Media literacy and pop culture curriculum policies: students learning and living in a highly technological and mediated world
Políticas curriculares para alfabetização midiática e cultura pop: estudantes aprendendo e vivendo em um mundo altamente tecnológico e midiatizado

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Abstract: This paper discusses *digital content* and *digital use* policies as modern teachers and administrators are forced to grapple with sometimes contradictory recommendations from local, state and national organizations in terms of whether to embrace new media technologies in schools or to guard students from them. For example, the National Council for Teachers of English (2007), whose standards to promote 21st Century literacies and digital media use differ greatly from the thinking of some traditionalists who seek to protect students from popular content, or to limit use of popular devices. While some organizations embrace various media technologies as tools for learning, other individuals and organizations reject new pedagogical approaches that attempt to harness digital media technologies. These protectionists believe that media technologies often affect youth populations negatively because the media messages channeled by popular technologies often promote harmful, illegal or illicit activities. gender differences.

Introduction

In most American states, as well as in many local, state and national governments worldwide, technology policy is an emerging field; policy makers everywhere are exploring best practice issues, like those discussed by Fuhrman, Cohen, and Mosher (2007), in making broad decisions concerning such things as *who* should implement technology (in terms of selecting vendors), *how* to implement technology (in terms of dealing with capacity issues and navigating existing systems already in place), *when* to implement technology (in terms of the curriculum choices related to constructivist learning versus the standardization of test-taking via technology), *where* to implement technology (in terms of equal access and funding issues), and *why* to implement technology (in terms of the student, teacher, and administrator needs for teaching, learning and facilitating learning). The questions are generally linked to issues concerning fairness and digital equity (SOLOMON, ALLEN & RESTA, 2003), and they manifest themselves in three major areas; those areas are related to *digital capacity*, *digital content*, and *digital use*.

While this paper will conclude with some recommendations related to *digital capacity* and student access, it will mainly focus its attention on *digital content* and *digital use*, particularly as teachers and administrators grapple with the sometimes contradictory recommendations from state and national organizations like the National Council for Teachers of English (2007), whose standards to promote 21st Century literacies with digital media usage differ greatly from the thinking of many traditionalists. For example,

Berley (2000), and Johnson, Jackson, and Gatto (1995) respectively admonish new pedagogical approaches which harness digital media, and believe that pop culture media has "deleterious" (JOHNSON, JACKSON & GATTO, 1995, p. 27) effects on youth populations, because some pop-culture media promote harmful, illegal or illicit activities.

Key Concerns with Using Pop Culture Technology and Media to Teach and Learn

The NCTE (2007) standards promote the use of new communicative technologies, and pop culture for learning. They highlight educational uses for many different media such as blogging, *MySpace*, *YouTube*, *Second*

Life, and affinity groups. While these media come with educational benefits that "bring opportunities for teachers at all levels to foster reading and writing in more diverse and participatory contexts" (NCTE, 2007, p. 2), and help "document the process of learning, promote integrative thinking, display published work and/ or provide a space for reflecting on learning" (NCTE, 2007, p. 4), they also come with costs in that they allow opportunities for more illicit uses as well, as is the case of the democratized or capitalistic experience in general, whether in cyber space or in 'real life', because marketers in popular spaces often appeal to users with sexual, controversial and otherwise dramatic eye-catching or ear-catching content.

The use of pop culture for learning undoubtedly invites new problems. For example, blogs "that serve as journals and can include Web links and photographs as well as audio and video elements" (NCTE, 2007, p. 4), could feasibly result in outsider access to student journals if community sites are made public or if individuals forward information to others outside the immediate community. This could be a cause for concern if students make careless or ill-informed remarks that anger a person or social group, remarks that in a traditional setting would only be available for the teacher to read and respond to via paper journal. Additionally, online journaling, like creating any online presence, could result in some sort of predatory action from an unwelcome reader or onlooker, just as any physical presence, like walking down the street or telling a joke to a friend in the 'real world' might invite unwanted onlookers, comments, or criticisms. On *MySpace*, where students can "rate professors, discuss books, and connect with high school and college classmates" (NCTE, 2007, p. 4), students might encounter illicit personal messages such as spam for explicit adult social networking sites like *Adult Friend Finder*. On *YouTube*, "where users can upload, view and share video footage, including movie clips, TV clips, and music videos, as well as amateur content such as student-produced videos" (NCTE, 2007, p. 4), viewers can also be exposed to other genres of 'shocking' or 'disgusting' user-generated video content, like *2 girls 1 cup*, a scat-pornographic film viewed by well over a million *YouTube* users. In *Second Life*, a virtual world which can assist students in cultural, social, political or economic contemplations, and where participants "explore, socialize, participate in individual and group activities, and create and trade items" (NCTE, 2007, p. 4), many of the virtual 'clubs' in the game are sexually themed. And, finally, even affinity groups that can "unite individuals with common interests," (NCTE, 2007, p. 4) sometimes center on destructive themes, such as 'pro-ana' (or pro-anorexia) sites that coach adolescents on methods for hiding eating disorders.

