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Establishing Understandings: Teaching About Culture In Introductory Television Courses

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Abstract

In teaching introductory courses using television equipment, we find that cultural studies interests can be meshed with basic skills-oriented production classes in useful ways. Utilizing an on-going discussion strategy emphasizing that students are evaluating, criticizing, and interpreting, as well as producing cultural products, the activities we describe articulate the reflexive nature of media and culture. Furthermore, in asking students to investigate and explore ways media both construct and reflect their understanding of culture, students are guided to begin a life-long process of critical thinking.

Courses in cultural studies can provide the best opportunities students have to connect classroom learning with the "real world" because of the emphasis on connections, linkages, and the analysis of lived, everyday experiences. However, in our experience, few colleges and universities have majors, or even a broad curriculum of interdisciplinary courses, devoted to an analysis of culture. Instead, these classes are "tucked away" in a variety of slots in the humanities or liberal arts divisions. They may be known on the individual campuses by the students and advisors as desirable selections, but their truly innovative activities often go unrecognized beyond a given classroom group or academic circle. A main value of these interdisciplinary courses is their connection of subject matter to culture. To address this situation, and to create stronger experiences for our students across our campus, we compared and evaluated goals in two media culture classes.

Introductory skills-based media courses often focus primarily on production. We suggest another approach is preferred, particularly for students who are not journalism/broadcasting majors. Liberal arts students need courses that emphasize critical thinking as much as mastery of specific devices. Identifying and challenging assumptions and exploring alternative ways of thinking and acting are the essence of the critical thinking process. (Brookfield, 1987, p. 71). Critical thinking is at the heart of a liberal arts education. Additionally, in less wealthy programs with older television production equipment, such a focus can become a necessity. Our approach does not suggest a "theory unit" at a single point; nor does it suggest slipping in an ethics discussion on the last day. Our approach integrates on-going discussions and examinations of cultural activities and processes throughout the term.

The focus we offer students emphasizes that they begin to see connections between aspects of their own lives and their courses. This pedagogical strategy makes the student central to the learning process, which opens up the possibilities to examine and evaluate their cultural experiences (More, nd). Examining their own creative processes in this fuller form encourages students to ask important questions about the creative

experience at several stages within each assigned activity. Additionally, we suggest they begin to expand their knowledge to re-recognize the integrated nature of media industries and the impact these industries have within the larger cultural framework we associate with common behavior, performance, and social action. In this way, students can delve into a study of culture that allows for a more explorative and collective educational experience (Johnson, 1993, p. 249).

This article outlines the general themes and intellectual arguments we employ in our own understanding of culture and in our teaching about media and culture. Next, we describe several exercises regularly used to explain and demonstrate the techniques. Finally, we summarize students' evaluative comments and engage in self-evaluation to indicate the usefulness of the proposed content and style of teaching.

Theory and Fundamentals: Presenting Points for Discussion

In the beginning of the course, and the start of each unit, we focus on primary themes as a way to indicate integration of concepts across the project schedules. The mindfulness implied in such an exercise stresses that students don't merely complete TV shows by deadline, but rather are encouraged to see tasks as a progression of sequenced activities that build into a total perspective. Additionally, the creation of the pattern of planning, production, and critique fits within the larger theoretical project we intend to train students to undertake.

In both the Speech course and the Theatre course, we start with discussing what students know from the media. Oftentimes, they begin with the "obvious"--they state conclusions about fashion, stereotypes, gender roles, and broad social values. For example, a student might say, " The Cosby show taught me to be nice to others." It then is our task as teachers to explain how those concepts fit together into the framework associated with the cultural assumptions, which are formed and reflected by media producers. As the following units indicate, the activity of discussing culture necessarily begins with an introduction to primary arguments and key theorists.

What Is Culture and Why Does It Matter?

