

Critical Pedagogy Through Popular Culture

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Abstract

In our media-saturated society, integrating critical pedagogy in the curriculum at all levels has sparked the interest of researchers, scholars, and educators. They have focused their effort on analyzing the profound influence of the media on the social, economic, and political issues. They have also promoted critical pedagogy to engage students to challenge the ideological and hegemonic representations, the structures of oppression, gender, class, power, and race. This paper attempts to highlight that, in addition to these goals, critical pedagogy of popular culture in the curriculum holds other tremendous benefits to students such as expanding thinking about others, finding alternative narratives in students' own lives, enhancing cultural synchronization, building culturally responsive awareness, building consumer awareness, and scaffolding social intelligence. This essay also contains a discussion of the essential aspects of a successful implementation of critical pedagogy of popular culture in terms of content, teacher's role and education.

Many educators and researchers have explored the relationship between critical pedagogy and popular culture to promote learning that fosters values, social empowerment and social justice, among others, while serving the broad interests of the diverse classroom in our highly media-saturated society. The main purpose of this article is to explore how integrating a critical pedagogy of popular culture in the curriculum in the form of moving images and music creates a powerful educational tool with the following benefits: expanding thinking about others; finding alternative narratives about one's own life; enhancing cultural synchronization; building culturally responsive awareness; building consumer awareness; and scaffolding social intelligence. This article further discusses the characteristics of a selective curriculum relevant to critical pedagogy of popular culture in a postmodern age. Finally, it also describes the new role of the teacher and teacher's education necessary for a successful implementation of critical pedagogy of popular culture.

Critical Pedagogy and Popular Culture

The importance of interpreting popular culture emerged with the advent of mass communication. Mass communication has provided popular culture with a powerful potential in

creating meaning. As Weaver (2005) points out, W. J. T. Mitchell's (1994) picture theory highlights this creative and authoritarian power of popular culture and stresses that people should realize the importance of interpreting the meanings attached to images. These meanings have harmful as well as beneficial impacts on all facets of life. Therefore, the ubiquity, pleasure and pervasiveness of popular culture has underpinned its indispensable connection to various goals of education. For example, Kline, Stewart, and Murphy (2006) explain that the protectionist educators who attempt to shield students from the harmful effects of the media fear that the media promote aggressiveness, laziness, depression, anti-social behavior, school failure and other lifestyle risks. The protectionists argue that children should receive a critical media education that empowers them with critical awareness of the various messages in the media.

Giroux and Simon (1989) also highlight the connection between critical pedagogy and popular culture. They state that popular culture is a pedagogical site where students' experiences and subjectivities are elements in the construction of meaning and knowledge. It is also a terrain of struggles against hegemonic practices of domination and a terrain of possibilities that emanate from tensions between the dominant and the subordinate discourses. For example, popular culture involves collective imagination that allows people to bypass their association with traditional knowledge and create new realities. Because popular cultural practices are the results of people's creativity, a counter-discourse should be established in the context of pedagogical encounter to challenge the relations of domination, privilege students' voice, and provide a promise of possibility for democratic practices and social empowerment. Similarly, Lynde (2005) believes that exposing teenagers to contradictory popular perceptions is an educational enlightenment as students are encouraged to reflect on their beliefs and attitudes. Popular culture is the dictionary of teenagers who are struggling to define themselves: "How else should they gauge their beliefs and behavior? For them, popular culture is normalcy" (p. 159).

White and Walker (2008) argue that traditional education is boring and irrelevant to students' needs, emotions, habits and preferences in our contemporary society. Therefore, they emphasize that "teaching practices in the social studies should promote interest, engagement, rigor, enthusiasm for learning, and a sense of personal investment and empowerment" (p. 16). They suggest that popular culture is an effective vehicle that facilitates such teaching practices especially when students' emotions are engaged.

Popular culture is an inescapable force of social change and democratic practice as it incorporates every aspect of our daily life; people are exposed to popular culture in their homes, communities, and schools; friendships are built around popular themes; and political messages are transmitted through popular culture. Popular culture “has the capacity to intervene in the most critical civic issues and to shape public opinion” (Dolby, 2003, p. 8). Thus, popular culture is a pedagogical site that should not be ignored. Everyday acts contribute to the transformation of the public sphere, the configuration of power, identity and citizenship. The next section illustrates other benefits of critical pedagogy through popular culture that deserve equal attention in the literature.