The irony, however, *is not* that the possibility exists that students could come into contact with these illicit communications as popular culture technologies in schools become more readily available and as teachers begin to usher in the new learning paradigms proposed by proponents of 21st Century literacies. The irony *is not* that educators could be faced with topical questions concerning how to guide students in the ways that they choose media both in school, for educational or leisure purposes, and in the home, for work and play. The irony *is* that these illicit communications are present in the lives of our students regardless of whether they encounter them inside of school or not, and students are often left to interpret these messages on their own. For example, "a typical 8- to 18-year-old is exposed to 8½ hours of recreational media content daily" (ROBERTS, FOEHR

& Rideout, 2004, p. 36) without much parental supervision (Roberts et al., 2004). In fact, "fewer 8- to 18-year-olds live in homes where an attempt is made to regulate media behavior than live in homes where no such attempt is made" (Roberts et al., 2004, p. 17). In essence, the majority of media usage goes unmonitored; most children are not restricted to a certain number of hours for viewing, restricted due to media ratings, restricted by parental controls or blocks on certain media, or restricted to only using certain media, like the internet, while parents are around (Roberts et al., 2004):

> Even those socio-demographic groups that emerge in a particular analysis as having the *lowest* percentage of televisions, or radios, or video game consoles, or the highest proportion of rules about computer use typically provide children a lot of access and very little supervision. Simply their sheer availability makes media a ubiquitous part of all of our young people's lives. (Roberts et al., 2004, p. 21)

Truly, the irony is that whether we acknowledge the role that media play in the lives of our students or not, media and media messages are everywhere. Therefore, as discussed here, popular media can be used both for educational purposes, and for potentially harmful purposes, however, currently students are left to make meaning from media representations largely outside of the guidance of parental or guardian figures, and traditionally outside of the influence of educators as well. One thing we do know is that "the environment within which young people encounter media affects their media behavior" (Roberts et al., 2004, p. 40), suggesting that humanities programs that utilize popular culture media for learning can promote the critical-analytical perspectives students need in their highly mediated lives.

Examples of Effective Uses of Pop Culture for Teaching and Learning

Historically, popular culture technologies and texts have been ignored, judged in value, or censored by educators; popular culture media have only recently been seen as useful to academic purposes (Scholes, 1998), so the NCTE (2007) standards are perceived by many to be a deviation from traditional learning standards. However, there are many opinions and published works that advocate the value of student generated media, creativity, and technology-related performances of understanding in our highly technological and socially connected world (Jonassen, Howland, Marra & Crismond, 2008; Wiske, Franz & Breit, 2005). Several studies demonstrate the effectiveness of curricula that utilize pop culture media, where the basis for media usage is specific to a students' individual choice. Students' interests or natural curiosities are central to the inquiry in this bottom-up approach to curriculum as opposed to the traditional top-down manner in which teachers filter information and decide which content is important.

For example, Alvermann and Hagood (2000) consider various facets of students' communicative performances through the media literacy framework, and describe the ways that students can use mimesis not as brainwashed members of a crowd, but for learning and critical analysis as they construct identity and represent the self. Their findings suggest that with some cultivation, students can learn to think critically by simply dressing or acting the part of pop icons or music stars they idolize. Fandom to the point of critical analysis (i.e. rereading, interpreting and memorizing things like song lyrics), and dedication to the point of authoring material (i.e. blogging about a band or designing fan websites) shows that pop culture interests can trigger traditional literacy practices, such as poetry analysis for lyrics or critique in terms of the critical analysis of song texts.

Popular music, however, is not the only area of pop culture than can have this effect. Alvermann, Huddleston, and Hagood (2004) are also able to engage students who are fans of professional wrestling (the W.W.F. or the W.W.E.), in thematic comparisons to Shakespearian drama. Through observation and interview, they study students who self-identify as disinterested in school but interested in wrestling. Several of these students become interested, and able to draw connections between wrestling plotlines and Shakespearian themes, which results in successful critical-analytical works concerning the texts. The link between learning and play was pointed out by Dewey (1900) who believed the bottom-up approach to be one way in which students could utilize natural curiosities for learning purposes, a phenomenon only superficially understood and/or encouraged in schools today, despite our knowledge that students independently choose to use media for play and leisure an average of 8 ½ hours per day (ROBERTS et al., 2004). The Alvermann, Huddleston, and Hagood (2004) study is telling in terms of how the harnessing of student interests in pop culture media can motivate academic work.

