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Teaching Critical Media Literacy in Adult and Higher Education: An Action Research Study

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Abstract: This paper discusses three findings of critical media literacy study: pleasure as a motivator and deterrent to becoming critical; the importance of facilitated discussion; and learning from application to practice.

Media has a powerful influence on all of us. We are constantly bombarded with sounds and images in our daily lives that affect who we are and how we think. A particularly strong influence in many of our lives is the entertainment media, particularly movies and television. According to the Economic and Social Research Council's statistics in 2000, the average person in the UK watched about three hours of television per day, while the AC Nielsen Company reported that average US person watches four hours daily (Herr, 2001). Whether or not we consciously think about it, the entertainment media teach us something about ourselves as we map new meaning onto our own experience based on what we see; it also "teaches" us a lot about "others," often in unconscious ways, and has the power to both educate and to "miseducate." In the past few years, there has been some discussion on the role of entertainment media in students' learning among critical education scholars (Berger, 2004; Browne, 2005; Buckingham, 2003; hooks, 1994; Yosso, 2002) who note the tendency of the media to both reproduce and resist structural power relations based on race, gender, class, and sexual orientation in their portrayals of characters. These scholars argue that the media is generally a source of pleasure; given that learners are and will continue to be, consumers of entertainment media, which serves as a means for knowledge construction about their own and others' identities, it is important to teach *critical media literacy* (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000).

Thus far, most discussions related to critical media literacy have focused primarily on youth. While discussion of critical media literacy and media education is beginning to make its way into the field of adult education as evidenced in recent conference papers on media and pop culture (Armstrong, 2005; Miller, 1999; Sandlin, 2005; Tisdell & Thompson, 2005, 2006; Wright, 2006) and journal articles (Eken, 2004; Guy, 2004; Jarvis, 2005), at this juncture, clearly more research is needed in this area. Further, critical education scholars argue that it is important to actively teach critical media literacy. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the process and results of a qualitative action research study where the purpose was to directly teach critical media literacy of fictional entertainment media (movies and television) to adult and K-12 educators in a graduate level class entitled "Popular Culture as Pedagogy: Teaching for Critical Consciousness and Critical Media Literacy". The two-fold emphasis was on (1) raising consciousness about portrayals around race, gender, class, and sexual orientation in popular entertainment media; and (2) helping learners to develop effective ways of drawing on popular culture to deal with diversity and equity issues in their own work as educators.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the study is grounded largely in the insights of the critical media literacy scholars cited above: that media is a source of pleasure that affects learning; that the media can both reinforce and resist the ideology of the dominant culture, and that it's

important to teach critical media literacy. Yosso (2002) summarizes the assumptions that critical media scholars make about media in teaching critical media literacy: that 1) the media are controlled and driven by money; 2) media images are constructions—both of directors, actors, and other media makers; 3) media makers bring their own experience with them in their construction of characters, including their perceptions of race, gender, class, etc.; 4) consumers of media construct their own meaning of media portrayals in light of their own background experience; 5) unlike print media, entertainment media such as movies and television, are a combination of moving visuals, sounds, and words that combine in facilitating meaning; 6) it is possible to acquire multiple literacies in becoming media literate. In sum then, critical media education scholars are coming from a social constructionist perspective in analyzing entertainment media, in the belief that viewers are constructing further meaning in light of their past experience and in dialogue with the images and sounds they see and hear on the screen.

Methodology

This was a qualitative action research study of a graduate level course entitled "Pop Culture as Pedagogy: The Role of Entertainment Media in Teaching for Critical Consciousness and Critical Media Literacy." There were 18 adult students (5 men, 13 women) in the class; one was a Black male; the rest where White and from the U.S. All of the students were either adult educators or K-12 educators. The class was team-taught by the three of us as white female co-authors: Libby Tisdell, an adult education professor (and the formal instructor of record for the course), and Heather Stuckey and Patti Thompson, both graduate students with strong backgrounds in critical media literacy. We came to work together on teaching the class because of our mutual interest in media, and in critical medial literacy. Two of us (Libby Tisdell and Patti Thompson) had worked together on an earlier media research study; Heather Stuckey had been a participant in that earlier study, and came to team-teach this class with us because of her work and fascination with semiotics (the study of signs and symbols) and how they work in media, particularly movies and television, to help portray a particular message.

Most qualitative action research studies are grounded in critical and constructivist paradigms, (Kemmis & McTaggert, 1988), and this one was grounded in the social constructivist assumption, that human beings do not "find" knowledge, but rather construct it (Gergen, 1998). Further, as Merriam and Simpson (2000) note, the purpose of action research is typically to try to deal with practical problems—in this case, to try to increase students' critical media literacy skills in the classroom by examining the race, gender, class, and sexual orientation portrayals of characters in the entertainment media, current movies and prime time television shows, so they can better attend to these issues in their own teaching to challenge power relations.