Other Benefits of Critical Pedagogy through Popular Culture

Expanding Thinking About Others

The use of popular culture in teaching for diversity in adult education helps students expand their thinking about others. Popular culture provides a context that facilitates a change of perspective on many complex issues, especially in the areas of race, gender, and class. When students participate in a reflective and critical discussion about a particular film depicting, whether overtly or covertly, relations of difference along the lines of race, ethnicity, sexuality, class or gender, they expand their thinking about notions of stereotypes and about the struggle of the marginalized people, and they even reflect on their own prejudices and renegotiate their identities (Tisdell & Thompson, 2007). For example, one of the participants in Tisdell and Thompson’s study had changed his view about sexual orientation after watching the movie *Philadelphia* which is about a gay man dying of AIDS. He stated that watching this movie had deeply changed his traditional perspective about gay and lesbian people. Other participants stated that the media helped them understand the challenges facing marginalized people, but had not completely changed their thinking about others (p. 663). I argue that these participants having admitted that the media helped them understand the difficulties of marginalized groups means that they actually became more open for further exploration of such issues and for reflection on their attitudes towards marginalized groups. Also many white participants in the Tisdell and Thompson’s study discussed how uncomfortable and embarrassed they were after watching the movie *Crash* which depicts how racism is exercised by whites as well as blacks, Iranian, Latinos and other minority groups in different situations in Los Angeles, California. The movie forced them to look at their own prejudices and attitudes toward other cultures; they realized that while

they thought of themselves as not racist, they had non-verbally stereotyped other cultures. This process of questioning their own prejudice is an expansion of their thinking about marginalized people. This process of looking at one's own prejudice and expanding thinking about *others* can evolve to lead to one of the most significant and inspiring outcome of the use of popular culture: it facilitates an understanding of issues of social injustices, fosters affiliations and empathy, and raises awareness that every person can participate in alleviating these injustices to a certain extent.

Finding Alternative Narratives

Another benefit of critical pedagogy of popular culture is helping students find alternative narratives for themselves inspired by the characters in the film or their engagement with the text. Popular culture portrays fictional characters in multiple social, political, economic, personal, professional, and family lives similar to the ones in real life. It connects to students' experiences related to fear, emotions, aspirations, and negotiation of their lives. Thus, students look for alternative lives in the movies they watch. In a study on the use of media in teaching, Tisdell and Thompson (2007) show how participants in their study related their lives to the lives of the characters in the media and how the media helped them make choices in their real lives. For example, a white participant named Kristin related her life to the lives of the four women in the show *Sex and the City* while the lesbian and bisexual women, such as Barbara and Helen, related to the show *The L World* that depicts lesbian community. Barbara, a lesbian participant, explained how *The L World* involved her in discussions with her partner and friends about alternative choices in their lives. Therefore, critical analysis of popular culture in an open and safe classroom environment can be highly beneficial to students because it offers them ways to deeply explore issues significant to their daily lives. It may also help them find alternatives and make choices inspired from their relatedness to the characters' lives in the media. However, it is important to emphasize that fostering a safe classroom environment is essential to achieve these beneficial outcomes. Also, the role of the teacher, as discussed below, is crucial in this regard.

Enhancing Cultural Synchronization

Critical pedagogy of popular culture can enhance cultural synchronization. Cultural synchronization is enhanced when students' knowledge is integrated in the classroom, while students' resistance takes place when teachers focus their instruction on academic material without addressing the existence and impact of cultural differences (Mahiri, as cited in Paul,

2000, p. 3). For example, Paul (2000) explores how a blend of the students' culture such as rap and the teacher's culture such as poetry can engage students in the learning process, particularly in urban-center schools with young black and Latino students. His students showed enthusiasm when they found out that "rap was valid poetic form" (p. 248).

Building Culturally Responsive Awareness

Critical pedagogy of popular culture helps build a culturally responsive awareness in the classroom among students of different cultural backgrounds. Gay (as cited in Au, 2006) states that culturally responsive instruction "acknowledges the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students' disposition, attitudes and approaches to learning as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum" (p. 114). Many movies and talk shows, for example, *Italian Wedding*, depict the values and customs of various cultures in a positive way. When discussions of these values and customs take place within the walls of the classrooms in a safe environment, minority students may feel more welcomed and mainstream students develop culturally responsive awareness that enables them to interact with minority students with respect, harmony and open-mindedness.

Building Consumer Awareness

Critical pedagogy of popular culture offers a great potential in building consumer awareness. Children are constantly bombarded with media messages that pressure them to act upon by various marketing corporations and organizations. Many scholars have expressed their concern about the mindless consumption of popular culture by children. Kline, Stewart, and Murphy (2006) subscribe to the view of a new critical media education that enhances children's critical thinking in order to foster a preventive education that acts as a defense against the detrimental impact of the commercialized messages in the mass media on children. McLaren (1995) defines consumerism as a "predatory culture" (p. 2) that has the power to infiltrate and contaminate the minds of the people, their ears and their eyes, by advocating and marketing a culture of violence and acquisition. Thus, he advocates a critical pedagogy in education that promotes students' agency by encouraging them to explore and contest media messages in order to construct their own identity rather than having it shaped and constructed by the media. I argue that when students participate in a critique of the media messages, they develop a deep understanding of its influential nature on their life styles, and consuming habits. Such an understanding activates consumer awareness and helps them develop a protective resistance to

commercialized messages. Integrating popular culture in the school curriculum is an effective tool to protect children against the mass media commercialized messages (McLaren, 1995).

