

Doing Vocational, Reformist and Critical Production: New Pedagogies for Media Education

DRAFT: WORK IN PROGRESS

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Media educators have typically sought to integrate media production into the curriculum using various modes. We define these modes as *vocational*, *reformist*, and *critical*, and, while not all media educators take this approach, we view these modes as sequential. Furthermore, we believe all three modes of media education production are essential to becoming media literate. However, the last of the sequence, critical production, is most often left out. Critical production is even often missing at the college level—the level one would expect the most freedom in critical inquiry. Thus, students rarely get the opportunity to learn this approach by “doing the thing”—producing media content that critically critiques the media system. This article argues, though, that we are at an historic moment in media education in which critical production can make sense to our students. Our students are increasingly immersed in critical digital media production, even though they may not know it. We describe a class-based project called *Critical Media*, in which we called upon the technological skills/critical mindset our students brought to the classroom, challenged our students to create a piece of critical media with high production values, and somewhat successfully combined all three modes of media education.

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Sophocles once said “one must learn by doing the thing.” And so it is in media education, where learning about the mass media has often meant doing media production.

Thus, media educators (and we include ourselves in this group) have typically sought to integrate media production into the curriculum in various ways. First, we can train students in conventional media production techniques in order to create high quality images and learn the language of visual communication. Second, we can teach our students to merge criticism with production skills and ask them to evaluate media content and produce work that expands the range of representations and ideas in the mass media. Third, we can ask our students to critically analyze the political economy of the global mass media system, and then produce media content that works toward a completely restructured, more democratic mass media.

As such, media education offers a series of scaffolds (Vygotsky, 1978), from the conventional to the activist, with each level supporting the next. We can define these scaffolds distinctly, as *vocational*, *reformist*, and *critical*, and while we think of them as sequential, not all media educators take this approach. Some for example, limit their lessons to *vocational production*, which teaches the technical skills of media production, with the ultimate goal of helping students find internships and employment in the mass media industries. This type of media education begins in the K-12 grades, where teachers train students to “write” with visuals (juxtaposing images into narrative form), acknowledge the “real world” of popular culture in students’ lives, and encourage students to produce work that mimics or parodies mainstream media content

(Buckingham, 1998B; Grace & Tobin, 1998). Vocational production continues at the college level, where students learn conventional studio production formats, imitate the style of music videos or scenes from Hollywood films, and try to approximate the production values of other commercial mass media.

The next scaffold, *reformist production*, brings media literacy together with production skills in order to improve (reform) representations of class, gender, race, sexuality, and social views in the media system. Buckingham (1998A) sees this kind of production as an extension of progressivism where students share their expertise and explore their own perspectives through creative media production. An example of reformist production is when students take the skills learned in their vocational classes and produce documentaries, soap operas, or commercials that feature subjects or topics that better reflect their personal experiences, or offer an alternative to commercial media practices (Hammer, 1995). The nonprofit Just Think Foundation, for example, designs extracurricular media education programs that encourage young people to produce personal narratives to articulate their own (rather than the mass media's) perspectives; create music videos "with a positive visual and lyrical message"; and design positive marketing campaigns for a healthy products (Just Think, 2006). All these efforts ask young people to find their voice, "write" with media tools, create interesting *original* video work, and prod the commercial media system toward positive change.

Critical production, what we view as the third scaffold in media education, starts with the analytical view of reformist production, but then takes a further step to challenge, disrupt, transform, and—in its most extreme form—replace the commercial media system with alternative systems of media production, distribution, and exhibition.

To use a business cliché, critical production asks students to “think outside the box,” to envision not the same or an improved media system, but one that is wholly different. Projects that fit within the critical approach are grounded in issues of power relations, political economy and hegemonic influence (Peters, 1998). The hour-long documentary *A Cold Day in D.C.: The Counter Inaugural* (2005), produced by media studies scholar David Sholle and Andy Marko with their Miami University graduate production class, is a critical production. At first *A Cold Day* appears reformist; it deconstructs the media portrayal of President George W. Bush at the January 2005 inauguration ceremony in Washington, D.C. by taking on a street-level, behind-the-scenes point of view and documenting what is not being shown on commercial television screens: protests and guerilla theatre in opposition to Bush’s second term; the heavy police presence; and the general frustration of those locked out of the main event. Besides offering a valuable alternative representation to the marching bands, dignitaries, and orderly ceremony shown in the mainstream media, the documentary becomes a critical work by actively commenting on the media system and offering contextual information about the economic power structures that make this representation seem like common sense. The section titled “TV Eye” is particularly instructive in terms of juxtaposing mainstream media footage with “real” street footage, and offering critical commentary such as this:

