

## **April, 1998 - Anna Brown, Political Science**

"You must read and write as if your life depended upon it." Adrienne Rich

Adrienne Rich, the twentieth-century American poet, speaks volumes to me. I came across the phrase I've cited a few years ago while reading a compilation of her essays entitled *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*. This sentence, with its clear-cut directive on how to approach what is basic to academic studies, now appears on every syllabus that I give to my students. What I'll address in these brief comments is how I've tried to get my students actually to live Rich's dictum.

Oddly enough, the way I've gotten my students both to appreciate and to live Rich's dictum is to have them listen. What they listen to, and listening is a relatively new technique for me this semester, are the musical selections of hip-hop, reggae, rhythm and blues, and jazz artists as well as spoken word poets on a weekly basis. (Well, if truth be told, they do read as well--I always type out the lyrics for them!) Music, I have found, is a means of breaking down the barriers that exist between people. My students may not agree with one another on certain political points, but they do appreciate, almost universally, the way Bob Marley sings his "songs of freedom." More importantly, however, the music that we listen to breaks down the wall of silence that is created by the students', lack of confidence in their own voice.

I believe that it is this lack of confidence that often prevents students from speaking up in class. Although lack of preparation certainly factors in here, I have often found the following response in the mid-term evaluation sheet that I have my students fill out every semester: "Yes, I would like to have more class discussion, but I am too shy and too embarrassed to raise my hand in class." More disheartening, however, is the response that indicates that the student "could really care less" about politics. This kind of response often leaves me wondering not so much how I will get my students to "read and write as if their lives depended upon it," but how to get them to read and write at all!

My turn to music is an effort to meet the students halfway. I realize that many students are captivated by MTV and commercial images, walk around with earphones that appear to be glued on their heads, and can't seem to pay attention longer than the thirty-minute duration of a television sitcom. I refuse to capitulate completely to that kind of popular culture but have enough of a feel for it to know how seductive it can be. My sense is that if I can provide familiar ground in the classroom, the students will feel more inclined to participate in classroom discussion.

The musical selections that I choose are directed, of course, toward the particular theme -poverty, freedom, justice, etc. -that we are covering in textbook readings for the week. After we listen to the musical selection and read through the lyrics, I

invite the students to reflect upon how the musical selection brings to light certain themes within their textbooks. I have often been impressed by what the students come up with in their reflections. What the music does is to provide a launching pad of sorts for a more in-depth and theoretical discussion that the students are now more inclined to follow. It seems that the passion of the songwriter is able to fuel the latent passion of the students for the textbooks' subject matters. While my use of music in the classroom does not work miracles, it does provide a starting point for our classroom discussions.

I'll add that the musical selections we listen to are all helpful in encouraging the students to write about politics. I require a weekly journal writing assignment to write about politics. I require a weekly journal writing assignment in all of my political science classes. Although students in my electives usually do not have a problem with this requirement, the students in the introductory classes are another story. "I don't know what to write about," or "I don't know how to begin" are some of the reasons that I am given as to why they have not completed the assignment. When I tell them that they may use the lyrics of the songs we have listened to, it does seem to give them the start they need. I can only hope that they keep going and that one day, they will "read and write as if their lives depended upon it"!