"Will You Please Sign on the Dotted Line?"

A Problem-Based Learning Approach to Social Responsibility in Race, Gender, and Media Courses

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Introduction

One of the most common obstacles I find when teaching media literacy courses[1] is student insensitivity. Although this can exist for many different reasons, the media critiques that students submit in this type of class indicate that they've become indifferent to misogynistic, classist, and racist stereotypes. On the collegiate level, this is most evident with students who are just starting their first year. According to the University of California Los Angeles' Higher Education Research Institute (2010), only 33.1 %of incoming freshman college students indicate that they thought promoting racial understanding is very important or essential in their college careers.

Reports like this have prompted me to create a teaching strategy that directly addresses this insensitivity. After years of teaching these kinds of courses, I have come to the realization that a good way to manage such attitudes is to encourage students to collectively construct a "Social Responsibility Contract" during the class. This article explains the rationale, the application, and the results of implementing this strategy in a media diversity course.

Classroom Setting

This strategy was carried out on the campus of a small liberal arts college in central Ohio in a class titled *Race, Gender, & Class in Media*. This course is offered by the Communication Department with mainly journalism and broadcasting faculty serving as instructors. The course is not required, but it serves as a substitute general education course for freshmen and an elective course for most upper class students. Among the 11 students enrolled, all were undergraduate co-eds between the ages of 18 to 22. There were nine females and two males. Six of the students were broadcasting majors, three were majoring in public relations, and two students had majors outside of the Communication Department, one in business management and one in equine science.

The class was also comprised of mostly freshmen, with five students in that category. Four were seniors and two were sophomores. The racial makeup included seven Caucasian Americans, two Hispanic Americans, and two African Americans. The primary teaching methods used in the course included lecture, small group critique exercises, classroom exercises, classroom discussion, and student reflection papers.

College Student Media Use Patterns and Student Attitudes toward Diversity Courses

During the first week of class, it is common for some students to indicate that they don't watch much television in their class comments, reflection papers, or group work. This is a significant perception, because the class requires the critique of many advertisements, music videos, and programs that are shown through the television medium.

According to the Council for Research Excellence (CRE) (2009), there is reason to be suspicious of these self reports. The CRE's Video Consumer Mapping Study reports that young adults between the ages of 18-to-24 averaged 287 minutes (or 4.8 hours) of television viewing activity per day. Over 73% of this activity was categorized as live television viewing. In addition, the study found that among all age groups, TV viewing was substantially under-reported while new technological video activities like on-line video viewing and mobile video viewing were over-reported. The study also indicated that this group uses a diverse set of media platforms including the following—DVR/Tivo playback, DVD, console games, websites, e-mail, IM, software, computer video, mobile text messaging, mobile web, and mobile video.

In addition, virtually all of the students in this class readily admitted to using some form of social networking site like Facebook, Myspace, or Twitter on a daily basis. A report released by the Pew Research Center (2009) confirmed this popular trend of social networking. The report shows that the percentage of college graduates who say they use social networking sites more than doubled from 20% in December of 2007, to 42% in 2009. In addition, the report also found that over 70% of young adults between the ages of 18-to-29 use social networking sites routinely. Thus, these millennial generation students use a variety of media platforms on a daily basis, but they are likely to underestimate their television consumption habits.

While some students embrace these kinds of media criticism courses, others who enroll are skeptical of the content and less motivated to study the issues covered. Many undergrads will often treat the ideas in these courses as unimportant because there is a perception that they won't learn any practical skill set. According to the Higher Education Institute (2010), over 56% of freshmen students indicated that it was important for them to choose a college where graduates "get good jobs." This indicates the tendency of many students to prefer practical classes where they learn skills valued by employers.

Diversity courses which tend to focus on abstract theories and concepts are perceived as less marketable. Moreover, many college professors who teach classes that address the concepts of racism, sexism, and misogyny often receive negative reactions from their Caucasian students. Heinze (2008) has written about his experience as a White male professor teaching White students about racism and White

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privilege. In his work, he indicates that White students often mention feeling guilty about the benefits they derive from White privilege, some of them have also mentioned feeling awkward discussing racism with their friends and family, and others have outright denied or resisted some of the ideas of privilege—preferring to cling to their original sentiments.