The ‘Big Media’ followed orders, shooting from platforms preselected by the Administration. These platforms were situated across from bleachers full of Bush friendly ticket holders. The result: the objective view: One of celebration. Meanwhile, the independent media shot from the ground in public areas, through four rows of police. The result: Not objective.”

Because Sholle et al. distribute their DVD independently through the Internet, these media educators join other critical documentary filmmakers such as Robert Greenwald (*Outfoxed; Iraq for Sale*), who are finding alternative distribution outlets in their committed effort to examine, expose and reorganize media institutions. Writer Michael Albert (1997) says critical or “alternative” media does not attempt to maximize profits or generate the largest possible audience to sell to advertisers for revenues. Instead, the goal is to “subvert society’s defining hierarchical social relationships” (p. 53). Unlike many reformist-type media efforts, the film by Sholle, Marko, and their students will never make its way into the mainstream media. Instead, *A Cold Day in D.C.* works through the Internet, classrooms, and public screenings to add its perspective to the media education dialogue.

Critical production need not only happen at the graduate level. Robert Williams and James Valastro’s MemeFILMS media education project is aimed at K-12 students. Williams and Valastro conduct workshops with young people to co-create short video segments that relate to media-related consumer, civic, and health issues. They introduce issues of political economy and mass media ownership by asking their students to base their work on a few simple statements, such as “teens see as many as 3,000 ad messages a day, while six Big Media corporations own as much as 90 percent of children’s media content.” Williams (2005) describes a few structural prototypes that have worked well for MemeFILMS: “The Rant,” which gets young people talking to the camera and offering examples that confront and disrupt commonsense advertising practices, and “The Appeal,” that shows young people talking, again to the camera, but this time the audience may be tobacco industry executives and the appeal is to “please stop targeting us,” or the

FCC, who is asked why they just voted to deregulate media ownership. “Having students talk directly to parents, or corporate executives, or advertisers is empowering,” Williams writes, “and makes for powerful media too” (p. 16). Williams and Valastro seek alternative distribution outlets such as community cable TV networks, statewide nonprofit networks, the Internet, and “world premieres” at local movie theaters, for MemeFILMS youth productions.

An opportunity for critical production

We believe that the vocational, reformist and critical approaches are all essential to becoming media literate. However, the last of the sequence, critical production, is most often left out. Critical production is even often missing at the college level—the level one would expect the most freedom in critical inquiry. Thus, students rarely get the opportunity to learn this approach by “doing the thing”—producing media content that critically critiques the media system.

That our students don’t understand more about the way our commercial media system works (who owns and controls the media, the profit-driven nature of our economy, and how that economy gives rise to a commercially driven media) is deeply unfortunate. Yet, given that we teach at universities that are increasingly bound up in the same far-reaching commercial environment (see, for example Johnson et al, 2003; Bok, 2004), it is understandable. Since most media programs at the university level are geared towards professional development, it is difficult to critique the system while we are, at the same time, teaching our students to get jobs within the system (Sholle & Denski, 1994). Thus, critical production would seem to have no connection with students’s lives.

But we are now at an historic moment in media education, a moment in which critical production can make sense to our students. Two factors are in play. First, since the late 1990s, young students are entering secondary school and university classrooms with increasingly developed media production skills. We have all witnessed the rise of inexpensive digital video and still cameras; digital audio recorders; digital media players; multimedia mobile telephones; digital video recorders (e.g., TiVo); non-linear audio and video editing systems; software for animation, photo alteration, and graphic design; computers with enormous hard drives; and perhaps, most significantly, high-speed broadband internet access, which links multimedia devices and enables young people to access a plethora of media content. Large media production systems which could have been found only in commercial or university studio environments a dozen years ago have been consolidated into inexpensive, powerful desktop devices that now reside in millions of teenagers' bedrooms. It is no surprise our high school and university students already come to us with familiarity and even great expertise in doing media production. This gives instructors a big head start on teaching vocational production techniques, and offers more time to cover reformist and critical approaches.

