Zines in the Classroom: Reading Culture

Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen assert that language-based pedagogy is not sufficient reading in our technology-driven society. We need to incorporate ways for students to read other signs and symbols and redefine what it means to be literate in a digital age. Still, there are many ways in which print-based texts can be used effectively in the classroom. The key is finding texts that engage and motivate students to become involved with the written word. Zines provide a way to motivate students. They are visually appealing, and they are easy to hold, manipulate, and access. They present short, attention-getting narratives, and they are written in language and vernacular most students understand and appreciate. Students can interact with zines and zine creators in personal ways, creating a sense of involvement and connection not found in traditional stories and texts. All the elements of zines and the zine culture make for engaging, multimodal literacy projects for both students and teachers.

So, What’s a Zine?

Zines can best be described as independent, self-published works created for pleasure that earn little or no profit. They have print runs from a few to thousands, most averaging around 100–200. They are less formal and commercial than most magazines (their closest literary relative), and they are an immediate way to participate in the literary scene. Zines can be compiled by one person or a group of people. They can cover topics including personal experiences, music, politics, parenting, travel, comics, sewing, or anything else one chooses to write about. Zine scholar Stephen Duncombe lists 15 broad zine categories including Fanzines, Political zines, Personal zines (known as perzines), Health zines, Comix, and Literary zines (11–13). Zines may last for one issue or for a number of years, and zine creators are a variety of ages and come from varied backgrounds. The texts in zines use words, images, art, and other tools of production, creating usable multimodal literacy sites.

When Did Zines Start?

Some argue that when Martin Luther hammered his Ninety-Five Theses on the door at Castle Church in 1517, he created the first zine. Since that time, there have been varied examples of zinesque publishing throughout print history. In the United States, zines can be traced back to the Revolutionary War and colonial pamphlets and broadsides, with pamphleteers such as Thomas Paine and printers such as Ben Franklin playing a role in their history.

The modern-day zine descends directly from the science fiction fanzines of the late 1920s and 1930s (Wright). During this time, science fiction fans looked for ways to connect with one another. Fans began to publish their own magazines, calling them fanzines, a term that differentiated them from the “fan magazines” of the time that were commercial, newsstand publications geared toward fans of pop movie stars and singers. Over time, the name fanzine was shortened to zine. These zines
resources creating a cut-and-paste aesthetic, and access to photocopiers—something not as readily available before this time. Zines became the predominant tool for the promotion of bands, reviewing shows and recordings, interviews with band members, and the promotion of the DIY ethic.

In the past two decades, there has been an explosion of zines created for and by young women. With ready access to computers, copiers, and other production supplies, young women use zines to share their stories, find communities, and create dialogue. Popular teen magazines, such as Sassy, regularly published zine reviews with contact information for readers to contact zine writers and obtain their work. Started in the early 1980s by zinesters such as Mike Gunderloy and his publication Factsheet Five, large circulation publications along with mainstream press publications, such as Pagan Kennedy’s Zine: How I Spent Six Years of My Life in the Underground and Finally . . . Found Myself . . . I Think and Stephen Duncombe’s Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture, began to bring zines to the attention of mainstream audiences. Larger independent publishing companies, such as Parcell Press, mass publish and distribute zines and other DIY products, yet the majority of zine writing and distribution still occurs underground by individuals or small groups who solely use their own time and resources to promote their work.

The late 1990s and 2000s also brought about the increased daily use of computer technology as a means of communication and community formation among zine writers and readers. Participants in zine culture formed zine communities through Yahoo groups and blogs such as Live Journal. Zine Distro (see Key Terms sidebar) owners formed websites with easy access for the browsing and purchasing of zines, and some zine writers supplemented paper-based products with websites and blogs because they allow zine writers to easily change and add information and they cut down on the costs of compiling, printing, and publishing paper-based zines.

Reading Zines in the Classroom

Zines are a great classroom resource. Once you know where to find them, they are easily accessible and also inexpensive. (See the Zine Distros sidebar.)
At $1 to $3 per zine on average, a classroom set could cost under $50, making them more affordable than a set of paperback novels. There are also numerous ways to have students create zines for the classroom. For example, in a recent English Journal article on creating novelzines as a way to complement novel reading in their classrooms, Karin H. deGravelles and colleagues discuss the use of zines as a tool to help students learn about and build community (55). After students create novelzines, teachers can use them in future classrooms as a way to engage students in reading novels or learning about classmates. Once you have decided to integrate zines into your classroom, there are a few things to think about before you incorporate them into your reading curriculum.