Culture and communication are integrally linked. As Williams (1958) asserts, culture as communication is the process of creating new shared meanings and of reconsidering individual meanings within the context of a specific community and its history. Furthermore, Williams argues that understanding culture by this definition includes considering and scrutinizing the set of activities wherein the processes of creating shared meanings are performed by the various forms of arts and communications media. (See also Williams, 1983.)

The cultural approach to communication emphasizes that people exist in a world of shared meanings, which they (usually) take for granted (Grossberg, Wartella & Whitney, 1998; review). Additionally, without deliberating on the nature of hegemony, members of a culture continually participate in the production, maintenance, and reproduction of a shared sense of reality (Mumby 1988). In terms of constructing a systematic and cultural approach to media literacy, we must continually examine media production decisions that we observe, and that we make ourselves, with regards to creative processes which are specifically and culturally situated with their own conventions and constraints. We must recognize that examining the practices of a given culture or subculture may be useful for suggesting insights into understanding how social actors in the larger cultural milieux are continuously coping with an ambiguous, ever-changing information environment (Deetz & Mumby, 1985).

The cultural model of communication is based within the theories associated with the social construction of reality. . Human beings live in a meaningful world, which they have produced through their own culture. (Grossberg et al., 1998, p.21). This notion is reinforced by most theories of socialization which suggest that within modern societies certain activities and ideological institutions function to tell citizens or group members who they are and how they are to behave. As Mills asserts:

> The media have not only filtered into our experience of external realities, they have also entered into our very experience of our own selves. They have provided us with new

identities and new aspirations of what we should like to be, and what we should appear to be. . ." (Mills, 1956, p.314 ; excerpt).

Updating the same argument when examining the media industries, it has been said that "mass communication is the key vehicle through which various ...individuals and organizations that make up society try to define themselves and others." (Turow, 1991, p. 164). Just as the rituals of a religion, a family, or a school can be interpreted as a means to gain understanding of the broader concepts embedded in the familiar patterns, we can begin to see media presentations as performed and received rituals that define and shape our cultural experiences and expectations (Carey, 1989). (For example, see James Carey: A Critical Reader; for a description of Carey's ideas about technology and culture, see Marvin, nd).

For a brief time our students will be media producers; but they will be life-long media users. We want to see our students develop a foundation and strategies that will help them critically evaluate their own media work as well as the media and cultural messages they encounter on a daily basis. The tools of media literacy we offer need to be versatile enough for both applications. Analysis of culture from our artistic and institutional perspectives can provide media critics with crucial insights to the current social processes, beliefs, and assumptions. For example, Kubey (nd) makes a strong argument for combining technical skils with media literacy. Our teaching approach can also suggest ways to improve the distribution of power presently enacted with media use.

Experiences Producing Cultural Products

The Speech Class: Introduction to Television Broadcasting

Through the planning, completion, and discussion of a variety of short televised segments, Introduction to Television Broadcasting focuses student attention onto the production, distribution, and interpretation of contemporary American entertainment programming. The approach to dealing with television production, mass media, and culture is an application of a hybrid theory we call a "critical political economy theory."

Traditional cultural studies research on communication is "centrally concerned with the construction of meaning" (Murdock, 1989, p. 436). In this approach, media forms are not vehicles for a message, but rather mechanisms for ordering meanings in particular ways. The major themes connected with meaning analysis are a reliance on the belief that meanings depend on context and an examination of how active audience members interpret media artifacts. However, this approach is only somewhat complete since it does not take into account the corporate nature of modern communications systems of media production and distribution.