Second, even if they're not fully cognizant of it, many of our students are already immersed in critical media culture, as they question conventional media forms, dismiss typical news media channels, and push for new media distribution systems. The production, distribution, and exhibition of films, television programs, popular music, political commentary, and other media content used to be the sole domain of massive media conglomerates (Campbell, Martin & Fabos, 2007). But for the new generation of students, they can do all of these things with their computer, a few peripheral devices,

and a high speed internet connection. This emerging critical mindset first became clear to the rest of the world in 1999 with the rapid rise of Napster, which enabled millions of music fans (nearly all of them young) to trade music.

Napster was radical in three ways: first, it was a distribution system created at the grassroots level by a young programmer (Shawn Fanning, then 19), and popularized by his age peers around the world; second, it demonstrated the power of the Internet as an alternative media distribution system (an idea that took the music industry years to grasp); and third, it undermined traditional thinking about intellectual property and called attention to the issue of copyrights. (Napster as a free music trading site was ultimately shut down by the courts for copyright infringement in 2001.)

Napster was only the beginning of this way of thinking. People have created new content and aesthetic forms on the Internet (Lessig, 2006); Web sites like YouTube, Flickr, and the Internet Archive have facilitated the distribution of moving and still images (some copyrighted, and some not), and social networking sites like MySpace (now owned by a big media conglomerate – the News Corp.) and facebook are still evolving into novel distribution routes. Moreover, people are joining a revitalized political discourse that, at least for now, exists outside of commercial media control.

Yochai Benkler (2006) talks about the “networked public sphere,” in which:

a wide range of mechanisms—starting from the simple mailing list, through static Web pages, the emergence of writable Web capabilities, and mobility—are being embedded in a social system for the collection of politically salient information, observations, and comments, and provide a platform for discourse. These platforms solve some of the basic limitations of the commercial, concentrated

mass media as the core platform of the public sphere in contemporary complex democracies. (p. 11)

Lawrence Lessig (2006) uses the metaphor of CD and DVD formats to explain that we've moved from a "read-only" culture in which we digest what the media industries produce, to a "read-write" culture in which we also have the power to create our own original culture and re-create what the media industries produce. Our students are living testimonies of this cultural shift. We take a show of hands in class and find that many of these fine young citizens have a serious disregard for the legalities of digital media distribution, and have acquired a huge stash of downloaded songs, images, and movies on their computers which they sometimes use to create their own derivative works. Thus, the digital culture has formed an educational scaffolding, albeit an imperfect one, for students to learn more about the media. All of this, we have found, makes for a good starting point in getting into the idea of critical production.

The significance of a critical critique

There has been considerable dissonance about the purpose of media production in media education. Some media educators often dismiss vocational tracks as "ideological reproduction" and anti-intellectual (Buckingham, 1998B, p. 65). In the words of Sholle and Denski (1994), "The mass media represent the greatest force for social control ever imagined and media education represents an acritical and celebratory indoctrination into the mechanisms and techniques of this control" (p. 8). Critical media advocates have also critiqued media reformists for focusing so completely on content and not looking at the

key questions of media ownership. “A major theme of the dozens of [reformist] media literacy projects around the United States is that no one is to blame for the content and form of the media,” Cynthia Peters writes in *Z* magazine. “We simply must be better educated about how to view and use it” (p. 26). Meanwhile, others validate a vocational approach and dismiss reformist and critical rhetoric as being overly theorized, self-righteous, and politically evangelical (Buckingham, 1998A). A divide has even emerged between the two largest media literacy associations in the U.S. The American Media Literacy Association is aligned with a more reformist agenda while the Action Coalition for Media Education is more closely tied to critical interpretations of media education.