Many scholars have written about the subversive influences of popular culture on the audience. Some notable examples of scholarship published in this area include the following: McMahon (1990) has published work on *Cosmopolitan Magazine*'s deceptive depiction of female sexuality; Kilbourne (2003) has written extensively on the tendency of marketers and advertisers to depict women in seductive and inhumane ways; Katz (2006) has addressed the problem of hyper masculinity in media and society; Jhally (1989) has shown how commodification has influenced the depiction of cultural artifacts and minority groups in advertisements and music videos; and Hurt (1996) has written insightful essays on the macho posturing of African-American males in rap music.

The good news is that research has documented the effectiveness of these courses in reducing racial bias among college students. Chang (2002) has shown that diversity courses utilizing these ideas have successfully reduced the prejudiced sentiments among White students in particular.

Using Problem-Based Learning and Social Responsibility Theory to Construct "Social Responsibility Contracts"

When students are learning about race, gender, and class in media programming, they must learn how to apply the criticisms they generate toward advertising, music videos, and movies to a broader societal level. This process is conducive to a teaching philosophy called Problem-Based Learning (PBL) or engaging students by organizing lessons around a central problem (Barrows, 1985).

PBL was first developed within the medical field where educators taught students lessons that emphasized hypothetical cases and deductive reasoning (Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980). In addition, Bridges and Hallinger (1997) have indicated that problem-based learning helps develop good decision-making skills. According to Hmelo-Silver, Duncan, and Chinn (2007), class activities devised around problem-based learning encourage students to work together in an assertive way. They report that "in PBL, students learn content, strategies, and self-directed learning skills through collaboratively solving problems, reflecting on their experiences, and engaging in self-directed inquiry" (p. 100).

In classes designed to teach media-related subject matter, PBL encourages students to make decisions based on intuition, common sense and experience (Reddy, Aronson, & Stam, 1998). PBL is effective in race and gender media literacy courses because it encourages students to think critically, cooperate in teams, and use appropriate resources (Duch, Groh, & Allen, 2001). Researchers have also shown that a PBL-centered approach can be very effective in engaging students in service-learning courses (Robinson, Lloyd-Sherwood, & DePaolo, 2010). These courses help develop concern toward the broader community and help teach a sense of social responsibility to students.

Accordingly, a good way to utilize this PBL approach is to develop students' concern for the role of media criticism in a broader society by having them work on a social responsibility contract. This strategy will require them to collaborate on a list of suggestions for depicting human beings in media content. Class activities of this nature make problem-based learning a "necessary" teaching tool to incorporate in the classroom (Knowlton & Sharp, 2003).

Before students can complete this activity, they must have an appreciation for the way in which the media can operate in a socially-responsible way. Students can be very resistant to lessons about social responsibility. Some of this stems from student apathy. I have found a significant challenge in getting students actively engaged in issues affecting local communities inside and outside of the classroom.

According to a report published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, only 30.8% of incoming first–year college students indicated that they expected to participate in community service or volunteer work during their college careers (Dey, 2009). In student reflection papers, some students have indicated this apathy by writing that they didn't realize that they could be part of any solution to raise awareness about negative media depictions.

A good way to introduce the concept of social responsibility is to refer to the Hutchins Commission report (1947). In this report, scholars, politicians, clergy, and journalists wrote a government document outlining some suggested ethical guidelines and principles for media practitioners to follow. From that document, one of the suggestions made of particular importance for race, gender, and media courses was to avoid giving offense to minority groups in media coverage. As a government document, this report brings authority and credibility to the notion of social responsibility. At the same time it justifies the pursuit of this idea within a media context.

The Teaching Strategy: Constructing Social Responsibility Contracts

During this activity students were given time in class to conduct small group discussions during two separate class periods. One period came during the second week of classes. The second period came when students were given some additional time to revisit the activity during the last week of class. This gave students an opportunity to incorporate new lessons, insights, and sensibilities into their discussion during the second activity.

