A Pedagogical Journey: Albuquerque 2015

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The subject of pedagogy and popular culture has assumed increasing significance in academic circles, especially since the publication of Phil Benson's and Alice Chik's anthology *Popular Culture, Pedagogy and Teacher Education* (2014), a series of interventions discussing how popular culture can be implemented in a variety of teaching situations across the globe. The book offers valuable insights into how popular culture can inspire learners through materials drawn from everyday life but tends to avoid essential questions such as *what constitutes popular cultural material* (and how it differs from other textual forms) and *what learning outcomes might be accomplished* through its deployment in the secondary or tertiary classroom (Benson and Chik). Such questions are intrinsic to all efforts to improve pedagogical standards.

In February 2015, I attended several panels in the "Pedagogy and Popular Culture Section" of the 36th Annual Southwest Popular/American Culture Association (SWPACA) Conference in Albuquerque, with the intention of discovering some possible answers, as well as finding out more about the latest thinking on the topic. In the following paragraphs I offer brief summaries of the papers I found most exciting and how they cumulatively represented a quest for the pedagogical Holy Grail of what should be taught in the classroom and why. Based on the evidence of what I heard, I conclude by offering a brief theoretical framework focusing on how and why popular culture offers unique opportunities for educators and learners alike to experiment with alternative forms of learning.

In a panel on "Teaching with Film and Television," the independent scholar Bryanna Bynum offered some thoughts as to how *Downton Abbey* might help introduce lower level undergraduates to other cultures past and present. Although the series is in itself an historical (re-)construction, with its origins in earlier period dramas such as *Upstairs Downstairs*, it provides the impetus for a variety of activities designed to promote empathy: learners can rewrite the plots, undertake prediction exercises, or even role-play (if educators are brave enough to tolerate it!). Through such activities they develop abilities such as group negotiation and collaboration. Bynum's presentation seemed plausible enough but left me wondering whether such objectives could be fulfilled with other materials. Learners could equally well empathize with Shakespeare as *Downton Abbey*. With a neat sense of timing, Tiffany Scarola (Northwestern Oklahoma State University) offered a series of what she termed "unusual" approaches to pedagogy using *The Daily Show* and different social media. She could not have known that regular presenter Jon Stewart would have announced his retirement from the show the day before her presentation; the news rendered her arguments all the more up-to-the-minute, proving unquestionably that popular culture possesses a contemporaneity that is denied to other forms of material and

hence exerts an immediate appeal for learners.

After one panel, one of my questions had been partially answered: popular culture's sheer ordinariness renders it superficially attractive, especially for educators faced with the prospect of working with large classes and limited preparation time. Yet still Scarola's presentation left me with lingering questions; how can we create a "true scholarly environment," as she put it, using material which to the majority of educators might seem profoundly unscholarly? Do educators need to rethink their roles in the learning process? Jennifer Bankard (University of Southern California) tried to answer this question by drawing a distinction between different types of responses to popular cultural texts. Learners tended to react "personally" to a text on first viewing; it was only after educators had provided vital input that they could formulate a "truthful" response integrating theoretical concepts with informed analysis. Bankard asserted that the process of transformation from "personal" to "truthful" responses could only be accomplished through collaboration, but I was not so sure. Three days previously I had taught to a group of learners in a Texas institution, the majority of whom experienced difficulty in comprehending auteur theory and how (or whether) it should apply to their lives outside the academy. Although their educator had assigned them several basic texts, they admitted that such texts appeared "highbrow," in complete contrast to their quotidian way of speaking. Their "personal" response (that the texts were difficult) seemed irreconcilable with the "truthful" response expected from them by the educator. Bankard attributed this problem to some of the long-standing binaries (educator/ learner, theory/ practice, highbrow/ popular) that stand in the way of accomplishing successful learning outcomes.

