

Semester Reflection

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Yesterday, as I was driving home from D.C. with my mom, we started discussing the recent Johnny Depp vs. Amber Heard defamation trial that has been consuming the news cycle for the past week or so. As we debated the case, I had a sudden realization that this wasn't simply an example of my mom and me engaging in celebrity gossip; we were actually having a true academic conversation. Now, this is certainly not a realization I would have come to a couple of months ago, but taking this class has given me a new perspective on the definition of "academic conversations" and how I engage with them as an academic myself.

In the preface of their book *They Say, I Say*, Graff and Birkenstein (2021) highlight the importance of an academic conversation, as it "calls on writers not simply to express their own ideas but to do so as a response to what others have said" (p. xiv). While discussing the Depp vs. Heard case, I found that my mom and I were analyzing our own ideas in response to the arguments that we have seen online and on social media, and forming opinions based on this conversation between ourselves and these outside sources.

One thing that I noticed as we talked was that we were employing Harris' (2007) concept of forwarding while discussing the case. We were not merely discussing the facts of the Depp vs. Heard case itself, but we were actually creating unique insights by putting such facts into new contexts and drawing on our own personal knowledge and experiences. One method we relied on heavily was illustrating, as we constantly were basing our arguments on concrete evidence that we wanted to discuss, such as quotes from various testimonies. We also employed authorizing, as we frequently referenced other people who had already asserted their opinions on the case. I actually found myself authorizing Natalie's project from class, as I related her discussion of male sexual assault in the Sienna Mae and Jack Wright case to the domestic assault faced by Johnny Depp.

Furthermore, I also found that we were employing Harris' (2007) idea of countering to move the conversation forward. When my mom brought up a point that I disagreed with, such as that Depp's history with alcohol called into question his actual victimhood, instead of just telling her that I thought she was wrong, I identified the weakness that I saw in her argument and added my own opinion after. I felt that this chain of commentary helped us move the conversation forward, because when I highlighted a weakness in her argument, my mom was able to recognize this weakness herself, which helped her confront her own biases and preconceptions.

As my mom and I discussed, I also realized that we were unconsciously revising our previous thoughts as we talked. According to Giles (2010), "'reflection' and 'reflective writing' are umbrella terms that refer to any activity that asks you to think about your own thinking" (p. 191). When I initially argued that Heard had some kind of personality disorder that was making her act the way she was, my mom asked me to clarify what I meant, confused by my definitive language. After reflecting on my initial assertion, I realized that I hadn't meant to diagnose Heard with a personality disorder. Rather, I wanted to bring to light that some of Heard's recent actions

in the courtroom, such as copying the various outfits and mannerisms of those on the stand, have been flagged by psychological experts as potentially being linked to a deeper psychological condition. By reflecting on my own thinking, I was able to revise my argument to reflect my thoughts more accurately.

I also found that, as we talked, my mom and I were engaging in metacommentary as well. According to Graff and Birkenstein (2021), “metacommentary is a way of commenting on your claims and telling others how—and how not—to think about them” (p. 138). This was a concept that came up a lot during my Project 4 draft revision in class, when I showed my peers my tentative script for my podcast about gossip culture. Since gossip culture is a complex issue, and one that I struggled with morally as I was writing, I found myself butting in now and then to clarify my thoughts as my peers looked over my script (“well, what I meant to say actually was...” or “I know this sounds bad, but...”). Making these clarifications helped me develop a deeper understanding of the message I was trying to communicate in my podcast and helped me eliminate a lot of the unnecessary wording in the script. As my mom and I discussed the Depp vs. Heard trial, I found we were employing metacommentary as well. Since domestic assault, especially when there is a male victim, is a very complex issue, metacommentary allowed us to clarify our statements and prevent misinterpretations.

Something else that my mom and I found ourselves commenting on was the visual rhetoric of the case in terms of how it has been presented on social media. In her *Writing Spaces* piece, Jenae Cohn (2020) illustrates how visuals can fundamentally affect our interpretation of something through the juxtaposition of two images of a burger. While one image shows a well-lit, juicy burger encased in a crispy bun, the other shows a dimly lit burger that is smooshed and accompanied by a dark, unidentified sauce. Cohn points out that while both burgers might actually be the same, the layout of the photos affects your desire for them. The same goes for the Depp vs. Heard trial. Many social media posts used this idea of visual rhetoric to their advantage, arranging photos of Depp laughing at the trial next to Heard frowning to paint her as “stuck-up” and him as “carefree.” My mom astutely pointed out that after viewing such posts, she immediately coined Depp as “innocent” in her head because the photos made him seem so relaxed. After she said this, I totally resonated with her statement but was also surprised that a well-arranged photo could convince someone of a defendant’s guilt or innocence. We also saw this idea of visual rhetoric play out in class, when we were reviewing the layout of various websites. Looking at *The Onion* website specifically, the repetition of various colors and font choices makes the site appear to be professional and could trick someone into believing that the articles are real as opposed to satirical, which just reinforces the incredible power of visual rhetoric.

One reason I also initially felt like my mom and I were merely engaging in celebrity gossip was because of the format. We were not only commenting on written arguments and news articles, but we were also examining video testimonies, photos, memes, social media posts, blog posts, and podcasts. In previous writing classes, I have always been taught that academic conversations are centered around writing itself, so engaging with other modes of media seemed to counter that belief. However, Melissa Gagich (2020) reframed my thinking by acknowledging that while many college students may be predisposed to consider multimodal texts as less academic, “understanding that all writing and all texts are also multimodal demonstrates that learning about multimodality and how to multimodally compose is just as important as learning how to write” (p. 72). Through

our class discussions, I saw firsthand how the integration of various modes can actually enhance an argument by making it more engaging. A couple of classes ago, when we provided feedback to our peers about their adaptation process so far, I began to really understand how multimodality could fundamentally change their arguments. For example, in Natalie's project on parasocial relationships with celebrities, the integration of actual comments from various social media users praising celebrities who had been canceled was an incredibly powerful way to show the intense and somewhat confusing bond between these celebrities and their fans.

Finally, throughout high school, I was always taught to avoid saying "I" in any academic paper like the plague. This rule subconsciously taught me that my own opinions were not as important as the opinions of authors and other academic commentators, and made me feel as if I wasn't an academic myself. It also taught me that whenever I was commenting on a rhetorical situation, such as the Depp vs. Heard trial, with my own opinions, the conversation itself was somehow less legitimate because I was citing my own opinions instead of somebody else's. Furthermore, as a teenage girl in a patriarchal society, I have been socialized throughout my entire life to believe that my opinions are less important than those of my male counterparts. However, Kate Maddalena's (2010) paper on the importance of first-person usage in academic writing totally shifted my perspective. Instead of invalidating my views as a student, Maddalena points out that "your own, well-defined viewpoint might shed new light on a topic that the experts haven't considered" (p. 184). She helped me understand that taking advantage of my unique life experiences can enhance the value of my perspective and make it worth listening to. This idea helped inspire my topic choices throughout the semester. I chose to focus on gossip culture and cancel culture because I felt that my identity as a teenage girl gave me a unique insider perspective on both of these issues.

Reflecting back on this class, my biggest takeaway has been that my opinion is just as valid and important as anyone else's. Through our in-class readings and activities, I have gained the skills and confidence to not only engage in existing academic conversations, but also to start my own, which I plan on doing as I enter my third semester.

References

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