Public communications systems are components of the "cultural industries". They are part of the general industrial structure--following the logic of other industries, constructing commodities in hopes of maximizing profits. They share the same interests and concerns as the producers of more durable goods, although most mass media fare is ephemeral. The prepared media programs and materials are created by a modern industrial process, involving specialized workers, hierarchical decision-making, and economic sensibilities. However, because they utilize particular ways about thinking about the world, the communication systems are not producing items which are culturally neutral. As culture, showing us ways to derive meaning from experience, communication systems play a predominant role in organizing the images and discourses people use to make sense of the world. To accommodate these ideas, work on communications via a political economy approach asserts "we should look not for the components of a product but for the conditions of a practice" (Williams, 1980, p. 48; see also Williams' "Technology and democracy"). In this approach, critical analysis looks at systems and structures. The major themes of political economy are:

- epistemology. examining the interaction of people in the world and scrutinizing the unequal distribution/command of resources, and
- historicity. examining late capitalism in relation to understanding of time and place.

Students and scholars alike are somewhat reluctant to reduce all of communication to this level of economic

sensibility because media products have a different sort of social impact than other consumer/ marketplace goods. In <u>Mass Media and Society</u>, Golding and Murdock (1997) present the beginnings of the hybrid critical political economy perspective we employ, by blending aspects of the above. These authors create a holistic, historical theory "concerned with the balance between capitalist enterprise and public intervention, investigating basic moral questions of justice, equality, and the public good"(p.14). (Curran and Gurevitch, 1997, expand this argument in <u>Mass Media and Society</u>.)

As we use it in our classes, critical political economy theory views communications activities as the focal point for the interplay between economic organizations and political, social, and cultural life. For scholars of mass media, this means an examination of the range and diversity of public cultural expression and the acknowledgment that communication choices are contained within wider social structures that require scholarly examination.

Speech: TV Activity Process

The theme of analysis used to theoretically ground all student assignments is based on a three-part media model: production, consumption, and meaning/interpretation. Although there are many models of communication, we begin with Lasswell's examinations of "who, says what, to whom, in which channel, with what effect?"(Lasswell, 1948) and Schramm's (1954) model involving two or more parties each with a "field of experience," encoding, interpreting, decoding, transmitting, and receiving information within a continuous loop of shared knowledge. We also integrate aspects of the Frankfurt School's view of media as cultural industry, by suggesting a rational notion of production processes that makes meaning production political.

Of course, students enroll expecting to produce TV shows, so the assignments require specific technical aspects that must be included with each studio project. But completing the taping is not the primary focus of the class; the projects are an opportunity to creatively construct examples of ideas students have about media and society. As evident in the syllabus, throughout the term students must also read, write, and speak about their perceptions to complete requirements. Our approach includes students writing in journals, using the assigned reading's examples or their ideas from the program they are producing or reviewing, and discussing their answers to the discussion points listed below. Specifically, we develop questioning strategies that encourage students to think as deliberate directors and consumers. We also ask students at various points in the term to review their own work, the work of their peers, and professional work. We stress that choices are not random in entertainment television; rather, they are intentional decisions. In this way, students look at television with a new level of criticism, beyond the "I like/dislike it" reviews offered by most at the start of the course. In addition to the observations students note, key concerns listed below are addressed in the review of every assigned show.

1. **Creative Production: Recognizing and Using Image Conventions**

   To articulate and examine the visual aspects of television, we ask students to answer the following questions:

   - How has the grammar of aesthetics been constructed?
   - Why do we "know" when something looks or sounds right?
   - How can we articulate these grammar rules into guidelines for composition and punctuation?

   Through the course we use excerpts from standard production texts, including some old classics such as Colby Lewis' (1979) notion of picture statements and Zettl's (1987, 1973) guidelines. At this stage, we introduce some vocabulary related to semiotics, symbols and signs. We discuss the connections and relationships among televised images, painterly art, and our concepts of "good" visual composition. We also suggest Western cultural assumptions influence visual composition standards, and relate media viewing aesthetics in the U.S. to our learned patterns of information processing.

2. **Creative Production: Creating Coherent Messages and Meanings**

To assist students in recognizing the creative activities related to message construction, we ask the following questions:

   - What kind of edit choices should be (or were) made, why, and when?
   - What does editing and post-production do to/ for the creation of meaning?

