A Semester by Song

Jessica Schreyer

University of Dubuque

JSchreye@dbq.edu

Jessica Schreyer is an associate professor of English and writing program administrator at University of Dubuque, where she teaches a variety of writing and rhetoric classes. Her scholarly interests include teaching composition, writing program administration, and new media. She also enjoys composing creative pieces in a variety of genres. She recently published “Adolescent Literacy Practices in Online Social Spaces” as a chapter in the book New Media Literacies and Participatory Popular Culture Across Borders (Routledge, 2012).

Each year, for a few blissful days at the beginning of the semester, I forget. I forget my struggles of the previous semester. I forget that some students will succeed, and others will not. I forget that all of my aspirations and goals for the year will not be completed, while some things I wasn’t expecting will be achieved. I forget how much I will learn. I forget how students will touch my life. I forget how I will, at times, wonder why I bother teaching at all. I forget.

As the years of my teaching have passed, my forgetfulness connects with my hope. I enter each semester with renewed hope that students will enthusiastically accept the challenges I set forth. I realize that I am creating and re-creating each class, which is much like creating a song. It can be upbeat and positive, or angry and dreary. It can have a quick tempo, or fall into a slow ballad. It can have a narrative that is filled with hope or one that is filled with defeat. Together, my students and I are creating the rhythm, the tone, the tempo, and the melody.

Music has often guided my experiences; it’s been a lifelong love. As a youngster, I’d ride with my dad in his truck with his country tunes blaring. The next day, I’d dance in ballet class with classical music wafting through the room. In fact, my life is set to a variety of songs. When I hear John Denver’s, “For Baby,” I am transported back to my wedding day, and all of the
feelings of hope and happiness I felt. When I hear the Oak Ridge Boys’ “Elvira,” I remember riding in my grandpa’s car, on the way to enjoy an ice cream cone. The genre of the songs wasn’t what mattered. What mattered was the feeling the music gave me and the people who were with me.

Just like in my personal life, I find that at times throughout the semester, I am driven by different songs. Some of these are songs that help me through. Some of them simply relate what I’m feeling. Some of them keep my spirits up. All in all, they are songs that help me be a teacher, through the good and the bad. So, in this essay, I hope to bring you along on a journey with me. It is a journey, set to music, of a new semester. While the journey is different each year, for me, it tends to follow some common paths. While the beginning of the semester causes me to forget, the songs help me remember.

As I enter each new semester, I find myself providing advice to my students much like Bon Jovi in “Welcome to Wherever You Are.” He sings:

Welcome to wherever you are
This is your life, you made it this far
Welcome, you gotta believe
That right here right now, you're exactly where you're supposed to be
Welcome, to wherever you are.

In the beginning, I am full of hope for each of my students. They are “here.” At my university, many of them are the first in their families to attend college. They face numerous obstacles, from financial barriers, to lack of understanding of what is expected, to academic struggles. I want them to fulfill all of their potential, know that they are supposed to be here, and most importantly, I want them to succeed academically during their first semester. This will set
the tone for their college career. Getting into a rhythm the first semester can teach them to be 

proud and successful students and citizens.

Despite my best intentions, slowly, I begin to form opinions about each of my students. I 
don’t like this quality in myself, because I know that so often I am wrong. Each semester, I 
remind myself to give students time to show me who they are. I try to remember En Vogue’s 
lyrics in “Free Your Mind.” They sing about seeing beyond the exterior:

Why oh why must it be this way? 
Before you can read me you gotta 
Learn how to see me, I said 
Free your mind and the rest will follow.

Yet, often I think I know my students by looking at their clothes, listening to the way they 
talk, and observing them in class. I think I know them. That is, I think I know them until they 
share their narrative essays. Then, my world is turned upside down. I read of struggles with 
depression, poverty, dyslexia, death, and feelings of inadequacy. Things are put back in 
perspective. As usual, I have so much to learn.

As more weeks pass, things are getting comfortable and our true colors start to show. 
Students know me, and now I more accurately know them. It seems that there is always one who 
stands out. Usually, it is a he. He has perfected the art of distraction. He thrives on attention. He 
loves a good laugh. The Coasters described this student as the class “Charlie Brown”:

Who walks in the classroom, cool and slow 
Who calls the English teacher, Daddy-O 
Charlie Brown, Charlie Brown 
He's a clown, that Charlie Brown
He's gonna get caught
Just you wait and see.
I struggle because I don’t want to take away this Charlie Brown’s enthusiasm, but sometimes it is hard to separate youthful enthusiasm and disruption. I keep working at it, though.

