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Dory Cochran
Utah State University

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CHAPTER 14*

Using Pop Culture, Feminist Pedagogy, and Current Events to Help Students Explore Multiple Sides of an Argument

Dory Cochran

Introduction

According to Project Information Literacy, students struggle with understanding the “big picture” of a research project, and in particular, with understanding “multiple sides of an argument.”¹ As a skill, understanding different perspectives is needed in scholarly research, but it is also integral to understanding current events and broader social conversations. This lesson works to address both of these needs by bringing pop culture and feminist pedagogy into the library classroom. In collaboratively analyzing pop culture examples connected to a current event, students can draw upon their own experiences with pop culture, identify other viewpoints, and ultimately explore an issue from multiple sides.

Understanding different views requires time for considering one’s own thoughts on a topic and listening to those of others. As an instructional ap-

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proach, feminist pedagogy incorporates self-reflection and critical listening, which in practice can help students consider multiple perspectives. Fostering an environment that promotes this type of collaborative learning can be achieved by encouraging students to lead conversations through activities like think/pair/share and by encouraging a communal learning environment through physically positioning the librarian away from the front of the classroom. Feminist pedagogy also asks students and teachers to connect learning in the classroom with larger social issues.² As multiple views inherently surround these broader conversations, bringing current events into the classroom creates an opportunity to practice exploring complex arguments in both an academic and a social context.

There are several ways current events could be incorporated into this lesson, but one advantage of working through pop culture is that students can readily draw upon their own experiences with pop culture in a classroom conversation. bell hooks writes that an important part of meaningful teaching is making sure that teachers draw upon students' experiences in the classroom to create "participatory spaces" where learning is collaborative.³ As the "cultural traditions of the ordinary people of a particular community," pop culture is part of a knowledge base students bring to the classroom.⁴ In drawing upon this knowledge base, varying ideas can be introduced in a context that is familiar to students.

Using pop culture examples connected to a current event also provides an engaging medium for introducing conversations from the broader world into the classroom and exploring the different sides of those conversations. In discussing the value of drawing upon current events in teaching, Jesse Gainer writes that bringing current events in the classroom can foster "critical thinking through analysis, discussion, and production of texts."⁵ This lesson uses pop culture examples as a way to promote this critical thinking by getting students to consider how messages within pop culture connect to current events and what different understandings are being portrayed. For instance, the visual messages of Beyoncé's 2016 music video for her song "Formation" have been discussed as a perspective on issues relating to the Black Lives Matter movement.⁶

While this lesson is geared toward students in classes such as introductory English composition courses, it can be modified for various levels and disciplines. Ultimately, in using pop culture examples to consider different ideas about an event, students practice the very skills needed to understand various sides of a scholarly argument, but in a context that is accessible and engaging.

Learning Outcomes

- Describe multiple perspectives or opinions about a current event
- Identify one's own opinions about a current event

Materials

- Short news video or article about a current event
- Two or three pop culture examples (electronic or print) related to the current event
- Dry-erase board
- Student computers with access to the Internet

Preparation

First, ask students to complete the following homework before the library session:

1. Identify a research topic related to a class assignment that asks students to make an argument or to analyze different views.
2. Complete a freewrite about their opinion on the topic. (Why is it important? What about your own experiences support why you think this topic is important?).
3. Come prepared to discuss their topic and freewrite.

Second, select a current event and find a few pop culture documents related to it. In selecting an event, I would suggest picking a recent event that is nationally known and has received wide news coverage. When picking pop culture examples, I would suggest selecting examples representing differing opinions, connecting examples to the interests of your students, and considering the amount of time needed to view the example. In first teaching this lesson in 2014, I was aware that many of my students were participating in the ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) Association's Ice Bucket Challenge, so I decided to use that as my current event. The Ice Bucket Challenge featured individuals dumping buckets of ice water on their heads and posting recordings on social media in order to raise awareness and encourage donations for ALS research.⁷ The pop culture examples I used were a BuzzFeed list of Ice Bucket videos gone wrong, Ice Bucket tweets, and a YouTube video featuring actor Orlando Jones.⁸ Jones changed the challenge to the Bullet Bucket Challenge in order to raise awareness about race-related police violence. In a second iteration of this lesson, I used the release of Meghan Trainor's 2015 album *Title* and conversations about the portrayal of gender roles in her music as my current event.⁹ The pop culture examples I used were Trainor's music videos for "Dear Future Husband" and "All About that Bass."¹⁰

Session Instructions

1. Encourage a participatory space by welcoming students to the library, introducing yourself, and asking students to share their names and research topics.
2. Review the day's activity and then introduce the selected current event. Ask students to share what they've heard about the event. Then you can show a short news clip, article, or opinion piece about the event and ask students to describe what else they learned. As students share ideas, you or a student volunteer write ideas on the board.
3. At this point, describe how students will use pop culture to identify additional perspectives about the event and show students the pop culture examples you selected. Ask students to freewrite on the examples with the following prompt: What different opinions or ideas about the event are represented in each pop culture example? Next, encourage students to go to the board and write down new ideas from their reflections.
4. Then, ask students to conduct independent searches (using a research tool of their choice) for one pop culture example connected to the current event.
5. Once students find examples, ask students to pair up and share their examples, discuss the perspectives represented, and pick one example to share with the class.
6. As pairs report back on their example, add new ideas about the event to the board.
7. Facilitate a class discussion about the event and the perspectives discussed. Possible questions to ask are: What similarities or differences do you see in the ideas on the board? Are there any opinions listed that some of us agree or disagree with? How so? How could we learn more about these different perspectives?
8. Following the discussion, ask students to use their homework and discuss opinions surrounding their own topics with a partner. If time is limited, this final step could be a homework exercise.

