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Critical Reflections: Editor's Introduction

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The present social and political climate has led university students and staff to encounter seemingly “new” challenges and opportunities on campus. As the White House administration support xenophobic policies and everyday practices (e.g., “America first” trade and economic policies and support for the physical harm of opposition) and young citizens become increasingly involved in cultural politics, the university classroom becomes a central place for students and teachers to reflect upon the tensions and implications they face.

In Nebraska, a student chapter leader for Turning Point USA filmed a confrontation between herself and a graduate student. When the video went viral, the graduate student was removed from her post as a graduate instructor (Flaherty 2018). Students and staff can witness the material implications of far-right ideology and policy on their walks to class or while scrolling through social media. As a result, many students have shown increasing interest in political action -- such as taking part in walk outs and rallies and getting involved in campus and community campaigns. Others have done the opposite, stating that they are indifferent to politics, and purposely shying away from confrontational debates or events. Of course, there are many in the middle of this spectrum, but it is largely the opposite ends that students occupy that has material effects on classroom discussion and culture.

While many instances of hatred are in fact not new, the context in which they are occurring – e.g., bolstering of xenophobia by the President, call-out culture on social media, neoliberalism – makes such instances imperative to examine. As teachers of media at the university level, we must take a moment to consider how media economics, production, and representation are impacting our students and ourselves, so that we may cater our pedagogy to address resulting challenges and opportunities in effective and ethical ways. We must consider how our attempts to create safe and supportive classrooms may affect our personal safety and employment status, given the implementation of things like the professor watchlist and ability for students to record and publish our words and actions online. We must also raise awareness of how to use media in ways that are equitable, respectful, and self-aware.

“Critical Reflections” attempts to tackle this difficult task through reflection, discussion, and the sharing of lesson plans. Overall, the pieces in this issue address the following questions: What does it mean to educate, and specifically to teach media, in the present context? How have media classroom environments shifted in recent years? How have media instructors adapted their teaching to respond to different social and political events? And how have students reacted to the present social and political context? Our hope is that the papers in this issue encourage, support, and inspire media educators to continue, and perhaps adapt, our imperative work in these embattled times.

Pamela Hill Nettleton reflects on her experience teaching media in a climate that empowers hate and resistance in “Teaching in the Age of Trump: Trickle-down Assaults on the Truth.” This thought-provoking piece offers cogent examples of reactionary conflict *and* ideas for engaging intellectually and respectfully with resistant students in the classroom. Nettleton’s piece reminds media instructors that our job is to challenge our students, and although this task is increasingly difficult in the Trump-era, this work is both subversive and patriotic.

In “Why ‘Intellectual Work is Cathartic’ and Other Reflections About Teaching Media” **Megan Yahnke** asks Dr. Mary Vavrus, professor at the University of Minnesota, about teaching classes in media studies in a context marked by media coverage of and student’s engagement with current events and political figures that illuminate political tensions. Mary reflects on how interrogating our media culture is more important than ever. Cultivating critical thinking around media is key to challenging oppressive and ideologically harmful representations. Although she acknowledges that it can be difficult to learn about media culture in a context in which disturbing events and practices are brought to our attention regularly (whether it be about sexual harassment or digital privacy), she points to hopeful shifts and important intellectual work taking place in the classroom.

Rosemary Clark-Parsons’ critical reflection, “The Work of Classroom Safe Spaces,” historicizes and contextualizes the ongoing debate of “safe spaces” on university campuses in the United States. She offers an intervention into the safe spaces debate, arguing that safe space is a pedagogical practice, something contextual, contingent, and above all, a form of work, rather than a stable, closed concept. Drawing on her own ethnographic work, Parsons asks three fundamental questions regarding what constitutes a safe space: who is the space for, what is this space safe from, and what is safe to do in this space. She carries these questions into the classroom to collaborate with her students on the possible answers.

Katie Day Good’s lesson, “C.H.I.R.P.S.: An Introductory Approach to Analyzing Intercultural Representations,” brings critical media and intercultural literacies together to offer a step-by-step method for critical analysis of visual representation. Good’s “C.H.I.R.P.S” (a mnemonic device abbreviating the words “contexts, histories, identities, representations, power, and space”) analysis guides students in contextualizing controversial images—such as a photo of Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the national anthem to protest the killing of black men by police—in larger systems of power structured by race, gender, sexuality, nation, ethnicity, class, age, ability, nationality, religion, among others. Students begin by practicing the method in a large group, facilitated by the instructor. Then, in six small groups (each assigned to research the image in terms of one of “C.H.I.R.P.S.” components), students apply the method to another image and present their analysis in a Google Slides presentation.

Bibliography

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