

Asking Questions First: Navigating Popular Culture and Transgression in an Inquiry-Based Media Literacy Classroom

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This article explores five concerns among media literacy educators related to using potentially transgressive popular culture texts as tools in the classroom, detailing the formative teaching experiences of several instructors in a media literacy summer enrichment program. These five concerns include such issues as inappropriate material in a media text and fear of offending parents or administrators. Using inquiry-based learning as a classroom foundation, instructors and administration in the program developed strategies for dealing with problematic and transgressive popular culture material in classroom use. Strategies explored include teaching and practicing critical thinking skills and encouraging open-ended student dialogue. Instructors modeled and supported positive and respectful conversations about popular media texts, facilitated collaborative media production and analysis activities in their classrooms, and fostered personal reflection about media use among students.

It is my first week as the program director and curriculum developer for Powerful Voices for Kids, a media literacy enrichment program offered to elementary and middle school students as a collaboration between the Media Education Lab (2003) at Temple University and the Russell Byers Charter School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I have been called in by one of the 13 instructors whose media analysis and production work with a small group of children will emerge over the course of an intensive 1-month summer program as a major media production final product. As an amateur musician and music enthusiast, today I have been asked to “guest lecture” to give a brief technical instruction on “mash ups”—combining two different songs to play simultaneously by making their beats and melodies match. Several students have voiced their enthusiasm at the prospect of studying popular music.

I enter the classroom confidently; I am excited to flex teaching muscles that have been dormant for a year. Last summer, I instructed sixth-grade students for 1 month myself. I have been thinking about pedagogy and curriculum development for months, facilitating workshops with local educators, and running instructor training with my staff. I am armed with what I believe to be several highly engaging, popular songs, including “She Wolf” by pop artist Shakira. I play the first song and wait for a spark of recognition, but there is no response. I ask the four middle school students whether they recognize the song. One student nods but seems unimpressed.

I uncomfortably transition to the white board, where I explain to the students that every song has a certain number of beats per minute (BPM), and that we can make songs with different BPMs match by doing a simple “cross multiply and divide” exercise. Their eyes light up when I ask if they could demonstrate long division for me. They quickly join me at the board. Two students fight for a dry erase marker and race one another to finish the equation first. Another student asks excitedly if she could use a calculator, too. They all find the correct answer together and double-check their work, and we continue the lesson with a new level of enthusiasm. I relearn a powerful lesson that I find myself forgetting time and again: I should never expect to know exactly what will happen when popular culture enters the classroom, and I should always be ready to have the class, and myself, ask and answer questions about material and about themselves first.

BACKGROUND

Powerful Voices for Kids began operation at the Russell Byers Charter School in Center City, Philadelphia in the summer of 2009. The mission of the program is to “strengthen children’s abilities to think for themselves, communicate effectively using language and technology tools, and use their powerful voices to contribute to the quality of life in their families, their school, their communities, and the world” (Media Education Lab, 2009). The Russell Byers Charter School, an urban elementary school in Center City, Philadelphia, provides service to 400 students from 41 Philadelphia neighborhoods. Student participants in Powerful Voices for Kids summer program are all drawn from the school’s current and alumni student population, a total of nearly 80 students in July 2009 and July 2010 (Media Education Lab, 2009). I was hired as a coinstructor for a sixth-grade enrichment class in 2009 and became the program director and curriculum developer in 2010.

Along with a 1-month media literacy program for students, Powerful Voices for Kids also provides an in-school mentor who works with classroom teachers at Russell Byers Charter School year-round to do media literacy lessons with students once a week. Educator and parent workshops are also offered. A research team explores children’s understanding of various media literacy concepts, including purpose, genre, target audience, and authorship. In my capacity as curriculum developer, I write lesson plans and multimedia curriculum documents that reflect nearly 3 years of experience with Powerful Voices for Kids. It should be noted that all examples given in this account are drawn from our summer program, which meets for 2 month, 4 hours per day, 5 days per week. It is therefore not an examination of the lessons taught in the course of normal school-year instruction by the Powerful Voices for Kids in-school mentor.