Assessment

Feminist assessment is “learner-centered and diverse and validates differing perspectives and voices.”¹¹ As a result, this lesson uses freewrites and group discussion to help students assess their own learning. These types of activities can help you better understand what areas of the lesson students struggled with and can encourage students to reflect on their own research and critical-thinking processes. Asking the course instructor to reflect on students’

participation and learning at the end of class also represents another perspective that can be valuable in assessing students' learning.

Self-assessment for the instructor is just as important as assessing students' learning. Practice your own self-assessment following the class and reflect on student and course instructor reactions to the lesson. Possible questions to consider are: How much did I talk in comparison to students and the course instructor? When should I have talked more or less in order to draw out students' ideas? What types of perspectives or viewpoints did students discuss? What was everyone's participation level like? What might have influenced some to participate less and others more?

Reflections

One value of this lesson is that it can help you and your students question assumptions you might hold about each other or a topic. When I used Meghan Trainor's music, not all of my students were familiar with the singer or conversations surrounding her album, but students still shared and learned from each other by making connections to other musicians. In a participatory learning environment this variation in knowledge is not a limitation, but a strength. The communal and reflective learning of feminist pedagogy means that regardless of each individual student's knowledge, students can learn from each other. Not every student will be familiar with particular events or pop culture phenomena, but this won't make the lesson less valuable to those students. Instead, it introduces an opportunity to learn about something new and from multiple perspectives.

This lesson can also introduce students to different perspectives regardless of whether you choose a politicized topic. However, the topics you choose can influence the depth of students' conversations. For example, the Ice Bucket Challenge was popular across the country, but it was less of a socially charged topic and that was revealed in students' discussions. Despite this limitation, students explored multiple reactions to the event, which is still a positive step towards understanding multiple sides of an argument. When discussing gender roles in popular music, students shared their own experiences, but also brought in other deeper perspectives, such as the importance of religious experience in discussing gender roles. This variation in student discussions shows that exploring views can be developed around all kinds of events, but that certain topics will bring in multiple perspectives more readily.

In closing, this lesson offers an engaging option for exploring multiple perspectives on a topic in library classrooms. Students won't automatically become socially aware after this one lesson, but they will have practiced self-reflection and peer listening, both of which are attributes of successful research

and of becoming critical thinkers. The more we can create lessons that foster these skills, the closer we'll be to supporting a culture of positive, educational change.

Final Question

What different layers of perspective or understanding are represented in pop culture and how could we use feminist pedagogy to help our students unpack those messages?

Notes

1. Alison J. Head and Michael B. Eisenberg, *Finding Context: What Today's College Students Say about Conducting Research in the Digital Age*, Project Information Literacy progress report (Seattle: University of Washington Information School, 2009), 5–6, http://projectinfolit.org/images/pdfs/pil_progressreport_2_2009.pdf.
2. Maria Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2013), 57.
3. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 15.
4. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “popular culture,” accessed December 12, 2015, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/147908?redirectedFrom=popular+culture#eid29256767>.
5. Jesse Gainer, “Critical Thinking: Foundational for Digital Literacies and Democracy,” *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 56, no. 1 (2012): 16, doi:10.1002/JAAL.00096.
6. “Beyoncé’s ‘Formation’ Is a Visual Anthem,” *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, Music News, last modified February 11, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/2016/02/08/466036710/beyonces-formation-is-a-visual-anthem>.
7. “ALS Ice Bucket Challenge—FAQ,” ALS Association, accessed October 12, 2015, <http://www.alsa.org/about-us/ice-bucket-challenge-faq.html>.
8. Dave Stopera, “21 Reasons Why the Ice Bucket Challenge Needs to End Right Now,” BuzzFeed, August 27, 2014, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/daves4/just-donate-money-again#.ww9YPY9zr; #icebucketchallenge>, Twitter search, October 12, 2015, <https://twitter.com/search?q=%23icebucketchallenge>; Orlando Jones, “Orlando Jones—Bucket Challenge” YouTube, 1:59, August 18, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mcGwCnMN2Bc>.
9. Meghan Trainor, *Title*, compact disc, Beluga Heights Studio, 2015.
10. Meghan Trainor, “Meghan Trainor—Dear Future Husband” YouTube, 3:20, March 16, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ShlW5plD_40; Meghan Trainor, “Meghan Trainor—All About That Bass” YouTube, 3:09, June 11, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PCkvCPvDXk>.
11. Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy*, 76.

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