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Two Terms You Can (and Should) Use in the Classroom: Cultural Homogenization and Eurocentrism

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Abstract

This article focuses on media literacy and globalization. Specifically, it discusses the issue of how and why classroom teachers should develop strategies for questioning the media's tendency to portray globalization in neutral, unproblematic terms. Through an examination of the way the media present two underlying tenets of globalization (cultural homogenization and Eurocentrism) in advertisements and in news broadcasts, I suggest classroom activities that encourage students to view globalization and its effects analytically and critically.

Introduction: Disturbing the Peace

In 1978, comedian George Carlin's classic routine, "Seven Words You Can't Say on Radio," challenged existing media censorship regulations in two critical ways. First, by mentioning the seven "forbidden" terms repeatedly in the routine, he succeeded simultaneously in de-mystifying them while at the same time mocking the US Federal Communications Commission's preoccupation with "filthy words".[1] Second, and perhaps most importantly, Carlin raised the question of agency (individual or collective resistance to some kind of external control) and the media. Given the immense power that the media has over what we see and hear, how can we question and resist its tendency toward the promotion of global consumerism, Eurocentrism and cultural homogenization? As social studies teachers, how do we formulate an effective response to the images that are presented to us as "normal" while at the same time seeking to uncover the "other" that has been left out?

Unfortunately, such questions are not easily resolved by satire, however savage or pertinent it might be. They are real dilemmas classroom teachers face when dealing with how the media represent (and privilege) a particular worldview. In the face of this representation, it is vital that teachers equip their students with the tools to question the messages that the media diffuse about globalization.

[1] www.eff.org/pub/Legal/Cases/FCC_v_Pacifica/fcc_v_pacifica.decision

Why it is Difficult to Teach About Globalization

If, unlike George Carlin, classroom teachers do not face official sanctions each time they mention the unmentionable, they are nevertheless constrained in what they say about the "unofficial story" of globalization. Ironically, these constraints are sometimes self-imposed. In many cases they are an internalized self-censorship in response to what curriculum scholar Michael Apple refers to as the "intensification" (Apple 1993) of teaching. By intensification, Apple means that teachers are increasingly preoccupied with externally imposed expectations (preparing students for standardized examinations, implementing district initiatives, fund-raising activities, etc.). Given the pressures these external demands create, teachers retreat from dealing with "difficult" classroom issues and focus, instead, on performing safe, uncontroversial activities.

Another serious constraint is the effect of the prevailing political and economic climate on schools and on teachers. In the past decade, government cutbacks to education in the service of supply-side debt-reduction policies have driven many schools to the brink of bankruptcy (Kachur and Harrison 1998). In order to survive, schools and school districts have increasingly turned to the private sector for financial or technological aid. Thus, we see the proliferation of educational "branding": there are Coca-Cola schools, Pepsi schools, Apple schools and IBM schools (Barlow and Robertson 1994). But with private sector funding and technological support comes a price, as insidious as it is inevitable. Students, often from a very young age, are schooled in directed consumerism and the school itself becomes a kind of "sphere of influence" of the sponsor. This colonial metaphor is particularly and tragically appropriate. The existing neo-liberal economic milieu that is one of the defining traits of globalization has served to create a virtual "Open Door" policy for companies wishing to exploit the opportunities that an impoverished public education system presents.1 In this colonial environment, teachers find themselves and their freedom compromised by the obligation to support (or at least refrain from directly criticizing) those companies that have provided assistance to schools. In such a climate of obligation, opportunities to develop media literacy based on critical thinking that is characteristic of responsible citizenship and that can challenge globalization are seriously diminished.

Fighting Back: Talking Back

Yet despite both internal and external constraints on teaching about globalization, it is important that students and teachers develop facility in viewing media critically. Without this critical sense, students, in particular, have no context for evaluating the "truth" of the worldview that the media present them with. As media illiterates, they become unknowingly complicit in the further development of globalization and ultimately in their own commodification (Dahl 1998).

However, in the face of this danger, there are locations for resistance, and it is clear that popular opposition to globalization can have an effect. The decision of the World

Trade Organization in January, 1998 not to proceed with its proposed Multilateral Agreement on Investment was at least partly a reaction to organized campaigns against the initiative, and the massive campaigns of protest and civil disobedience at the November, 1999 Seattle Congress of the WTO certainly placed growing concerns over globalization at the forefront of the public agenda.

Perhaps more importantly for social studies teachers, it is quite clear that there are enough spaces to develop media literacy programs in the classroom. Even a cursory examination of some provincial curricula suggests that media literacy is given a fairly high priority in Canada. In Alberta, for example, the Language Arts Program of Studies introduces the concept that "The viewer must evaluate the apparent reality created in media products" and goes even further to note that, by the end of their final year of studies: "Students should be able to analyze and evaluate the extent to which manipulative devices are used in the material they encounter in their daily lives" (Alberta Learning, English Language Arts Program of Study 1981, 16).