Five Concerns Shared by Educators

I have developed a theoretical and structural framework based on five areas of concern using popular culture, mass media, and digital media in the K–12 classroom. These areas of concern were shared in an informal survey among 25 local and national educators participating in a staff

development program in July of 2010, the Open Doors Workshop for Educators. The areas of concern were grouped as follows:

1. Inappropriate material in the media text
2. Ignorance or lack of sufficient knowledge about popular culture
3. Dislikes of popular culture
4. Alienation from popular culture, for example, “I feel out of touch” or “It doesn’t relate to me”
5. Fear of offending administrators or parents.

In 3 years of experience with *Powerful Voices for Kids*, I have quickly learned popular culture texts can serve as highly engaging, provocative, and useful tools in a classroom environment, but they can also provide access to transgressive material and give voice to transgressive, unproductive, and unanticipated attitudes and behaviors, particularly in a K–8 environment. Media literacy educators often focus instead on technology skill building, original production activities, and a protectionist approach to dealing with popular culture. Teaching defensive and critical approaches to media can be effective, for instance, in drug and alcohol prevention initiatives (Kupersmit, Scull, & Austin, 2010). Those same skills are not as easily applied to the popular culture texts that students themselves cherish. When students are taught to criticize or guard against favorite media, they may react with contempt for the lesson or may merely parrot teacher positions without connecting them to their lived experiences with the same media (Buckingham, 2003). Good media literacy practice aims to transfer useful skills and concepts in thinking critically about media to students’ everyday lives. One powerful way to accomplish this transfer is to imagine the classroom as a site for open-ended and inquiry-based learning, where the practice of asking thoughtful questions is a foundational skill. I have compiled stories from my own experiences, observations, and interviews with instructors and participants that highlight the benefits and challenges of using popular culture to support inquiry-based learning in a media literacy classroom.

WHAT IS TRANSGRESSION?

Before exploring manifestations of transgressive material and behavior with popular culture, it would be useful to define *transgression*. Most simply, *transgression* is a student disruption in a classroom environment that falls outside the realm of inquiry. What separates a transgression from inquiry is relative to the culture of inquiry in a given classroom—for instance, an educator lecturing a large class who does not encourage direct feedback from students will consider any interruption to be a transgression from the code of that particular classroom. Moving into a more student-centered arena where lecture formats are not the norm, transgressions take on a variety of forms that not every teacher will interpret as transgression, including calling out of turn, using inappropriate language, not taking a lesson seriously, or physical excitement (when we introduced FlipCam technology to our kindergarten students, one boy was so thrilled he wet his pants). Often classroom disruptions occur during the introduction of taboo topics and subjects like violence and sexuality, which appear frequently in students’ favorite popular culture texts. Discussing media or popular culture itself may cause excitement, as many students are not used to experiencing or talking about their favorite media in a classroom environment. Talking about

media experiences also engages with problematic “home” uses of media, including listening to explicit music, watching R-rated films, and “acting out” through online communication (Hobbs & RobbGrieco, 2009).

As we have experienced in the Powerful Voices for Kids program, the threshold of a given teacher for transgressive behavior is different from that of any other teacher. Still, many teachers do share similar anxieties about working with popular culture in the classroom. Each of the five areas of anxiety that I have identified has accompanying transgressive pitfalls, and each requires a set of strategies for deflecting or shaping transgression into inquiry. Ultimately, the impulse to control transgression in the classroom is really the impulse to defuse transgression, and to turn transgression into part of a robust and meaningful learning experience. Some transgressions would be better prevented; others offer profound opportunities for learning.

INAPPROPRIATE MATERIAL IN THE MEDIA TEXT

Inappropriate is a word that demands application in a particular context and situation. Some popular media—media that may contain adult situations, swearing, or depiction of violence or drug use—can prove effective in engaging and shaping students’ sense of civic engagement and responding proactively to issues like drug use and violence (Montgomery, 2007). There are key developmental factors involved in determining the appropriateness of some kinds of media in the classroom as well. Studies have shown, for instance, that very young children tend to remember violent acts in television more than the context in which the acts appeared, leading to what researchers call the “boomerang effect” (Byrne, 2009). Beyond developmental needs, there is a broad spectrum of “appropriateness” that is informed by students’ family and community cultures, regulations from school administration, and educators’ own judgment of material.