We think a scaffolding approach using all three modes of media education is the best approach. Vocational productions may generate work that doesn’t challenge students to critically engage with the larger media environment, but learning how to successfully frame and light an image is, we feel, an important skill. Likewise, reformist and critical productions may be self-righteous but they don’t have to be. What they do offer are healthy criticisms and useful policy alternatives to the corporate-dominated media system. It’s important to consider that all three types of production have an inherent political advocacy, whether it is the implicit conservatism of the vocational approach (which doesn’t question the operations of the commercial media industry), the more explicit reformist approach (which is critical of various aspects of the mass media), or the unequivocal activism of the critical approach.

Indeed, one of the significant pedagogical challenges to doing critical production is that it often seems to be the only “political” approach of the three production modes because it doesn’t fit into normative political rhetoric (at least in the United States).

Thus, in the political correctness (generated from the left and right) that still clouds U.S. educational campuses (Young, 2005), we gently skip around the idea that we're imposing a political agenda on them. Our remedy is not to water down our projects, but to bypass the typical left-right language in favor of the critical goal with which we could all agree: working toward more democratic mass media.

The right to fair use and critical media

In 1991, University of Massachusetts professor Sut Jhally edited together images of MTV videos, and added new music and a voice over that critiqued the sexist representations in the videos. He also commented on the political economic environment in which MTV and its parent corporation Viacom marketed to an adolescent male audience; it made good business sense to use dehumanizing images of women in MTV videos (Davis, 1991). Jhally's "Dreamworlds: Desire/Sex/Power in Rock Video" was a critical production—so critical that MTV threatened Jhally and his university with legal action for copyright abuse. Jhally held his ground, arguing “This sort of cultural commentary is what universities exist to do” (Davis, 1991, p. 29). MTV ultimately backed down.

The work of vocational production, as noted earlier, is to create original media content in the dominant style of mainstream media industries. As students move into reformist and critical media production, though, their work contains varying levels of criticism of mainstream media. An important tool in doing this criticism is being able to “quote” examples of media content, as Jhally did in his video, and as critical writers have

done for centuries, citing other written documents in their own work. Legally, nonprofit educational media producers are entitled to use portions of other media content under the doctrine of “fair comment and criticism” or “fair use.”

The Center for Social Media at American University in Washington, D.C. defines fair use as a concept existing in tension with copyright:

Fair use is the right, in some circumstances, to quote copyrighted material without asking permission or paying for it. It is a crucial feature of copyright law and what keeps copyright from being censorship. You can invoke fair use when the value to the public of what you are saying outweighs the cost to the private owner of the copyright. (Center for Social Media, 2006) (find better quote from Lessig)

Thus, critical artists negotiate blurry legal horizons as they argue for the democratic value of their work in order to steer clear of copyright lawsuits. As video, music, and images become more central to our culture and as digital formats make this content more accessible, media corporations have wielded legal threats to protect their “intellectual property.” In 2005, documentary producers mounted an initiative to stake out ground for their work. Through the Center for Social Media, a coalition of independent media producers and academics released a “Documentary Filmmakers’ Statement of Best Practices in Fair Use” (2005), and asserted that a media producer should be able to use copyrighted material if it is used as the object of social, political, or cultural critique, if it is used to illustrate an argument or point, if it is captured in the background as part of a work on something else, or if it is used as part of an historical sequence. The doctrine

even allows commercial works to invoke fair use if they are guided by the above principles.

Although this doctrine in no way settles the battle between fair use and copyright (Lessig, 2006), there exists today extraordinary flexibility to create critical media productions that reinterpret mainstream media content to critique our social, political and cultural environment. Consequently, our students' adeptness with digital technology and their familiarity with reusing copyrighted work give us a great head start in teaching. Moreover, because our approach is to "re-write" culture (versus the vocational production goal of creating read-only culture from scratch), we can spend less time on vocational skills and move into reformist and critical approaches earlier.

The Critical Media DVD

The *Critical Media DVD* project was an experiment in critical media production. Our purpose was twofold. First, we wanted to get our college-level students engaged in a cultural (critical) critique of the media. This cultural critique would be based on original scripts we would write and illustrated with material acquired from television programs, advertisements, internet sites, and any suitable source within our cultural media environment. As such, we would be relying on the principles of fair use, and Lessig's notion that we are commenting on and transforming cultural/media representations by repositioning or "re-writing" them in a critical context. Second, we had vocational aims for this project: we wanted to work alongside our students and demand both high production values and insightful content that would, in the end, be presentable as a usable

product that would be distributed in DVD or internet form to educators nationwide, and used to stimulate discussions about the media in college and K-12 classrooms.