This follows #1 closely. We use this unit as a vehicle to describe an expected tone, pace, and mood that is created by the media as both a communication channel, and as a communication message itself. We also introduce students to McLuhan's (1964) notions of the medium as the message, and to some theories of technological determinism. We then begin discussions about the possibility that a specific meaning could only be understood through particular media vehicles, and about ways they may begin constructing specific meaning through their decisions.

3. **Media Industry and Program Distribution**

To guide students into an integrated examination of the industrial/corporate nature of contemporary mass media in America, we ask students to address the following questions:

   - In what ways has this media work been treated as a commodity? (Or for student work, a reflection of existing ones?)
   - How does it tie-into other available entertainment products?
   - In what way does it follow the tradition of earlier products within an established style or genre?

We use the writings of Frith (1997) and Turow (1991) in this section of the class (see Cisler's review of Turow's Breaking Up America). We also introduce and examine the nature of "taste publics" (Gans, 1974), established media markets, and ratings (DeFleur & Dennis, 1996).

For the professional works, students are also directed to observe and record for comment the source information related to the program, such as producer, director, distributor, and network of production, as well as time and channel of viewing. Following Bagdikian's (2000) arguments about increasing concentration of media ownership, this gives students an experience in examining (media) industrial practices.

4. **Examining the Media's Roles in the Social Production of Meaning**

To assist students in evaluating the cultural consequences and influences of the mass media in their own lives, we ask students to consider the following questions:

   - How do we know about people different from ourselves, and what do we know?
   - What do we know about people who are other races, or genders?
   - What are our expectations, values, and stereotypes?

During the term we discuss a range of critical, scholarly research, and current-events type readings, including magazine essays on this topic. We also use articles by Gray (1996), Hamamoto (1998), and Dow (1998) to provide specific examples of analysis, and to assist students in techniques they may use for articulating their own observations.

5. **Articulating "My Own Theory" of Media and Society**

Inevitably media effects and their consequences becomes a topic of dispute within the class. To examine the level of effects (powerful versus weak), and nature of effects (e.g., individual versus social, universal versus limited. for specified audiences only, only with intentional learning, etc.) students read a variety of assigned studies. These include social scientific as well as critical

research from the scholarly journals and from the popular press. From there, they construct a major entry for their journals. Throughout the term they are given "think piece" short essay/response assignments from (instructor) selected readings. (See for example, a course reading list and some journal assignments given on-line.) By the end of the term students also use their interests to gather supplemental support from library sources to write longer journal entries containing additional commentary and connections.

All of the above ideas are folded into a simple-appearing assignment such as the creation of a music video. Beyond merely giving students the increasingly difficult technical requirements for each studio project, the activity is integrated in two ways with the experiences leading up to the assignment. The students are given the specific requirements for each aspect of the planning, production, and interpretation of their work. The studio tasks clearly build on previous works, such as the directions for more camera angles, or more complicated staging. The assignment is also meshed into the journal writing exercises and the larger project of the above-described exploration of theoretical perspective. This combined approach functions to assist students in developing their own articulation of a completed critical political economy-based statement about the role of media in society.

The theory-building is an on-going activity throughout the term. Students write, read from, and discuss their journals in the pre-production meetings with their classmates, and in the in-class grading/critique sessions. For instance, students using this approach explain why the music video they made would belong on a country station, M-TV, or BET. They talk about the look, feel, tone, style and costuming, as well as the sound. Most importantly, for a long-term understanding of contemporary mass media in America, they can more fully talk about how the media operate as a consciousness industry. (For example, see a student paper completed in the course.)

