

August 12, 2011 by Mark Bauerlein

Against Relevance

In recent years, I've spent many hours in committee rooms and academic conferences in which people there talked about how important critical thinking is to the English Language Arts curriculum. Many reasons came forward, but one of the more pressing ones is this: young people need to analyze critically the messages they receive in contemporary life. They are saturated with media—with advertising, with value-laden songs and videos, and with television shows that bear implicit values and attitudes. They tend to consume them mindlessly, feeding on the ideologies buried within, unless teachers show them how to interpret them critically, to unmask those values and attitudes.

The outlook translates into a curriculum. Critical thinking advocates believe that the best way to inculcate enlightened, analytical mindsets is, precisely, to bring the materials of mass culture into the classroom and submit them to enlightened analysis. Teachers should show a beer commercial and unveil its gender stereotypes. Have students read a pop teen novella and identify its adolescent norms. The more teachers do it in the classroom, the reasoning goes, the less students will let those materials slide by when they encounter them later.

This is a mistake. For one thing, it takes the precious few hours of English class and devotes them to materials that are vulgar, transient, and thin. American adolescents have such a meager knowledge of literary history that the loss of hours devoted to Shakespeare, Milton, Emerson, Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, and W. E. B. DuBois is a costly trade. For some of them, high-school and freshman English is their only chance to encounter Macbeth, Elizabeth Bennet, and Jay Gatsby.

Second, the materials of mass culture aren't worth the labor. In truth, it takes little time and effort to draw tacit ideological meanings out of music videos, TV fare, and magazine ads. They are a lot more transparent to youths than many grownups think. Students are not impressed by the teacher's ability to display the consumerism of children's shows, nor are they inclined to hear their favored media disdained. A teacher who tries to show her savvy about the ingredients of **their** leisure lives turns them off—and rightly so.

Third, most importantly, bringing mass culture into the English classroom is not, in fact, the best way to plant critical thinking about mass culture in students' heads. One might call it the "imitative fallacy." Yes, it makes intuitive sense for teachers to draw items into the classroom that they want students to understand when they leave the classroom. If they wish students to acquire some interpretative distance from TV commercials, common sense says, then teachers should incorporate them into the presentation.

But this is to confuse the actual experience of something with the training it takes to produce it. As any trainer in sports, in the military, or in martial arts will report, however, to make the experience successful, training for it has to go well beyond it. In martial arts, for instance, one goal is to prepare someone to handle a confrontation wisely, with proportional force and self-awareness. Some confrontations may require physical defense, blocks and punches and kicks, and so the student has to be trained for them. The training program, however, asks of students much more than the confrontation will demand. Training involves high kicks, but rarely is it effective to throw one in a confrontation. A low kick will suffice. But in order to make that low kick effective, the student has to master high kicks.

The pattern applies to the cultural materials on the syllabus. If teachers want students to discern the implicit meanings in commercial images, they should have students study images of more complexity and subtlety. A few days with images taken from great photography and film will equip them to "read" music

videos much more effectively than will a few days with those videos themselves. Poetry by Alexander Pope and Edna St. Vincent Millay will do more for students' verbal cognizance than will political advertisements and Twitter tweets.

This is the immediate virtue of anti-relevance. If teachers want to raise critical thinking about contemporary mass culture, they should expose students to past high culture. The language of Romantic poetry exercises critical thinking about language better than does the language of billboard jingles. It's a paradox, but it's true. If teachers want students to know the present and all its coarse enticements, they should immerse them in the best expressions of the past.

Return to Top ↑

Bookmark the permalink.

51 Comments The Chronicle of Higher Education

 Login ▾

 Recommend  Tweet  Share

Sort by Oldest ▾

formerprof • 8 years ago

On the whole, this is a good argument of the relevance of the humanities for life (and careers). It presumes that students are able to transfer insights and skills gained from study and discussion of course materials to other facets of their experience. Such a presumption might be risky, but I think it is unavoidable. Nevertheless, a quick off-the-cuff allusion or two in class to mass media expressions might help students realize that their instructor is not a totally isolated nerd.

6 ^ | v • Share ›

whitakal • 8 years ago

I would take this salutary argument one step further, and suggest that a surefire way to fail to inculcate critical thinking is to teach "critical thinking": <https://www2.bc.edu/~whitak....>

Keith Whitaker, www.wisecounselresearch.org

1 ^ | v • Share ›

trendisnotdestiny ➔ whitakal • 8 years ago • edited

To borrow from Mark's sport analogy, your comment is like so many coaches who get caught up in formations in the game soccer. In a field so fluid like teaching and soccer, the start of the shape or what you call your approach is less and less relevant. It is what you do within that shape that counts.

I would draw upon the same analogy with your comment on "critical thinking". Your

About This Blog

Posts on Brainstorm present the views of their authors. They do not represent the position of the editors, nor does posting here imply any endorsement by *The Chronicle*.



The Conversation

The Chronicle's new online opinion venue features discussion about higher education, ideas, and academic life.

[Read more »](#)

Archives

Select Month



© 2019 The Chronicle of Higher Education

1255 23rd Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037