

“An Excellent Adventure . . . ”

Sara M. Glasgow

Socrates. Joan of Arc. Billy the Kid. Genghis Khan. As these and other historical figures entered stage right with a flourish at the end of *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure* (Herek 1989), I am not certain if I ever paid that much attention to the impact that the protagonists’ history project had on their peers; likely, I was too busy snickering at the saucy one-liners of the first ninety-seven minutes. A light-hearted, late eighties comedy, the film follows the adventures of Ted “Theodore” Logan and Bill S. Preston, “Esquire,” as they seek to successfully complete a capstone history project and so avoid failure and the attendant consequence of military school. Aided by a time-traveling mentor from the future, Rufus, the pair zoom through the past—ancient Greece, medieval Europe, the nineteenth-century American West, among other times and places—in a quest to “collect” (read: kidnap) historical figures for their living history project.

Only upon a rewatch years later, this time as a seasoned teacher and academic, did I experience that moment of clarity that reveals where the roots of some of our most deeply ingrained habits and beliefs derive. As the historical figures filed in again, and as the high school auditorium erupted in cheers from the sheer novelty and interactivity of the project, I saw the experience in a whole new light; beyond giving us cheeky jokes and a commendable morality (“be excellent to each other!”), this comedy offers a very serious insight into teaching in two ways: first, by demonstrating that passion, joy, creativity, and engagement are instrumental in offering students the kind of

learning experience they want to participate in; and second, by recognizing and challenging power structures otherwise unacknowledged or just tacitly accepted—in the case of the film, what an academic project could or should look like.

While the academic context in that film is history, and much of this reflection is grounded in career experiences teaching political science, the applicability of these core pedagogical principles happily transgresses disciplinary borders. More, they reify values and principles especially important in other disciplinary contexts, namely, English and the teaching of English. Given that students are encouraged in composition and literary studies to discover and develop their narrative voice in diverse contexts, which itself can be an exhilarating but also at times an intimidating experience, pedagogy fostering engagement through pop culture, humor, or play empowers students to navigate this process more comfortably. Further, the focused attention on rhetoric in English invites opportunity to discern and respond to those latent power structures that contextualize rhetoric in profound, yet often subtle ways.

Consequently, while these insights emerged and evolved in a disciplinary context far removed from English, they intimately connect with key concerns and issues within the field. More, the extent to which our pedagogical approaches “travel,” or demonstrate applicability and promise outside the immediate context in which we discover them, the more robust their utility.

That utility is why I keep coming back to these principles, regardless of disciplinary application. And the development of teaching perspectives derived from that filmic “excellent adventure” certainly constituted an excellent one of their own. Unfortunately, though, time machines don’t exist, and the challenge of teaching political science, rife as it is with dense theory and the kind of graphs that numb the eyes, is that the brilliant “solve” Bill and Ted found for their project couldn’t just be imported to my classroom. But the spirit of their project could, and I have spent the last two decades refining strategies to present the kind of material students usually dread out of either fear of difficulty or boredom into something lively—an experience they want to participate in, that they see as relevant to their own lived experience; in so doing, they also challenge the very concept of normalcy in academic work and hence engage more intentionally and critically with power structures that tell us what is “normal” or “good” or “right.” As someone who teaches because of the profound emancipatory power of education, for its prospects to produce a critical, engaged citizenry, this is perhaps the most important reason of all.

While I never did find occasion to teach *Bill and Ted* (either their

excellent adventure or bogus journey), as a novice academic I got one open seminar a year to go beyond the standard fare of American government, international relations, and disciplinary methods, and before long I found occasion to use those seminars as an opportunity to engage students more intentionally around questions of passion and power. It would take a pedagogical crisis, and some deep soul-searching first, though, to wake me up to those possibilities.

It was actually in a political theory course that I first channeled my inner Bill and Ted and had that important realization that I needed a different approach. We were covering theories of justice, and the students read, of course, the usual suspects from the canon—Plato and Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, John Rawls. It was in the middle of explaining Rawls’s concept of distributive justice that I realized I had somehow found myself in the middle of another pop culture classic: staring out at a sea of bored, tired, and frustrated faces, the echoes of “Bueller . . . Bueller . . . Bueller” grew louder and more insistent in my head: I had become the caricature teacher, disconnected from my students’ realities, blathering on as they struggled to see the relevance and connection of abstract theory to their daily lives; about the only consolation is that no one actually passed out from boredom as they had in the movie scene. Small victories.

