

Extending Cultural Literacy

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In this paper the authors argue for extending the traditional conception of cultural literacy to include a critical perspective in which the role that the mass media plays in the transmission and maintenance of North American cultural stereotypes is addressed. They distinguish between the ideational and material aspects of culture and suggest that present day communication technologies play a powerful role in shaping many of the values and beliefs that were previously learned in familial, religious, and educational settings. As well, they question the moral perspective embodied in certain material presented by the mass media and advocate that students be taught a kind of critical thinking that is based on the concept of respect for persons.

Dans cet article, les auteurs proposent un élargissement de la conception traditionnelle de l'alphabétisation culturelle en vue d'y introduire une critique qui questionne le rôle joué par les media dans la transmission et le maintien des stéréotypes culturels en Amérique du Nord. Les auteurs distinguent les aspects idéologiques et matériels de la culture et soutiennent que jusqu'à maintenant, les techniques médiatiques ont joué un rôle important dans la mise en place des valeurs et des croyances qui furent transmises par la famille, la religion et l'école. Les auteurs questionnent également la dimension morale présente dans certain matériel offert par les media. Ils proposent enfin que soit enseignée une pensée critique fondée sur le respect des personnes.

Students of culture have long distinguished between two different entities that, in combination, comprise a group's culture (Sathe, 1985). These two forms are what anthropologists refer to as the *ideational* and the *material* aspects of a culture. Ideational culture consists of aspects from the world of ideas. These include values and beliefs about virtually anything that is encountered within a specific cultural context. Included in the ideational aspects of a culture are such things as religion, child rearing practices, gender relationships, conceptions of justice and equality, and notions of artistic and esthetic experience. Acquiring a knowledge of how to behave in a cultural setting involves learning a complex set of values and beliefs.

Material culture consists of the tangible aspects of a group's culture. Items of technology and the various means of production that are a part of the culture's economic structures comprise material culture. Moving through the day-to-day

experiences that constitute life in a given cultural setting involves the use of many items of material culture. Whether it is using a spear to hunt for fish in Borneo or using a computer in Canada, members of a culture use items of their material culture to engage in economic activity in order to meet the basic needs of food and shelter.

If we look at the history of humanity through the ages, it is apparent that for much of our past there has been a relatively clear separation of the material and ideational aspects of culture. This is not to say that the two realms have existed independent of each other. In fact, there are many who would argue that the ideational and material aspects of a culture are inseparably intertwined. Our purpose here, in claiming that there has been a *relative* separation of the material and ideational aspects of culture for much of the past, is to highlight what we see as a radical change in the current interaction of these two aspects of culture.

Prior to the latter half of the 20th century culture was transmitted, for the most part, through socialization processes that took place in the settings of the family, religious and educational institutions, and the workplace. It can be argued that the teaching and learning that took place within these different settings was intended to pass on, or transmit, either the ideational or material realms of culture. Learning within the family and religious institution was largely concerned with the transmission of the ideational aspects of culture, whereas learning within the workplace was concerned with material culture and one's place in and proficiency with the means of production. School learning, in its ideal form, represents a hybrid of the two in that it aims to prepare educated citizens who are capable of contributing to society in both moral/ethical and economic ways.

For much of our history ideational culture has been acquired through the transmission of values and beliefs via human interaction in the settings of family, school, and religious institutions. However, since the 1950s this process of cultural transmission has changed radically. With the emergence of television we have seen a merging of the ideational and material aspects of culture to an extent that is hitherto unparalleled in the history of humanity. In the latter part of this century we have seen technology take on a new role such that it has moved from its traditional focus on the economic activities associated with the provision of food and shelter to a position where it now plays a dominant role in the transmission of the ideational aspects of our culture. We believe that this shift away from the family, the school, and religion as vehicles for the transmission of values and beliefs has had a profound impact on our culture.

