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## **Teaching and Learning Popular Media Cultures: Fostering enquiry journeys within the messy world of human social life**

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In this theoretical paper, I draw from the interpretive, constructionist epistemology that frames my research practice as social scientist to reflect on the practice of teaching popular media cultures. In contrast to cynical approaches to popular culture, and taking distance from dogmatic assertions, I highlight instead the relevance of user-centred perspectives where entertainment, affect and pleasurable investments are legitimate reasons to engage with popular media texts, including celebrities (García-Rapp, 2017). There is a multiplicity of purposes, needs, and contexts that frame interpretive resources, appropriation, and modes of reception. It is possible and it is meaningful to offer nuanced and thoughtful conclusions that increase our understanding of cultural phenomena, without resorting to paternalistic views or preconceptions about the critical abilities of these communities (2019).

In my classroom, we work from and within media anthropology approaches and do empirical work online to interpret meanings. Since it is important to create opportunities for students to experience for themselves how they develop their research practice with each passing week, I expose them to research early on by asking them to conduct their own small projects online. We work to achieve data-grounded theoretical contributions that present a complex picture of a culture by drawing attention to patterns that imply cultural process (Hammersely and Atkinson, 2007; Fetterman, 2010). The examination of these particularities in our interpretive accounts reveal common elements of a culture and are of academic relevance as theoretical and analytical raw data to be transferred and compared with other social formations, other celebrities and audiences, or other emic social norms (García-Rapp, 2019).

### **Teaching popular media cultures from an anthropological perspective**

When researching and experiencing the messy world of human social life, I believe in fostering enquiry journeys that promote a tolerance for ambiguity. Social life is messy and complicated, and we should provide students with tools for them to make up their own minds. We are located in disciplines that are arenas of contestation and discussion and we often agree to disagree. This is the challenge, and virtue, of teaching, researching, and immersing oneself in social sciences. Tolerance for ambiguity is a key trait in research and learning journeys. A powerful way to aid students in their self-regulation and monitoring of their tolerance for ambiguity is by motivating them to keep going whenever they encounter novel concepts or apparently contradictory information.

Part of sustaining tolerance for ambiguity is to nurture contributions that extend our understanding of, and commitment to, the multiplicity and plurality of legitimate goals for social science inquiry (Bochner, 2000). From the very first session, I make clear that we are looking for perspectives that tolerate ambivalences, contradictions, and embrace the complexity of social worlds and human interaction (Tolson, 2010; García-Rapp, 2019). As Baym and Markham argue “our goal is not to convert others to our way of seeing. We are not after one true explanation. Rather, we are after a thorough, grounded, trustworthy voice that makes meaningful contributions to ongoing dialogues and on which others can build” (2013, p. 189). By acknowledging how culture is relational, partial and plural, how it is always about cultures, with an ‘s’ (Agar, 2006), we understand that our accounts are not final truths or ever complete. Our conclusions are situated and subject to revision (Boellstorff, 2008; Livingstone, 2003; Bazeley, 2014). “Accounts are essentially

contestable, just as cultural analysis is a necessarily incomplete business” (Morley and Silverstone, 1991, p. 157).

When we teach how to research our complex social lives, we must grant space for subjectivity, indeterminacy, and instability. Stemming from hermeneutics and phenomenological understandings, influenced by the egalitarian stance of cultural studies and poststructuralism's call to deconstruct binarisms, I argue for open and fluid scholarships (Elliot, 2013) to explore already open and fluid texts. In the words of Chin and Morimoto, to work from an “open socio-cultural perspective” (2015, p. 229; see also Sandvoss, 2005). Therefore, when planning learning activities and explaining methods as tools, I highlight the processual character of both learning and researching.

In this line, there is a certain sensibility, curiosity, and empathy that characterize anthropological work (Wollcott, 2008, 2010) that I seek to convey to students learning how to research our mediated socio-cultural realities. While it is important to recognize that we bring our own interpretive sense and cultural orientation with us to the field when seeking to portray the ‘ethos’ of media cultures from emic perspectives, I teach students to embrace the interpretive value of “intuitive realizations” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 5) and develop “theoretical sensitivities” (p. 148; Glaser, 1978).

