

## Teaching for Change

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” This axiom was aptly expressed by Nelson Mandela, a renowned political leader who taught by the example he set through his words and his deeds to an audience of 40 million South Africans. The axiom ties well into the theme of the current issue of *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy* which deals with the act of teaching through the elucidation of known phenomena in order to affect the thinking of members of the public and bring about an element of personal growth and social transformation. Such pedagogy is present in various forms both inside and outside the traditional classroom. Yet Mandela’s lesson of peace and reconciliation was a challenging one to absorb and to live by in a post-apartheid South Africa that was rife with racism, white supremacy, and structural violence. But to maintain peace in the country, and to enable its citizens to move towards the transformation of the oppressive social, political and economic realities that had been experienced by Black South Africans, it was crucial that Mandela’s message reach a mass public. Hence, by strategically utilising his political platform to lead controversial conversations within the public sphere, Mandela succeeded in employing rhetoric with the potential to impart knowledge to South Africans of all stripes, and was aimed at modifying their perspectives and bringing about transformative peace and stability within the country.

Education has to do with the types of conversations we choose to lead as educators and the methods we use to engage others in the conversation. It is about the pedagogical tools we employ, and its effectiveness relies on the skillful use of the platforms that are available to us. Regarding out-of-classroom platforms, these have been numerous and diverse throughout the ages. For instance, ancient Greeks had the Pnyx, a hill with a platform on which rhetoricians stood to address their listeners. Preachers had their pulpits and religious reformers their pamphlets. And today, we have various art forms, social media platforms, differing forms of satire, and late-night talk shows, among others. The wide reach of our current-day platforms impart a host of possibilities for personal and social change as these can be used to engender a conversation among diverse groups of people. Through them, an “educator” can elucidate a perspective on certain phenomena or further explain, approve of, or even ridicule a particular politico/socio event. Also, by using platforms such as comedy or satire, a public personage can spread their message in an entertaining way. This can be a powerful pedagogical tool. Yet as with all forms of communication, there are limitations that could lead to a particular message being diluted or provide room for misinterpretation.

The pedagogical tools used by public persons with large followings can also generate unfruitful misunderstandings and controversies. In some cases, the tools such influential personalities select to promote specific points of view can lead to a misinterpretation of their intended meaning, inciting their followers as well as their dissenters to remonstrate in ways that are potentially harmful to their reputations or to their cause. What’s more, the negative conversations and comments that come up may have less of a focus on the message delivered than on the actual character of the person delivering that message.

The four articles and the musings on pedagogy and practice featured in *Critique and “Controversy” in Pedagogy and Pop Culture*, highlight the ways that pop culture and social media provide platforms that promote critical thinking, dialogue and debate, and the type of questioning that underpins a socially aware and politically engaged citizenry. For instance, in our first article, “Perils and Promise of Virtual Reality in Inclusive Teaching”, Michelle VanNatta examines the possibilities, and potential difficulties, of employing

virtual reality (VR) as a classroom tool to support inclusive education pedagogy. The author presents a specific VR project that was employed in a criminology university class and provides the views of the students regarding the benefits and limitations of the exercise. Through VanNatta's article, we learn that via the use of VR, which has the technology to simulate real environments in a completely embodied and immersive experience, students are given the opportunity to experience the reality and point of view of others. It is this that renders VR technology relevant in the inclusive classroom. The adage that states that "you have to walk in another someone else's shoes before judging someone" rings true, and the shoes of others provided by the VR experience include those of members of diverse societal groups whose experiences in society differ from members of the dominant and more privileged ones. Allowing university students to experience the lives of different individuals from the latter's point of view enhances their understanding of the current realities of their lives. VanNatta illustrates the use of VR technology in her classroom via a study where, subsequent to the activity, students answered a survey where they shared their opinion on the effectiveness of the exercise as well as some limitations that would need to be addressed.

Our second article, "Will the Odds Ever Be in Her Favor? Katniss Everdeen and the Female Athlete" demonstrates a pedagogical strategy employed by the writer Tom Kemerly where the popular dystopian film *The Hunger Games* was brought into a "Culture of Fitness" class to generate the interest of the students, a technique that proved successful as it gave rise to thoughtful discussion and comparisons between the role of the female athlete both in the real world and in the film. Among Kemerly's students, which included several female athletes, the discussions became honest and very meaningful as these students described the gendered divisions they are forced to navigate within their sport and how these divisions affect their athletic performance as well as their conduct outside of practice and competition. These conflicts, in turn, mimic the reality of the female athletes in *The Hunger Games*. Hence, the same restrictions for female athletes exist in both spheres, the real and the make-believe, and interestingly, it was the film reflecting the reality of the female athletes in the classroom that enlivened the course and generated awareness of a situation in sports still lacking in fairness and equality.

