Theodore F. Fabiano

“A Perfect Fit for Our Era”: Using *New Yorker* Covers to Generate Curiosity and Provoke Argument in the ELA Classroom

With blank sheets of paper in front of them, a class of eleventh-grade students considers an image projected on a screen before them. There are pursed lips, folded arms, arched eyebrows. On the screen is a cartoon image of a middle-aged man on a step ladder, affixing a glass bowl—presumably a “head”—atop the form of what appears to be a primitive robot. The man’s kitchen is littered with wires, nuts, bolts, and tools. The task before the students: given this image as part one of a two-part “story,” predict what you will see on the second page, and explain why you drew that conclusion.

The replies are diverse:

“The robot will have cleaned up the kitchen.”

“The robot will be building an even better robot.”

“The building will be on fire and people will be running in the streets.”

And creatively, albeit disturbingly: “The robot will be removing the man’s head.”

None of the students accurately predicted the second image, in which the completed robot and man are seated in the living room, peacefully playing cards together. There is no mess; the room is immaculate, and musical notes emanate from a record spinning on a turntable in the background. The man, now wearing slippers, examines his cards with a glass of milk beside him; the robot rearranges his cards next to a glass of oil.

There is a pause as the students take in this surprising scene. Then: a few laughs, a few groans, and a few muffled protests of “What?”

These students had been shown the two-fold cover of the May 12, 2008, issue of the *New Yorker* magazine illustrated by Daniel Clowes. It was the first of many *New Yorker* cover illustrations that would greet them as they walked into my junior English class that year.

Connecting Art and Inquiry

The previous year, I brought in copies of paintings, projected them, and had students write, using the “Train of Thought” model adopted from Larry Weinstein’s *Writing at the Threshold: Featuring 56 Ways to Prepare High School and College Students to Think and Write at the College Level*. The objective of the “Train of Thought” is for students to “think on paper” “in all of its inherent messiness” (17). This form seemed ideal for responding to covers that deliberately perplexed readers. “All hard inquiry involves a stretch of time (sometimes several stretches) of getting nowhere, but with writing’s help one can get nowhere fast and then make progress” (18). I quickly learned that not only did these trains of thought help students “get somewhere,” but they allowed students to examine their critical thinking processes and allowed me to see how connections were made and conclusions drawn.

Mark Tansey’s “Action Photo II,” pulled from *The 20th Century Art Book*, proved to inspire the deepest thinking. The painting, a Norman
Rockwell-esque depiction of the launch of a space shuttle, is made confounding by the presence of a group of artists who are impossibly chronicling the launch with brushes on canvas—identically, no less.

During my first uses of that painting, I urged students to use the “Train of Thought” to figure it out, to decipher the artist’s purpose. The problem? I wasn’t sure I knew what the painting “meant.” I had ideas—and I guided discussions so that students would understand my conclusions.

I came to appreciate that the responses I received revealed rich examples of critical thinking and genuine learning. I recognized that there were many ways students could show learning: eliminating possible answers, clarifying the question, even demonstrating confusion. The complexity of the artwork intrigued students, and their effort at understanding superseded the goal of recognizing a possible conclusion. I could see that artwork—particularly artwork that commanded multiple interpretations—provided students with an access point to understanding how an artist or author creates a message that is not only received but also resonates.

This work with visual literacy is crucial, according to filmmaker Martin Scorsese (Taxi Driver, Goodfellas, The Wolf of Wall Street). “We’re face to face with images all the time in a way that we never have been before,” he writes in his essay “The Persisting Vision: Reading the Language of Cinema.” “And that’s why I believe we need to stress visual literacy in our schools.” In response to those who would consider visual literacy of marginal importance, he refers readers to the dialogues of Phaedrus, in which Socrates “worries that writing and reading will actually lead to the student not truly knowing it—that once people stop memorizing and start writing and reading, they’re in danger of cultivating the mere appearance of wisdom rather than the real thing.” The significance of teaching students to think critically about and with images can be seen in references to visual literacy in nearly every type of ELA standard, including Common Core State Standards (CC.RA.7) and National Council of Teachers of English Standards (9).

