflect the personal view of the writer, much less the performer. It is my view that the lyrics are simply a form of social commentary.

Obscenity is often an artful tool. True, it can be taken to extremes, but who is to decide the boundaries to be set? I would hate to see censorship take place just because someone "doesn't get it" or misses the point of a song.

Even though, as I will reveal in a moment, all is not perfect in the world I've created, I am convinced that—with a little fine-tuning—daily student journals can improve any course whose content has room for interpretation. It is a very easy and direct way to encourage and ensure the multiplicity of viewpoints (race, class, gender and more) we consider essential in today's curriculum.

Some problems have surfaced since those idyllic summer days—at least with some students. Despite the journals' weight as 30% of their final grade, some students still don't take them seriously. They shun reading any of the texts and try to bluff their way through the questions. Some are such bad writers that they rewrite every entry at home—and presumably with their heads in the appropriate places in the texts. I am considering collecting the entries daily, but then they'll become more like essay quizzes than journals. Pity. The major problem, however, is My own: I spend far too much time reading and reacting to the journals. I

simply cannot resist the opportunity for witty, sarcastic—or, Me forbid, encouraging—comments in the margins. God's reluctance to relinquish power, I presume. But I'm working on it. For inspiration I ponder Craig Nelson's opening remarks about critical thinking:

Information is doubling every two-and-a-half years. There is constant turnover as new and better ideas replace unworkable, obsolete ones. The world we grew up in is no more. The survival of society depends upon our willingness to invite students into our conversation!

OK. If you put it that way, I guess I'll read the journals holistically and mutter my remarks into my beard. A God should be secure enough to sacrifice some things to ensure society's survival. And I have a confession to make: I rather enjoy transferring power to the students. Many even seem to enjoy having it. When more do, society will survive.