The circumstances of this class were rather unique. We were teaching a “project” class within Miami University’s new interdisciplinary Interactive Media Studies Program, which exists outside of the typical production sequence of a mass communication or broadcasting program. The IMS project class is supposed to emphasize real-world, client-based projects, bringing together students from various disciplines to form “content,” “graphic design,” and “technology” teams which build an interactive media project as a collaborative experience. Ideally, students come into this senior-level project class with a significant set of interactive media skills—including the ability to do digital nonlinear editing, Macromedia Flash, Photoshop, and web design—in addition to their particular disciplinary (academic major) interests.

However, the program is young and for now, students arrive in project classes as relative novices in most or all of these technical skills. As such, the class offered both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge was that only two of the 18 students had any minimal media production experience and only two others had advanced media criticism skills. Most of students in the class were majoring in economics, finance, computer science, and graphic design. It was an odd mixture for a media criticism/production class, and there was little chance to scaffold one level of media education onto another. The opportunity, though, was to see if our students, who, we assumed are already immersed in a digital media culture, could pull it off. Building *Critical Media* was a chance to see how relative media literacy novices could produce a high quality media literacy pedagogy tool, good enough for wide distribution.

Defining the project

We assigned 12 students to the content team, two graphic designers, and four students who were responsible for the project's technology. One of us (Fabos) was the course's main instructor. The other (Martin) played the role of "outside consultant." We also engaged our colleague, Richard Campbell, as another external consultant. All of us presented the project on the first day of class, and outlined the goal of media criticism, framed (as noted above) within the context of greater democracy.

Our first goal was to decide which topics to address, and how many pieces to create for our educational DVD. The DVD would contain 18 short video pieces (1-3 minutes was our initial target length—they would be lengthened considerably), divided into six topic areas: advertising, journalism, public relations, new technology, media effects/representation, and media economics. Our model for the style and critical quality for the short videos was a futuristic Flash animation piece called "Epic 2015" by Robin Sloan and Matt Thompson, which prophesies, in a smart and irreverent tone, a world in which Google and Amazon gain control of all news media by 2015 (Sloan & Thompson, 2004). We hoped that our pieces would also be critical, entertaining, and well researched.

It was essential to us that students in the content team worked within topic areas in which they were interested. We spent about a week discussing ideas for specific pieces, provided a list of project resources, and then sent content students off to do

research. The graphic design team was at this time building an arsenal of design ideas, and the technology team was investigating technological platforms on which to build the final product. Meanwhile, the entire class was learning elementary skills in Flash, which we hoped to integrate into some or all of our critical video pieces. By the end of this period, we had settled upon a framework for each video piece, and found that numerous video ideas could be listed across categories. The 18 pieces evolved over the course of the term; below is the final title, with an added description of each:

Advertising

Ad Insidiousness. This piece is about the increasing use of subversive youth culture as a marketing technique. It highlights how the anti-consumer artists Basquiat, Minor Threat, and Tats Cru have all been co-opted by the advertising industry to sell products such as M&Ms and Hummers, completely reversing the original intent of the artists.

My Channel One. We approached this video through personal narrative, using *Channel One* clips to illustrate the narration. The narrator critiques Channel One's advertising and excessively promotional news content, but interestingly, remembers hardly *anything* from six years of 12-minute broadcasts.

The Future of the 30-Second Spot. Part historical, part futuristic, this video illustrates how digital video recorders such as TiVo have disrupted the effectiveness of spot ads, and discusses how the commercial television industry is learning to adapt.

Ask Your Doctor. Exploring direct-to-consumer (DTC) advertising in the pharmaceutical market, the video parodies a typical pharmaceutical advertisement. An advertising executive has a “problem” of how to effectively target consumers. The solution, is, of course, DTC advertising. Pharmaceutical ads illustrate the piece.