In Ontario, the Ministry of Education specifies a separate Media Studies component in its English curriculum and notes that students need to develop critical thinking skills in order to: "Understand at first hand how media works are designed to influence audiences or reflect the perspectives of their creator" (Ontario Ministry of Education, English Curriculum 1999, 5).

In the Atlantic Region, the essential learnings document for the four Maritime Provinces identifies the need for students to "critically reflect on and interpret ideas presented through a variety of media" (New Brunswick Department of Education 1999). Although provincial governments clearly expect that media literacy will figure prominently in the English curriculum, it is interesting to note that media literacy has a much lower profile in the history and social studies curricula. Ironically, these disciplines are exactly those that are in a position to deal most directly with the social, cultural and economic consequences of the medias' promotion of globalization.

Given the need to equip students with media literacy skills as they are faced with the medias' unproblematized representation of globalization, the exercises that follow are designed to help address the problem. Like George Carlin's routine, they focus on the forbidden-or at least the controversial. Through an examination of "two terms you can (and should) use in the classroom," the exercises below suggest how students and teachers might develop a sense of agency as they deal with the effects of globalization.

Teaching the World to Sing: Consuming Cola and Cultures in the Same Breath

First Term: Cultural homogenization

Coca-Cola's famous 1970s ad that had children representing cultures from around the world singing together (and, of course, drinking Coke) symbolizes the tendency of

globalization to discount or caricature cultural difference while reducing individuals to the status of potential consumers. But despite its attempts to set global harmony to song, the move towards cultural homogenization that is implicit in the ad and in globalization has significant consequences. Cultural homogenization substitutes a kind of decontextualized consumerism for a more grounded and authentic sense of identity. Dahl describes the impact of cultural homogenization as a "mirror effect" in which the behavior of media role models is "mirrored, digested and internalized" thus: "The norms and values, the morals of the culture industry they represent are taken over. If they drink Coke, their followers do" (1998, 8). Furthermore, cultural homogenization reduces existing cultures to superficial parodies of themselves and in suggesting that these pale imitations are the essences of local cultures, it minimizes significant differences that can and do exist between cultural groups. Ultimately, cultural homogenization is a form of cultural repression rather than an open expression of cultural difference.

Particularly in television advertisements, cultural homogenization has become so pervasive that many students have ceased to remark on its underlying message of consumerism and cultural conformity. As a way of revealing and analyzing the subtext of cultural homogenization, students should be encouraged to "talk back" to television ads through the creation of "anti-ads." The structure of such a project might have the following form:

Talking Back to Your Television: Creating an "Anti-Ad"

We have all seen television ads that use exotic images of different nations and cultures to endorse particular products. Despite the visible differences between these other cultures and our own, the ads tend to promote the underlying message that we are all basically part of the same global culture and that we all believe in the same values. But is this true? Critics of these ads point to the idea that they promote global consumerism and cultural homogenization. Cultural homogenization threatens to diminish or to eliminate local cultures by creating a global culture based mainly on consumerism. In the following exercise, you will be looking at the idea of cultural homogenization as you create your own "anti-ad."

Instructions

Part I: Gathering Information

* Over two or three evenings watch television for ads using images of different nations and cultures to sell their products.
* Describe how the ads represented those nations and cultures by briefly answering the following questions:

1. Were other nations and cultures shown as fundamentally similar to or different from you?
2. Were stereotypes used to represent these nations and cultures?
3. What stereotypes were used, and would you describe them as positive or negative?
4. How did the ad represent Western or North American nations and culture?
5. Do you think the nations and cultures used in the ads were accurately and fairly

represented?

Part II: Talking It Over
* In a 20 to 30 minute general discussion, share your answers to these questions with those of your classmates.

Part III: Creating an Anti-Ad
* Working in groups of 2 or 3, pick a single television ad produced by a company that uses images of different nations and cultures to sell its products.
* In 2 or 3 class periods, create your own anti-ad video with slogans, pictures and images that you think more fairly and accurately represents both the nations and cultures shown in the original ad and the effects the particular product or products have had on these nations and cultures.

Part IV: Taking a Stand
* Show your anti-ad in the classroom, and along with the other groups, make a brief (no more than 3 minute) oral presentation about the images and slogans you used.
* Using all the information gathered in this project, write 1-2 page essay on the following topic: In a world that is increasingly global, how does globalization affect local or national cultures?

Peter, Lloyd and Me: Watching the News Through Different Eyes

Second Word: Eurocentrism

In its attempt to encourage the development of a single global market, globalization has actively substituted the values of European-based cultures for those of other cultures. While cultural diffusion and cultural hybridity are the expected consequences of interaction among states, the Eurocentrism that is associated with globalization is much more than just another example of cultural diffusion. Eurocentrism implies a field of values specific to the historical experience of Western society. Chief among those values are individualism, a belief in progress as defined by technological sophistication and material well-being, and a worldview predicated on the twin notions of prediction and control (Habermas1984; Borgmann 1993). This field of values represents a cultural template that fits well into market-driven economics and globalization.