Yet such comments do not offer much of a way forward for anyone interested in creating effective popular culture pedagogies. Perhaps we need to set aside the notion of a "proper scholarly environment" (whatever that means), and rather work towards a learning environment in which everyone – educators and learners alike – are treated as equals. Another panel on "The First-Year College Experience" offered various accounts of how educators addressed this issue. Kristine Larsen (Central Connecticut State University) proposed a series of extracurricular activities such as walking trips as well as in-class activities designed to forge classroom unity. Kate Huber (University of Central Oklahoma) advocated the introduction of classic satire (Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, for example) alongside popular cultural material to stimulate critical thinking and thereby transform learners from passive into active participants in the classroom event. Miriam Kushkaki (Arizona State University) begged to differ; she believed that learners could only refine their judgments through popular cultural texts – a point reiterated by Margaret Wintersole (Laredo Community College), who believed that the fear of failure needed to be overcome before an effective learning environment could be established. This, she believed, could be best accomplished through collaboration, giving learners the freedom to construct their own syllabi (in collaboration with educators).

All four presenters offered plausible accounts of their pedagogic experience, but overlooked the essential point of any learning exchange: what do those involved actually get out of it? It's all very well to claim that popular culture is accessible to learners' (and early career academics') daily lives, but that advantage does not really provide a justification for using this type of material in the classroom. Negotiation and collaboration are significant components of any learning experience, but they are not exclusive to popular culture pedagogy. They form a basic part of my junior year courses in "Introduction to English Literature" in the Department of Education at Başkent University, Ankara, Turkey. The term "critical thinking" is frequently cited as one of the major advantages of any form of humanities education, but I find it highly imprecise (critical thinking about what?). Perhaps the roundtable on "Popular Culture and Media" led by seven representatives of the University of Texas at San Antonio would offer answers to my questions. Drawing on a variety of sources such as *The Walking Dead* and *Megamind*, the presenters explained how popular cultures could be used to explore notions of postcolonialism, identity and participation, and thereby help learners acquire the kind of citizenship abilities intrinsic to their lives outside the educational institution. I was encouraged

by the way this panel drew a connection between popular cultural texts and tolerance, while claiming that learning takes place throughout one's life, not just in the academy. Even while watching a movie or chatting online, individuals might experience an "aha" moment. Popular culture pedagogy dissolves the (culturally constructed) boundaries between work and play, school and home, and thereby stimulates learners to become more mindful of themselves and their potential for intellectual development.

In the panel "Multimodality and Maker Culture" Vittorio Marone (also of the University of Texas at San Antonio) argued that we all experience moments of "silent-being," as we step out of our socially-constructed roles as educators, learners, parents, or siblings and reflect on our past as it shapes the present and future. Such reflections are most intense once we are exposed to popular cultural products: while taking a vicarious pleasure in their "popularity" (as compared to the more refined pleasures of high cultural products), we lay ourselves more open to being influenced by them. This helps to explain why certain musical styles and their stars are transformed into global phenomena. Marone argued that by drawing upon our "silent-being" we can establish alternative modes of learning extending beyond the classroom into every aspect of our daily lives. This model offers fruitful areas of research designed to answer such questions as can we stimulate learners to make sense of their "silent-being," not only in class but through social media? What potential might there be for creating virtual discussion-groups to develop this facility through exposure to popular cultural texts? At last I was beginning to find answers to my previous question about how popular culture pedagogy might differ from other pedagogical forms; perhaps educators do not have to proclaim the fact that they are using "popular culture" but rather establish a collaborative, non-judgmental approach to learning extending beyond the classroom in which everyone has sufficient time and space to savor moments of "silent-being" and share them with others. These points underpinned the talk given by Tiffany Bourelle (University of New Mexico) on twenty-first century literacies, as she referred to the importance of continuous learning geared towards personal growth. Maggie Melo and Anushka Peres (University of Arizona) offered a case study of how this objective might be implemented, as they recounted a unit of work wherein learners had to script, research and evaluate short films of their own, as well as integrating their prior knowledge of film studies with new insights gained as part of the filmmaking process. Melo and Peres took into account the fact that unlike previous generations, twenty-first century learners possess a quite astonishingly sophisticated visual literacy. It is incumbent on every educator to draw upon as well as refine that literacy, and perhaps the most accessible means to achieve this is through popular cultural texts.