Start with the type of zines you believe will interest your students most. If you are working with middle school students or struggling readers, you may want to start with zines that are image heavy. There are a number of great comic zines that draw students in and get them interested in the genre. If you are doing a unit on poetry or short stories, you might want to start with poetry or literary zines. Many students are drawn to zines because of the personal content of perzines (see Key Terms sidebar). They like learning about other people’s lives and experiences. Contact Distro owners and ask them to send you a “grab bag” of zines they think might be of interest to your students. The assortment will give you and your students the opportunity to look through a variety of zines and get more of a feel for the medium.

How will you use zines in your English language arts classroom? There are several ways to approach using zines in the classroom. You could design an entire unit on zines and include reading and analyzing zines as well as creating zines for your classroom collection. Or, you could opt to read a novel, such as Ellen Wittlinger’s young adult novel Hard Love, which focuses on two zine-writing teens, and supplement the discussion of the novel with an exploration into the world of zines. Creating a print-rich classroom with zines and books throughout encourages students to read different varieties of texts, allowing students to explore medium and genre. Using zines as a way to examine the use of images and their relation to text, or images as primary text, opens up opportunities around information literacy.

**Examples of Zines in the Classroom**

The following are a few ways in which secondary and middle school teachers could incorporate zines into their reading curricula.

**Exploring Consumer Culture: Zines and Mainstream Magazines**

One interesting lesson with zines is to compare and contrast them with mainstream magazines. I usually focus this unit around consumer culture and how media advertise to teens. We watch and discuss excerpts from videos such as PBS’s Frontline segment “The Merchants of Cool” and discuss teen marketing and media giants. Students then break into groups and are given piles of zines and piles of mainstream “glossy” magazines. They start by creating a Venn
students through this process (see fig. 2). We then come back together and discuss the different ways that magazines and zines are part of consumer and producer cultures and how who produces culture changes what is consumed and how ideas and opinions are presented as well as whose ideas and opinions are presented and valued. We focus on images, advertising, and ownership of media.

I use this lesson (sometimes expanding it over two days and having the groups look at multiple sets of zines) to continue a larger discussion into media, consumerism, and images of youth. We also spend time discussing how adolescents can be passive consumers or become more active consumers and producers of culture. The students are drawn to zines, want to work to create their own zines, want to know where they can find more, and usually ask to take some home. Because they are so easy to access (once you know how) and because they are portable—most zines will fit in your pocket—I believe students develop a bond with zines that they sometimes don’t feel with traditional books or even glossy magazines.

Zine Reviews
Another fun project is to create zine review blogs or even databases. There are several online databases used to log and keep track of book collections (e.g., BookCrossing at http://www.bookcrossing.com, Goodreads at http://www.goodreads.com,
FIGURE 2. Comparing Zines and Magazines

In small groups you will answer two of the sections below. (Feel free to use additional paper.) In each section, give specific examples to support your answers. Once you’ve completed your work you will share your answers with the class, so make sure you are thorough and have data and evidence to support your claims.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Zine</th>
<th>Magazine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who is the audience? Be specific. Why do you believe this is the audience for the publication?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the purpose of the publication? What themes, topic, and ideas is the publication presenting to its audience? In what ways is it attempting to persuade the reader? How does the publication accomplish its purpose/goal?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the layout of the publication? How are images and texts presented? How “professional” is the layout? Are there advertisements? If so, for what products, goods, or services?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What language is being used in the publication? What is the style of the writing? Is the writing more formal or is there a great deal of slang and everyday language? Is the publication well proofread and edited?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who is in control of what goes into the publication? How are the choices as to what should be published made? How does this impact the content of the publication?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who owns this publication? Who is allowed to make decisions about selling, publishing, promoting, and including information into the publication? How does this impact the overall publication?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and LibraryThing at http://www.librarything.com). Zines must be tagged in some form, which makes BookCrossing a useful database because the system for tagging and blogging about books is already in place. Students read zines, write reviews, and post them. Students can rate the zines, react to other students’ reviews, learn about zines they may want to read, and keep a list of what they have read. A database or review blog is also a nice way for teachers to keep track of their zines. Students may choose to add their own zines as well, swap with one another, or even create zines, add a tag to them, and “follow” their zine around. You can also combine zine reviews with other review projects.

Discovering Biography

One of the elements that draw students to zines is the personal nature of the medium. Students enjoy reading about the lives of others and finding out how zinesters deal with conflict and tackle tough situations. Creating an autobiography unit and incorporating perzines gives students unique opportunities to interact with authors in ways that mainstream autobiographical texts do not. During the zine section of the unit I divide the class into small groups and give each group a collection of perzines by one author, trying to find zinesters who have written a larger number of perzines about their lives and experiences. I try to find zinesters
that students can relate to in some way to engage students in the stories. Students are given a list of questions to answer as they look through each zine collection. Questions cover basic biographical information—age, hometown, family history, school and work history, etc.—seeing what groups can compile by looking through the zines.