One effective way to turn judgments into a positive experience for educator and student is to have an open discussion about appropriateness as part of the earliest stages of developing agreed-upon classroom rules. Our instructors were usually able to develop guidelines and boundaries for the content of visual, audio, and online media that greatly aided the discernment between *appropriate* and *inappropriate*. Swear words, drug and alcohol abuse, and sexually explicit material were, depending on students’ age, not only prohibited from in-class media at Powerful Voices for Kids, but thoughtfully discussed as subjects themselves in a supportive environment, as when one sixth grader defended a reference to marijuana in the song “Day ‘n’ Nite” by rapper Kid Cudi as “appropriate” because of the song’s implicit antidrug message.

Still, it is inevitable that, even given a framework for appropriateness that falls into a reasonable set of classroom-led restrictions, there will be gray areas and accidental inclusion of inappropriate material. In my first year teaching sixth-grade students, a coteacher and I used the music video for “Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)” by R&B artist Beyonce to teach about how verses in pop songs sometimes establish stories and plotlines. In classroom discussion, students instead focused on a persistent tabloid rumor that one of the “Single Ladies” dancers in the Bob Fosse–indebted video was, in fact, transgender. Here we saw some classroom transgression as students started decrying the idea that “a man would become a woman.” One student invoked her community church and voiced disgust. One student used a derogatory slur.

We were faced with the challenge of exercising the appropriate response to the behavior, which we viewed as unacceptable—but we also did not want to directly challenge the community values

of students no matter how much we disagreed with them. We needed to choose whether to ignore, deflect, or engage with the behavior. Our actual response encompassed all three tactics.

First, we ignored. We would simply finish the video, bracket our knowledge of what we had heard, and factor it more thoughtfully into a future lesson. Because we were free of time and content restrictions that many teachers face regularly in a K–6 environment, we could experiment with such a lesson later in our month of instruction. However, ignoring the behavior did not work. Students would not be ignored and actively avoided the next step in the assignment. Acknowledging the disruption was necessary, but it would also bring a complicated new topic into the lesson.

Next, we deflected. In deflection, transgressive attitudes and behaviors are redirected into another lesson that, though outside the scope of the intended lesson, does not directly engage with the origin of the transgressive behavior. We asked students where they received the information that the dancer was transgender and attempted an improvised discussion on “truth versus rumor” and how we determine the credibility of sources. However, not having prepared for this lesson, neither my coteacher nor I worked toward a clear lesson goal, and the freewheeling conversation led to more involved discussions about gossip sites like TMZ.com and taboo topics often found there, thus creating a context for further disrespectful commentary from students.

Finally, we engaged. We decided that if we could not improvise a new lesson or ignore the transgression, we would at least structure the vocabulary in this instance to ensure we were speaking about others respectfully at all times. With that in mind, we taught students a new vocabulary word: TRANSGENDER. We wrote it in big letters on the white board and began to define it. Right on cue, a very special visitor—the founder of the school—came into the room and cheerfully asked the students what we were learning about that day.

It was then that we realized how little impact this moment of perceived transgression had on our students and conversely how much impact it had on us. Our students were far more interested in explaining what we had learned about the benefits of green roofs for the Philadelphia community than exploring “Single Ladies” any further. Her back to the white board, the founder smiled, thanked us, and left without ever knowing about the transgression—or our response to it—that had immediately preceded her impromptu visit.