In virtually every household in North America people learn about their culture and the world through the medium of television. In Canada children spend an average of three hours a day watching television. On a weekly basis students spend almost as much time watching television as they do going to school. The amount of time adults spend watching television is even higher. For women the national average is 3.8 hours a day; for men the average is 3.2 hours a day

(Young, 1990, p. 232). Clearly, during the past half century television has become an agent of socialization that is equal to or perhaps even greater in its influence than the school, family, and religious institution.

Given the high proportion of time that individuals spend watching television, it is important that we ask two major questions. From a learning perspective, it is important to ask: What is the nature of the medium and what kind of learning does it promote? From a cultural perspective concerned with the transmission of values and beliefs, we need to ask: What is the nature of the content that is viewed and what values does that content promote? We have sought answers to these questions and find what we believe is ample ground for concern, particularly if we accept the premise that these technologies now play a leading role in the transmission of culture.

With regard to the nature of the medium itself, even casual observation indicates that television is a one-way medium. That is, watching television does not involve the viewer in any form of dialogue or discussion. As a means of learning this differs radically from human conversation, which until recently, along with experience itself, was the primary means of learning one's culture. When one watches television, there is no chance for clarification of meaning. The initial interpretation that one makes of the seconds-long visuals and dialogue is the impression that lasts. By its very nature television does not promote having a second, in-depth look at whatever is being presented. In short, television is a medium of high speed, unreflective consumption of value-laden imagery and sound.

A second feature of television is its ethereal nature. If one of the strengths of television is that it can present the viewer with almost any imagery that the human imagination is capable of conjuring up, then an accompanying weakness is its inability (or refusal) to portray realistically the consequences of the actions it presents to viewers. When we watch television, we see violence that is bloodless and painless. Much has been written about the desensitizing effects that television violence has on young children. Doerken (1983) describes numerous studies, including several conducted by the American Medical Association and the National Institute of Mental Health, that document the negative effects of violent television on children's behavior. In a recent article in *The Globe and Mail* (Social Studies, 1991) it was estimated that by age 16 a child has seen 200,000 violent acts on television.

From a perspective of the transmission of ideational culture, the actual content of television programming and the values and beliefs that are embedded within that content need to be examined. It is our belief that the ability to examine the content and its implied value premises constitutes a kind of literacy. However, prior to a discussion of this conception of literacy we will look at the notion of literacy itself and examine how that idea has been linked to a notion of cultural literacy.

Literacy

Literacy is defined, quite simply, as the ability to read and write. To be literate is to be able to read and write. There are two main variations on this theme.

A basic literacy level is often defined as the ability to read and understand the instructions on a medicine bottle. Thus, someone with a basic literacy level is able to shop, read traffic signs, read instructions on medicine bottles and food packages, and engage in the reading and writing necessary for day-to-day life in our society. A functionally illiterate person possesses less than these basic abilities. Many people who do not achieve a basic literacy level during their school years become very adept at getting clues from pictures and from other people and are actually able to conceal their inability to read, even while working at a job. In recent years functional illiteracy has "come out of the closet" and adults are coming forward in record numbers to learn how to read and write.

The failure of schools to diagnose properly all students' needs and to see that all students achieve basic literacy is a source not only of continuing criticism but also of frequent suggestions of the "why Johnny can't read" variety.

Another meaning associated with the word literate is that of an educated person — one who is acquainted with literature. Here literate means much more than possession of basic literacy. The literate person is steeped in and very knowledgeable about literature, the arts, and the aspects of culture that are passed on in universities. A synonym for this sense of literate might be cultured. Such a person is probably (but not certainly) well educated in a formal sense, is articulate, commands a large vocabulary, and is able to read and write very well indeed.

How can we apply these understandings of culture and of literacy to the concept of cultural literacy? First, we will examine the existing notion of cultural literacy and then we will argue for a redefinition of the term.