With "Don't Sweat the Technique: Rhetoric, Coded Social Critique, and Conspiracy Theories in Hip Hop", John Chase takes the reader out of the traditional classroom and into that of the real world. As the title suggests, the article discusses the role conspiracy theories play in hip hop and the way the intent underlying their use can be misinterpreted by those who either follow or critique these various hip hop artists. Chase calls our attention to the consequences of hip hop artists infusing conspiracy panic into their work. Essentially, these artists employ lyrics related to conspiracy theories as a rhetorical technique, embedding these words into the essence of a song. Frequently, however, such lyrics are used to demonstrate the fallaciousness of the conspiracy theory, and thus do not reflect the artist's point of view. Listeners and critics, however, frequently misunderstand the rhetorical nature of the song, reductively ascribing these views to the artist. Chase uses examples from hip hop lyricists Rakim, Tupac, and Nas to illustrate this tendency and to demonstrate how these misguided social critiques may ultimately delegitimize both the artist and their art, denying the artist's scope to widen their own individual outlook to produce a work of art.

In the final article of this issue, Marissa Lammon examines the conflation of comedy and politics in the creation of satirical sketches and their influence on public opinion about controversial phenomena. The primary example in "Cake and Conclusions: Rhetorical Roots in 'Sheetcaking' and Fallacious Community Responses", is that of comedian Tina Fey's hotly debated sketch on Saturday Night Live, where she ridiculed President Trump's response to the Charlottesville protests and urged privileged middle-class women to eat sheetcake instead of participating in rallies held in response to the protests. Fey's sketch prompted debate and controversy as many listeners misinterpreted her underlying message. Lammon uncovers the nature of the public's misunderstanding of the sketch and consequent outrage, demonstrating the role such satirical comedies play in moulding public opinion and satirizing public personages. The structure and nature of late-night talk shows is laid bare, showing their capacity to inform viewers of political issues and perspectives through humor and satire, and by so doing, leading to the formation of society's understanding and resulting opinion of political issues.

In this issue's musings, Florencia Garcia-Rapp reflects on the scholar's need for tolerance and an acceptance of ambiguity while researching issues in popular culture. In "Teaching and Learning Popular Media Cultures: Fostering Enquiry Journeys within the Messy World of Human Social Life", Garcia-Rapp illustrates the potentiality of popular media culture pedagogies for enhancing anthropological discussions of today's society. Indeed, for the student and/or researcher of the social sciences to attain an understanding of modern culture, it is crucial that social phenomena are interpreted in the spirit of openness towards diverse interpretations. It has to do with entering the discussion with the expectation of encountering contradictions and differing viewpoints, which ultimately enhance the scholar's understanding of cultural phenomena and enables them to contribute meaningfully to the conversation. Furthermore, Garcia-Rapp highlights the import of bringing in elements of popular culture into the classroom through the processes of zooming in and zooming out as a way of allowing the educator to truly understand their students and providing students the opportunity to expand their knowledge of the cultural artifacts they engage with on a daily basis.

Ultimately, we should have these conversations, regardless of the discomfort brought about by potentially difficult dialogues. It is therefore necessary for educators and rhetoricians of any stripe to take on these pedagogical risks and that the ensuing conversations be held in an open and accepting manner. This is the type of education that will enable us to actualize a more liberatory society for all.

The overarching theme underlying *Critique and "Controversy" in Pedagogy and Popular Culture* is the conversations that are generated by educators in the traditional classroom and rhetoricians on popular culture platforms that are geared towards heightening awareness of current politico/socio issues and bringing about heightened tolerance and empathy towards individuals from other social groups. The current issue has come about through the collaboration of our dedicated team of individuals which include all authors featured in the issue and our peer-reviewers: Managing and Musings Editor, Karina Vado; Copy Editors, Robert Gordyn, Arlyze Menzies; Reference Editors, Joseph Yap, Yelizaveta Kamilova, April Manabat; and Production Editor and Creative Director, Douglas CohenMiller. In reading the articles and Musing in this issue, readers will gain an understanding of the merits of introducing studies of popular culture into the classroom, and conversely, the impact of popular culture in shaping and enhancing opinions and sensitivities regarding the controversial issues of the politico/socio sphere.

### **Miriam Sciala**

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Book Review Editor

We look forward to your engagement with this issue and working with you in the future!

### **Anna CohenMiller**

Editor in Chief

## **SUGGESTED CITATION**

### **APA**

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