Upon reflection, the lesson we learned from this example was not directly related to dealing with transgression when it happens; an educator’s choice to ignore, deflect, or engage with transgressive student behavior may succeed or flounder for a variety of reasons in a variety of circumstances. Rather, the example underscored the importance of deeply considering media texts’ relationship to a lesson goal. Our lesson goal was to connect the structure of verses in a song to its story and plot. It was a simple vocabulary-building exercise to introduce aspects of songwriting necessary for an upcoming music production project. Our decision to use the music video introduced complicated new layers of meaning to the intended lesson. There are a variety of ways to access and use popular media culture texts, and finding media texts in multiple forms and formats, excerpting them, and above all tying them to specific lesson goals are essential for media literacy educators to model media and information access and analysis skills, crucial practices in effective media literacy teaching (Kellner & Share, 2007; National Association of Media Literacy Educators [NAMLE], 2007). Just as we wish to teach our students that accessing new information is a fundamental media literacy skill, we need to access our own materials carefully to ensure that popular culture texts conform to our lessons rather than expecting our lessons to conform to the texts.

IGNORANCE OR LACK OF SUFFICIENT KNOWLEDGE ABOUT POPULAR CULTURE

Expertise is a problematic ideal for an educator's popular culture knowledge in a classroom environment, and an educator's relative ignorance is not in and of itself a deficit in effective or engaging classroom discussion. There are two key considerations here, one of which has always been true of media literacy practices and another of which is unique to the digital age and the many forms and points of access to media in the 21st century.

The first reason that educators cannot also be popular culture "experts" is that students' media experiences are closely linked to their personal and social experiences. Expertise in popular culture presumes that knowledge of popular culture itself can be equated with knowledge of students' uses of popular culture, but those two concepts are not the same. I have discovered this in dealing with my own media savvy, which I have developed since I was old enough to engage with film, video games, music, television, and internet communication. Keeping up with popular culture trends, arguments, and events has been a key aspect of my own identity formation, and I find that keeping in touch with youth culture has its own personal rewards for my conversations with friends and peers. I write about pop music professionally, have two degrees in film, and talk endlessly about all sorts of popular culture with friends and online.

I have not been able to translate much of my own passion for popular culture into teaching. To understand students' media worlds, I quickly learned, I needed to understand how students use media in the context of their everyday lives. I could no more be a "popular culture expert" in my classroom than I could be an "expert" on their sense of style, the clothes they wear, or how they choose to represent themselves. These decisions are crucial to students' shifting and emerging personal identities, and engaging with them requires a classroom of intimacy and trust, and a consideration of boundaries and ethics.

The second reason that educators cannot be popular culture experts in any meaningful sense has to do with how students access information in the digital age. Digital distribution of media makes it impossible to effectively filter content, and this anxiety has largely expressed itself in school districts through administrative filtering of online content. In our program, however, we had full access to sites like YouTube, Facebook, and other user-driven media sites. One colleague, now a full-time in-school mentor at our partner school, had his rude awakening into the world of classroom transgressions by playing what he believed to be the edited or "clean" version of a popular song, "Every Girl" by the rap collective Young Money. He loaded the song from a YouTube page and was instantly greeted by a string of inventive vulgarities fired off so rapidly that even stopping it after 5 seconds caused commotion. The students' transgressions here were minor in comparison to the song's offensive material—there was some laughter but mostly confusion from students, many of whom loved and had requested the song.

The solution here seems obvious: screen content first. Yet in the middle of a lesson during which students must access online information for research or for a project, such raw, unexpected media experiences are inevitable. Instead, one must take a decidedly exploratory approach to finding media, with some base knowledge of search engines, trustworthy sites, and unpredictable sources. In a complex online and digital environment, educators might imagine students, and themselves, like early media literacy theorists Howard Gardner and Leona Jaglom (1981) imagined preschoolers navigating the symbol systems of television—as budding anthropologists

exploring a vast and unpredictable terrain. Where Gardner and Jaglom observed children's development of preference, prediction abilities, character and brand knowledge, and the ability to distinguish between real life and television, educators might also observe and foster children's development of browsing habits, identification of different types of web content, or distinguishing between a credible and untrustworthy source, as well as other practices identified by many scholars as essential to digital literacy skill building (Jenkins et al., 2009).