First, the students were introduced to the subject when they received an assignment in which they read a chapter of the original Hutchins Commission report. It is also recommended that an additional reading be assigned with a secondary source that places the document in historical and theoretical context. Baran and Davis (2008) have written a mass communication theory textbook that treats social responsibility theory in a way that complements the original document effectively for undergraduate students. The instructor gave a 45-minute lecture on the definition of social responsibility, the historical context of social responsibility, and the practical application of social responsibility in today's media industry.

The rest of the time was used to give students a handout requiring them to discuss and write down their responses to the following question:

> *What suggestions do you have for media programmers when they depict human beings in media stories?*

In addition, I clarify that I am not asking them to censor media messages, but rather that I am asking them to provide suggestions for responsible media coverage.

I then require them to come up with at least five suggestions. Here are some

examples of suggestions that students provided during their first week of class:

> The media should depict human beings in an un-biased manner.
>
> The media should be more conscious of age limits and young viewers.
>
> No reporting until concrete facts can be found and backed up.

Each group was given an opportunity to present their suggestions to the rest of the class. The instructor then facilitated a classroom discussion. After that discussion, the handouts from each group were collected and saved for the second class session.

During the last week of class, the instructor distributed the handouts the students had completed earlier. The teams were assembled with the same student groupings, so that they could readily reflect on their earlier discussion during this exercise. Copies of the handouts completed by the other groups in the class were distributed to everyone in order to help generate discussion.

At this point, the students were asked to make any additions, deletions, or corrections to their original list of suggestions for socially-responsible media coverage. They were asked to examine their own list, and the lists of other groups in the class. After they deliberated, they presented their new list of suggestions to the rest of the class. Students came up with the following suggestions:

> Real people should be used more in advertising and not the macho-man or Barbie-doll women that are common.
>
> Advertisers should be clear on their intent to sell products, and not sex.
>
> Media literacy should be taught early as a mandate for children.

Students were encouraged to come to a classroom consensus of a finalized list of suggestions. This finalized list of social responsibility suggestions was created in the form of a contract (See Appendix). The top of the contract contained the following phrase:

> Being enrolled in this course, I worked on a list of guidelines to suggest how human beings should be depicted in media content. I contributed or agreed to the following list of suggestions.

All of the suggestions the students agreed to as a class were included. At the end, they were given a space to sign their name. Signing the contract was not mandatory. The instructor gave them the option to refuse their signature. The voluntary signature demonstrates the extent that students actually bought in to the notion of social responsibility. During this class, all of the students decided to sign the document.

Levels of Student Engagement

The level of student engagement during the social responsibility contract exercises requires a significant degree of learning involvement from students. Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill, and Krathwohl (1956) constructed a taxonomy of learning tasks that is widely respected among educational scholars and professionals. An examination of this taxonomy reveals how the learning tasks students used during the social responsibility contract exercises differs from the tasks they used during a regular class period where they were exposed to lectures and small group exercises.

The tasks during the regular class periods were mainly comprised of media criticism exercises. In his critique of the proliferation of media criticism activity, Ward (2008) identifies the characteristics of responsible media critique. He describes the task of media criticism as involving the following activities: instructors should teach students how (media bias) is related to the economic, political and social climate; instructors should also teach students how to incorporate journalism and media ethics to evaluate media bias; in addition, instructors should teach students to focus on how the news (and entertainment) media are functioning to serve democracy; and, finally, instructors should teach students to conduct objective, rigorous, and comprehensive research into the state of the news media.

As important as these learning goals are for teaching students media literacy, they are typically designed to give students an orientation to key concepts. During the first five weeks of the course, students were introduced to media bias, media ethics, and research strategies for the first time. During this portion of the class, students were typically asked to perform the tasks on Bloom's taxonomy that are consistent with learning information for the first time. As shown in Table 1, the four most basic levels of student engagement include knowledge, comprehension, application, and analysis. There was a lot of emphasis placed on acquiring knowledge, comprehending information, applying ideas, and analyzing examples during this time period.