E.D. Hirsch and Cultural Literacy

The term cultural literacy was coined by E.D. Hirsch, Jr. in his book of the same name (1987). In his book Hirsch argues that the poor showing of American schools in international testing is due to a de-emphasis on transmitting knowledge and facts and an emphasis instead on teaching skills. The problem, says Hirsch, dates from the 1940s and stems from the elementary school, where essential factual knowledge is undervalued. In a scathing critique of American education he says:

The misguided emphasis on skills has been the most disastrous mistake of American schooling in the past forty years. An emphasis on skills coupled with a derogation of "mere facts"... distinguishes the thought-world of professors from that of common sense. (Hirsch, 1989, p. 29)

Poor and disadvantaged children do not lack "thinking skills," argues Hirsch; in their own milieu they are street-smart and sophisticated. What they lack is the factual knowledge that other children acquire early in life from reading and discussion in the home and from travel and exposure to different people, places, and experiences. Knowledge builds on knowledge; according to Hirsch, children learn by analogy and metaphor, connecting new information with what they already know. Those who enter school already deficient in factual knowledge fall further behind because they don't grasp the teachers' analogies. These children need to catch up on facts, not thinking skills. "Children who possess broad background knowledge will be able to learn things more readily than those who lack it," says Hirsch (1989, p. 31). He calls this "earning new wealth from old intellectual capital" (p. 31). The only way out is for elementary schools to "take a systematic approach to shared knowledge in the elementary schools" (p. 31). Furthermore, success in the world of work depends upon the ability to adapt to new kinds of jobs, to communicate, and to continue learning. Hirsch claims that these abilities can only be acquired through a broad humanistic and scientific education. Thus, for Hirsch cultural literacy means a breadth of knowledge gleaned from the mainstream of the humanities and sciences.

It is our view that a balance of skills and factual knowledge is important. Especially essential is the teaching of skills in context and the marriage of critical thinking with content. However, being literate about our culture requires more than knowledge and skills in the humanities and sciences: It requires the ability to assess critically popular culture. No matter how literate we are in the book-learning sense, we are surrounded and bombarded by the messages of popular culture; therefore, it is incumbent upon us to make students literate about those messages. Hirsch (1989) misreads the situation vis-à-vis popular culture and unfortunately dismisses it as unimportant when he says:

Some had hopes that television might produce children with a common basis for early learning. But TV culture consists of multiple channels that randomly impart ephemeral information to random groups. Indeed, very little "popular culture" is shared by a large proportion of American society and that little is not diverse enough to provide an adequate basis for later schooling. In a modern nation there is really just one effective vehicle for transmitting widely shared culture — the elementary school. It is the only channel that everyone must tune in. The single most effective elementary-school system uses a single channel — in the form of a standard curriculum. (p. 33)

What Hirsch misses here is the importance of the messages that channel-hoppers (movie-goers, billboard-watchers, print media-readers, computer-users) are receiving. It is essential that students learn to "read" those messages.

Extending Cultural Literacy

The messages that we receive via communications technology are powerful and pervasive. Contrary to what Hirsch (1989) asserts, there is much more to

television than “randomly imparted ephemeral information” (p. 33). In many respects the messages of television touch upon some of the key aspects of our lives as members of a North American culture. An expanded conception of cultural literacy is one that would promote a critical analysis of the impact that communications technologies (television and movies in particular) have upon the maintenance of current structures and ways of thinking within our society. From this vantage point there are four areas that we see as essential to this type of analysis. These are (a) product endorsement and its role in the creation and maintenance of a society based on conspicuous consumption; (b) the exploitation of violence as a starting point for entertainment and as a solution in situations involving conflict; (c) the perpetuation of existing gender stereotyping and the role that it has in violence against women and gender-based discrimination; and (d) the perpetuation, mainly through omission, of the racial stereotyping which leads us to believe that the beautiful people are not only well-to-do and young, they are white.

Television, with its sophisticated techniques for product promotion, has contributed to the development of a consumer-oriented society. As we approach the 21st century, the effects of unbridled conspicuous consumption are becoming more and more apparent. Global warming, toxic waste in our food and drinking water, and Third World starvation are examples of the negative side of our consumer-oriented society.