Against that backdrop, I had just finished a graphic novel for my own enjoyment—Greg Rucka’s (2003) *Wonder Woman: The Hiketeia*; the novel explores competing notions of justice and duty, ones that ultimately pit her against Batman as she honors an ancient ritual guaranteeing sanctuary (in this instance, to a young woman who has run afoul of the law trying to avenge her sister). As I reflected on the novel, I couldn’t help but notice that it spoke clearly, directly, to the same issues that I was desperately trying to get students to even pay attention to, let alone care about—and where I was struggling, and failing, so epically. And that’s when I began to ponder—while I was never going to replace the classics with pop culture treatments of the same issue, what if augmenting them were a possibility? What if Diana and Bruce could get through to my students in a way that Rawls and I couldn’t?

We were scheduled to spend one more day on theories of justice, and while it wasn’t possible to pivot and have them read *The Hiketeia* at that point, we were able to bring elements of the story into the discussion, and I noticed an immediate spark in engagement. The next time I taught the course, I planned the graphic novel’s inclusion from the get-go, and as they read it alongside those sages of political theory, they more readily made connections, inferred implications, raised questions, and, even more, shared

their own viewpoints around questions of justice. It turned out that my lonely musing in the aftermath of a difficult lecture clarified what I perhaps should have attuned to sooner: that our passions, and our students' passions, far from being something to check at the classroom door, should be invited, welcomed. They should become a routine part of our feast in the classroom, not relegated to dessert on special occasions—if only for their ability to help navigate an academic culture that can sometimes feel, especially to those unfamiliar with it, alien, arrogant, or otherwise inaccessible.

After several gentle, tentative toe dips into the pond of pop culture, and consistently seeing deeper, more authentic engagement from students not only with those pieces but also with their paired textual companions (the “dry,” “boring” stuff everyone complains about), I intentionally crafted many of those open seminars around traditional political science topics, but also explicitly paired with pop culture characters, a franchise, or a series. Courses like *License to Kill: James Bond and Post World War II Security*, *Nothin' but Hippies*, *South Park and American Cultural Politics*, or *Hell on Wheels: The Political Economy of Western Expansion* had a predictable effect: students *en-rolled*, curious or hopeful that all they would be asked to do is watch movies or television; and colleagues just rolled—their eyes, that is—at what seemed like such shameless pandering.

The thing, though, that those colleagues never appreciated is that the concept of “text” is broad (not surprisingly, I earned more understanding nods from my humanities colleagues on that one), and the most seemingly banal piece of entertainment can be critically analyzed and hence become part of a wider intellectual conversation—whether around international security, American cultural politics, or nineteenth-century political economy. More, I came to learn that whatever initial disappointment some students felt that they'd still be expected to read that more traditional academic content, it rarely lasted; rather, the intentional pairing of that content with other texts dealing with the same issues—novels, comics/serial art, film, and television—only deepened their engagement across both styles of text.

If Rucka's *Hiketeia* could so shake the foundations of what I thought a college experience should look like, it was undoubtedly by shifting my pedagogical lens to focus on the power dynamics that made me believe in the durability of that model in the first place. Quite simply, I taught as I had been taught because in twelve years of undergraduate and graduate education, I had never experienced anything different. This shift to focus on questions of power in domains that don't appear as overtly political as an election or a war further shifted my thinking on how to teach political science to students

who often claimed, quite vocally, that they weren't political, didn't care about politics, and didn't understand why they had to take a class on it. (American government was a hard requirement in many of our programs at that time.) This feature, perhaps, is not so different from students in composition or other English classes struggling to find an interest in and comfort with writing. And while *The Hiketeia* did not speak so directly to this evolving challenge, the spirits of Bill and Ted again whispered in my mind; there had to be a way, beyond that intentional blending of pop culture and more traditional content into a single academic experience, that would help them see the relevance of these debates and issues to their own lives.

In pondering how to cue students' consciousness to the various ways that power shapes our lived experience, I came to recognize that it would mean exploring those dynamics well beyond the formal institutions often assumed to be so integral to the study of politics. Especially in political science, the general tendency is to treat power as either "hard" (weapons and military might, economic dominance and the policy tools that produce it) or "soft" (diplomatic influence, international regimes and norms)—but it is consistently overt, recognizable, empirical. And while those forms of power are relevant for shaping the world order in which we find ourselves, more typically the power that most directly impacts daily life is exercised in diffuse and subtle ways—neither overt nor easily discernible, but a hidden heart that beats a regulatory tattoo in our systems of knowledge and the construction of our very identities. But how to get students to hear that quiet beat? To recognize it for what it is, and not irrelevant background noise where overt power might appear nonexistent?