Media Economics

Media Rules. Our goal with this piece was to explain the core concepts surrounding broadcast media regulation. We used archival footage of key FCC moments (e.g., the signing of the 1996 Telecommunication Act as featured on C-Span), and Flash animation to help illustrate the way regulation has been relaxed.

Corporate Synergy. The video uses News Corporation to explain how a company successfully employs vertical integration. Noting how this practice was outlawed in the film industry 60 years ago, the video tracks News Corp’s animated feature, *Ice Age II*, as it was cross promoted on *American Idol*, Fox News, *MySpace*, FX, and Harper Collins, all subsidiaries of News Corp.

Bad News Sinclair. The video offers a short history of Sinclair Broadcasting Group and the news conglomerate’s use of “central casting” in local newscasts. Showing similar footage from a number of “local” Sinclair stations across the country, the video illustrates the downsides Sinclair’s economic strategies—that of eliminating local journalism.

Public Relations

VNRs. This video is about video news releases—“fake news” disseminated by public relations firms to tout a particular product or sponsored event. The video’s narration, which explains the what, why, and how of VNRs, is illustrated with footage from actual VNRs, offering critical insights into the way they are used (and abused) by commercial news media outlets.

Government Propaganda. Offering a short primer on the rise of public relations in American politics, this video focuses on some of the public relations practices developed in the George W. Bush White House. It also questions U.S. journalism’s role in allowing these practices to continue.

Myth and the Media: An illustrated analysis of the myths that created the Marlboro Man and President George W. Bush. The video urges us to be critical of our culture’s myths, and to be ready to take them apart in order to make sense of our world.

Effects/Representation

Male Body Image: Loaded with images of beauty product advertisements (which portray a certain kind of beauty), this piece illustrates how the media industry’s increasing portrayals of metrosexuals and steroid-inflated guys reflect a growing market for male beauty products—and male anxiety.

Racism and Local TV News. Based on the media scholarship of Chris Campbell, this video looks at the local TV news crime block, which stars African Americans and other minorities, and reinforces stereotypes and racist attitudes in mainstream white America. The video relies upon footage from local news programming.

High-Calorie Advertising: This video first takes a historical look at tobacco advertising, which was forced off public airwaves a generation ago. Then it looks at fast food ads, and points to revealing similarities in both content and marketing strategies. Is the smoking epidemic related to the obesity epidemic? Should we ban fast food advertising from television?

New Technology

Search Engine Oligopoly: This video offers a short history of the search engine industry as well as a glimpse into the increasingly powerful world of search.

I Spy WiFi. This video investigates the democratic potential of wireless broadband and the telecommunication industry's attempts to control it.

Journalism

Anchor Dreams. Discussing low pay, conformity of appearance, and occasional stalkers, this video tells the untold downsides of the local TV anchor.

Fair and Balanced News? Using the topic of global warming, this video discusses how balance, in the name of objectivity, can skew the story and move us away from the truth.

I am a Journalist. Documenting the true story of Kelmend Hapciu, a journalist working under Serbian authoritarian rule (1986-1996), this video discusses the horrors endured by Kosovo's Albanians during of this period\ as Slobodan Milosevic rose to power, and the efforts among journalists such as Hapciu to get the truth out.

Designing *Critical Media*

The next stage involved writing and rewriting scripts, addressing graphic design choices, and both specifying technology needs and learning technology applications that would be used in the project (we would be editing with Avid, AfterEffects, and using DVD Studio Pro). The technical team was also responsible for thinking through video storage issues and editing strategies, which, given the limitations of our media lab, were necessary considerations.

All of the elements in this phase sound easy and straightforward but none of them were. Not surprisingly, some students were far more comfortable and adept with the

research and writing phase than others. As drafts were turned over to the consultants (both media scholars), who then heavily edited and revised them, many students felt violated at the additions and deletions rather than seeing this part of the process, or rather than seeing their work as contributions towards the whole. “None of my words are in here,” a few students would say about the edited scripts. Of course, there is a lesson on vocational production here—editors in the “real world” of the media industry can wield a cruel pen. But there was a bigger lesson for the students. Had they not provided a first draft, the second draft would not have been possible. Students brought fantastic ideas to the table and a freshness to the content that would be unexpected from more academic takes on these subjects.