Throughout all of this time of getting to know each other, I suddenly realize that we have written. We have written quite a lot, in fact. I’m feeling good, and a bit inspired. The Beatles’ “Paperback Writer” offers me a context for our writing,

It's a thousand pages, give or take a few
I'll be writing more in a week or two
I can make it longer if you like the style.

Students are finding their voices and I am encouraged. Good things are happening here! And yet, my students still struggle. Many of them have difficulty reading or lack confidence or prior academic successes. Many feel as if they don’t belong, and some need a more clear understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. And so, some of their “School Days” are like The Runaways. They sing:

Used to be the trouble maker
Hated homework, was a sweet heartbreaker
But now I have my dream
I'm so rowdy for eighteen
Never read a single book
Hated homework and the dirty looks
Now I live my life
There's a lot I seen at eighteen
School days, school days

I'm older, now what will I find.

It’s sometimes hard for me to understand these students. I always loved school, and for fun. I found confidence in school that I didn’t have in other areas of my life. However, some of my students find confidence on the football field or playing a video game or putting together great outfits. My students are searching for themselves; I have to find a way for them to find confidence in themselves as writers, and ultimately, as students. I keep working to encourage them.

All the while, I face my own disappointments. Some students fade into the background and quit attending class. Meetings seem to be happening more frequently. Deadlines are near. We are yearning for a break. Huey Lewis and the News chirp in my ear:

Somedays won't end ever and somedays pass on by
I'll be working here forever, at least until I die
Dammed if you do, dammed if you don't.

The days are passing more slowly and all of this writing is sure starting to feel like a lot of work. I’m feeling less confident about my strategies. Midterms grades are due. Papers are piling up. Students are formulating excuses. I am trying to keep my spunk and ambition, at least enough to convince the students to keep going. So, I put on some upbeat Dolly Parton as she sings enthusiastically about the day-to-day grind. With her southern twang, she sings:

Tumble outta bed and I stumble to the kitchen
Pour myself a cup of ambition
Yawnin', stretchin', try to come to life
Jump in the shower and the blood starts pumpin'
Out on the streets the traffic starts jumpin'

And folks like me on the job from nine to five.

And yet, it is not nine to five that I’m working. The papers stretch into the late evening and the glow of the computer calls to me, telling me to keep going. They are telling me to keep providing feedback, even when it seems like I am the only one reading it. I’m not the only one who is tired. Students are tired and sometimes I imagine them putting on The Aquabats as they holler:

I put my head down on my desk
To help me get through all this mess
I fell asleep and before I was done
I woke up in shock my whole arm was numb.

Oh no, I think. What if after this class they never want to write again? And it is all my fault! I can get a little melodramatic as the semester wears on.

Somehow, though, we all find our second wind as we move towards the end. We’ve passed the slump, and feel a bit more mature, a bit more accomplished. Destiny’s Child’s lyrics of strength come to mind:

I'm a survivor
I'm not gonna give up
I'm not gonna stop
I'm gonna work harder
I'm a survivor
I'm gonna make it
I will survive.
Suddenly, it is the end of the semester. I am wistful. I think of all we have accomplished, and the other things I wish I had done. I’m proud of the progress students’ have made, and their evaluations of their own work. I am really going to miss them. I wonder if I will ever have as great of a class, or whether the best is behind me. I forget about our struggles. I put on The Carpenters and they remind me:

Before the risin' sun, we fly
So many roads to choose
We'll start out walkin' and learn to run
And yes, we've just begun
Sharing horizons that are new to us
Watching the signs along the way

Another semester gone. I am filled with joy and sadness, and sometimes relief. I’m almost ready to start another semester and forget all over again.

Works Cited


Song title: "fall semester song". Original Upload Date: Aug.4.2019. Singer: Eleanor Forte CYBER DIVA (chorus). Producer(s): ippo.tsk (music, lyrics, illust, video). Views: 80+ (NN), 900+ (YT). Links: Niconico Broadcast / YouTube Broadcast. There's no better place to be Only by myself, I'm free I'm free to be whatever I may be. However it may be As long as I find truth in life, again. It's never been so hard to breathe with my own lungs I guess I've lost them all for this. Song: Stängt p.g.a. semester 4 translations. Translations: English, Italian, Russian, Turkish. åœ*. Proofreading requested. English translation English. A A. Closed Due To Vacation. Last edited by alltid_aldrig on Tue, 03/09/2019 - 08:14. Swedish Swedish. Stängt p.g.a. semester. Click to see the original lyrics. åœ*. Advertisements. Add new translation. Add new request. More translations of "Stängt p.g.a. ..." English alltid_aldrig. Live Acoustic Version of Jesse Lacey playing a Brand New song. This should be 100% to how he played it at that show. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u68Ixgtel_0 Tune down a half step to Eb t.