Scaffolding of Social Intelligence

I also argue that critical pedagogy of popular culture is a scaffold of social intelligence needed for all students regardless of their gender, race and sexuality as well as their ethnic, cultural, social, political and economic backgrounds. Social intelligence, as defined by Goleman (2006), has two main components: social awareness and social facility. “Social awareness refers to a spectrum that runs from instantaneously sensing another’s inner state, to understanding her feelings and thoughts, to 'getting' complicated social situations” (p. 84). Primal empathy, attunement, empathic accuracy and social cognition are the facets of social awareness. Social facility is our use of social awareness. Self-presentation, influence, and concern are three aspects of social facility. Popular culture in the form of movies, shows, commercials and TV programs are rich with individual experiences and social interactions depicting emotions, personal needs, ambitions, obstacles, conflicts, feelings, beliefs, values and morals. I argue that engaging students in a critical analysis of these texts enhances their social intelligence. For example, Goleman defines primal empathy as the ability to automatically detect emotions and feelings by observing others’ tone of voice, and non-verbal expressions. I maintain that a critical analysis and discussion, for example, whether three high-school boys approaching another child are bullies based on their non-verbal expressions and the way they are walking, activates students’ primal empathy. Consequently, they can draw upon it to make judicious decisions when faced with similar situation in real life.

Thus far, I have explored the connections between popular culture and critical pedagogy and illustrated the multiple benefits of integrating critical pedagogy of popular culture in the curriculum. The following section demonstrates that, to achieve those benefits, an effective implementation of critical pedagogy of popular culture is required especially in terms of content selected, teacher’s role and education.

Selection of Popular Texts

Selection of popular culture texts for critical pedagogy is tremendously challenging to teachers for many reasons. First, Callahan and Low (2004) state that most teachers feel that they lack expertise in selecting sound and challenging texts that promote effective and dynamic learning. The cause of this feeling emanates mostly from their awareness of the students’ tacit

knowledge of popular culture which might significantly surpass their knowledge. Therefore, Callahan and Low encourage teachers to relinquish their authority and co-investigate culture with their students. Students then are motivated to bring popular culture texts into the classroom to share and explain their knowledge with all the classroom participants. Students will then be more likely to be passionately and seriously engaged in their learning.

Teachers are to exhibit utmost sensitivity when selecting popular culture material for critical pedagogy in order to avoid selecting films and songs that are either overtly or covertly immersed in racism, sexism, stereotypes, gender, class, and ability. Though the purpose of critical pedagogy in most cases is to help students find alternative narratives about their own lives, expand their thinking about others, uncover unjust social issues and ideologies, deconstruct, and reconstruct and negotiate meanings, and though such themes are essential for liberating and emancipatory critical pedagogy, a caution on the part of the teacher is required to avoid material that offends and further marginalizes some students. Also, it is important that teachers be aware of their students' readiness to be involved in what can lead to heated and upsetting discussions. The movies, shows, or music chosen should involve students in a genuine exploration of their own experiences and offer new positive alternatives and choices to both marginalized and subordinate groups.

An important caveat when selecting popular culture texts to be incorporated in the curriculum is that "often, popular culture is used as a 'hook' or 'attention grabber' in the classroom to draw students into the traditional elements of English curriculum" (Callahan & Low, 2004, p. 56). Also, White and Walker (2008) warn against the deceptive use of popular culture in education to reinforce the traditional curriculum rather than the development of a transformative education and the critical thinking of students. For instance, by showing a film about one of Shakespeare's plays, teachers are reinforcing the traditional education under the pretext of providing innovation through the use of popular culture.

I am cognizant that the following argument could spawn intense debate among scholars, but I strongly believe in it: it is time to strip the overloaded curriculum of old-fashioned and high culture subjects mostly related to Anglo-American mindset and integrate instead critical pedagogy of various forms of popular culture that are germane to the daily lives of contemporary students. Many scholars advocate the integration of popular culture and critical pedagogy of popular culture along the traditional curriculum. For example, Semali (2000) maintains that the

classic works, for example, Shakespeare and Milton, are “remote and disconnected from their [students] experiences” (p. 3) and that it is time to “broaden the canon and the curriculum” (p. 3) to include films and videos among other kinds of technologies. Also, Bartholome (2005) states that “in an introductory literature course it can be beneficial to have students watch an episode of *Seinfeld* before attempting Shakespeare’s *Much Ado about Nothing*” (p. 151). I argue that students can learn the same values and ideas embedded in *Much Ado about Nothing* from an episode of *Seinfeld*, without wasting their time and energy in deciphering Shakespeare’s language, when provided with proper guidance towards critical analysis. They also acquire a long-lasting knowledge because they are frequently exposed to *Seinfeld* outside the classroom, and can easily connect with, enjoy, and relate their daily life to it more easily than to Shakespeare’s plays.