DISLIKES OF POPULAR CULTURE

Many educators I have met, from new teachers with no experience to veteran teachers with decades of experience, have anxieties around the role of bringing their own value judgments of popular culture into the classroom. On the one hand, some teachers may have some powerful connections to popular culture themselves, watching some of the same programs alone or with their own children, listening to some of the same music, and using some of the same Websites. The ethics of digital interaction between children and adults on social networking sites has its own unique and complicated challenges (Lüders, Brandtzæg, & Dunkels, 2009). On the other hand, many educators find much popular media for children to be distasteful, inappropriate, or even harmful, and their own sense of social and political value judgments may be manifested in their classroom practice or assessment (Shores & Weseley, 2010).

The issue with criticizing the objects of students' tastes, and by association often criticizing students' navigation through their unique media worlds, is the assumption that the negotiation of teacher/student authority applies to what is fundamentally a process of personal and social discovery. I have met teachers who are surprised that a hit pop song does not engage students. Some teachers are disappointed when popular culture with which they once personally identified does not translate to their students' experiences and tastes. I have also met teachers who are surprised but pleased to find that their love of an older song is effective in a lesson. One teacher noted that the Rock Band and Guitar Hero video game series, with their emphasis on older songs, have introduced unexpected new connections to an older generation's popular culture.

Inquiry in the classroom is a two-way street; students need to learn to ask good questions of the teacher and of the material in a respectful manner, but teachers also need to learn to ask good questions of students and of themselves. Celebration and criticism are neither open ended nor conducive to a process of inquiry. Each is a way of merely stating a preference or value, not a means of questioning or exploring what value a media text may have in which contexts, how it functions, and why it ultimately matters. An open inquiry environment that encourages thoughtful questioning creates risks and challenges for educators, because such an environment forces educators to ask questions of themselves that they would also ask of their students. However, when such an environment is modeled, developed, and respected, the outcomes can be rewarding and educative for teachers and students. The critical thinking and open inquiry processes, like any other important skills, come with practice and are most effective when carefully scaffolded and supported by teachers themselves. This is one reason that the Powerful Voices for Kids instruction model privileges group sharing and reflection among staff members as a regular practice. When

teachers learn from one another, they bring their new knowledge, understanding, and strategies back into the classroom with them.

Still, even with peer support and a plan to scaffold such processes in the classroom, unexpected conflicts in values and tastes will inevitably arise. When handled thoughtfully, these also become wonderful learning opportunities for teachers and students alike. When one Powerful Voices for Kids teacher, Osei Alleyne, taught the history of positive hip-hop music videos as a model for his students' own music videos, which they would produce as their final product in their class, he experienced some unexpected behavior. His students split sharply into two camps—one camp viewed a positive hip-hop video from the 1990s, "U.N.I.T.Y." by hip-hop artist Queen Latifah, and praised its message of empowerment to women and its demand of respect for men. It should be noted that the song's own lyrics were transgressive by many classroom standards, but explicit language and directness (Latifah raps in the chorus, "you ain't a 'bitch' or a 'ho'") elicited strong positive responses from the young women in the class, who identified strongly with this message. Meanwhile, a different camp criticized the video—they called it "dumb" and "corny." Had the conversation ended there, the instructor may have felt that the intended goal, to promote a positive model for youth production, had not been met. He may have been personally unsettled by the values expressed by those in the "con" group.

Here, then, was a choice; Alleyne could ignore, deflect, or engage. Many media literacy educators I have worked with have used such "nonpreferred" student responses to deflect the issue, and to treat students' dislike as an issue of reading comprehension. This is sometimes a valuable approach; when fifth-grade students in one class who watched parts of the documentary *Amandla!* (Hirsch, 2002), about apartheid in South Africa, did not deeply consider its message or impact due to basic misunderstandings about geography, culture, and context, further scaffolding helped them to use this model of socially-conscious filmmaking in their own work making public service announcements. But in more complicated matters of values toward a media text, the "wrong" answer is often not wrong, but undesired. Openly and honestly exploring undesirable responses to popular culture texts—from students and teachers alike—is an inevitable and crucial component of connecting to students' lived experiences and sharing a genuine dialogue between students and between educator and learner.

