Students in Action: Media, Popular Culture, and Pedagogy as Social Intervention

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Abstract

New and emerging digital media environments have been theorized in terms of broad and profound social and cultural transformations. Popular media and culture have been significantly redefined in the dynamism of digital communication—new media, new platforms, and new social communicative capacities. The emergent social dimensions of media have arisen with multiple and networked media sources and sites, highly malleable and accessible platforms and content, and above all, with participatory media practices. What do these popular cultural transformations mean for pedagogy? Simply stated, students now talk back, and rather forcefully and digitally, and have the potential in new media environments to co-create their own learning. The consequences and influences of a rapidly changing popular culture demands that our understandings and practices of pedagogy need both conceptual and practical reform to be resonant with, and critically engaged with the possibilities of contemporary popular culture. Arguments and recommendations offered in this paper proceed from two key principles of pedagogy in the digital age: first, the irrefutability of participatory culture (the fulsome and every day engagement of students with media technologies); and second, prevailing digital culture should direct us to pedagogies that put students into action, that is, situate students in a position of agency. The conceptualization and activation of new pedagogies is informed by seminal and progressive stages along key intellectual trajectories in education: from Dewey's advancement of educational reform in terms of student-focused theory and practice; to Friere's foundational theories in the movement to "critical pedagogy" and the emphasis on learning as a civic and moral project of social change; to current and prevailing notions of participatory culture in which students recognize and assert their responsibilities in learning, and in the active transformation of knowledge. The arguments presented will be grounded in a specific case study of a course designed around "students in action". Applied Communication for Social Issues involves the research, design, and implementation of media/communication interventions in pressing and complex social issues. The course design eschews instrumentalist pedagogies, and static and template methodologies, and instead, emphasizes learning conditions of self-reflection, autonomy, and critical agency.

1. Introduction: Popular Culture and Agency

The question addressed here concerns the urgent and critical project of connecting education with social change; or more forcefully stated, realizing through pedagogical design and practice, the progressive and democratic project of education as social action. This conceptual approach weds experiential learning with critical pedagogy.

A starting point is the concept of popular culture as key in educational progress. Digital media scholar Henry Jenkins' observed that based on interviews conducted with high-school aged students around the world, "young people had a richer intellectual and creative life outside of school than inside it, that the things they learned from and the things they cared about were things they did after the school day was over." (Jenkins, 2013) [1] Another way of understanding this observation is that while popular culture has always been a powerful influence in the lives of young people, in the accelerated pace and dynamism of new digital media environments, popular culture becomes ever more decisive as a site of experience, understanding, and as a daily organizing principle for the young. Jenkins' concern, which should be the concern of all educators, is how to develop pedagogies that connect participation in popular culture to participation in "political and civic structures"; that is, how do we properly attend to the appeals of, and power within popular culture to activate students through learning environments.

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Concepts of popular culture in communication studies have of course, ranged over complex issues and themes—ideology and power; hegemony; resistance to dominant culture; negotiated positions in the reading of popular cultural texts; the exchanges between production and consumption; and more. (Storey, 2008) [2] Of these concepts, Raymond Williams' emphasis on popular culture as "culture actually made by people for themselves" (Williams, 1983) [3] is particularly relevant to a view of agency as a defining principle of popular culture. Further, if we wish to understand the relationship between popular culture and pedagogy in emerging popular, digital media and communication environments, then this conceptualization of agency sets us on the proper track to develop educational environments and pedagogical strategies that set students into action. The process of learning through action exemplifies the critical connection between formal contexts of learning and the unfolding of social and cultural life outside the institution.

The activation of students in the digital age and its prevailing popular culture of digital media and communication is a critical objective in educational futures. The conceptual key in such activation is the principle established in the long progress of philosophies of education as first, deeply and socially embedded and participatory (Dewey, 1997) [4] and second, as civil, moral, and emancipatory (Freire, 2000) [5].

2. "Doing" Education: Experience and Critical Pedagogy

A deservedly oft-cited dictum from John Dewey, while simple in its wisdom, is enormously complex and provocative in its method. In urging an approach to pedagogy that is "as unscholastic as possible", that is activated and directed by "experience" or "empirical situations" from "outside" the school and that arise in everyday life, Dewey proposes in effect, that anti-authoritarian and democratic education proceeds from a concept and practice of action. The methods of educators, argues Dewey, must "give pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing of such a nature as to demand thinking, or the intentional noting of connections; learning naturally results." (Dewey, 1997) [4] Dewey advocated a philosophy of progressive education that privileges experience, that conceptualized content as a process rather than as immutable and authoritative, that evolves subject matter from experience, and that develops from the social embedment of that experience.

The activation of students demands a philosophy and a practice that enables and direct engagement with public issues, or as Stanley Arnowitz argues, education that addresses what is needed for a student "to become an informed 'citizen' capable of participating in making the large and small public decisions that affect the larger world as well as everyday life." (Arnowitz, 2008) [5] The nurturing of informed citizenship is the foundation of Freire's articulation of "critical pedagogy" (Freire, 2000) [6]; in particular, Freire defined pedagogies that cultivated and advanced self-reflection, creativity, participation, and agency over the prescriptive institutional ideologies that "teach to the test", as Giroux puts it (Giroux, 2010) [7]— pedagogies that are "instrumental", "geared toward memorization" and "conformity" (Giroux, 2010) [8], reductive, and disciplined by administrative metrics of accountability. Freire's pedagogical vision was infinitely more expansive as he defined pedagogies that were meant to inspire and guide the values, the knowledge, and the social relations and engagements toward citizenship—this was the moral and civic project of education.