The exploitation of violence as a starting point for entertainment has reached such a point that in 1990, 60% of the movies that carried an R rating contained violence, sexual or otherwise (*Premiere*, 1990, p. 29). There are now genres in the movie industry that are devoted exclusively to portraying gore and the violent destruction of human beings. In a recent interview, the producer of the movie “Jacob’s Ladder” described his intentions in making the movie and his definition of a successful product. “If someone says, [after seeing the movie] ‘I almost threw up, and I couldn’t go to sleep that night,’ that’s success — that’s the purpose of the exercise” (Troy, 1990, p. 94). We seriously question such intentions and at the same time ask: Is there something that we as educators can do to counter what seems to be a cultural preoccupation with the darker side of humanity?

The role that the mass media plays in the perpetuation of gender-based inequality is also a concern that needs to be addressed from a critical perspective. Television and movies have played what is arguably a hegemonic role in continuing inequities between the sexes. From the not so subtly titled “Father Knows Best” of the 1950s to the 1990s comedy “Married With Children,” television has played a powerful role in the construction and maintenance of a social order that puts men at the top of an economic, political, and sexual hierarchy. In addition, the mass media has contributed to, and even fuelled, the objectification of women as sexual objects who are used to sell everything from automobiles to chocolate bars.

On an even more disturbing level, writers of many movies and television programs continue to use the violent sexual assault and/or murder of women as the starting point for their plots and storylines. Recent surveys reveal that 56% of Canadian women are afraid to be alone outdoors after dark. One in four Canadian women will be sexually assaulted in her lifetime. Is there a connection here? Certainly, sexual assault has been a societal concern for thousands of years. Some would argue that it is patently unfair to blame the mass media for the current state of affairs regarding the violence that plagues women in North American society. This is a complex issue and it is not our intent here to lay blame. Rather, our intent is to make explicit our concern with the cultural mores that allow a sanitized and voyeuristic version of sexual assault or murder to pass as a legitimate starting point for entertainment, as well as to point out that the mass media has had an undeniable role in the widespread transmission of such material.

In terms of racial stereotyping, while American television dramas and sitcoms have shown us Black families over the last 10 years, the racial mix on television is in no way representative of the multicultural makeup of North American society. There are token Black or Oriental babies in disposable diaper ads but we rarely see mixed-race couples in advertisements.

The explicit values here are not hard to capture; however, we need also to explore the implicit messages in popular culture's single-minded promotion of youth, the white middle class, and titillation through violence and dehumanized sexual encounters. In attempting this exploration we must note that ours is not the first society to glorify sex and violence. Roman citizens cheered as hungry lions dismembered early Christians in the ring; pornography has flourished since people learned to draw pictures. Why exploitation vies with relationship as a way for humans to deal with each other is a philosophical question beyond the scope of this paper. But it should be clear that the longstanding human tradition of glorifying violence and pornography is not an excuse for our society to glorify it too. The explicit values promoted through the mass media, the norms toward which we all are encouraged to strive, are eternal youth, the body beautiful, and abundant material comforts. The way we are taught to treat each other is as sexual objects; the way conflicts are resolved is through violence. Perhaps our primeval fear of meeting violent death is temporarily eased through the vicarious fear of watching violent acts. And the linking of sex with violence gives extra stimulation to a jaded public whose senses have been dulled by years of media bombardment. Children learn the messages that sex and violence are linked, that the good life requires excessive consumption, and that only the young are worthwhile people. These messages are transmitted in television sitcoms; in ads for beer, cars, and cosmetics; on billboards; in rock videos; and in computer games. We must not underestimate the extent to which we are affected.

How many middle-aged women and men spend increasing amounts of money to hide wrinkles and grey hair and to get a health-spa figure? How many diet companies flourish on our fear of being unattractive? How many murders are committed because we have learned that guns and knives are quick solutions? How many teenage suicides occur because even that unspeakable act has been glorified in rock songs as a way out of despair? How much despair is engendered by the failure of each of us to attain the unattainable ideal of youth and beauty presented in the media? How many cars, clothes, and cakes will we buy to deaden that despair?