Using the New Yorker

Overland Park, Kansas, may seem like an unlikely setting for using the New Yorker. While it is not the “Wizard of Oz” Kansas—more suburban sprawl than expansive wheat fields—the ethos is far from the cosmopolitan aesthetic of New York City. And while some of the contents of the magazine directly catalog events of the city—plays, music, art openings—the covers, always illustrations, never photographs, appeal to a much broader audience:

Most magazines use their covers to advertise a particular story within the issue, but the New Yorker... uses its often-jokey covers to promote a general sensibility: Tuned-in but as often as not divorced from the news cycle, witty in an often absurd way, self-consciously erudite. (D’Addario)

Some covers I will not use, for various reasons. Illustrations that invite divisive political opinion seem afield from the English classroom. Although the New Yorker avoids an overt political agenda on the bulk of its covers, the election of Barack Obama as president was commemorated by a cover showing a moon over the Lincoln Memorial in the shape of Obama’s stylized campaign “O” (November 17, 2008; Staake). In addition, the choice to illustrate the folly of either a Republican or Democrat reveals a bias, at least for one activity, that would be an unnecessary distraction. Certainly, recent covers satirizing the exploits of U.S. Representative Anthony Weiner (August 5, 2013; Cuneo) and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie (January 20, 2014; Blitt) could be seen as evidence of a “liberal bias.” However, the bulk of New Yorker covers comment on culture, and by being selective, I avoid the notion that I am promoting any kind of agenda apart from thinking about the world in which we live.

Relevance and Timeliness

The “relentless pace of change that is responsible for our disillusionment is also our greatest hope,” write Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown in A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change (2). Their “new culture of learning” acknowledges that the world our students live in is being refreshed every five seconds, if not faster. Even now, most schools are either considering a textbook adoption, deciding which ones to use, ordering the books, receiving them, or training teachers how to use them—a time span that likely has rendered either some of the content outdated or bearing a viewpoint that has since been reconsidered.
The covers of the New Yorker provide weekly views outside the walls of the classroom. The June 22, 2015, cover depicts two girls playing games on their laptop that simulate conditions right outside their window (Ware). Titled “Playdate,” this cover raises the same issue as a July 18, 2015, Denver Post article by Joanne Ostrow on “screen addiction” as described in the documentary Web Junkies. The cover on June 14, 2014, depicts a whale rising from the water with an ad for “Cap’n Ahab’s” on his side (McCall); a June 13, 2015, article in the Johnson City Press, “Carter County School Buses Get Ads” (Thompson), describes how local businesses have been allowed to advertise on the sides of buses to raise revenue for school projects. In both cases, humor—very often a feature of a cover—increases the appeal of consideration and response to a current event.

Provoking Argument

The New Yorker covers can raise questions that may lead to relevant argumentative writing. When discussing the cover depicting the man assembling the robot (“Man’s Best Friend,” by Daniel Clowes), several students saw beyond the humorous conceit that a man would go through the effort of building a robot to play a hand of cards. They saw human interaction made possible through technology. And while many students thought it was “sad” that the man built a companion instead of having a human relationship, they also saw that they frequently played games on their smartphones and saw nothing sad about that. They also saw that many of their conversations took place through their phones, laptops, or tablets and that these could feel intimate—a feeling Clowes seems to satirize by depicting the man’s apartment and the “Lost in Space” era robot in a 1950s “homey” style.

Based on this illustration, and after discussion, students were asked to consider what larger issues were raised by these covers. I wanted students to generate “essential questions,” defined in Understanding by Design as “important questions that recur throughout one’s life” (Wiggins and McTighe 108).

Creating these questions does not come reflexively in response to an image or text. Students first made lists of observations about the cover image and then shared their lists in class discussion with the intent that students noticed all important aspects of the illustrations before drawing conclusions. After being asked to make inferences and share, students were challenged to imagine what essential questions could arise from this cover.

The following are some of the questions my students generated:

- Do you find it easier to be with technology than with people?
- Do you want to be this guy when you grow up? Why/why not?
- Do we create our own situations in life? Our own happiness?
- How has technology changed our idea of personal relationships?
- Why would you choose to hang out with a robot and not a human?
- What can human interaction provide that technology can’t?
- How meaningful are your relationships?

