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Practice-Based Media Education in the Humanities Classroom

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Abstract

While there is good reason to be suspicious of the enthusiastic rush to integrate technology into the classroom, we in the humanities should embrace the opportunity it presents for media literacy and critical cultural inquiry. The mass media saturate our daily lives and circumscribe the cultural environment of our era. Media literacy initiatives under such conditions must go beyond “reading” the media and encourage practice-based reclaiming of the powerful communication technologies they employ. Significant hurdles which prevent the integration of practice-based work in the humanities classroom need to be articulated and addressed.

Introduction: Media Practice in the Humanities Classroom at Bryant College

In discussions around curricular change in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at Bryant College, we focused at one point on trying to articulate our unique contribution to the college mission. This exercise was required not only because of our particular circumstances at Bryant, but because of larger trends in our fields and in college organization more generally, which seem to threaten the humanities with irrelevance or with its reduction to a mere service role in professional training. Among the distinguishing features we struck upon and claimed for ourselves is a notion of cultural practice, the idea that what we offer our students is a platform for developing a view of themselves as cultural agents, rather than as employees or consumers. The focus on practice, we realized, is critical in a social and cultural climate in which the knowledge that was traditionally produced in the humanities is increasingly marginalized. And while all the implications of this focus on practice have yet to be realized in our curriculum, it has underscored the importance of many of the experiments with media that some of us had undertaken individually in our classrooms. Some of my colleagues and I have been working with students to produce web-sites, videos, photography, CD ROMs and other media in courses across our literary and cultural studies curriculum. I am convinced that this work is vital to the survival of the humanities. Not only does it give us the appearance of relevance in our technocratic era, but it brings our unique resources into engagement with some of the defining features of our culture. What I want to share in this paper are reflections upon the importance of the idea of cultural practice,

particularly with respect to media and the use of technology in the classroom, and to address what I see as some of the barriers to its institutionalization within the humanities curriculum.

Technology and the Humanities: Warranted Suspicion

There are many good reasons why those in the humanities are suspicious of the enthusiasm for technology so in evidence on college campuses these days. Intensive investment in technology, along with “fitness” facilities and landscaping, is often part of the focus on the visible elements of college life used to up the ante in the increasingly competitive world of college recruitment (Winter, 2003). It is easy, in this climate, to view technology as a token of the degradation of the college’s education mission and a capitulation to a technocratic world view within which mastery of technology signifies the road to economic achievement.

Such a view of technology dovetails with the various critiques of contemporary society that have influenced humanities scholarship in the postwar period. Critiques that focus upon mass culture, consumer culture, “late capitalism,” and postmodernism often address the role of technology in general and media in particular in the structural dislocation of traditional forms of higher education.

In this context the integration of “new media” into the humanities often engenders cynicism even among its advocates, as in the following quotation from self-professed “new media pedagogue” Jeffrey Sconce (2003):

At many institutions of hired learning, digital media have become one of the juiciest carrots ever to hang in front of the sad, downtrodden little donkey that is now the liberal arts. In the new corporate mode of university organization, digital media hold the promise of channeling revenue streams into (gasp!) humanities programs...Having your son or daughter become one of the state’s leading experts on *Finnegans Wake* is somehow less painful if they also learn how to design a *Finnegans Wake* website—at least that’s practical experience that might be of interest to prospective employers (p. 183).

The cynicism many in the humanities feel about the enthusiasm for technology in the college classroom converges, as well, with doubts about the role of practice-based work in attempts to foster media literacy. One of “the seven great debates” in media literacy circles, according to Renee Hobbs (2001), concerns whether media production should be an essential feature of media literacy education. Hobbs’ survey of the field finds significant fear that practice-based use of technology will either simply reproduce “the hierarchy of Hollywood or the news industry” or contribute to a “bogus type of vocational education” that keeps, often low-achieving, students from attaining more valuable text-based literacy skills (p. 4).

There is an understandable siege mentality in the humanities that lends itself to a conservative attitude about the infiltration of technology into its curriculum. While the goal of media literacy is widely embraced, the means to media literacy often explicitly

rejects the language of new media drawing instead upon the forms of traditional text-based literacy as a guide.