It is clear that a lot of money is being made from our insecurities. The implicit message may be as simple as this: We need to spend money to be like the television gods. Unable to reach this goal, or dissatisfied and empty when we do, we need the stimuli of vicarious sex and violence.

Viewed with a critical eye, the messages described here can be discerned in almost any sampling of movies, television advertisements, rock videos, cartoons, comedies, and dramas. For example, the television hit "Twin Peaks" skillfully wove sexual violence and the occult into storylines and images that were fascinating and compelling at the same time that they were repugnant. More recently, the subjects of sex, violent death, and mutilation were the central topics of the Academy Award winning movie "The Silence of the Lambs." Rock videos, in which images move at less than a frame per second, link popular music with flashes of violent or sexually degraded behavior, stylishly presented. There is an addictive quality to much of this material and a powerful subliminal effect even on those who may feel they are intellectually invulnerable.

Critical Thinking

Earlier, we indicated our desire to present an expanded conception of cultural literacy — one that would include a focus on the implicit messages contained in media content. We spoke about the implicit values that are embodied in the content of some of this material. We presented examples of the kinds of things that can be picked up from mainstream television. How can we, as educators, prepare students to examine consciously and critically the content of such material? Is there any way around the moral morass that appears to characterize much of the broadcast and motion picture industry?

Lest we be accused of advocating the adoption of a simple-minded vision of the moral high ground or the imposition of Puritan standards on the nation as a whole, we need to reiterate our concerns. These include the negative effects of television on people's behavior as consumers, the way television simultaneously launders and promotes violence, and the manner in which television perpetuates existing gender and racial stereotypes. In presenting these concerns, we recognize that there *are* aspects of the mass media within which a commendable job has been done of highlighting some of the issues of which we speak. Public

television, both Canadian and American, has produced many fine shows which range in focus from the environmental crisis to the need for equality and justice across racial and ethnic lines. However, despite these efforts, much of what we consume remains, and will probably continue to remain, material that promotes or condones violence and the continuation of a social order that is rife with inequality and environmentally damaging conspicuous consumption.

What, then, are our options? Given a steady diet of less than nutritious intellectual fare coming to us via mass media technologies and given our desire to have students adopt a consciousness that reflects something greater than the lowest common denominator toward which the media aims, what can we as teachers do? We believe that the situation can be improved considerably if we help students to develop a critical consciousness that they can bring to bear on the entertainment and informational material they consume. One vehicle for developing such a consciousness is what is broadly known as critical thinking.

As a genre within education, critical thinking encompasses a plethora of definitions and prescriptions for how it can be taught. Beyer (1985) provides a definition in which critical thinking begins with a previous claim, product, or conclusion; the question is raised: Of what truth or worth is it? Implicit in part of Beyer's definition is the application of some kind of standard or set of standards; clearly, when the worth of something is assessed a comparison is made between the product and some already existing set of criteria. Selman (1990) makes the point that "a large part of being a critical thinker is being sensitive to certain sorts of distinctions" (p. 5). Selman also argues that in many of the "process" approaches to teaching critical thinking, the essential role of standards becomes muted and hence undervalued in the whole conception of what it means to engage in critical thinking.

In thinking critically, then, one makes distinctions between a product and a set of existing standards. Given this approach to critical thinking the question of what or whose standards must be raised. In adopting a set of criteria for critical analysis are we not adopting a particular value position? In short, the answer is yes and we will have more to say about this later; for now, it will suffice to remember our concerns: consumer behavior and its effect on the planet, gratuitous violence, and racial and sexual discrimination.

It is an open question as to whether or not one can teach the type of critical thinking we describe above. Selman points out that, just as in learning a language, one of the most effective means for learning how to think is to be exposed to positive examples via modelling.