But the aggressive political and economic expansion that was typical of Western culture during the 19th Century and that has continued today under the guise of its less overt, but no less powerful surrogates, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization, has paved the way for the substitution of Western cultural forms as universal touchstones for all nations under the guise of transcendence. As David Morley notes:

For all that it has projected itself as transhistorical and

> transnational, as the transcendent and universalizing force of modernization and modernity, global capitalism has in reality been about Westernization-the export of western commodities, values, priorities, ways of life. (Morley 1995, 108)

To resist being caught in a perspective that judges the merit of other cultures through such an ethnocentric lens, students need to become aware of the cultural values that underpin Eurocentrism and see them as representative of one culture, not as representative of all cultures. One way to counteract Eurocentrism is to examine and analyze how other cultures are represented in news broadcasts. The exercise below suggests openings for cultural analysis that resists the Eurocentrism that globalization promotes.

Watching the News Through Different Eyes

We all watch the news. It gives us a sense of the local, national and global events that affect our lives; as citizens it helps keep us informed, as individuals it connects us with our community and with the world as a whole. But is the news totally objective in what it shows us about our world, or is it presented from a particular perspective? Those who suggest that news is broadcast from a particularly Western cultural perspective sometimes use the term Eurocentrism to describe how news is presented in most industrialized nations. A Eurocentric point of view presents events mainly in terms of the values that are basic to Western industrialized societies: individualism, support for capitalism and a belief in technical and material progress. The exercise that follows encourages you to examine and compare news broadcasts for evidence of Eurocentrism and cultural bias.

Instructions

Part I: Keeping a News Log of Western Media

* As a class, pick an emerging story that deals with an important issue or event in the developing world.
* Assign 3 or 4 students to tape three newscasts that deal with the issue or event you have selected:

-One newscast should be Canadian, one should be American, and one should be British (BBC World News is available from most cable networks).

* In class, view the 3 tapes and prepare a written news log (this could be in the form of a chart) comparing how the issue or event you selected was represented in the different broadcasts. As you do this it will help to keep the following questions in mind:

1. What pictures or images did each newscast use to illustrate the story?

2. In your opinion, were the images or pictures stereotyped (provide examples)?
3. How did the news reader describe the event (what tone of voice was used, was the news item mainly factual or did it express an opinion or a conclusion)?
4. What kind of background information was given?
5. What kind of coverage did the story get (was it a short item or a longer piece)?
6. Were local people interviewed in the piece?

Part II: Keeping a News Log of Eastern Media

* Access the web pages of either Asahi Shimbun <www.asahi.com>, or the India Times <www.indiatimes.com> and prepare a written news log (again, this could be in the form of a chart) examining how the issue or event you selected was represented in these online journals. As you do this, keep the following questions in mind:

1. What images or pictures (if any) were used to illustrate the story?
2. In your opinion, were the images or pictures stereotyped (provide examples)
3. How did the article describe the event (what was the tone of the writing, was it primarily factual or did it present an opinion or conclusion)?
4. What kind of background information was given?
5. What kind of coverage did the story get (was it a short item or a longer piece)?
6. Were local people interviewed in the piece?

Part III: Comparing the Coverage

* Take part in a class discussion about the similarities and differences in how the event or issue was covered in the Western TV broadcasts and the coverage it received in non-Western online journals.

Part IV: West and non-West: A Role Playing Activity

* In a role-playing activity, (this can be videotaped or acted out in the classroom) re-broadcast the original news item with a Western and a non-Western newsreader sitting together.

* As the western newsreader presents the story, the non-Western newsreader should respond or interrupt to present the story the way he/she views it.

Part V: Becoming Critical: New Ways to Approach the News

* Based on your experience in this exercise, prepare a 1-page handbook on how to view the news critically.
* Your handbook should offer viewers tips and suggestions for detecting cultural bias in newscasts

Conclusion

Traditionally, social studies has attempted to develop the kind of critical thinking that helps students become active, responsible citizens. However, in an age of globalization when consumerism and cultural conformity appear to leave less and less room for independent thought and action, this task is increasingly difficult. One way to approach this difficulty is to develop media literacy programs that encourage students to critically engage the ideas that the media diffuse about culture and society. The exercises included in this article suggest how you can (and should) use such concepts as cultural homogenization and Eurocentrism to involve students in an investigation of the impact of globalization on culture and, ultimately, on democratic institutions themselves.

Notes

1. At the November, 1999 meeting of the WTO in Seattle, it was proposed that education be included in the trade category of "Services". This inclusion carries with it the implication that national and provincial or state educational systems of all WTO nations could be in competition with transnational educational corporations offering a variety of educational (packaged learning, distance education etc.) products.

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