Experience and citizenship were foundational for both Dewey and Freire in the objectives for democratic education, and key in the achievement of active and participating students: that is, students with agency. The core idea here is that educational philosophy and actual pedagogical practices (from curriculum design, to content co-creation, to experientially-based assignments and assessments) are understood as transformative; specifically, pedagogical approaches must encourage and guide students in their relationship to knowledge and learning, and must ultimately equip students with capacities to engage with, and ultimately transform social and political power. Education's mission then, is nothing less than the advancement of democratic society.

In tangible and compelling ways, these influential revisions in philosophy and practice in education— "experience" and "critical pedagogy"/citizenship—speak to the democratizing influences and social dimensions of emerging digital media and popular culture. As evidenced in the affordances of, and capacities for engagement and participation in new media environments, and in the ongoing erosion of distinctions between producers and consumers, experiential and critical pedagogy are given renewed relevance in the participatory nature of media and popular culture—and here is the connection between popular culture and education. Educational approaches must be continually revised to account for, and be

relevant in the democratizing potentials of media environments. In particular, our abilities as educators to nimbly invent and re-invent pedagogical practices depends in no small measure, on our ability to read the shifts and the evidences in media and communication, in open and mobile platforms, and in highly malleable peer or social environments of media.

3. The Digital Turn

In his lively analysis of the political power of social media, Clay Shirky noted that "What matters…isn't technical capital, it's social capital". (Shirky, 2009) [9] In broader terms, Shirky argued for the transformative power in the emergence of digital social media and popular culture, and theorized the shift from "information" to "coordination", or from limited traditional views of communication and communication technologies as serving information dissemination and transmission, to communication as a supremely social activity. Eschewing a "transmission" model of communication, the limitations of which have been long established in communication studies (Carey, 1993) [10], Shirky points to the cultural depth and social significance of communication as sharing and participation as the signatures of contemporary digital media cultures.

Sociality, and not technological capacity then defines and motivates digital media culture. This social dimension and purpose of communication technologies, and the capacities of social media to instigate and serve social, even at moments, political transformation suggest to many analysts of pedagogy in the digital age (as well it should) that the "social" is undeniably the purpose and the method of contemporary pedagogies. Digital culture demands new perspectives on the role of human agency in the active re-workings and re-interpretations of technologies, and in the same way, digital culture demands open, dialogic, and participatory pedagogies.

The transformations referred to here have been about fundamental changes in the media landscape, and about change from a previous media industry logic that proceeded by way of production strategies for marketplaces of consumption, to new media popular cultures in which the "consumer", enabled by digital technology, is also inclined to create, produce, share, collaborate, network, and communicate socially. A grasp of media and communication is an essential lesson for educators, and not simply in terms of the development and use of technological tools for pedagogical practice. As educators, it is not enough to simply adapt to changing communication environments. We must evolve those environments, and pedagogical practices must work precisely with media and popular culture to point the way to open, progressive pedagogies; that is, education must expand and elaborate the capacities of digital media through creativity and invention, through collaborative and participatory practices, all of which are informed by an open media that is ethical, that enables and activates, that inclines education as social change, and that sets students into action.

4. Course of Action

I designed the course *Applied Communication for Social Issues* (School of Communication, Simon Fraser University) to precisely embrace the principles and the practices of experiential and citizenship education. Its outcomes are defined specifically in terms of community engagement through experiential learning that connects theoretical and applied dimensions of the social sciences (and communication studies in particular), and understands learning as sustained social action for change. It sends students out of the classroom in collaborative project groups, and into the community. The actual classroom becomes a convention space for presentation, discussion, and debate, while the community—encountered in both face-to-face and lively and at times, volatile open source, online platforms—becomes the site of research, experience and co-creation. The interdisciplinary field of "social issues communication" involves the application of public and media analysis to the design, strategy, production, and implementation of communication planning, programs and campaigns around urgent and critical social issues—truly, theory meets practice. It is about the development of sustained public engagement, driven by objectives of social change, and focused on the strategic design and use of media. Above all, social issues communication research and design proceeds from a comprehensive understanding of the nature of dynamic media environments—the forms, content, producers/consumers, and strategies of media-based communication.

The course is structured on the principle of "research-based communication for social change". The range of issues addressed, as defined by the students themselves, is wide-ranging and forcefully consequential: HIV/AIDS prevention, mental health and social stigmatization, environmental issues including fossil fuel

extraction, sustainable aquacultures and forestry practices, e-waste, and more; poverty intervention and alleviation; urban transportation; racism; youth-at-risk; human trafficking; addiction; campus rape culture; gender equality; "voluntourism", and much more. With research foundations in advocacy, activist public relations, social marketing and social advertising, strategic communication, social media design, and more, students create real world media, messages, and campaigns of public engagement for social change.

The premise of this course is the activation of students. This premise first, emphasizes the role of students as participants in, and co-creators of knowledge, and second, sets the learning conditions for self-reflection, autonomy, and critical agency. The course's pedagogical philosophy and practice proceed from an understanding of the social dimensions of media technologies, and from a grasp of the on-going popular cultural transformations digital communication. The course is a demonstration that we need to set students into action, and that our pedagogies not only encourage students to talk back, but to talk back with power and consequence.

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