

# **Building a Pedagogy of Critical Curiosity in Professional Education: The Power of Popular Culture in the Classroom**

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## **Beginning (with) Reflection**

In adult education, references to reflection as key to meaningful learning are common. Not all reflection is equal or equally critical, though. For Jack Mezirow, ‘Critical reflection is principled thinking’ (1998, p. 186). Stephen Brookfield further distinguishes critical reflection, noting that it questions ‘power relationships that allow, or promote, one particular set of practices over others ... [and] its foregrounding of power dynamics and relationships and its determination to uncover hegemonic dimensions to practice’ (2009, p. 294).

We agree that the cognitive process of critical reflection is vital in adult learning, but wonder about its limitations. Building feminist, critical race, and decolonization scholarship, adult education scholars have clarified that education and learning are multidimensional processes (hooks, 2010; Illeris, 2009; Lawrence, 2008; Leicester, 2001). We ask how the recognition that emotion ought to be given serious thought is juxtaposed with the cognitively oriented reflective process of *thinking* about what has been seen, heard, experienced or done and propose a shift in emphasis from reflection alone to curiosity. To that end, we discuss a study exploring how the incorporation of popular culture—particularly works of fiction presented in films, television, novels, etc.—into professional education can encourage what we refer to as critical curiosity. We see such curiosity as vital in the development of practitioners who care about, respect, and respond to the varied identities and situations of clients, patients or students and can connect individual circumstances to social conditions.

## **Becoming Curious**

Grounding the study are Cynthia Enloe’s idea of ‘feminist curiosity’ and Paulo Freire’s writing on curiosity. We begin by contending that marginalized groups are ‘worth

thinking about, paying close attention to, because in this way we will be able to throw into sharp relief the blatant and subtle political workings' (Enloe, 2004, p. 4) that underpin inequitable conditions. We also take up Freire's reference to critical or 'epistemological' curiosity, 'without which it is not possible to obtain a complete grasp of the object of our knowledge' (2010, p. 32). Critical curiosity exposes the 'common sense' (Gramsci, 1971) that maintains hegemonic relations and is crucial in nurturing critical hope and critical practice.

Those ideas are in tension with the neoliberal emphasis on instrumentalism and technical competencies (Kreber, 2016). Associated expectations can create reluctance among students in professional programs, particularly those who adhere to a hegemonic view of social life, to study theory and contentious but important topics such as racism, homophobia, critiques of capitalism, and sustainability (Carr, 2016; Griswold, 2017). Critical pedagogues often find that their focus 'can be difficult, dull, and uninspiring to students' (Wright and Wright, 2015, p. 26).

Working in the context of those trends, we propose a pedagogy of critical curiosity, which, like adult learning, is multidimensional rather than solely intellectual and is forward-looking rather than retrospective. Engagement with popular culture is similarly multidimensional and can support teaching about concepts, theories or issues that might garner resistance from students reluctant to stray too far from so-called applied education.

### **Imagining (in) the Classroom**

In connecting critical pedagogy and curiosity to popular culture, we begin with a basic assertion made by public pedagogy scholars. Public pedagogy, a term popularized by Henry Giroux (2000) and Carmen Luke (1996), expresses the view that cultural engagement is always pedagogical. Some adult education scholars working in this area establish that audience members—cultural consumers—can engage in critical learning from cultural

consumption in their leisure lives (Jarvis and Burr, 2011; Jubas, 2015; Jubas, Johnston and Chiang, 2017, 2020; Jubas and Knutson, 2012; Wright, 2013; Wright and Sandlin, 2009; Wright and Wright, 2015). Still, without guidance, consumers' attention can be diverted away from problematic representations and messages as they are caught up in stories of likeable characters (Jarvis and Burr, 2011) or the sheer fun of cultural consumption (Tisdell, 2008; Tisdell and Thompson, 2007).

We are investigating how, by using popular culture, instructors can help students bring a critical curiosity to their engagement with popular culture and scholarly texts. Popular culture texts—‘any artifact[s] or experience[s] that we can read to produce meaning’ (Maudlin and Sandlin, 2015, p. 369)—feature characters who both resemble and differ from consumers' own lives and can be used to illustrate scholarly ideas about difference and equity (Jarvis, 2012; Tisdell, 2008; Wright and Wright, 2015). As students invest themselves emotionally in those characters and stories, instructors can help them relate those fictions to scholarly texts and issues of practice and to ask new questions, reach new understandings, and develop as ‘professionals who are more than technicians’ (Jarvis and Gouthro, 2015, p. 76).

Instructors in various fields have used films, television shows, music, and other forms of popular culture in teaching about social diversities and inequities (Brown, 2011; Guy, 2007; Kennedy, Şenses and Ayan, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Tisdell and Thompson, 2007) and critical media literacy (Hanley, 2007; Stuckey and Kring, 2007; Tisdell, 2008). In organization and management studies, topics have included gender and leadership (Jule, 2010) and employment relations (Lafferty, 2016). In nursing or medicine, instructors have used film and television in teaching about mental health, doctor-patient relationships, professional identity or ethics (Darbyshire and Baker, 2012; Green, 2013; McAllister, Rogers and Brien, 2015). What remains largely unexplored is how students receive popular culture in

their education, as if instructors are developing a pedagogy based on intuition rather than evidence.