People learn to think as they learn the language. If they spend a lot of time with other people who are reasoning competently and who spend time talking about what makes this a good or bad argument and that a good or bad explanation, and they have the opportunity to try it themselves with someone who takes the

time to correct their mistakes and explain them, they will become competent, at least. (p. 10)

This view of learning to think critically puts us, as teachers, in a difficult position. It is difficult for us to model the kind of critical viewing that would call into question the values and beliefs that underlie television programming because virtually all of children's television watching happens outside the classroom. As parents we are in a better position to model the kind of critical thinking that we hope children will bring to bear on television. However, in our role as teachers we can, if we so desire, bring television to the classroom. The advent of VCRs has changed our television and movie watching habits. The freeze frame and rewind features of VCRs can be used very effectively in classroom discussions designed to help students unpack the values embodied in the content they watch. Through discussion, analysis, and the modelling of critical thinking, we can help students learn how to look beyond the immediate imagery of television and movies to the point where they can begin to question the value premises and implicit assumptions about the nature of human relationships that are embodied in the various media messages that they consume.

Respect for Persons

Cultural literacy, as we have defined it, requires two things. A basic requirement, and here we agree with Hirsch, is that one be literate in the usual sense, that is, able to read and write and possessed of broad general knowledge of the arts, sciences, and humanities. Second, since culture must be seen to include the pervasive messages of the popular culture, one must be able to apply critical thinking to the analysis of media messages.

We believe that there is a third component of cultural literacy: a strong value base from which students can do their critical analyses.

The notion that there can be value-free reasoning has been quite thoroughly debunked. Whenever we make choices we do so from some set of values. In the early days of organized schooling in Canada there was a shared set of Christian values that society agreed should be passed on by the schools (Tomkins, 1986). This was an explicit task and the values the school promoted were complemented by teachings in the church and in the home. The situation in Canada is very different today. We are a multicultural society. People follow a variety of religions or no religion at all. The explicit teaching of values does not necessarily occur in homes (though some value system is always taught by example) and public schools are generally careful not to promote any one set of beliefs.

Nevertheless, there are shared values that societies want to transmit to students. These do not reside in religious principles as they did in the past but

rather are encapsulated in a vision of the good Canadian citizen. Perhaps society needs to be more aggressive in its treatment of citizenship values; perhaps what is needed is a shift in focus.

Philosophers have long struggled to articulate principles of decent human behavior. This work reached its peak in Immanuel Kant's formulation of the categorical imperative, which can be expressed by the idea that one must treat others as ends and never as means. Thus,

a rational being is constrained by reason not to bend others to his own purposes, not to enslave, abuse or exploit them, but always to recognize that they contain within themselves the justification of their own existence, and a right to their autonomy. (Scruton, 1981, p. 153)

This fundamental moral law is sometimes called the law of respect for persons — all human beings have the right to be treated with dignity and respect.

This is an excellent base from which to work as we strive to inculcate in students not only the tools for critical inquiry and analysis but also a strong moral sense of how people should behave with one another. Clearly, the principle of dignity and respect does not dictate how we should act in specific situations. However, it provides a place to return to, a standard against which to weigh our plans and actions as we make our way in the world and formulate our position on various issues. For instance, some may feel that a particular war must be fought, despite suffering and loss of life, in order to accomplish the destruction of a cruel tyrant and the prevention of even greater suffering. Others may argue that war is always evil and that peace can only be achieved through nonviolent means. Both sides may argue from the principle of respect for persons. We may choose to change our television viewing habits, to boycott certain products, or to actively protest a particular media offering if we see it as violating the principle of dignity and respect. In order to weigh evidence, evaluate arguments, and make decisions we must be critical and well-informed; as well, we must have a strong ethical and moral base.

Conclusion

We have argued for a new conception of cultural literacy which includes not only being literate in the traditional sense but also possessing the ability to read the messages of popular culture. Bombarded by messages of violence, gender and race stereotyping, and mindless consumerism, it is essential that we become literate in this way. Otherwise we can be duped into believing in the gods of eternal youth and beauty, seduced into the enjoyment of violence and pornography, and driven to waste the earth's precious resources.

Helping students to become culturally literate must include explicit analysis of the artifacts of popular culture, the thoughtful teaching and modelling of critical thinking, and the acceptance of respect for persons.

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