Using Popular Culture in the Classroom in High Schools and Universities

REVIEWS OF:

Janak, Edward, and Ludovic A. Sourdot, editors. *Educating through Popular Culture: You're Not Cool Just Because You Teach through Comics*. Lexington Books, 2017. Hardback, 341 pp. $120.00. ISBN: 9781498549372;

Buckingham, David, editor. *Teaching Popular Culture: Beyond Radical Pedagogy*. Routledge, 1998. Paperback, 207 pp. $43.95. ISBN 1857287932;

Reiser, Elana. *Teaching Mathematics Using Popular Culture*. McFarland, 2005. Paperback, 235 pp. $29.95. ISBN 9780786477067;

Dong, Lan, editor. *Teaching Comics and Graphic Narratives: Essays on Theory, Strategy, and Practice*. McFarland, 2012. Paperback, 272 pp. $35.00. ISBN 9780786462462.

Laurence Raw
Baskent University,
Ankara, Turkey
l_rawjalaurence@yahoo.com

Lexington has recently released a very large anthology of essays on teaching popular culture. Most of the contributions came from the Popular Culture Association conferences – both national and regional – so it should be of interest to all readers of *Dialogue*. It's very pricey, unfortunately ($120), so unless you are fortunate enough to receive a review copy, it is predominantly destined for library use. It is divided into five sections, each devoted to some aspect of teaching popular culture: Looking Behind, Looking Around, Looking Globally, Looking Ahead, and Looking Theoretically. They provide an effective way to organize the book but only incidentally reflect the content of the essays themselves. *Educating through Popular Culture* is best approached as a text to dip into as and when required, with many points appearing regularly in different essays.

However, the book as a whole raises a bigger question facing all educators and learners in popular culture, which relates to how the subject should be taught. Should educators approach popular culture in similar fashion to more conventional subjects as a primarily top-down subject, with learners regularly given lectures, worksheets and other teacher-initiated material, from which they can make judgments? Or should popular culture make use of its advantages as a wide-ranging subject and essay a bottom-up approach, with learners given a full say in how the course (or courses) should be structured, delivered and assessed? Whilst

it might be attractive to embrace this form of learning, several teachers reject it, fearing a loss of control and potential censure from their senior managers. In this piece I want to address the topic of learning, using extracts from *Educating through Popular Culture* as well as extracts from previously published books on the topic, in an attempt to see whether teachers at all levels are prepared to let go the reins and allow the class to be truly collaborative. It's a risky strategy to be sure, but one that can pay dividends if boldly implemented.

In the late Nineties, the spirit of Cultural Studies was dominant, especially in the anthology edited by the Briton David Buckingham. His *Teaching Popular Culture* was full of bold statements, inviting teachers to experiment with new methods of learning, including video production that not only taught children production skills but produced the pleasure in "exploring the boundaries between work and freedom" (Grace and Tobin 54). This approach created extensive debate among educators about the "naughty, resistant and transgressive behaviours of students," which to some were neither emancipatory nor progressive but simply reinforced existing gender divisions, with the boys aggressively asserting their authority (55). Such beliefs overlooked the potential for establishing transgressive and carnivalesque elements in the curriculum: "sexual, grotesque, and violent ways of working can be ways of working through rather than just reproducing dominant discourses and of undesirable social dynamics, and of building a sense of community in the classroom" (Grace and Tobin 56). There was a fundamental ambiguity about this apparently libertarian spirit: while giving students the power to experiment with their own material, it was circumscribed by a Bakhtinian paradigm that was determinedly educator-oriented. Because Bakhtin favored the carnivalesque spirit as a way of liberating learners, this approach was justified. What the authors did not address, however, was how teachers could encourage the "sexual, grotesque, and violent ways of working," without losing control of what they were doing during the lesson.

In general books about teaching tended to be slightly more conservative in their scope, concentrating on how popular culture could enhance the impact of certain classes on learners. Elena Reiser's *Teaching Mathematics Using Popular Culture* offers a series of strategies drawn from film and television for improving the quality of Mathematics teaching. The book is divided into sections, including algebra, geometry, probability and modeling, and offers examples from US television programs to illustrate particular points about each subject. The book has obviously been designed as a series of resources for educators to draw upon while creating their own individual classes, rather than as a course-book. I am not a mathematician, so I cannot comment on the quality of the materials, but the book as a whole conforms to what most educators expect from popular culture: to provide a vindication for what they have already done in the subject. Educators offer the theory; textbooks like *Teaching Mathematics Using Popular Culture* offers examples of that theory in practice. In such learner/educator exchanges, the educator retains overall control of the classroom. The same basic principle applies to Lan Dong's *Teaching Comics and Graphic Narratives*, which incorporates a series of suggestions about classic graphic novels and how to teach them. There is nothing wrong with this approach, especially for the tyro educator, but this kind of volume limits learner potential for implementing their own approach fundamentally different from that of their educators.