The truth of this notion was admirably reiterated in a panel led by Moorea Coker and Jared Bolin, both graduates of Texas A&M University – Commerce who are currently teaching English and composition at high schools in the same state. With the participation of several of their learners (Zachary Alan Leonard, Hannah McKeon, Emily Alavarenga, Jennifer Velazquez, and Pascal Ibe), they offered a case study of a scheme of work introducing film and popular culture as modes of learning. The subject matter might have been familiar; the style of delivery certainly wasn't. Coker and Bolin had given their learners the freedom to develop their own ideas, and the learners had responded with a quite alarming degree of critical and intellectual sophistication. In their short presentations as part of the panel, they revealed a facility with certain concepts (e.g. Foucauldian constructions of power) that would flummox many an under- or postgraduate learner in different contexts. Inspired by such concepts, they arrived at nuanced appreciations of popular culture and its essential role in promoting dissident viewpoints. The learners spoke with rare passion; the assignments they discussed were not just designed to be graded and forgotten about but represented genuine attempts to forge a community of practice involving themselves and their educators. The age gap separating Coker and Bolin from their learners had been seamlessly negotiated; everyone developed their visual literacy through a series of learner-generated activities and used that experience to develop transferable abilities such as negotiation and listening.

As I listened to the high school learners and marveled at the facility with which they set forth their

ideas (with a fluency that would put many academics to shame), I began to see how my experience witnessing different interventions in the "Pedagogy and Popular Culture" area might help me formulate a basic theory of pedagogy and popular culture that differs from other pedagogic forms. The high school learners' panel emphasized the importance of working from the bottom-up rather than top-down. It is not necessary to forge "a proper scholarly environment," as Jennifer Bankard suggests; rather educators and learners should develop material of their own. The University of Texas San Antonio roundtable helped me understand the significance of setting aside culturally-relative distinctions between school, home, work and leisure, and regarding every experience as a potential learning experience, to be shared virtually as well as face-to-face. Marone's analysis of "silent-being" draws our attention to the importance of being non-judgmental and thereby creating spaces for everyone to cultivate their own perspectives. This seems to me a far more suggestive and liberating than the overused term "critical thinking," that might require a degree of scholarly sophistication that seems antithetical to popular culture's essential attraction. Through exposure to familiar and accessible material, learners can not only cultivate their visual literacy but look into themselves, thereby developing a reflective capacity that recognizes the presence of unknowable aspects of our own (as well as others') personalities. Learning should transform the unknowable into the knowable and thereby expand our awareness of the world we inhabit.

Choosing the texts for learning can be accomplished through various means. We can follow Bynum's suggestion and place the responsibility in educators' hands, or we can take the path trodden by the Texas high school learners and forge a collaborative approach. What matters more in popular culture pedagogy is the methods by which such texts are exploited, with the emphasis placed on discovery learning designed to bridge the generation gap between educators and learners as well as promoting cross-cultural awareness. This is something both inter- and intracultural; as education becomes more globalized as well as multicultural in scope, we have to develop more openness to alternative points of view, a willingness to negotiate and a toleration of difference. This requires a high level of understanding on the part of learners and educators alike; what is not is said is often more significant that what is overtly stated.

What the panels helped me understand is that popular culture pedagogy is *difficult*, despite all appearances to the contrary. While the texts employed might be more accessible than other types of writing, learners and educators have to make a considerable ideological shift so that they can work effectively with such texts. In place of critical thinking, they have to acquire a facility to really listen to one another and use that experience to forge a genuinely cooperative atmosphere wherein learners can trust themselves and not feel the need to seek validation from their educators. Modes of assessment have to be rethought with the emphasis placed on visual literacy-based assignments rather than the more familiar research paper and/or written exam. I am not saying these last-named activities should be dispensed with, but rather that they should be a constituent part of a menu of assessments encompassing visual, spoken and writing abilities. We have to understand how the term "knowledge" in the Victorian sense has become obsolete now; what matters more is the development of transferable abilities that not only contribute to career development but prove beyond doubt the intrinsic place of the humanities within any curriculum, irrespective of the institution, It is this potential that renders popular pedagogy significant, and I pay tribute to all the presenters, as well as the panel chairs Kurt Depner and Erik Walker for organizing such a series of inspirational sessions.

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