Technology and the demands of the New Literacy

The suspicion about technology initiatives on campus and the cynicism about the support for new media in the humanities is understandable, and yet the capitulation to a siege mentality and a rejection of practice-based routes to media literacy, in my view, is the wrong response.

Literacy has always required a vast background in history and culture(s), an attention to complexity of meaning and form, and development of the various layers of understanding that allow for critical insight into one's own time. The functional aspects of traditional literacy, reading and writing, are both markers of the attainment of literacy and the practices necessary to this attainment. But we have moved from being what historian David Lowe (1982) calls a "typographic" culture to being an electronic or even a digital one. According to Lowe this transition is not simply technological, but accompanies a transition in the very organization of the human senses (p. 5). We are a different sort of subject in the digital environment than we were in the "typographic" one, and what constitutes literacy in our era has also changed. Literacy now includes media literacy and requires the same complex and multifaceted approach that traditional literacy required. And just as traditional literacy centered on the importance of reading and writing, this expanded notion of literacy requires the ability to work with the language of electronic and digital media.

The fear that a practiced-based approach to media literacy simply reproduces existing cultural and social hierarchies and borders on vocational training is based upon a reduction of new media to the corporate and military-industrial conditions of their development. And while new media certainly cannot be separated from these conditions, they, nevertheless, constitute the language of our era and any alternative to its present configurations will also be developed in this language, not in terms of the literacy of an earlier era. (And remember that, as Benedict Anderson (1991) has taught us, traditional literacy itself did not have innocent origins.)

The humanities then cannot continue to promote literacy by avoiding technology. The interest in technology in the classroom, regardless of its motivation, is a boon to the humanities, which have been starved for support. Indeed, I would argue that it is the role of the humanities in the increasingly technocratic college climate to appropriate technology for the traditional goals of liberal education: the cultivation of an informed, critical and participatory citizenry. If technology is not going to be our ruin, it will be because it is put to better use than that for which it was originally imagined.

Of course, the same ubiquity of media that justifies an expanded notion of literacy can be a barrier to that very same literacy. Bryant College is a business focused college, and my students are business students. Their orientation toward the mass media is often framed by the concerns of their majors and their likely careers. They take media for granted as the context of their lives and focus instead on them as a means to more practical ends.

While this orientation may be especially pronounced at Bryant College, I imagine that it is much the same everywhere. Students are not accustomed to thinking of media as cultural phenomena. For example, they can see advertising in terms of marketing strategies more easily than as a vehicle for the mobilization of cultural myths. They can understand the evening news' treatment of events in terms of a drive for market share more easily than as fulfillment (or abandonment) of its responsibility for fostering democratic debate. They see movies, video games and the internet as simple entertainment or information more easily than as forces that shape their view of the world.

The mass media themselves also tend to subvert the goal of media literacy by creating content without displaying its conditions of production. The slick finished forms deflect analysis and produce, despite some of their lauded interactivity, passive acceptance of these forms. We are mostly consumers of media. Even when our participation is elicited as in video games, we are being drawn into a repackaged experience. And, increasingly, the interfaces we encounter on the internet are commercial ones. When we treat the media as "text" and encourage critical modes of "reading" them, we may demystify their conditions of production and get students to see the way that they construct a world for us, but we do not thereby give them an active relation to the language of media itself. We must also provide students with the skills to "speak" the language of the media. They need to employ the non-linear, highly visual language of their culture in order to become agents within it. This goal demands more than reading or writing, but a robust media practice. Steven Goodman (1993) in his "An Open Letter to Media Educators," makes this point as part of an eloquent challenge to educators to follow through on their desire to get students to think critically about the media. He insists that only by making students into media makers can they become more than just informed media consumers, but "producer(s) of culture and agent(s) of social change." If we in the humanities are to maintain the goals of liberal education, it will be by providing our students with practice-based media literacy. And to achieve this goal, we must be ready to embrace new technologies in our classrooms.

Other Barriers to Practice-based Work in the Humanities

Even if we in the Humanities can get beyond suspicion of technology initiatives and come to see the need for a media literacy that works with the language of the media, other barriers to a practice-based approach may remain. In what follows, I want to address two major barriers and offer some suggestions for their overcoming.