The three of us didn't actually come to formally conceptualize teaching the course as an action research study until the course was nearly over. Since we regularly collected data in the course through daily course evaluations, our notes and various iterations of the changes in the syllabus in light of student input, and because a good part of the course is online, it was easy to track how the course unfolded, and how participants' attitudes on media changed and expanded as we engaged in critical media literacy. We had actually gone through Kemmis and McTaggert's (1988) "plan-act-observe-reflect" stages of action research throughout the course as part of our regular teaching and planning. The curriculum was partly pre-designed and partly negotiated with students, both in terms of assignments and which movies and television shows to view and analyze. Students were active participants in choosing which movies and television shows to analyze. Some of the movies chosen were *Crash, Brokeback Mountain, Whale Rider, The Hours*. Each class session had been planned in light of what went on in the prior face-to-face

session, and online discussion. Since we had this documented, we had much data to analyze for this as a study. Thus, students were contacted and signed permission forms after the course was over, if they were willing to allow us to use some of their online comments and written comments in course papers as data. The data we analyzed for the study included daily open-ended questionnaires about each class session online, several online conversations, three sets of student papers analyzing movies, television shows, and e-mail communications with participants.

Findings and Discussion

Due to space limitations, we'll focus here only on three inter-related findings related to the development of critical media literacy: (1) pleasure as both a deterrent and as facilitator of critical media literacy; (2) the benefit of more facilitated discussion for analysis; and (3) practical teaching application as deepening one's consciousness about portrayals in the media.

Pleasure As Both Facilitator and Deterrent of Critical Media Literacy

People generally watch TV or movies because of their entertainment value. It is therefore easy to get people engaged in discussion about movies and television shows that they enjoy. As one doctoral student (Kristin) noted: "Watching films is a pleasurable activity for me and I view this media from a primarily egocentric viewpoint, such as 'How does this show impact me personally and how does it entertain me?'" Kristin however, was one student who was very successful in moving beyond the strictly pleasure aspect of entertainment media and came to be able to analyze movies and television shows from a much more critical perspective. She notes: "Until I took this class, I rarely questioned motivations or other agendas that may have influenced what I was watching. This course encouraged me to look beyond the surface to examine the social, political or financial implications that impact what is shared on the screen." In particular, she did an excellent job of analyzing one of her favorite movies, *The Way We Were* in light of particular guidelines laid out for the paper. She explained that she initially focused only on the love story aspect of the movie, but researched the historical context of the McCarthy era based on the time period when the movie was set. "I didn't know anything about that before this paper, and it encouraged me to investigate beyond the surface of the movie" she writes. She discovered that when the film was screened, the audience was more into the love story than the political statements, and that the directors "wanted the film to make money and fit into mainstream." She noted that Barbra Streisand, "fought strongly to keep the political scenes in the movie, but ultimately the studio had the financial power to decide the final version." Given that one of the points of the class was to analyze issues not only about portrayals of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation, in the broader scheme it was to help students learn to analyze how money, power, and politics plays a large hand in how a message is portrayed. Kristin sums up indicating that she got this point by saying, "Analyzing all these things helped me to develop my own critical media awareness and literacy."

Kristin's analysis of her favorite movie *The Way We Were* (which was the initial assignment in the class) is one example of how we drew on students' sense of pleasure to build critical media literacy. Kristin did a particularly good job on this assignment. Sometime however students' sense of pleasure, or the fact that they related very strongly to a film or television show, seemed to interfere with the ability to critically analyze it beyond a certain point. One student, a nurse, in doing an analysis of how nurses were portrayed on various medical shows was able to do a good analysis of portrayals of nurses and critique the relations between differential power status between doctors and nurses, but she didn't do as much of an analysis particularly around gender, race, and class to the same degree. As another example, a black male student did an

analysis of the movie *Coach Carter*, and did quite a good job of analyzing this show as a positive portrayal of African Americans in the media. Though *Coach Carter* was intended to be a feel good movie, which he acknowledged, he didn't discuss the fact that there were many scenes that reinforced stereotypes of inner city life. This is where the sense of pleasure that is evoked by favorite movies or television shows may interfere with people's ability to analyze in depth. But requiring students to think more critically, does enable them to see some of the stereotypes of media. Anna, in her analysis of one of her favorite movies and seeing the stereotypes in new ways, noted: "It made me think, how many other movies, TV show, etc. have stereotypes that I've missed because of the fact that I was watching them for pleasure." Thus, pleasure can serve as a two-edged sword. It's important to use the sense of pleasure to engage, at the same time that it's important not to be seduced by it.