In *Educating Through Popular Culture*, the views of the writers are much more cautious: learner-centered activities are encouraged but within a framework that is educator-centered. The general consensus seems to be that this approach is the only one that can orient the semester's work towards examinations. Tonia A. Donsay's "Karma in Comics" offers a case-study of her class in which learners have freedom to choose texts but are expected to follow a series of guidelines relating to the primary and secondary source documents and the folklores they involve, and how the comic renditions of such texts are constructed, with special attention paid to the storyboard as well as the individual frame. Paul Chaozon Bauer and Marc Wolterbeek want to "made academia cool" (61) by combining traditional literary study with popular culture in the form of comic books. This involves relating such texts to literary criticism as well as involving processes of genre comparison

(77). Learners have the freedom to bring in texts that they might like to study, but the focus is very much on the educator directing classes towards a predetermined end – the exams.

Yet there are alternatives. Cadey Korson and Weronika Kusek explore patterns of internal and external migration in the US through popular media. They have devised their own critical pedagogical approach with its particular aims and objectives, but learners embark on a series of discovery learning projects to understand the power of stereotyping, complemented by a use of social media to understand other people's feelings about the topic (123). Educators guide but try and refrain from offering too many comments – not at least until the papers are marked. Maha Al-Saati has a more difficult task while working in a Saudi university as he had to provide some cultural context for his activities before encouraging learners to work on their own (127-45). Any form of learner empowerment is a step forward on the road to independence, according to Chad William Timm, who persuasively argues for popular culture-related activities in all forms of classroom to develop individual philosophies of education (221-41).

However much we admire the contributors' accounts, there still remains a feeling that compared to the pioneering spirit of Buckingham's *Teaching Popular Culture*, the articles in *Educating Through Popular Culture* are somewhat muted, that the potential for liberating learners has been limited somewhat by institutional forces such as exams or the need to keep justifying the subject to heads of department and other opinion-formers. Partly this can be explained by context; when Buckingham's book was first published, tuition fees did not exist in British universities and there wasn't the emphasis on providing subject-specific outcomes for each course. Educators could get away with relating their popular cultural work to more general issues, that involving the learners in the planning stage of a course would produce a greater feeling of being responsible for their own learning, especially if they could negotiate about the content and form the assessment would take. If educators were brave enough, they could go out on a limb and co-create a course with learners and justify it to their superiors. At that point it seemed as if popular culture embraced much of cultural studies' pioneering spirit in creating new learning approaches.

Now the atmosphere is no longer so conducive to experiment. Most students have to find their own money for fees and accommodation and hence have become more concerned with value in education. It is up to the educators to provide the stimulus for them through educator-initiated activities. Meanwhile the educators have to justify their courses in numeric rather than pedagogical terms; if a program does not attract sufficient numbers, then it will be closed down. The desire to experiment has been replaced by the instinct to survive. Courses should have their own subject-specific aims and objectives; the fact that a Popular Culture course can improve the abilities acquired in the world of work is considered less of a priority. There may, of course, be exceptions to this rule, but I believe that institutional changes have been fundamental in limiting popular culture's potential to encourage learner independence and therefore encourage a top-down view of learning amongst educators desperate to survive.

Some readers might consider my views too negative; after all, there are related disciplines such as Fan Studies that actively encourage learner participation, and the effect of such courses should impact Popular Culture courses as well. However Paul A. Crutcher and Autumn M. Dodge sound a cautionary note at the end of the *Educating Through Popular Culture* anthology; however much we might want to promote Popular Culture in the curriculum, learners might not feel the same way, having been brought up in a world where value for money counts more than intellectual and personal development (313). Clearing that obstacle might be more difficult than we anticipate.

REFERENCES

Grace, Donna J., and Joseph Tobin, "Butt-Jokes and Mean-teacher Parodies: Video Production in the

Elementary Classroom." *Teaching Popular Culture: Beyond Radical Pedagogy*, edited by David Buckingham, Routledge, 2005, pp. 42-63.

AUTHOR BIO

Laurence Raw teaches in the Department of English, Faculty of Education, Başkent University in Ankara, Turkey. A long-time contributor to popular cultural journals on the subject of teaching, he is the author of *Adaptation Studies and Learning - New Approaches with Tony Gurr* (Scarecrow, 2013). He recently wrote *Six Turkish Filmmakers* (U. of Wisconsin P., 2017).

REFERENCE CITATION

MLA

Raw, Lawrence. "Using Popular Culture in the Classroom in High Schools and Universities." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2017, www.journaldialogue.org/issues/v4-issue-1/using-popular-culture-in-the-classroom-in-high-schools-and-universities/

APA

Raw, L. (2017). Using popular culture in the classroom in high schools and universities. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy. 4*(1). http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v4-issue-1/using-popular-culture-in-the-classroom-in-high-schools-and-universities/