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Black and White, or Grey All Over? Lessons for Characters in and Viewers of a Hit TV Show about Work-related Identity, Ethics and Pedagogy

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Abstract: *This paper uses the television show Grey's Anatomy to exemplify how popular culture functions as a source of informal adult learning related to work. Identity, ethics and pedagogy are explored as central themes of the show's messages to audience members.*

This paper summarizes an ongoing study which explores popular culture as a source of work-related learning. The project centers on the television show *Grey's Anatomy*. Its first stage involves an analysis of the show's messages about identity, ethics and pedagogy. The second stage involves focus groups with undergraduate medical and nursing students who watch the show; it focuses on how watching the show complements formal work-related learning.

Central Concepts and Scholarship

Maintaining a holistic conceptualization of adult learning as multi-dimensional, involving emotion as well as intellect, I focus on unstructured, often unanticipated, socially contextualized informal and incidental learning. Armstrong's (2008) study of various versions of *The Office* is especially relevant here because it too focuses on popular culture and work-related learning. I pick up on his claim that novice workers have ideas about work-related practices which are informed by cultural representations of work, and that those ideas both converge with and diverge from actual experiences of work. I additionally assert that cultural consumption is not a unidirectional reflection of social life; rather, it offers dynamic opportunities for people to reflect on and challenge, as well as confirm, hegemonic discourses and structures at and beyond work. In other words, people learn about themselves and society through cultural consumption, and popular culture and its meaning(s) are constructed as people come to understand themselves.

Identity construction also figures here. I recognize that identity is developed relationally, over time. Cultural consumption creates an identity-related dialectic, as it helps people produce and express identity, and reflects and reinforces socially structured identities. At the heart of this perspective is the awareness that "culture does have a 'menu of meaning' but some have more choice to dine à la carte than others" (Kenway & Bullen, 2001, p. 153). Identity is not set; still, socio-economic structures limit options for a show's characters and its audience members.

Methodology

Following my earlier work, I continue to draw on Kincheloe's (2001) ideas on bricolage, a mixing of methodologies across disciplinary traditions. Stage 1 of this study resembles cultural studies' reliance on semiotic analysis of cultural products (see Van Leeuwen, 2005). The second stage resembles qualitative case study methodology, which is more typical in the social sciences, and involves focus groups. The line between disciplines and methodologies becomes blurred by my approach to stage 1 as an ethnography, which demands careful observation of a study's participants in their everyday settings. Unlike analysis of a film or a novel, analysis of multiple seasons of a television show is, in some ways, akin to such an ethnographic study in which

characters are viewed as participants. The fictional setting and participants in this study are interesting because they are located in a teaching hospital (“Seattle Grace”), where messages about work-related and social identity, ethics and pedagogy are both overt and covert. Real-life focus group participants are students in the Faculties of Nursing and Medicine at a Canadian university. I aim to hold three groups with undergraduate medical students, and three with undergraduate nursing students, all of whom watch *Grey’s Anatomy*.

Stage 1 Findings

Three themes are discerned in my analysis: learning about identity, ethics and pedagogy. These themes have occupational and broader social aspects. Like popular culture, work is as a space where hegemonic structures and ideologies of gender, race, class and sexuality are both affirmed and contested. One main character, the hospital’s brain surgeon Derek, has two love interests during Season 3 – Meredith, the lead character and a surgical intern, and Rose, a nurse. Meredith (Grey) and Rose live up to their names: One is a doctor with a complex temperament and world view, and the other is a nurse with the feminine attributes of beauty, comfort and simplicity. Ethical dilemmas abound at Seattle Grace. In one episode, a murderer awaiting execution requires brain surgery. He presses for the right to refuse surgery and die in hospital, spurring debates over doctors’ obligation to save lives and capital punishment. Further complications ensue when he agrees to donate his organs to a patient awaiting transplant. Messages about teaching and learning are similarly complex and varied. One message stresses specialists’ knowledge, and reflects a liberal philosophy of education. Experiential learning is valued by interns who compete to participate in certain cases, and recognized as the first interns become teachers to the next group; this conveys a constructivist notion of knowledge. Ultimately, pedagogy is presented as political. While the Chief of Surgery sets formal teaching strategies, sometimes interns and residents take charge of their learning, secretly conducting procedures. These pedagogical messages imply a rejection of a one-size-fits-all approach, even when set against a constant refrain that practice and experience matter.

Discussion Questions

As I move into stage 2, I am finalizing focus group questions. I am also starting to think about what my analysis contributes to adult education. The following questions follow from the analysis to date, and will guide this round table: How are notions of personal, professional and cultural identity and ethics intertwined? What sorts of questions might continue to encourage interesting, useful discussion in and analysis of focus groups? What conceptual, methodological and practical implications might this inquiry have for the field of adult education?

Selected References

(Extended reference list available upon request)

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