### **Investigating Possibilities**

For the qualitative multi-case study discussed here, we are speaking with instructors and students in courses where popular culture is included in curriculum. Case study methodology is well suited to this inquiry because of its flexibility and adaptability, useful when investigating a new or rarely explored question or phenomenon in a setting of practice (Simons, 2009). Instructors' participation involves a semi-structured interview and students' participation involves a focus group. We collect course syllabi and might do an in-class observation. We also invite all participants to a short follow-up interview to share further insights, especially about whether the impacts of using popular culture in one course carry over to other courses or to professional practice. All participants choose or receive a pseudonym and transcripts of interviews and focus groups are being analyzed with nVivo. Here, we report findings from focus group and follow-up interview conversations with 25 students from four University of Calgary courses, two in adult education (taught by the first author), one in teacher education, and one in counselling.

### **Turning Stories into Lessons**

In the doctoral adult education course, two cultural texts were used: *Moonlight*, a coming-of-age film about an African American boy struggling with poverty, his mother's drug use, and his sexuality, race, and gender, and *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen*, a romantic comedy about a wealthy Arab man who hires a white British consultant and a scientist to help him establish a salmon fishery in the Yemeni desert. Episodes from the television shows *Scrubs*, a comedy about medical interns, and the satirical *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, were used in a Master's-level course on work and learning. The counselling course on family dynamics was developed around the film *Fences*, set in 1950s' Pittsburgh and revolving

around an African American family. Finally, storybooks, music videos, and graphic novels were brought by students and the instructor into a literacy education course. In this discussion, we highlight two related themes that surfaced as student participants discussed how those popular culture texts functioned in their courses and informed their learning: tackling difficult but important matters and recognising bias and broadening perspectives.

### **Tackling Tough Topics and Concepts**

Despite the struggle that many students in professional fields have with material that is theoretically oriented or focused on ‘difficult’ topics, critical pedagogues remain committed to covering such material. Participants agreed that using popular culture is helpful in those efforts. Rebecca summarized participants’ view that popular culture ‘could be used to enhance some of the understanding from the [scholarly] articles that we were reading ... to help us gain a little bit deeper understanding’. Jessica stated, ‘When I read a particularly heavy text ... I try to relate it to what I would see in pop culture’.

Topics dealt with in the study’s courses range from social marginalization to the ethics of working with objectionable individuals. Maggie, an adult education doctoral student, noted that watching and discussing *Moonlight*

forced me to raise questions that I wouldn’t necessarily have thought of and to expand my learning and my understanding of some of those topics.... It forced me to think more deeply of the topics that we were discussing, and to work with them on a different level than I would have otherwise.

One concept that students in that doctoral course struggled with is intersectionality, which was taken up in both scholarly articles and *Moonlight*. Common in critical race and feminist scholarship, the term refers to the idea that individuals have multiple identifications and that the oppression is amplified exponentially if an individual identifies with multiple marginalized groups. Gemma thought that, ‘without the visual, I would not have been able to

grasp it, to be honest'. She spoke similarly about the other film used in the course, which was connected to transformative learning. 'I actually clearly recall the transformational learning discussion with *Salmon Fishing on the Yemen* and how we looked at each character separately and how they went through that process. I think that was very helpful', she said.

In the counselling course, Vanessa recalled how *Fences* was used in teaching about multipartiality, the need 'to understand each person's perspective without judgment, or without favouring one or diminishing someone's perspective'. Another concept featured in the course was first and second order change. According to Vanessa, 'first order is smaller change. He [the instructor] described it as like changing the ... rules, or like learning to play the game better. ... And then second order change is, like, scrapping the game'. She recalled a scene when, after Troy brings home the baby born from his affair, which his wife Rose had tolerated, Rose agrees to care for the infant, but 'she said, like, this girl has a mother, but you are a womanless man, or something to that effect. ... She's going to continue to live with him, but she's not his wife anymore'. In setting new ground rules for their marriage, Rose enacts a second order change.

Participants from that course admitted that they initially found those concepts difficult to grasp but ultimately crucial in professional practice. Moreover, *Fences* became crucial to their understanding of those concepts. According to Maryann, the film was 'a starting point from which we could talk about concepts related to family therapy, because there's a lot of family dynamics in that movie'. Sherry added that 'we used the characters in *Fences* to see how ... terms actually played out'. Maria was able to 'pull those [representations] out of the movie and apply them to my life. And even apply them to what I saw or heard about going on in friends' lives'.

In the Master's-level adult education course about workplace learning, topics included neoliberal austerity and the gendering and racialization of workplace relations, used to

introduce Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, doxa, illusio, and social and symbolic capitals. Given how dense and confusing the students found the associated articles, popular culture texts, notably an episode of *Scrubs* and a segment from *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, were welcome additions to curriculum. Melissa recalled,

When we were going with the different types of capitals ... and ... having those things being clearly connected to what we were watching ... it was a great way to take something that might be more of an abstract concept and tie it into something....