For example, the piece on Channel One, the daily commercial newscast beamed to about 40 percent of U.S. secondary schools, evolved as a personal narrative: the observations of a student who “grew up” in a Channel One classroom. The piece revealing the unglamorous side of local news was written in second person and developed a very compelling “you know what I mean” tone. The narration for the piece about male beauty products/male body image was envisioned as “omniscient deadpan.” And the piece on direct-to-consumer pharmaceutical advertising emerged as a parody of these very commercials—a truly innovative approach (at least when one thinks of typical classroom materials) to exposing marketing practices. Thus, there was a remarkable array of strategies and ideas given the multiple authors working on the whole project.

With the help of knowledgeable media scholars, students’ initial efforts were shaped into well-reasoned, sophisticated arguments. Still, a major problem in this phase was the way that content team writers did not witness the editing and the discussions as

the consultants polished their scripts. Unfortunately, there were too many scripts to work on and not enough time to include the students in the process. While this is standard practice in “the real world,” it’s not as effective in the classroom, where students can benefit from explicit explanations for each edit. We would recommend more dialogue during the editing process on future projects like this one, particularly for students who aren’t accustomed to regular criticism in media writing projects.

Building Critical Media

By now, scripts were done, the graphic designs were taking shape, the DVD structure had been organized, and the technical team had figured out how 18 people would efficiently digitize gobs of visual and audio material and edit and polish 18 pieces—which had now grown to 5-8 minutes each in length—in the month and a half remaining in the semester. Now we had entered production mode. Images needed to be found and digitized, narrations needed to be recorded and transferred to the video editing computer, and music—either public domain or original—needed to be secured. Whereas scriptwriting and skill learning had been disorienting and scary for students, here they exhibited an extraordinary expertise when it came to finding images to accompany the scripts: wifi connection boxes mounted on rooftops, flag-draped coffins arriving from Iraq, artist Basquiat, and soccer star David Beckham (the image had to show him wearing fingernail polish). Perhaps the most impressive find was a photograph of the newspaper building in Pristina, the capital of Kosovo, which was needed for the piece called “I am a Journalist,” about the importance of a free press and a Kosovar journalist’s heroic efforts

to get the story out of his Serbian-controlled homeland in the 1990s. Owen, the piece's student author, had no knowledge of Kosovo and had only a description of the news building to go on. And yet, he located four images of this building, all from different sources. Another success story was when Sally-Anne located a photograph of the reclusive Sinclair family (of the U.S. media corporation Sinclair Broadcasting). This seemed like an impossible task; even local Pennsylvanian newspapers couldn't come up with an image. With undeniable persistence, however, she found an image online. There were numerous accomplishments like this one throughout this stage.

Beyond photographic images, the project relied on video images recorded on a digital video recorder (a huge and necessary job that Fabos took on). She had a list of images, mostly advertising and news, to record and bring in. Students then located the images applicable to their piece, digitized them, and added them to their videos to illustrate their commentary.

Narration created other interesting production experiences. Students first identified the kind of narrator voice they wanted for their pieces (most students were working on at least two videos). Some scripts called for younger voices, such as the scripts on subversive advertising, vertical integration, video news releases, and fast-food advertising, which we found among class members or people they knew. Other scripts called for more mature voices, such as the piece on Sinclair Broadcasting, the history of TV sponsorship, and the parody on direct-to-consumer advertising. Picking the voice and recording the script in professional recording sessions (which often required multiple takes) helped these students appreciate the significance of tone, inflection, rhythm and overall quality in their media productions. On some occasions, content team members

had to ask their narrators to re-read passages on a separate day only to find that their narrators' voices had changed dramatically, requiring narrators to come read the entire script a third time. Other times the narrator thought to be ideal was not right at all, which led to a scramble to locate the right voice for the piece. All of these skills, of course, relate more to vocational rather than reformist or critical production techniques, but we see media education, again, as a wholistic process. We see production technique as a significant component of more advanced media education.