The Benefit of More Facilitated Discussion

In teaching critical media literacy, we found that it is more effective to have facilitated discussion of movies and television, rather than to simply have students engage in a free flowing discussion about a movie or television show. It is simply too easy to be seduced into the pleasure aspect of television and movies, since that is why most people engage the media to begin with. Most online discussions of television shows were relatively unfacilitated by us as instructors, and students were mostly left to themselves to discuss the race, gender, class, and sexual orientation issues portrayed in these shows online. (They broke into small groups and discussed one of the following television shows of their own choosing throughout the show: *My Name is Earl, Sex in the City, Desperate Housewives, The Office*, or *Law and Order.*) While some people are much more analytical than others, and there were some good discussions of portrayals of race and class and gender particularly in *Desperate Housewives,* too often the discussion in the other groups focused on what people liked or didn't like about the show, or only a very surface analysis of rather than any real analysis of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation. For example, one group was analyzing the show *My Name is Earl*, did do a minimal analysis of class and race, they tended to focus often in whether the show was funny or not.

The online discussions of movies in this class tended to have greater degrees of facilitation by us as instructors, and so there was a bit more depth to the discussion. Even then, there is a tendency for students to focus on what is more obvious in a move. For example, in considering the movie *Crash* students were given a series of questions to respond to that focused on general impressions/striking scenes; the use of symbols; striking lines; race/ethnicity, gender, and national origin in the director's message. There was an excellent online discussion of race and ethnicity in the movie. But this is what the movie is most obviously about. Even though gender was specifically asked about, only one person responded online to the question: " What about gender issues in the movie? What did you make of gender relations and why?" She provided an excellent analysis of gender in the film online, and we took it as an opportunity to talk further about the gender aspects in the movie in our face-to-face discussion.

Another important aspect to facilitated discussion is that in general most graduate education students, unless they have a strong background in humanities or film studies, have little experience analyzing symbols, use of camera angles, etc. While the course did focus on the basics of media analysis through the use of Berger's (2003) text, and many articles on the subject, it is difficult for any of us to see all the symbols in a media clip through one viewing. Facilitating discussion of the role of symbols in creating a certain message, particularly though not limited to race, gender, class relations helps deepen analysis here. When watching a film,

viewers can have one interpretation of a symbol, but when they begin to construct knowledge with others, many other possible meanings and interpretations can come to light (Gergen, 1999).

One example of the social construction of knowledge was in our dialogue about *Brokeback Mountain* about the relationship between two gay cowboys, Jack and Ennis, surrounding a scene involving Jack's seeing Ennis's reflection in a rearview mirror, and the metaphor of the rearview mirror itself. One participant noted it symbolized the pain of letting go of something deeply wanted, yet the relationship that Jack was unable to have. Another suggested it represented the distance of Ennis and Jack's relationship, which could not be held in public view. These types of dialogue about the possible meanings of the film help us to construct knowledge collectively and add layers of analysis and meaning to the text. Deeper discussion about symbol, and the portrayals of gender, race, and class, as well as the role of money and power in shaping a message in a movie is far more likely to happen through a facilitated discussion that keeps questions more focused. Further, participants tend to find this fascinating. As one student, Debbie wrote, "[O]ne of my favorite parts of this class was the semiotics discussion… looking for symbols is like a hidden picture puzzle. But more fun than finding the symbols is trying to decipher their meanings. I find my self looking for symbols in many television shows and movies I view." Facilitated discussion helps participants see these symbols in new ways, and understand it as one of the ways the filmmakers and audience facilitate meaning-making.

Practical Teaching Application for Deepening One's Media Consciousness

A way of building critical media literacy as well as the ability to teach critical media literacy is to have students engage in a practical project where they need to engage others in analyzing gender, race, class, and sexual orientation. Many students commented on how this had the effect of building their own critical media literacy. Nora used the film *Places in the Heart* in a Church setting and chose it specifically because of its multiple aspects of race, gender, and disability. In analyzing how doing the activity affected her thinking she wrote:

> As I considered using this film for my practical project I anticipated that my awareness of situations and issues that are embedded in this film would be heightened. While this proved true, I know that prior to viewing the film a few weeks ago I had no idea how differently I would approach both my viewing of the film and the use of the film in a faith-based setting. Several concrete examples are my consciousness of the gender roles in the film, the entire concept of how characters in the film gained power and access to social institutions, awareness of Edna Spaulding's agency, the portrayal of race and racial issues, considerations of class in the film, and the powerful symbolic use of music.…In short, my entire approach to discussion deepened and broadened as a result of this course and this assignment – I cannot approach this learning activity hoping only that others' understanding and awareness of healing and wholeness would change. Rather, I approach this activity equipped with a toolbox filled with skills in critical media literacy that I eagerly anticipate utilizing with participants.

While space does not allow for further discussion, many students made similar remarks, that the act of teaching others about critical media literacy, further facilitated their own. As co-authors we had a similar experience, both in teaching the course and in writing this paper!

Conclusion

In sum, teaching critical media literacy is important in the field of adult education since the media is such a powerful means of education or miseducation. While more research needs to

be done in this regard, this study is a beginning attempt at looking how adult educators might do this more effectively.

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