Students then come up with questions they would like to ask the writers about their lives. Students write or email the authors, explaining they are creating biographies and asking the questions compiled by the group. Most zinesters are responsive to questions about their lives and their work and are happy to answer any questions the students ask. By contacting the zinesters, students have access to a primary source and begin to understand biography and narrative in ways they would not when reading texts by authors they cannot easily communicate with. With zinesters, students are able to fill in the gaps and learn details that would many times go unaddressed in other biographical works. Jacqueline Edmondson’s English Journal article on biography urges English teachers to take a new approach to the genre as a way to better engage students with biography and to allow them a “more nuanced understanding of the complexities, challenges, contradictions, and consequences of life stories” (45). Zines’ ready access to their authors, as well as other primary sources and artifacts, make them one way teachers can encourage students to consider the complexities of biographies and the stories authors choose to share.

Once groups get basic biographical information together and have sent their emails, I have students divide the life of their zinester and then individually select one or two stories from each zinester to use as part of the section of the biography they create. We discuss which stories might be relevant to the biography as a whole and how different parts of and experiences in a person’s life may be important to the larger biography. Students then work to write a biography on their zinester. I usually incorporate the reading and discussion of other biographies, drafting, peer reviews, and revision and give time for students to receive and incorporate the responses they get from the zinester they are writing about. Students then compile their biographical sections, create a zine about the zinester, trade it with members of the class, and send one to the zinester herself or himself.

Reading Culture

In Adolescent Literacy: An NCTE Policy Research Brief, NCTE leaders argue that “adolescent literacy is social, drawing from various communities in and out of school” (3) and that students have access to a variety of discourses that we as teachers need to value in our classrooms. The brief further argues that adolescents are successful in the classroom when they bridge everyday and classroom practices and realize the social nature of literacy. In addition, it addresses the importance of motivating students by actively engaging them through inquiry-based activities that present diverse texts and multiple life perspectives, “particularly if texts include electronic and visual media” (4). Bringing zines into the classroom fosters a reading culture that engages in research-based teaching practices such as those addressed in NCTE’s important document. Zines are textual forums that students may engage in and out of school and that many participants use as a social activity and a way to communicate with others. Zine readers share diverse and multiple viewpoints and zines allow readers to engage with not only the visual texts, but the authors as well.

In addition, zines can easily be aligned with NCTE/IRA Standards for English Language Arts. For example, Standard 7 states,

Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and nonprint texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

Having students compare and contrast zines with mainstream magazines and viewing documentaries on teen marketing allows students to gather and synthesize data from both mainstream and alternative media sources as well as explore and better understand primary and secondary sources and the ways in which media engage teens. Encouraging students to design questions and contact zinesters about their zines also teaches students to be active researchers and readers, pushing them to use zines as texts and data.
Similar activities can also be aligned with Common Core State Standards now adopted by most states. For example, in the Reading Informational Text Strand for high school, Indicator 7 asks ninth through tenth graders and eleventh through twelfth graders to be able to Integrate Knowledge and Ideas:

CC. 9-10. R.I.7 Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person’s life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.

CC. 11-12. R.I.7 Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

Reading zines as autobiographies, contacting zinesters about their stories, looking at multiple representations of stories addressed in zines, and looking at how zinesters tell similar (or different) stories than those represented in mainstream media are all ways of taking best practices of incorporating high interest readings that students can (and do) engage in outside of the classroom and aligning them with the Common Core.

We are continually bombarded with media, messages, and information using written, visual, and oral texts. Learning to decode the various ways we “read” media, images, and text is rapidly becoming important in the classroom. With so many different media and images, finding new ways to bring nontraditional hybrid texts into the English language arts classroom—especially printed text—that engage students and make them think can be challenging. Bringing zines into the classroom engages students in multimodal literacy and encourages them to actively participate in reading and creating culture.

Note

1. Cindy Crabb (Doris: An Anthology, 1991–2001; Portland: Microcosm, 2005), China Martens (Future Generation: The Zine-Book for Subculture Parents, Kids, Friends and Others; Baltimore: Atomic Book, 2007), and Marilyn Wann (Fat!So?: Because You Don’t Have to Apologize for Your Size! Berkeley: Ten Speed, 1998) all have compiled their zines into anthologies. These may be best suited for a college classroom, but they are also helpful in understanding how biographies and narratives come together over time.

Works Cited


Rebekah Buchanan is assistant professor of English and Journalism at Western Illinois University where she teaches English education and writing courses. Her research examines how zines and other narrative writing can be used in the classroom as well as how personal narratives published in alternative spaces create sites where participants challenge traditionally accepted public narratives. She can be reached at rj-buchanan@wiu.edu.

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Writing professional reviews teaches students to understand audience, content, and publication guidelines. In “Professional Writing in Action! Publishing Student Reviews Online,” students put these skills into practice as real writers critiquing, designing, and publishing reviews on Amazon.com. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/professional-writing-action-publishing-30754.html