One classroom exercise that illustrates this is when the instructor was teaching a lesson on social constructionism. Students were asked to read a paragraph describing a hypothetical candidate who was running for mayor. The name of the candidate was Jaime Rodriguez—a gender neutral name designed to keep the students from determining if the candidate was a man or a woman. The class was under the impression that everybody received the same biographical material. The basic outline of the candidate biography was the same. The

Table 1
Levels of Student Engagement According to Bloom's Taxonomy (1956)

Bloom's Taxonomy	*Lecture and Group Discussion*	*PBL—The Social Responsibility Contract Exercises*
KNOWLEDGE (recalling information)	Describing, ***Listing***, Finding, Identifying, Writing	Describing, Listing, Finding, Identifying, Writing
COMPREHENSION (giving meaning to information)	Explaining, Discussing, ***Comparing***	Explaining, Discussing, Comparing
APPLICATION (using information in new or real life situations)	Using, ***Illustrating***	Using, Illustrating, Solving, Constructing
ANALYSIS (breaking down complex information into simpler parts)	***Categorizing***, Explaining	Comparing, Contrasting, Categorizing, Explaining
SYNTHESIS (integrating information into usable insight)		***Devising***, ***Incorporating***, ***Revising***
EVALUATION (making judgments based on established standards)		***Judging***, ***Justifying***, ***Assessing***, ***Prioritizing***

only difference was the adjectives used to describe the candidate.

Half of the class was given descriptors of the candidate that were typically associated with females (i.e., compassionate, beautiful, sympathetic). The other half of the class was given descriptors of the candidate that were typically associated with males (i.e., rational, aggressive, intelligent). At the bottom of the paragraph students were asked to list all of the characteristics of the candidate and guess the gender of the candidate. The instructor than asked the class to raise their hand if they guessed that the candidate was a female. The instructor than asked how the candidate was described in their biography and wrote the descriptors on the board. The same thing was done for the students who guessed that the candidate was a male.

In most cases, students concluded that the candidate with the female descriptors was a woman. The students who received the biography with the male descriptors concluded that the candidate was a man. The instructor than facilitated a classroom discussion of why we make certain descriptors gender specific—then proceeded to explain the idea of socially-constructed terms. The instructor then divided all of the descriptors written on the board into two categories and labeled them womanhood and manhood to emphasize the difference.

Some advertisements for the class to examine for socially-constructed gender roles were then distributed. With an activity like this, students were required to conduct many of the learning tasks that coincide with the first four levels of Bloom's taxonomy (i.e., knowledge, comprehension, application, and analysis). The tasks included listing the male and female descriptors (knowledge), comparing the differences between male and female descriptors (comprehension), illustrating how socially constructed gender roles are operating in ads that are provided in class (application), and categorizing different forms of socially constructed gender roles by genre (analysis).

On the other hand, the social responsibility contract encouraged students to spend more time engaging in activities that required more involved and advanced learning. In part, the social responsibility contract which they had to revisit at the end of the term required students to do more synthesizing and evaluating (the advanced levels of student engagement on Bloom's taxonomy). Students were encouraged to draw on the lessons that were presented during the course of the term in order to come up with this contract. They were given the responsibility to come up with suggestions that reflected the lessons they had learned, the sensibilities they had developed, and the terms they had incorporated into their vocabulary. At no other time during the class were they asked to assimilate all of the lessons that they had learned into one activity. This required them to engage with the material on the synthesis level.

This included the learning activities of devising (i.e., coming up with their list of suggestions.), incorporating (i.e., reviewing previous course content and drawing on the material to formulate the list.) and revising (looking at the original list that was formed during the second week and making additions, deletions, or corrections). For the evaluation level, they had engaged in judging (evaluating previous suggestions and the suggestions of other groups), justifying (providing support for each suggestion as a need), assessing (determining the adequacy of previous suggestions and deciding to delete, clarify, or keep them the same), and prioritizing (deciding which suggestions were most important as they were only required to come up with five).