This practical teaching problem became an opportunity to reflect on how we encounter, navigate, and respond to power in those more everyday contexts; in particular, it invited attention to the ways language and rhetoric, for example, structure and deploy power relations, often quite subtly. And so it was in the context of teaching a course on the history and politics of disease that I first came to assign *Illness as Metaphor* (1978). Susan Sontag's interdisciplinary masterpiece critiquing the implications of using metaphor to process, discuss, promulgate, or educate about the disease experience puts power's subtlety under the microscope in a way few texts do—and more, it does so with deep compassion for those who bear the brunt of these metaphors: the patients themselves. Pointing to the destructiveness of using the term *cancer*, for example, to describe aggressive, undesirable, or dangerous phenomena, Sontag writes: "To describe a phenomenon as a cancer is an incitement to violence. The use of cancer in political discourse encourages fatalism and justifies 'severe measures' . . . the concept of disease is never

innocent” (84). Here, the connection of cancer to political discourse demonstrates how metaphor and figurative language more broadly are embroiled in normative judgments and the exercise of power.

Sontag further reminds her audience of the real harm that the cancer metaphor does to those who suffer from it: “The people who have the real disease are also hardly helped by hearing their disease’s name constantly being dropped as the epitome of evil. . . . And the cancer metaphor is particularly crass. It is invariably an encouragement to simplify what is complex and an invitation to self-righteousness, if not to fanaticism” (85).

These twin maneuvers—an excoriation of the uncritical use of metaphor that hardens certain power dynamics and a deep compassion toward those who are most negatively impacted by that use—opened up for me, and my students, a space to reflect on how discourse and language regulate and normalize our daily experience (e.g., illness), and our perception of that experience, in very subtle yet powerful ways.

More, it offered an avenue to critically reflect on and respond to that exercise of power. Where Bill and Ted challenged conventional notions of what history assignments could or should look like, and thus contested entrenched pedagogical power structures, the students engaging Sontag’s cancer metaphor became attuned to that discursive power in the public health context and thus were able to critically respond to it. Interestingly enough, they also did this in the context of a class project—minus the time machine, of course. In a whole-group collaboration on a public-health education campaign, the class selected an issue—type 2 diabetes prevalence among college students—and coordinated with the state’s department of public health to develop educational materials for our campus. In the context of analyzing existing guidance materials on type 2 diabetes, however, the students discerned an overwhelmingly behaviorist focus—even though behaviors themselves are frequently structured by economic, cultural, environmental, and other factors. Attending to these dimensions more explicitly in their educational materials was a critical inclusion made possible by their engagement with Sontag’s text, and especially the cancer metaphor.

To communicate that lesson of recognizing and interrogating those more subtle implications of discursive power, I surely could have assigned them Michel Foucault—concepts like biopower, governmentality, and the more general links between power and knowledge all would have communicated the same general point; and deeper in that course, and in other classes, they do encounter Foucault. But Sontag’s emphasis on the concrete impacts of our discursive habits, and the compassion she shows toward those who

bear the brunt of both physical illness and status as discursive pariah (her expanded second edition explores this particularly well in the context of AIDS metaphors), produce the kind of “aha!” moment for students in a way that Foucault can’t quite achieve—if only because first encounters with Foucault are as much, if not more, about unpacking his narrative style in order to get the point, as the point itself.

Of course, only students in that class on disease read Sontag; even so, the principles she actualizes in her analysis deeply inform pedagogy in all my courses: a sensitivity to the diffuse, deep, and varied ways that power shapes our lived reality; and engagement with those power structures embodying critique and compassion in equal measure. *Politics*, or *political science*, may be defined in terms of its institutions, processes, or historical evolution; at its core, though, it is the study of power and power’s exercise. By inviting students to consider more deeply the subtle ways in which power is deployed, most especially through our daily experiences that seem so apolitical, they are empowered—much like Bill and Ted who challenge conventional notions of what an assignment could be—to better discern and respond to the exercise of power in their own lives.

In many ways, the kind of challenge that Bill and Ted pose to those staid, entrenched notions of pedagogy—how we teach, motivate, evaluate—has become the central project of my teaching career: to enliven the learning space first, because if there is passion and connection to the content, learning quickly becomes thirsty work; and to deepen that liveliness and sense of engagement by opening up space to recognize, and then respond to, those subtle power dynamics that appear benign, if they even appear at all. And if I never simplified things to the extent that Bill and Ted do—at no point teaching political philosophy, for example, did I ever drop a Kansas reference on the human condition: “Dust. Wind. Dude.”—the curiosity and playfulness they embody is a welcome approach to the classroom. More, in an era when learning is assumed to be only a means to the end of a job, or its lessons tinged with polarizing rhetoric, it is absolutely necessary.

Works Cited

- Herek, Stephen, dir. 1989. *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*. Orion Pictures.
 Rucka, Greg. 2003. *Wonder Woman: The Hiketeia*. Burbank, CA: DC Comics.
 Sontag, Susan. 1978. *Illness as Metaphor*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.