Some of these questions call for speculation—the kind that could be explored in a quickwrite—and some invite consideration that could lead to an argumentative essay. Based on the enthusiastic response to this cover, I looked through back issues of the New Yorker and made selections based on what kinds of essential questions I could anticipate.

Generating Curiosity

These questions, generated by students, invite the kind of investment lacking in most argumentative assignments. Choice alone does not guarantee student engagement. Many students, given no guidelines save their own choices, will choose topics based on what they perceive to be a low degree of difficulty rather than genuine interest. Given the stimulus of an illustration, rather than “choose a topic,” students create a question, a scenario that generates curiosity.

While I often hear teachers say “students love to argue,” I find that students are not innately curious about arguments in the abstract but can become curious given a complex issue or by withholding conclusions. These magazine covers stimulate curiosity, a trait not only...
crucial to the development of an argument but also a trait considered in Paul Tough’s *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* to be one of seven keys to high achievement.

I was drawn to issues that featured multiple-page covers, seeing that the element of surprise was key to the interest in “Man’s Best Friend.” Bruce McCall’s “The Ascent of Man” (May 14, 2007) also employs the multipage cover to surprise the reader. In a three-page gatefold, McCall shows the evolution of man, from ape (yes, controversially) to caveman, pharaoh to knight, factory owner to business executive, all ascending while supported by the efforts of era-appropriate labor: an ox, a serf, a machine. The final scene shows modern woman (and man) distracted by papers and a phone, falling down a collapsing electronic staircase.

As with many covers, the argument McCall suggests need not be simplified as anti-technology, although students may focus on the tragic end and see it as such. Those students who attend to the progression at the bottom of the “machine”—the evolution of labor—will see that the progress of the man (or woman) at the top is built and sustained by someone or something at the bottom. A series of questions about social class and work is certainly invited along with the effects of technology (an animation of McCall’s cover by Toronto’s Smiley Guy Studios has also proven to generate discussion from students and groups of teachers).

The September 11, 2006, two-fold cover continues to intrigue my students. John Mavroudis and Owen Smith’s “Soaring Spirit” is entirely white save for a male figure in the upper quarter of the page. New Yorkers may recognize the drawing as Philippe Petit, the man who walked between the two World Trade Center Towers in 1974; to my students it is Inter- net perfection—so perfect you would think it was genetically modified.

Print magazines and cartoon illustrations do not sound like 21st-century tools; certainly, the world has changed dramatically in the 90 years since the first cover of the *New Yorker*. What remains—and what can be accessed using these covers—is the need to stimulate student awareness, curiosity, and imagination. All three of these traits were visible in students’ responses to Clowes’s robot cover:

“The robot is just like my cellphone. I sit down after school and play games on it.”

“It’s my companion and I probably pay more attention to it than to my family.”

“I never feel lonely because someone is always texting me, but I’ll bet if someone was watching me in my living room I’d look just like this man with the robot.”

**Works Cited**


Theodore (Ted) F. Fabiano is an instructional design coach for the Blue Valley School District in Overland Park, Kansas. He is also a teacher-consultant for the Greater Kansas City Writing Project, a site of the National Writing Project. He has presented at several NCTE Annual Conventions. He can be reached at tedfabiano@gmail.com.

Henrietta Lacks: HeLa
(after reading Skloot)

Ethics
we learn
with your immortal
existence
and care
across cells
living
and breathing
your name.
Rest assured
you are
our fundamental
breath
in times
of biopsies
and mitosis.

You connect
us
all.
Live on.
Movements
your cells create
and remind us
that we
are made
of stars
and you.

In immortality
rest alive
and known
as we bow
alive
with you. December 3rd, 2016, El Paso, Texas

—R. Joseph Rodríguez
© 2017 by Rodrigo Joseph Rodríguez

R. Joseph Rodriguez is an assistant professor of literacy and English education at The University of Texas at El Paso, which is located in the Chihuahuan Desert borderlands. He is the author of Enacting Adolescent Literacies across Communities: Latino/a Scribes and Their Rites. Catch him virtually @escribescribe or via email at rjrodriguez6@utep.edu. He has been a member of NCTE since 1997.