Limitations

A few limitations of this activity became clear during the term. Students needed more time to deliberate on this social responsibility contract. Much of the work seemed a bit rushed as it came at the end of the term and students may have been experiencing some burnout. They also needed more exposure to the suggestions of other groups. A class blog or wiki could help address these issues and students could comment and make revisions during the entire term.

Conclusions

During the activity when the class revisited the social responsibility contract on the last week of the term, a couple of themes emerged when students were revising their earlier drafts. The first thing I noticed was students incorporating the vocabulary they learned during the quarter in their list of suggestions. One group specifically used terms like "codes, symbolic annihilation, dismemberment, and clowning." These were all terms directly connected to the course content.

Another theme that emerged was the respect for accuracy in reporting and describing minority groups. This was expressed by one group as using two reliable primary sources before airing a news story. The strategy of using primary sources was covered as part of the media literacy lecture. Other groups expressed this by suggesting that media pursue different viewpoints or perspectives of a story to get a more complete picture.

The third theme that emerged from these suggestions was the increased level of awareness and sensitivity to the too-often inhumane depictions of minority groups. Many groups in the class expressed this by including suggestions that encourage more diverse representations. Some class groups suggested outright that the media should avoid racial and gender discrimination.

One class group made a suggestion that there should be more diversity toward gender classifications. This was a reference to a discussion we had about hermaphrodites and the case of Caster Semenya. Another group made a suggestion that reflected the inevitable continuation of negative depictions by advising the media to warn viewers of content that is considered explicit. Other groups also accounted for this by suggesting media literacy programs for children.

Note

[1] Media literacy courses focus on debunking racist, classist, and misogynistic media depictions often shown in contemporary popular culture (i.e., music videos, news, filmed entertainment, advertising, and television).

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Appendix

MCOM 270, Fall 2009, Social Responsibility Contract

Being enrolled in MCOM 270—Race, Gender & Class in Media—during the Fall quarter of 2009 at Otterbein College, I worked on a list of guidelines to suggest how media should depict human beings in media content. I contributed or agreed to the following list of suggestions. (Italics type indicates new additions, adjustments, and corrections made to the list during the second session).

Media should depict human beings in an unbiased manner, ***no racial or gender discrimination***.

Media should depict human beings in appropriate situations according to time slot and channel.

Media shouldn't always depict human beings as being a threat to society (news).

Media should be more cautious in regards to the availability of explicit content (iTunes) + ***websites***.

"Real people" should be used more in advertising and not the macho-man or bimbo blondes that are common.

Advertisers are clear on their intent to sell.

Reporters should have at least 2 reliable primary sources before they bring a news piece to the public and they must be able to name them.

Media should be conscious of images of violence/death and its impact on the public.

Freedom of the press is allowable unless it damages a person's reputation.

Media should be more conscious of age limits and young viewers.

Site owners should restrict/control certain outlandish responses.

Media should depict all human representations.

Media should report/depict all parts of a story or report … avoid soundbites. Bits of information.

Media Literacy should be taught early, as a mandate for children.

When using pictures, use the whole original picture to show the total truth.

Special attention should be given to minority groups so we continue forward and don't go back to old times.

For every story, the good and bad parts should be told and more inspiring stories should be heard.

No reporting until concrete facts can be found and backed up. Ex. Micheal Jackson death

More diversity of the depiction.

Don't base the focus on a person's race, gender + class.

Use careful vocabulary when referring themselves to someone especially in crimes.

Prepare speech, not extemporaneous, could be more dangerous.

Don't assume or make presumptions unless you have proof and facts (especially in crimes).

When taking quotes from sources, if you are going to use one, make sure the entire thing is printed/broadcasted and not bits & pieces. It could change the meaning.

Avoid codes that are stereotypical such as symbolic annihilation, dismemberment, clowning.

Have different points of view look at the production—emale, male, different races, different class status.

Media cannot interfere with the rights, and therefore privacy, of the individual, with the exception of people employed by the public.

Should be sensitive to the concerns of minorities.

More diversity toward gender classifications.

The media should warn viewers of content that could be considered explicit.

My signature below indicates that I agree in principle with the above suggestions of responsible media representation.

Signed: