

## Professor Finds Place for Teens' Music in English Class

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When Chris Goering describes himself as a student, it's hard to imagine him doing what he does now – teaching students

who will become teachers.



**Chris Goering gets Siloam Springs High School students started on writing a 'soundtrack' of their lives.**

A University of Arkansas assistant professor, Goering recently told his story to an auditorium full of juniors at Siloam Springs High School. He was barely getting by in high school, he said to the audience, a kid with a poor attitude, cruising with little motivation to apply himself. His passion was music but the sort of music that was inappropriate for school – rock tunes by Motley Crue and Warrant – not the music played in music class.



**Chris Goering**

It wasn't until one day in his high school English class at Medicine Lodge, Kan., that a teacher finally got through to him. He had come unprepared – no paper or pencil – not an unusual occurrence. His teacher refused to loan him supplies and when two classmates helped him out, he muttered under his breath that at least someone cared.

That was a turning point.

"Mrs. Parker had super hearing, I guess. She yanked me into an empty adjoining room," Goering recalled. "She was irate. She demanded: 'Do you think I would be here if I didn't care? Do you think any of your teachers would be here if they didn't care?' That changed the rest of my life."

What Mrs. Parker also did was help Goering connect his love for music with reading and writing.

"Mrs. Parker asked us to pick a song appropriate for school and to write an analysis paper about what we thought that song meant," Goering said. "I got a 98, and I was identified as a writer. English class became more relevant to me. I came into a love of reading and writing through music."

Now at 31, Goering is in his third year on the faculty of the College of Education and Health Professions. An assistant professor of literacy and secondary English, he also directs the Northwest Arkansas Writing Project. The project, an affiliate of the National Writing Project based in the college since 1997, conducts a four-week institute each summer for teachers to improve their own writing skills and learn how to incorporate writing across all content areas.

### **MUSIC INTERTEXTUALITY**

With his experience teaching high school English for five years, Goering began to research the use of music lyrics in teaching literature. In addition to publishing articles and book chapters on his research, he uses the concept in the classes he teaches at the university, his work with teachers in the writing project and in presentations to teachers, including a recent keynote speech in Florida.

Earlier this fall, Goering spoke to about 80 teachers at a summit sponsored by the Florida State University affiliate of the National Writing Project. He also addressed the students and faculty of the English education program at Florida State and spoke to teachers at a nearby middle school.

Discussing song lyrics in the classroom can help students connect in multiple, complex levels with traditional literature, Goering explained. Because of the importance of music to adolescents, the method can engage some students who otherwise would not be interested in literature and challenge the ones who are. For the students in Siloam Springs, he put lyrics on a big screen from the song "Broken Plow" by Chris Knight, who wrote the song after reading John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, according to Knight's Web site. Then, Goering asked them to compare those lyrics to "Email my Heart" performed by Britney Spears.

"If you're a fan of Britney Spears, I don't mean any offense, but that song is mostly a string of clichés, don't you think?" Goering asked the teens. "It doesn't give us a lot to think about."

Goering, who recently released his first CD of original music, hosts a Web site at <http://www.littunes.com> for teachers to share links between literature and lyrics. He describes this connection as musical intertextuality. Last year, nearly 6,000 visitors were recorded at the LitTunes site, according to Goering. Subscribers to the site's newsletter number almost 750 people with representatives of all 50 states.

"The Soundtrack of Your Life," one of the most popular lesson plans on the site, leads students in reflective writing and personal narrative. Goering gave the Siloam Springs students a mini-version of the "Soundtrack" lesson plan that is designed to be completed in four 50-minute class periods. Basically, students choose eight major events in their lives and then list songs to accompany each event.

#### Goering Releases Debut CD with a Little Help from his Friends

"These are events that made you who you are," Goering explained. "The songs you choose could be an important person's favorite song or the song you associate with that person or a song that was playing during an event in your life."

In the Siloam Springs auditorium, a girl who was a recent immigrant to the United States discussed this part with a classmate.

"When I came to visit Arkansas, what songs do I remember listening to?" she thought aloud before going on to talk about songs she listened to after meeting a boy she liked last summer.

The lesson plan calls for the students to write a reflective letter that explains why each event and song is included. Later, the students share a small part of their soundtrack with the rest of the class. In addition to sparking their interest in writing, the lesson helps students and teachers get to know each other, building a positive classroom climate, Goering explains in the lesson plan.

A related assignment takes the concept further by applying it to a novel the students read. They summarize the main ideas of each chapter with a song that captures or shares the same meaning.

Goering invited the Siloam Springs students to complete the soundtrack assignment and send their work to the LitTunes site.

"Students and teachers all over the country use this assignment, and if they could look at your tracks, that could be helpful to them," he said.

#### **MOTIVATION TO LEARN**

Teachers have to overcome a feeling that popular music shouldn't be a part of the classroom, Goering explained.

"When you really get into lyrics, you can do a lot with them. I like the depth and ambiguity to them," he said. "I feel this method provides an opportunity for students to have a voice in what they do, what they learn and how they learn.

"It's really difficult to get some kids motivated, and at first I didn't subscribe to the idea that, as a teacher, it was my job to motivate them," he continued. "The reality of teaching in the 21st century is that motivation and engagement are critical and lead to students working at higher and higher levels."

Analyzing song lyrics and comparing their themes to themes in literature helps students build their reading, writing and critical thinking skills, Goering contends, all skills they can apply across the curriculum and in their future lives.

While Goering tends to the LitTunes Web site and speaks to teachers and students around the country – he recently spoke in Philadelphia, too – teachers are using his ideas in their classrooms.

Two northwest Arkansas teachers used the "Soundtrack" assignment as a tool for assessing students' writing and to help students and teachers get to know each other early in the academic year. Tara Griner is in her first year of teaching. She finished the college's Master of Arts in Teaching program last spring and was hired to teach seventh-grade English at Lincoln Junior High School in Bentonville. She did the assignment herself as a student in



**Lezlie Flores, from left, Anne Lane and Lizbeth Soto show the covers they made for the 'Soundtrack' assignment at Ramay Junior High School in Fayetteville.**

Goering's methods course.

"I really enjoyed doing it, personally," she said. "I love the bridge between music and English. That's one reason I wanted to be an English teacher."

Griner said the process of looking introspectively, getting the most important events in her life onto paper, was beneficial to her. One song she chose for her soundtrack was "Baby Blue" by George Strait. Her mother died when she was 3 years old and she's been told all her life that she has her mother's baby blue eyes, and then more recently Griner found out Strait's was the last music album her mom bought.

"In my class, I did the 'Soundtrack' assignment as the very first project of the year," she said. "I think it let's me know who the students are and even what their work ethic is. Some spent hours on the cover

for their assignment; others scribbled it on notebook paper. The letter that goes with the song choices is a form of writing assessment that allowed me to look at grammar, spelling and paragraph structure.

"It was different than anything they had ever done," she continued. "Some ate it up. Parents came to me and said they knew their kids were going to like my class. For some students, though, it was frustrating if they don't listen to music much. Others are very literal – if there was no song that talked about moving out of state, they didn't know how to choose a song to represent their moving. For everyone, the exercise helped them to learn to think abstractly. That was the biggest realization for me, that it moved students further along on abstract thinking as a skill. It's a good indicator of that."

Griner said she's considering having her students repeat the assignment or do a similar one at the end of the year such as the "Soundtrack of Seventh Grade."



**Making a cover for the 'Soundtrack' adds to the creative aspect in the assignment.**

Anne Lane, ninth-grade English teacher at Ramay Junior High School in Fayetteville, has several more years of teaching under her belt than Griner. She has taught at Ramay for 16 years and also co-directed for 10 years the Northwest Arkansas Writing Project's annual summer invitational for teachers. That's where she was introduced to Goering's musical intertextuality concept. She modified it, decreasing the number of events and songs

she asked students to include. The Ramay ninth-grade teachers, who all gave the

assignment for the second year, also created a rubric to fit their students' level.

Like Griner, Lane said the assignment was a primary way everyone got to know each other in the classroom and gave the teachers an opportunity to read early samples of student writing.

She said two of her students, in particular, excelled at the assignment and helped other students in the class. Ninth-graders Lezlie Flores and Lizbeth Soto said the assignment was a new experience for them.

"I thought about the past and three things popped into my mind when I was picking songs," Flores said. "I chose 'Put Your Records On' to use for when my aunt died, 'Who Let the Dogs Out?' for when I got my first dog and 'Independent Woman' for when I wrote about my future."

Soto chose her songs first, then matched them with events in her life. Several of her songs were in Spanish, such as "Mi Lupita," which she had listened to while hanging out on the beach with family during a summer vacation in Mexico. Another was "When I'm Gone" by Simple Plan because it expressed her feelings about growing apart from friends she had the year before.

"To me, this assignment was about connections," Soto said, "and after it we read short stories that were about connections."

"It allows us to see students' personalities and to learn about their music," Lane said. "It was amazing to us that some of the kids were going back to older songs. The teachers made their own soundtracks, too."

Flores and Soto agreed with Lane that they got to know her earlier and better than they usually do with their teachers.

"It created early bonding in the classroom," Lane said.