The Role of the Teacher

The role of the critical teacher is fundamental to the success of integrating critical pedagogy of popular culture in the classroom. First of all, the new role of the teacher involves a risky challenge to the traditional assumption that academic knowledge imposes on popular culture. Academic knowledge rejects popular culture as a form of knowledge and maintains that popular culture goal is to delude the naïve viewers (Weaver & Daspit, 1999). Weaver and Daspit call for a reconfiguration of the epistemological notion of knowledge and method in relation to the ways in which students, teachers and administrators enter into a dynamic and forever shifting relationship with popular culture texts in order to construct multiple meanings of the texts, schooling and society. In other words, Weaver and Daspit urge critical teachers to see knowledge as partial rather than fixed, and to encourage multiple independent readings of popular culture texts that connect with students, administrators and teachers’ personal experiences, and to offer “a pedagogy of possibility in which societal problems are addressed, silenced voices heard, and alternatives envisioned” (p. xxvii).

Also, in the process of promoting critical pedagogy, Kincheloe (2004) asserts that teachers cannot not claim neutrality in their teaching practices. When they express their opposition to the dominant power, they are not indoctrinating and manipulating students as it is argued by some critics. When they remain silent and ignore forms of oppression in the mainstream education they are approving these forms. To deal with this dilemma of educational politics, Kincheloe emphasizes that teachers should not impose their perspectives on their

students but explain it to them. Therefore, he maintains that critical teachers should assume a dialectical authority, an authority that is directed toward supporting students to produce their own meanings rather than delivering fixed knowledge to them.

Kincheloe (2004) also highlights the importance of empowering teachers as researchers to transcend their limited traditional role of delivering just what experts or curriculum developers impose on the education system. As researchers, teachers become learners of the social, political, economic, cultural and psychological factors that affect their students' learning. They construct their own insights of the nature of the teaching process and produce knowledge that challenges the standard curriculum. Further, researching students is crucial to effective critical pedagogy. Teachers should develop a deep understanding of their students' environment, their current preoccupations, their social interactions with other people, and their sociocultural backgrounds, amongst others (pp.17- 20). The author states that, "Freire, Giroux, McLaren, Shirley Steinberg, bell hooks, Patti Lather, Deborah Britzman, and Donaldo Macedo are all advocates of various forms of critical teaching who recognize the importance of understanding the social construction of student consciousness, focusing on motives, values and emotions" (p. 20). Students' diverse backgrounds in terms of culture, race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and class as well as many other factors influence their learning process. Therefore, teachers must develop a deep understanding of cognitive differences affecting the learning of their students in order to promote a socially transformative education.

As already highlighted above, the role of the critical teacher is more complex and challenging when critical pedagogy is implemented through the use of popular culture texts such as movies and music. Therefore, there is a need for a progressive teacher education that, on one hand, prepares teachers to embrace multiple interpretations of schooling in relation to cultural, social, economic and political issues related to the students in their classroom and in the larger society. On the other hand, it provides teachers with an extensive knowledge of popular culture forms that are already incorporated in the daily life of students. The process of becoming a critical teacher of popular culture is a demanding task that requires subtle observation, deep, self-reflection, cultural and social sensitivity, heightened awareness of interactions between the behavior of the students and their environment, as well as courage to challenge the traditional political status quo imposed on schooling. The educational benefits, as outlined above, are worth the effort.

Conclusion

In conclusion, critical pedagogy of popular culture offers a tremendous amount of educational benefits such as expanding thinking about others, finding alternative narratives about one's own life, enhancing cultural synchronization, building culturally responsive awareness, building consumer awareness, and scaffolding social intelligence. A well-selected film can encompass and intertwine different themes engendering multiple benefits in a fun and interesting way. Through critical pedagogy of popular culture students' critical thinking and understanding of most of their life experiences is significantly enhanced. They become more engaged and interested in evaluating and negotiating their own perspectives on the connection between learning, personal experiences, and social values. They became effective agent of change of their lives, the lives of people around them and society as a whole. Therefore, it is time to end the discussion of whether to integrate it in the curriculum and start an effective and progressive effort to select appropriate popular culture texts to incorporate in the curriculum through all grades, from elementary to high school to university. It is time that teacher's education undergoes a progressive change toward preparing future teachers to be efficient facilitators of learning relevant to our postmodern age.

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