The Theater Class: Television Acting and Directing

TV Acting and Directing is currently used as a follow-up course to TV Production. This class analyzes a variety of television genres, such as commercial, info-mercial, daytime drama, situation comedy, and music video. Students engage in discussion to determine the style and custom of each genre. They then develop, script, perform, and tape their projects. Because performance, like all art, reflects the culture in which it is created, the implementation of scripts and the experience of performing, as actors, technicians, and directors, allows students opportunities to produce cultural products. Students are establishing culture through performance. Students learn that, despite appearances, TV does not re-present reality; instead, it encodes reality along familiar conventions that can be creatively applied or manipulated. They are then able to begin to discern "the 'real' from the more 'phenomenal' illusion of ideology" (Alvarado, 1993, p.191). Fiske (1997) asserts that deliberate representation is linked to issues of ideology and subjectivity. The very process of encoding produces a sense of reality that is ideological. The effectiveness of this ideology is enhanced by the iconic value of TV, which the medium uses to situate its truth claims and claims of natural and real. These claims transparently produce ideologically-laden representations and truths.

What is seen as natural and normal to the unexamining viewer is "the production of televisual reality, [which] reproduces not objective reality, but capitalism, even if ideologically rather than materially" (Fiske, 1997 p. 54). As theatre students learn through observing and creating media productions throughout the course, people can act as social agents constructing meaning only in the ways that are permitted by their particular social formations and defined by their understanding of their relationships with others. Polysemy is not unlimited; nothing on programmed entertainment should happen accidentally. All choices resound with meaning , therefore they must be carefully thought-out, clearly motivated, and reasonable. "Bottom-up" as well as "top-down" meaning constructions are constrained by each others. relations and dominant meanings are not totally unknown or ignored by those people attempting to construct alternatives (Hall, 1986).

Students learn their work can do nothing but reflect the society in which it exists. The real information lies, not in the words, but in the intentions and relationships of those involved (Esslin, 1976). When students plan and perform, they must analyze human communication so they can intentionally re-create it. We emphasize that communication involves nonverbal messages, such as body position, gesturing, facial

expression, vocal tone, pitch, and vocal interrupters, as well as verbal messages. Through observations and mirroring of cultural behavior, and working within the confines observed and analyzed within specific genres, students are able to "try on" a variety of social identities to see if and how they may "fit." This theoretical perspective, repeated throughout the course, gives students the opportunity to examine their own subculture as well as the world established by the shared reality understood within the given genres.

Theatre: TV Activity Process

The goal of the theater course is to introduce and provide the analytical, technical, and performative skills necessary to engage in discussion and performance in front of, and behind, the camera. Student learning objectives are:

    a. to acquire knowledge about the process of developing, rehearsing, acting in, and directing on-camera performance
    b. to engage in practical application of skills learned
    c. to develop an understanding of, and an appreciation for the art and craft of acting and directing for television.

Similar to the television course in the Speech Discipline, this course contains the three elements of journaling, paper writing, and the production of video projects. The strategy is that the simultaneous activities build upon each other, providing information that becomes invaluable for the next assignment grouping. This circular model is structured to give students the incentive to take each assignment seriously, as a step toward final projects. For clarification, each assignment will be described individually.

1. **Journals**

   The journal activity provides students with a chance to demonstrate a basic mastery of primary course materials and vocabulary in an applied situation. The journal content consists of comments and observations related to directed, extensive, and deliberate television viewing of the students' choosing. Students record what was watched and when it was viewed. The weekly journal also contains students' analysis of the following: spatial relationships, performance style, language usage, custom, setting, costumes, music, and scene rhythm. (A variety of sample journal assignments/ review paper topics can be found at "Useful Lists"). Additionally, for each program, students must state who they believe is the intended audience for the program and their opinions concerning how messages are manipulated with regard to age, gender, race, and beliefs. In doing so, students are creating a statement regarding the observations and connections they can make with regard to their own viewing choices as a member in, and of, a particular culture.

   The journal becomes the primary source material for the Review paper. In constructing such a mindful effort to examine and reflect upon what was viewed, students begin to draw conclusions based on specific empirical observations. Additionally, the content of the journal is used to begin discussion of the process of observation to creation-performance. Because students will see that the program offers a reflection of the culture in which it is created and/or the culture of the intended audience, examining television as a cultural artifact affords a student the opportunity to analyze messages both implicit and explicit.