The dialogue between students about "U.N.I.T.Y." allowed Alleyne and other students in the class to deeply consider positions of students who did or did not like a media text that Alleyne held to be archetypical. It also provided an opportunity for both sides to explore their statements. What began as a "like" versus "dislike" conversation became instead a conversation about whether production or lyrics are what we pay attention to when we listen to music. According to Alleyne, one student who disliked the song articulated the "production" position: "I like [current hip-hop star] Drake better; I like his flow, and his beats are better. I get that she's saying something good, but if you don't have a good beat it doesn't matter." A young woman in the class disagreed: "I think it's a really positive message that people need to hear. That's what I like about it." Alleyne remarked on how independent this conversation was, noting that it "carried itself" without his input. He capitalized on the opportunity to focus a seemingly visceral encounter with popular culture into a more nuanced conversation about how the song worked and why it was or was not effective. Students listened again, thought carefully, and modified or built on their remarks. What began as simple difference of taste provoked a more enriching discussion of the music's formal qualities and its expressed values in lyrics, performance, and music video visuals that complemented the song's lyrics, messages, and tone.

ALIENATION FROM POPULAR CULTURE

When most educators voice their own feelings of alienation or isolation from contemporary culture, they are more accurately identifying a place of disconnection from particular strands of popular culture. Certainly these educators do engage in cultural experiences; they just do not identify these experiences as “popular culture.” The same is often true of students themselves, a point that an educator’s choice to engage with popular culture in the classroom can potentially overlook. Culture is contextual, and its value will vary according to the specific use of media texts in the lived experiences of students.

I focus on one student in particular, whom I will call Aaliyah. Aaliyah, a rising ninth-grade student, was one of the oldest Powerful Voices for Kids participants, and she identified strongly with emo, rock, and heavy metal music. When she created a personal mixtape as an introductory class project, she shared no favorite genres or artists with other students in the program. She was by no means an “average” student within her class, and her tastes in music and media were markedly different from those of her peers. Her exceptional status in cultural and media self-representation is a reminder of how often a select few students can suffer when popular culture is brought into a classroom for the purposes of simple engagement rather than as part of a genuine inquiry process.

Genuine inquiry would require the inclusion of her own taste and expertise—and the affirmation of her own lifestyle choices—for her to feel respected and “listened to.” The small size of our middle and high school class allowed her instructor to work independently with Aaliyah toward a project that reflected her own unique, and considerably sophisticated, knowledge and attitudes toward media. In larger settings, it can be more difficult to identify and properly support atypical tastes and values, which can make the prospect of bringing popular culture into the classroom as alienating for some students as it can be for their teachers.

This example helps to illuminate a difficult aspect of the applicability of popular culture to learning. It is often tempting to use popular culture media for their potential to engage students, but engagement alone is not at the core of why popular culture media is useful to media literacy practice—it is essential to connect to lived experience, and those experiences are inevitably complex and unpredictable without asking thoughtful questions first. Using popular culture illustratively and uncritically to complement a lesson, for instance, is a widespread teaching practice among media-savvy teachers that constitutes a nonoptimal use of media in the classroom (Hobbs, 2006). Such engagement tactics have unintended consequences of potentially reinforcing social class distinctions that emerge in any classroom setting among those who like or frequently use popular culture and those who do not. Although most children have a working knowledge of popular culture, engaging with up to 10 hours of media per day according to recent surveys (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2009), the assumption that every child shares the same working knowledge is problematic. Rather than engage the majority of a classroom, bringing in popular culture may in fact do more harm to those alienated students who fail to identify with popular culture—or identify instead with cultures outside of popular groups in classrooms—to replicate the kinds of social boundaries these students may challenge or resist.