### **Explaining and complicating, ‘zooming in’ and ‘zooming out’**

If we want young people to understand us in the context of a classroom, then we first need to understand them. We need to be attuned to their interests, their everyday media engagements and habits. Asking questions is also a way to acknowledge their hopes, expectations, fears and worries, to recognize them as persons, and to build “a safe space” (Brookfield, 2015, p. 5), ‘a climate in which there is freedom to learn’ (Rogers, 1983, p. 157, cited by Mortiboys, 2012, p. 10). Planning activities based on contemporary pop culture and youth interests heightens their motivation to participate and their curiosity in ‘finding more out’.

University students are often avid media users themselves, who have already customized, personalized and appropriated their chosen media technologies and media pleasures in their everyday lives. My objective is to provide new perspectives, to “zoom out” and achieve a deepened awareness and self-reflexivity of aspects of their own situated practices and local knowledge (Knoblauch, 2005) as members of audience communities and fans of mediated texts and celebrities.

They can also be great informants, letting us know of new developments and trends. It is beneficial to establish an equalizing base of considering ourselves all users, fans, and members of the audience. This implies parting from what we all share as members of society to try to *clarify and complicate*. We do zoom in’ to discern specificities of phenomena but, beyond the explanation, complicating a concept, practice, or the engagement with a particular celebrity as media text, implies paying attention to their multiple dimensions and furthering knowledge of other possible interpretations, uses, and meanings.

Mass media and pop culture as fields of study put us closer to powerful, well-known examples to start a fruitful conversation where students and teachers are on the same page. Discussing celebrities, online self-presentation, Instagram, and Tweets, are approachable, mundane topics and, as such, great opportunities to heighten their motivation and curiosity. We should make use of this and take profit from the engagement and enthusiasm we generate when involving them in things they ‘know’ already. The relevance of working from what they already master is also present in Carnell’s study (2007) around notions of successful teaching and learning in HE contexts, where it emerged as key to empower students to learn from their strengths. In this sense, it is relevant to facilitate learning by encouraging and supporting them to activate prior knowledge in order to make connections that bring them forward.

To conclude, I would like to reflect on one last point. In her study of UK university teachers’ conceptions of effective teaching, Carnell (2007) mentions the similarity in teacher and researcher journeys. Parting from their own research methodologies, teachers seek to enable students to construct their own knowledge and make sense of their experiences. I felt identified with this idea. For me, it is the foregrounding of the emic perspective and an underlying cultural relativism that I always ‘carry’ with me in my research (and life) journeys. Often it becomes particularly explicit how blended the dimensions of the ‘researcher self’, the ‘teacher self’ and the ‘self’ actually are. I see it as an ontological and epistemological chain where the way we, as people, understand human social life, feeds into our roles as researchers and this further frames our

pedagogies, allowing us to involve others. But it also comes back to us advancing in the opposite direction: We realise that it is, after all, possible to end up passing on that same enthusiasm in enquiry journeys ingrained in ourselves, our personal selves, and our researcher selves. As Brookfield (2015) argues, our teaching practice develops from mixes and matches, from a patchwork quilt of formative experiences, and inspirational moments that we went through as learners and peers ourselves.

- Let us practice tolerant, open scholarships where entertainment, affect, and pleasure are legitimate reasons to engage with popular media texts, without resorting to paternalistic views or preconceptions about the critical abilities of users, audiences, and fans.
- Let us nurture contributions that extend our understanding of, and commitment to, the multiplicity and plurality of legitimate goals for social science inquiry. Let us embrace our partial, plural, and relational paths and truths. Fluidity, ambiguity, polysemy.
- When we teach how to research our complex social lives, let us grant space for subjectivity, indeterminacy, and instability. It is, after all, possible to end up passing on that same enthusiasm in enquiry journeys ingrained in ourselves, our personal selves, and our researcher selves.

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