Doing things differently

The final DVD was completed by the end of the semester, and we were exhausted, but satisfied with nearly every part of the final production. But, some things we wish we could have done differently, particularly in the production process. If we had a chance to repeat this project, we would first remove it from the conditions of “marketability” and “client-based” projects that is the IMS model we were working under. We would never again ask our students to do so much in such little time. We should have, in retrospect, cut the scope of *Critical Media* in half. We were also uncomfortable dividing the group into disciplinary teams, following, again, the IMS methodology for project classes. These divisions caused understandable tensions between groups with some groups working harder than others at times. Moreover, it took away the critical media dimension of the class: yes, we were building a critical media pedagogy tool, but not every class member was equally skilled in the content, which lessened the experience overall. For some, the technical demands of the project came

first, the content came second. Thus, for those students, the vocational production aspects overshadowed the lessons of the production's critical aspects.

We would also place this class within a media education sequence where it is the final stage. Students could work on issues leading them towards a script in a separate class, and then in this project class, build the piece. They would also, in an ideal situation, come to a project class like this with editing and animation skills already set in place. Combining research, scriptwriting and production in the same class was extremely difficult to pull off.

Outcomes

In their final form, the 18 pieces making up *Critical Media* are each outstanding in their own way, something students were proud of. But how does one measure success in a project like this?

One way of measuring success is in the individual impacts on the project's 18 students. Some had concrete vocational outcomes. For example, the class's project manager used her production experience from the project to get a job as a producer in a top boutique advertising agency's Chicago bureau. Another student who had come into the class with dreams of pursuing a job as a broadcast journalist had learned, through researching her two pieces, that she would be happier in another career path. Her first piece, "Anchor Dreams," tackled the reality of local broadcast news reporting, which she found to be a low-paying women's job with limited creativity and control. Her second piece, "Bad News Sinclair," detailed the crass economic and political incentives of the

Sinclair Broadcasting empire, helping her understand the extent that economics drive the broadcast news business, not a commitment to quality reporting. Still one more student, part of the technology team, found a way to use his music talents during the project. He composed the background songs for nearly every piece in the DVD, the first time in his college career that he had used his creative side. His musical work was so critical to the project that this part of him was somehow validated.

There were some other concrete breakthroughs as far as getting students to critique the media system. One student with aims to work in progressive politics worked on three pieces: “Government PR” (about escalating government public relations strategies); “Media Rules” (about the Federal Communications Commission and its media ownership regulations); and “Corporate Synergy,” about vertical integration practices of media conglomerates. Although this student had already embraced a critical critique of the U.S. media system before he took the class, his work on all three pieces cemented his understanding of these ideas. Finally, one other student who took the class as a junior and authored “I Spy Wifi,” a piece explaining the democratic potential of wifi technology, extended his research into the following semester and made wifi the subject of his senior thesis project. Putting research into practice, this student is finding a way, through various funding channels, to bring wifi access and computers to the low-income neighborhood located at the edge of our college town. Prior to working on the *Critical Media* project, this student had no concrete understanding of wifi.

Another way of measuring success is in an award the *Critical Media* DVD received – the Grand Prize in the Fair Use/Free Speech contest established by the University Film and Video Association and American University. This was a huge

national honor, inspiring us, in the end, to make our individual video pieces easily available online for download rather than distribute the DVD through educational outlets. In the spirit of the creative commons and fair use practices, all pieces are accessible via these two cites: XXXX and XXXX (CITES TO COME).

Finally, we can measure success against our initial pedagogical goals. As we noted earlier, we believe that the vocational, reformist and critical approaches are all essential to becoming media literate, and that by doing production we can best teach critical media criticism. But, honestly, we had never done such an ambitious project, and worried that we had taken on too much.

Our failure was that we did indeed do too much at once. The idea of scaffolding in media education is a good one, we think, but building all of the scaffolding in a matter of weeks and not over a college career is not the best approach.

But, there is more wisdom (using students with a background in media production and criticism) to engaging all three production modes on the same project. As Douglas Kellner has noted, combining practice with theory demonstrates how theory can be relevant to everyday lives (Kellner, 1995). We agree, and suggest that doing all three production modes has a tempering effect. On one hand, the critical nature of reformist and critical perspectives prevents students from falling blindly into career-driven vocational work. On the other hand, the practical rigors of vocational work keep the rhetoric of reformist and critical production rooted, for these projects had to speak honestly, effectively, and not too pedantically to the target audience of high school and college students.

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