

“Current Events” Pedagogy: Facilitating Radical Imagination and Vulnerability

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The inclusion of current events as a pedagogic device is essential in the Media Studies toolkit; as an interdisciplinary framework, Media Studies serves as a critical source for “making sense” of contemporary spectacles. Framed as “critical media literacy,” the practice of dynamically analyzing media texts is not easy to master in a specific time frame; rather, it is a layered form of knowledge that takes practice and a desire to consider various disciplines and epistemologies. Introductory courses to Media Studies – and other related disciplines such as Film Studies or Mass Communication – are often designed to include critical media literacy skills as learning outcomes; importantly, the “skills” are the outcome rather than “literacy” as an end.

Practicing those “skills” involves various active learning measures and assessments, and current events often become on-the-spot “drills” that create rich opportunities for engagement. Increasingly, the options for current events discussions – in such introductory courses – often intersect with racial considerations and the politics of coverage, decoding, and political economy (e.g., mediating the travel/Muslim Ban, reporting police violence, *the* H&M ad, the success of *Black Panther*). Depending on the students’ experiences’ with, and understanding of, the intersection of racial formation and media culture, these discussions may pivot away from critical media literacy skills, and instead of a nuanced discussion, students may find themselves angry, confused, alienated, and/or traumatized.

Institutional context is important here. In the Predominantly White Institutional (PWI) setting, whiteness can often create a corporeal and symbolic distance for the majority of students, while students of color may experience a compound of trauma and isolation from having these issues discussed as “current events” issues versus political “calls to action.” In light of this tension, I believe that it is essential to facilitate a space for *vulnerability* and *imagination* into such discussions; extending the practical lessons of current events as “example” to the practice of self-reflexivity and creative praxis offers a pathway for students of all backgrounds to examine their role in the production of alternative possibilities. Unfortunately, although “production” is an essential element of critical media literacy – and in theory, the discussion of a current event should be accompanied by an activity that offers a pathway for praxis – often, introductory courses are so packed with information that creating this additional space risks upending the day’s lesson plan that is so tightly woven into the pedagogical flow of the course.

Often, students experience conceptual limitations when faced with the economic realities of mainstream media culture, yet when alternative pathways are simultaneously discussed – such as online distribution, independent media organizations, or the “networked era” – imaginative breakthroughs emerge in written exercises and active learning. There is potential in fostering space for *radical imagination* in the Media Studies classroom, even when faced with overwhelming, yet relevant, cultural and political events. And yet, it requires vulnerability from both the instructor and the students. It requires an openness to multiple perspectives. In the PWI setting, it requires the instructor to carefully introduce racial discourses as historical and culturally-specific rather than spectacle. It also requires the instructor to facilitate the current events discussion as an educational project, with an interest in humanization and praxis. Over the past academic year, I’ve been questioning the ways that I’ve introduced controversial, often racially-themed, current events issues and texts into the classroom. While my intention has been to offer a bridge between course concepts and application, I have often felt that the lesson was “incomplete” or that the outcome was less productive or meaningful than what I had envisioned. Sometimes I could sense my students of color sinking in their chairs or putting their head down as a result of comments such as: “This really isn’t a racial issue and the more we bring up race, the more it becomes a racial issue.”

It is my position that, given the complexity of our contemporary, cultural context(s), that current events raised in the Media Studies classroom – music videos, scandals in the popular press, problematic advertisements, social media accounts of police brutality – that highlight racialized discourses, symbolism, and violence, need to be supported by additional pedagogical practices. Based on my experiences as a white, cisgender woman teaching at a PWI, offering students an opportunity to imagine opportunities for social change, and a vulnerable space to check in with their connection to such current events, might create a bridge between the current event “object” and the “possibility” of action. If necessary, additional readings (of any form) may need to be brought into the classroom. The creation of memes, the remixing of an advertisement, the re-writing of a script, letter-writing to a state representative, and the brainstorming of a podcast all represent opportunities to transform the “current event” discussion into an actionable, active learning experience that mitigates alienation and trauma.