Additionally, Heron-Hruby, Hagood, and Alvermann (2008) perform a cross-case analysis concerning the ways that students "who struggled to meet school based readings standards… shaped and [are] shaped" (p. 311) by "popular culture and adult expectations for literate practice" (p. 311). They examine the experience through a resistance theory framework in order to discuss the cultural clashes that arise when adult and student perspectives differ in terms of 'correct' usages of popular media:

> [The] findings suggest that adult-youth conflict over popular culture can provide young people with opportunities to investigate sociocultural and sociopolitical issues. Such conflict can also provide adults who work with adolescents opportunities to reflect on how their own expectations about reading and writing shape student learning. (HERON-HRUBY, HAGOOD & ALVERMANN, 2008, p. 311)

The study demonstrates that students can utilize their own media interests as a springboard to engage with lived, authentic topics such as social, cultural, political, or economic themes, in addition to traditionally literary ones. In this case, 'imperfect' popular texts (those not promoted to literary canons) provide opportunities for self-reflection and critical analysis potentially because of those imperfections; students are likely more confident critically analyzing and/or criticizing popular media than Shakespearian flaws, for example. The findings suggest that sometimes the best texts for analysis are those that help students survive, navigate and make conscious choices in their own highly mediated lives. The critical analysis of texts students encounter themselves, in their own lived experiences, can help them to better understand their own identities, and to explore who they are in relation to the world. The implications are relevant to our exploration of 21st Century Literacies, and the future of pop culture media uses for learning.

Policy Recommendations and Conclusions

While most literary canons are by nature longstanding, the question of textual or historical merit is a subjective one. There are, however, common cultural understandings of those authors like Shakespeare that are 'best'. Because opponents of these longstanding literary traditions are often met with resistance, it is the recommendation of this reviewer that policy leadership be initiated from the state level, to give local school districts not only the right or authority to move forward with less than traditional approaches to curriculum, but to provide incentives for them to do so, such as substantial funding for professional development that specifically embraces the use of new technologies (DARLING-HAMMOND & BRANSFORD, 2005), and some funding to subsidize student uses of technology not only in the school, but in the home as well, in order to bridge the digital divide by equitably extending access to both traditional and 21st Century content there.

As discussed in the introduction, local officials, board members, principals, and teachers will

likely confront adversarial perspectives when parents and parent groups learn the potential for students to encounter illicit material via pop culture media. In fact, they will likely encounter considerable opposition when traditionalists get wind that students are learning through pop culture media in general. Educators should expect a social and political backlash when parents, parent groups, and members of the media learn that students are performing school tasks on social media forums, or via their *iPods*. It will likely be shocking even when students who are pop culture enthusiasts (i.e. Alvermann & Hagood, 2000), struggling to meet school standards (i.e. Heron-Hruby, Hagood & Alvermann, 2008), or apathetic towards learning (i.e. Alvermann, Huddleston & Hagood, 2004) are asked to submit work electronically on public spaces like *Facebook* or to learn things such as assonance, consonance and alliteration by listening to pop songs on their school provided *iPods*. While media literacy scholars find the literary skills used to critically analyze pop culture and ancient culture to be similar if not exactly the same (Scholes, 1998), these individuals are likely in the minority in terms of the general population's perception of that which constitutes valuable information for teaching and learning. Because older cultural texts, documents, music genres, and art, for example, are often perceived as better, more valuable, or more credible in academia and in schools while that which is mass produced or popular is often perceived as less credible, less valuable, or less safe for public consumption, this policy question is really one that seeks to addresses the high versus low culture bias that seems ingrained in our social, cultural and educational systems (Haugland, 1994). Haugland (1994) describes this widely accepted cultural hierarchy as an "artificial distinction" (p. 787). Therefore, as Lane and Gracia (2004) write, "it seems obvious that policy decisions should be made and

frameworks put in place that provide schools with the knowledge, resources, and discretion they need to properly implement identified reform efforts" (p. 109), in the case of the example at hand, in order to empower those who identify and would oppose this bias. It is therefore my recommendation, again, that new uses of media technologies and pop culture content be incentivized at the state level, in order to promote substantial professional development and change within school districts, as discussed by Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005).

While policy makers in the coming months, years, and decades might limit their understanding of technology policy as those issues which center around capacity, or the ability of schools to access technology, this paper suggests that discussions concerning *content* and *use* are equally as important. I have presented the pervasiveness of student media usage (i.e. Roberts et al., 2008), highlighted relevant research which shows the potential of utilizing popular culture for learning (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Alvermann, Huddleston & Hagood, 2004; Heron-Hruby, Hagood & Alvermann, 2008) and articulated a position which recommends that policy-makers promote the learning of 21st Century and media literacies both in schools and in the home, in a more conscious way, particularly as we consider the amount of media our students engage with, for work and play, and the amount of unmonitored time students have to participate with this media. Teachers, parents, administrators, and policy-makers are key players in this issue, however with all of their influence they cannot be by the sides of their children and students every moment of the day. Instead, they can create and administer the policies that will promote students' critical and conscious use of media whenever and wherever they are using it.

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