[W]hether it's how women are [positioned in] ... the workplace or power differentials in the workplace ... I find myself really keying into how people and things are represented in pop culture now and what that says about our society at large.

During their focus group, Isabella and JC remembered the use of the *Scrubs* episode:

Isabella: So ... doxa and illusio and habitus, which were pretty challenging to begin with. ... We went over [the reading] and you explained those concepts in more detail. And then we watched the ... *Scrubs* video clip. We would watch it, but then we talked about ... examples in that video clip. ... And I remember that being very helpful, to have a very specific example of, oh, when this character did this, that, or this was an example of this. ...

JC: [I]t seemed to me when we wanted clarity on an item such as illusio or doxa ... then you were able to look back on one of those types of media and use it as a grounded reference.

Through such comments, participants articulated the value of popular culture in learning about concepts and topics with scholarly and practical relevance. Especially because the cultural texts provided emotionally powerful illustrations rather than mere explanations of ideas, students found them useful components in curriculum.

### **Identifying Bias and Broadening Perspective**

Critical curiosity helps students and practitioners unearth preconceptions and biases that they bring to practice. Set in motion at the outset of a professional relationship, such biases have lasting effects, whether beneficial or detrimental. In recalling their experiences in the courses included in the study, participants described how engaging with popular culture in a focused, purposeful manner helped them recognize and challenge their own biases. Abigail, a doctoral student, commented, 'In the process of watching the film [in class], you become aware of your biases and then they are also challenged. ... I was also challenged to press beyond, beyond those walls'.

Adopting a critically curious approach helps students and practitioners (prepare to) work with people in inclusive, respectful ways. Participants in the literacy education course talked about how using popular culture produced by members of marginalized groups who might be considered at-risk for low literacy helped them appreciate capabilities rather than deficits. For example, Gary replaced a limited, elitist view of literacy with the more expansive multimodal literacy, which expresses the understanding of literacy as more than 'being able to read and write. There's a sense of ... oral comprehension and hearing and seeing text and being able to translate that'.

Bias might also relate to the perception of who deserves care and support, a question that anybody working in a helping profession must grapple with in order to work ethically and responsibly. Despite their intellectual recognition of the importance of multipartiality, students in the counselling course found it emotionally difficult to get past the flaws of *Fences*' main character. As Vanessa realized, 'There's going to be people like this in your practice, and you still have to work with them—so let's practice now, suspending your judgment of this person'.

Doctoral student Drew explained how juxtaposing popular culture with scholarly articles helped him recognize the subtlety and depth of social and personal bias. As he



explained, 'I think it really heightened my ability to see systemic discrimination. It also really emphasized my own biases a little bit more. And even hidden biases that I might not have known that I had prior'.

Identifying and moving beyond their own biases was associated with a general quality of broadened perspectives that participants aspired to in study and their practice. Working with popular culture texts helped them recognize that any text or idea can be interpreted and used in multiple ways. Among the adult education doctoral students, Wendy commented,

I feel like that exercise ... has helped me through some articles and things that I have read in the current course that I'm in. ... I think [it] gave us really practical skills around looking at resources, looking at different pieces of academic work and being able to assess it differently, through different lenses and from different perspectives.

Trinity thought back to the group presentations that students did, for which they linked a course film to a set of topical scholarly articles:

I think that really helped to sort of look at the same concept from multiple different angles. So ... you have the visual and then we have the reading and then the group discussion .... [A]ll of those are still actually embedded in my mind.

Fred, a student in the workplace learning course, commented on how students responded to a *Scrubs* episode viewed in class:

What was interesting was the dialogue and conversation that happens after watching the episode, because many people in the class seemed to view the episode with a very different perspective and lens ... as far as character interaction and dialogue, things like that. So there was a real diversity of thought.

Through such comments, participants suggested how the popular culture texts directed their attention to bias and invited them to broaden their perspectives in the classroom

and in practice. Crucial to the ability of popular culture texts to spur that learning was the emotional impact and memorability that engagement with cultural texts had for participants.

### **Taking Stock**

For students, engaging with films, television shows or other types of popular culture helped them entertain topics, understand concepts, recognize biases, and broaden perspectives. Concepts such as intersectionality, transformative learning, first and second order change, multipartiality, multimodal literacy, habitus, doxa, and capitals were paired with topics such as sexism, racism, family dynamics, literacy, workplace relations, and austerity. Acknowledging that adult learning, cultural consumption, and critical curiosity are multidimensional processes, some participants commented on the paradox that the emotional enjoyment of cultural consumption supported their cognitive learning about complex topics and concepts. Cindy welcomed ‘a little brain vacation for a couple of hours, even though clearly we were going into those concepts in-depth afterwards’. By engaging with popular culture texts in a scholarly manner as they pursued provocative topics and challenging concepts, students reconsidered what counts as professionally relevant education and knowledge.

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