2. **Genre Review Paper**

   The completion of the review paper demonstrates student understanding of the construction of a particular media genre. After viewing a specified number of hours of television, students evaluate the performative and technical aspects of their selected form of program. They examine how the program type communicates meaning, at general and specific levels. Students offer conclusions regarding reasons why viewers may, or may not, be compelled to watch the program. The student reviewer/media consumer must also examine and comment upon who controls the messages we receive.

As the review paper is also a research assignment, students must read and evaluate reference materials that examine their selected genre choices. Students are told to read articles about acting style, directing style, genre purpose, genre reaction, technical aspects of the genre, and general articles about what makes good television. Students use the combination of personal observation and expert information to create a reasoned and critical response to the particular tenets, models, and customs of a given media genre.

The knowledge gained from this process is directly applied to the completion of the student-created television projects. In their papers, students examine how they can use the information they have gathered through review for their own activities as director and as actor. Additionally, a goal of the paper is to show the integration of student understanding of the genre as a cultural phenomenon and the practical considerations necessary to develop, direct, and perform in said genre. The writing constructs the beginning framework for students to make deliberate choices.

3. **Televised Projects**

The project provides students with the opportunity to demonstrate an understanding of a particular genre, and to examine the cultural influences of television as a form of communication. As students "make TV shows" they move their theoretically-grounded knowledge to practical applications. In addition to providing opportunities for students to function as directors, technicians, and actors, the exercises in the television studio integrate all discussion, planning, and journal/review observation elements of the course.

The students work in teams as cast and crew to realize the creative process together. The deliberate and careful decisions made at various stages of the process come together into final projects which display student abilities to demonstrate their understanding of the selected genre, either commercial, soap opera, situation comedy, or music video.

Because student projects use limited resources, assessment of the video productions focuses on the primary concerns of the course. Evaluation examines:

- integration of genre knowledge with specific demonstrated activities during the program
- adequate planning so projects can be completed in the allotted studio time
- coherence of actor performances
- appropriate technical mastery of studio equipment; and suitability of finished product.

The last criterion includes examining if the finished studio project is creative, indicates clear relationships, and communicated meanings. Furthermore, to mesh with other aspects of the course, the studio video projects are evaluated in terms of their ability to clearly indicate that students have examined the cultural resonance of their own choices within the confines of a specific genre.

Assessment: Evaluation of the Process

Responses to our theoretically-grounded approach to teaching media production are encouraging. In the first term the technique was used, some students lamented that they wanted to be graded solely on technical performance. They were frustrated by the need to turn in planning notes and outlines, write papers, and examine television as more than simple entertainment. Slight modifications in the syllabi and in the courses' statements of purpose helped. Also, written assignment descriptions greatly clarified most general student concerns.

Written directions for the studio assignments, the journal tasks, and the final essays in the Speech and in the Theatre courses now provide a concrete basis for evaluation that the students have learned to respect. The handouts explain not only how many points each assignment can earn, but also how each component of the course combines with the others into a total learning experience. Because in both classes we clearly explain the course emphasis on the student writing process to form descriptions, students have learned to articulate

the ideas behind their critical and creative activities. Recently, teaching and course review comments have been overwhelmingly positive. Student comments include:

- using the hands-on approach helped
- we will always remember a great deal from this course because we were able to learn our way
- I know more (about TV Broadcasting) than I ever did before.

Students have also begun to say that they are learning skills they will use in future careers, such as broadcasting and theater, and as parents, teachers, and scholars.