1) "We aren't media experts. How can we teach media?"

Obviously, some familiarity with various technologies is necessary to a practice-based media literacy. We typically have more expertise than we imagine and there are often resources at colleges and universities available to provide faculty training in the use of various technologies. However, I want to encourage people to work beyond their technical expertise in order to practice their cultural expertise. As teachers of the humanities, we have portable skills of analysis and critique that are vital to bring to bear upon contexts that extend beyond the ones within which we were trained. Our students

often have technical skills, experience working with websites, video, multimedia and software that exceed, perhaps inevitably, our own. (We all have heard the cultural commonplace that has children coaching their parents on programming their VCRs.) At my institution, we have found that we can send the students off to produce videos, multimedia presentations, websites and other media with very little instruction on how to go about it. Students find on and off-campus resources, share skills and work together; they typically enjoy learning new technical skills (they are easier to master than complex meanings) and are eager for the excuse to acquire them. Once I addressed my own fear of not being able to guide the students on every step of their work, I have been able to empower them to produce their own work--- and I have learned with them along the way.

Practical Example: “Low-Tech” Video Production

When we fear that we lack the expertise to teach media, it is often because we are imagining having to master complex technologies. However, when our goal is to teach media literacy, to teach students how to express themselves in the language of the media, “low-tech” applications are often available, which take little skill or prior knowledge to use. Arguably, “low-tech” is preferable to the use of complex media technologies, because they empower the student in the knowledge that media skills are easily within their grasp. When I teach “Introduction to Cinema Studies,” basically a course on film history and aesthetics, the students do a video project to activate their understanding of how images construct narrative. The college has a few digital video cameras and many of the students have their own. Making a narrative sequence is simple to do. The students can plan their shots before hand and shoot them in the order that they want them to appear in their final project or they can edit by running their cameras through their TVs and capturing the material on VHS tape in their VCRs. The students who are even slightly more adventurous can download simple editing software from the Internet and explore non-linear editing. Our goal is not to compete with the slickness of professional media, but to understand through practice; the effect, in my experience, is a much deeper understanding of the constructed quality of media imagery and the complex collaborative labor involved in its production.

2) “Media Practice is outside our purview; We are scholars, not practitioners”

This barrier is addressed by this article in its entirety, but it needs to be put in its starkest terms. Perhaps the greatest barrier to a practice-based media literacy has to do with our own sense of what we as humanities scholars and teachers do. In our own research, we read and write and tend to regard what we produce as contributions to knowledge rather than as creative productions or a cultural practice, and we train our students to regard scholarship in the same way. Such a view is fine as far as it goes, but it can create a false division between knowing and doing that gives an implicit priority to text-based literacy. We do produce knowledge, but we do so by actively intervening within the cultural field. Academe is not an ivory tower, but an important part of the dynamic development of culture itself. The media are a significant dimension of the cultural field that we are already working within. We are producers of culture. Reading, writing and scholarship are practices and we are, as we practice them, cultural agents, not just scholars. Just as traditional literacy involves reading and writing, media literacy also requires the practice of its forms. I’m certainly not saying that other aspects of media (political economy,

production, socio-historical context) do not require their own specific expertise, but that the media are also part of the domain of the humanities and that any adequate media literacy must draw on our specific expertise as cultural practitioners.

Conclusion

Supporting a practice-based media literacy is not difficult once these barriers to its acceptance are addressed. Once we get over our fear of our own lack of technical expertise and our sense that, as scholars, we *know* rather than *do*, we realize that the necessary tools and skills are widely available to us precisely as a feature of the media saturated world we live in. When we resist this expanded notion of literacy in the name of typographic superiority, we risk losing our students through irrelevance and subvert the goals of literacy itself. Practice-based work is not capitulation to a degraded media infused culture, but a way to work toward the same goals of literacy that have always motivated the humanities. In my experience students, whom we have grown accustomed to think of as impervious to the more advanced demands of literacy, are ready and waiting for us to provide the culturally relevant education they need, using the language of the world they know.

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