Conversely, students and teachers in an inquiry-based classroom ask questions, without challenging personally-held values outright, of all assumptions one might make about the value of a given media text. In a sense, “digital native” theory—which posits that children of the digital age

have grown up with innate skills different from those of their parents—falls outside of the realm of genuine inquiry in a classroom context. The assumption that all students share certain attitudes, skills, or preferences always runs the risk of alienating some of the most vulnerable members of a particular classroom. Similarly, assumptions about shared culture, attitudes, or tastes sometimes have the unintended result of reinforcing the discouragement or alienation of those students who take particular comfort or discomfort in falling outside of those categories.

FEAR OF OFFENDING PARENTS, COMMUNITY, AND ADMINISTRATORS

Parental and administrative disapproval of popular culture texts is a powerful force that influences the process of bringing popular culture into the classroom in often negative or restricting ways. Literal restrictions on content type (movie ratings, Internet access, etc.) are imposed externally and for the most part cannot be dealt with in the context of a classroom. Somewhat similarly, teachers cannot realistically expect to shape the experiences of children's parents. Here again, the spirit of open inquiry-based learning—the process of asking thoughtful questions—will often prevent or shape judgments from administrators and parents. One reassuring example comes not from *Powerful Voices for Kids*, where the elementary school administration has been generally supportive and there have to date been no serious parental objections to content, but from Steven Goodman's (2003) account of his experiences as the founder and executive director of the Educational Video Center in New York.

Goodman (2003) recounted the story of how one student in a documentary class, Majandra, produced a film about her personal experiences with depression and a suicide attempt. She found support for this difficult topic in the classroom, where a frank discussion of students' feelings and values in a trusting environment was key to her own sense of confidence in completing the project. However, even upon completing the first draft of her project, Majandra had not involved her parents, who had direct experiences with their daughter's suicide attempt. Goodman described how Majandra was able to model the questioning process learned in her documentary work for her parents. She had what was, according to Majandra and her parents, the first in-depth conversation about her suicide attempt with her father since it occurred. Although Goodman noted the power of the presence of a camera, which "made possible" the conversation, Majandra also recognized that her skillful ability to ask the right questions in the right environment was just as crucial: "I didn't ask too many questions, but I asked the right questions to get his point of view on his suicidal teen across" (Goodman, p. 95).

One way to consider external pressures is to remember that compared to many other lived experiences, our encounters with transgressive popular culture—and students' choices to use popular culture transgressively—are but a small piece of a complex puzzle that constitutes our personal and social identities. In some ways it is easier for those unfamiliar with popular culture, be they educators, administrators, parents, or students themselves, to assume either a "see no evil" or purely defensive approach to popular culture. Inquiry-based learning can be applied to seemingly external relationships with administration and communities with the enrollment of students themselves in the process of modeling these environments. However, educators have to know and pay attention to their own school policies, community standards, and administrator expectations.

CONCLUSION

Teaching about popular culture is but one strategy toward the larger goal of creating an inquiry-based culture in classrooms that transfers learning to students' lived experiences. Popular media is one sizeable fraction of those experiences. The five areas of anxiety examined here—inappropriate content, lack of expertise, conflicting tastes and values, alienation and isolation, and outside pressures from administrators and parents—are never “resolved” fully but rather reflect the ongoing negotiation of power and respect in the classroom and outside. Like any other subject matter, precluding the possibility of including popular culture within a curriculum or within a classroom environment altogether only guarantees that nothing will be done to address the many natural questions, concerns, and ideas that students have about the media that they interact with on a regular basis.

However, letting popular culture in is not therefore a step that can be considered as lightly as any other sanctioned content—just as there are wide ranges of tastes and values, there is also a range of privacy that educators must acknowledge and respect as well. There are many students who wish not to use popular culture for personal and social reasons. Transgression in listening to risqué material is also itself a pleasure, and in defusing transgression to transform it into inquiry, pleasure itself may also be defused, as was the case when I foisted a popular song on students who did not ask for it. A healthy inquiry-based environment models the process of asking thoughtful questions of one another and of classroom texts first to determine shared boundaries, pleasures, and concerns; choosing not to use popular culture at all is often an outcome of this process. The strategies listed here are merely a survey of many potential student responses, both productive and transgressive, along with several possibilities for thoughtful engagement from educators when problems or opportunities arise.

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