The journal and essay assignments are also reviewed with extremely favorable comments. Students have stated: "I think I have a better understanding of different kinds of media and issues related to them." On standardized evaluation forms, the classes earned high marks in:

- critical thinking about issues
- good background in mass media
- general understanding of mass media and media criticism

Student comments also reflect an awareness of how all choices students make in their work resonate with meaning. Students also stated:

- this course has opened my eyes to problems I never thought about
- I really started to think about the workings of media and society, and how they relate
- I had no idea of the messages relayed (by television)

The papers in both classes are effective for communicating the integration of course ideas and terminology in a way that appears successful. Students genuinely seemed to value the opportunity to examine a process of creative reasoning and enjoyed the opportunity to use a term's worth of consideration to draw their own theories. Many students have been taught that others have formed ideas, and their goal as students is to learn "who said what" for tests. In contrast, our approach allows students to begin to see the construction of theory as a creative process, which can parallel the joy of the artistic endeavor usually associated with performance.

Mills (1956) suggested the media tell individuals who they are, thereby giving us our identities. Early in the term, students oftentimes enter into discussion about media effects and the interaction of media and culture with similar certainty, but with the conclusion that when it comes to themselves, the media do not "make *us* who we are." By the end of the term, students who have completed our courses are more frequently saying phrases like "it depends" or "in some ways." They are also conversant on the range of scholarship on the topic and, because they write final papers, are able to cite others to defend their chosen positions. As end-of-term student feedback indicates, the variable notions concerning levels of media effects and media interactions with culture begins a long inquiry, for which students learn they can be comfortable with multiple correct answers.

For beginning instructors, the pedagogical approach we advocate for introductory media production courses is not simple nor easy. Additionally, from the text books we have previewed and used over the years, it is not expected either. In fact, if the instructor were trained in a production-focused or professional master's program, the concepts for discussion may be outside the instructor's primary area of expertise. The language of cultural studies is somewhat difficult for first-time readers and the sometimes international focus of critical essays may need to be "translated" for American students. It does take an extra amount of time and effort to understand and apply the variety of concepts we tackle in a term, and grading journals and essays is an activity that makes many professors cringe. Nonetheless, we believe our experiences indicate that the enriched, cultural inquiry nicely supplements technical instruction while giving students opportunities to demonstrate a variety of kinds of thinking.

Because our primary classroom goal is not to make professional-quality television programs, but rather to

stimulate the students to expand their knowledge and explore their understanding of culture, we feel the extra efforts are worth the trouble. To keep the course current, we continually revise the readings and the activities we use. Thus, the lessons and activities we suggest are assisted by an anthology of selected readings that the instructors compile each term. Our students access materials on the instructors' web pages, and are directed to check the library reserve desk weekly.

Conclusion

The suggestions and guidelines we discuss in this article are beginning tips for media instructors who want to add course relevance, connections between classroom work and everyday experiences, an increased level of cultural literacy, and an interdisciplinary liberal arts focus to their media production curriculum. We hope this article will especially encourage readers who want to further discuss teaching media and culture to contact us, as well as others in the field. Additionally, we hope that courses like the ones we have described will prompt students and professors alike to re-examine the reciprocal natures of contemporary American culture and mass media. Richard Campbell (1998) suggests that being critical consumers of the media also encourages us to be engaged citizens in the contemporary society that the media helped to shape. Judith Abbott (1995) encourages teachers to help students "learn to articulate their reflections on cultural assumptions, to make connections, to agree and disagree with respect...the whole point of a liberal arts education" (p 49). We strongly agree with both.

In surveying the cultural landscape with the course-provided tools for critiquing the media, we hope to help our students become better able to examine contemporary trends in mass communication, and scrutinize media influences on democratic life and consumer culture. Throughout their lives, people experience the mass media, yet rarely is it given the extensive scrutiny of the classroom "critical thinking" practices usually associated with text and speech analysis. To develop a student's own expressive, analytical, or creative skills and abilities, media studies courses should expose students to those . traditional. skills of critical reflection and analysis, combined with some level of technical experience or production competence. Although production technologies will change, and many students will not make their careers in media, with the integrated sort of learning we advocate, students will have the tools really necessary to make the life-long examination of specific lived experiences more completely.

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