

English Education and Popular Culture: Integrating New Medias and Literacies into Old Methods Courses



The “Crisis” in Urban Literacy Education

- The **perceived** crisis
 - Regressive literacy pedagogy
 - Deficit explanation of home and community practices
- “New” “literacy” demands
 - New demands for traditional literacies in postindustrial workplace
 - Demands for new literacies in techno-centric society
- The real crisis
 - Lack of access to *literacies of power*
 - Lack of connection to home and community literacies
 - Lack of attention to new media literacies

Challenges and Opportunities for English Education

- Increasing standardization of curriculum
- High turnover in teaching profession, aging of the teaching profession
- Increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in classrooms
- Increasing literacy demands for professional engagement and civic life
- Lack of respect for Teacher Education programs
- Training the “next generation” of English teachers
- Increased attention to cultural diversity, multicultural education, ethnic and gender studies
- Proliferation of New Literacy Studies and New Media Literacies

Working Hypothesis

- A **Critical Pedagogy of Popular Culture** will allow English Educators to confront the challenges they face and capitalize on the opportunities available;
- The primary aim remains to mentor a new generation of English Teachers who are able to effectively connect with a diverse group of students and who are able to promote academic and critical literacies.

Media and Cultural Studies

Cultural Studies:

- Is an interdisciplinary field that appropriates theories and methods from sociology, anthropology, linguistics, literary criticism, art theory, philosophy, and political science
- Aims to examine its subject matter in terms of cultural practices and their relation to power.
- Its objective is to understand culture in all its complex forms and to analyze the social and political context within which it manifests itself.
- Is both an intellectual and political enterprise.
- Aims to understand the structures of dominance everywhere, especially in industrial capitalist societies. (Sardar and Van Loon, 2000)

Media Studies:

- Media culture has become a dominant force of socialization, with media images and celebrities replacing families, schools, and churches as arbiters of taste, values, and thought, producing new models of identification and resonant images of style, fashion and behavior (Kellner, 1995, p.24)
- Media cultural studies is the project of analyzing the complex relations between texts, audiences, media industries, politics, and the sociohistorical context in specific conjunctures. (Kellner, 1995)
- Role of media in proliferating hegemony
 - Gramsci was interested in analyzing the agencies by which culture is shaped (i.e. media, literature, theatre, schools, politics) and to what extent culture could be guided by conscious political agency (Gramsci, 1985)

What is Culture?

Cultural theorist Raymond Williams (1995) articulates three components of culture that are essential to any thorough analysis of the subject.

1. *Ideal*, in which culture is a state or process of human perfection in terms of absolute or universal values.
2. According to the *documentary* component, culture is the body of intellectual and imaginative work, in which human thought and experience are recorded.
3. Finally, the third, or *social*, component of culture is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning, but also in institutions and “ordinary” behavior.

Popular Culture

- In the *ideal*, popular culture is **expression of universal human values**, namely the desire and struggle for freedom from tyranny and oppression.
- It also *documents* human experience via **hip-hop music, film, and the mass media**.
- Finally, it encompasses the everyday *social experiences of marginalized peoples* as they confront, make sense of and contend against social institutions such as schools (Bowles and Gintis, 1976), the mass media (Baudrillard, 1990), corporations and governments (Giddens, 1987).
- Cultural theorists also see popular culture as a **site of struggle** between resistant subordinate groups and dominant forces that seek to capitalize upon and co-opt this resistance (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1998; Docker, 1994; Hall, 1998; Storey, 1998; Strinati, 2000)

Critical Media Pedagogy

- Draws from the work of Gramsci, the Frankfurt School, the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, and American critical cultural theorists such as Kellner, Giroux, Lipsitz, and McLaren.
- Counter-hegemonic instruction aimed at developing a consciousness of the role of the media in configuring social thought. Also intends to foster engaged citizens who are able to critique these master media narratives and who also have the skills to use new media technologies as tools in the struggle for social and educational justice.
- Targets populations that have been targeted by media industries.
- Involves critical consumption, production, and distribution of new media texts.

Toward a Critical English Education

- Historicizing and re-theorizing key terms “English,” “Literacy,” and “Pedagogy.”
- More attention to New Literacies
- More inclusion of Media and Cultural studies
- Engaging K-12 students as intellectuals and knowledge producers
- Engaging English teachers as transformative intellectuals and agents of change

The Poet in Society Unit

- Taught hip-hop as a period of poetry; as an inspired youth resistance to urban postindustrialism (Rose, 1991)
 - Alongside other periods of poetry such as Elizabethan, Romantic, Harlem Renaissance, and Civil Rights Poetry
- Students compared and contrasted contemporary hip-hop texts with classic poetry texts
- Students wrote 5-7 page critical interpretations of a song of their choice
- Students wrote an anthology of ten poems and presented their poetry to their peers.

Outcomes

1. Increased appreciation for classical poetry and role of poetry as social commentary (interviews, discussions, and student writing)
2. Development of analytic skills and presentation skills (examination of student work and classroom footage)
3. Increased motivation (interviews and classroom observation)
4. Produced quantity and quality texts across genres (essay, presentation, and anthology of poems) (student work).

From Presentations

- Pamela: Like when it says days are shorter and nights are colder, that's the way that the world is now, but that is not the way that he wants it to be. I don't think that the nights are any colder than they've ever been, but it's like [James] said, because you are up at night worrying, you get to experience that the nights are actually cold. I guess that would make your days shorter too because you worry about stuff.
- James: Like when he's talking about black diamonds and pearls, he could be talking about...like white diamonds and pearls are expensive and people tend to think that white pearls are better than black pearls just like society thinks that white people are better than black people and he wants to make things totally opposite. It's like weddings and funerals. Weddings are supposed to be happy occasions and people usually wear white. A funeral is a sad occasion and everybody wears black. Why is that? It's just a stereotypical view of society that white is always going to be better than black. It's something good, then people wear white, it's something bad, and people wear black, that's just the way that society looks at it. Black diamonds and pearls could also mean the children...If you look into the chorus part when they say walk right up to the sun, they are not talking about the *points to the sky* the sun that is making that heat, the son is our future.