

AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE: SHOULD WE INTEGRATE IT INTO AMERICAN EDUCATION?

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Educating the youth of America has always been a significant challenge, and the present is no different. We will be more effective as educators if we integrate the study of the popular culture with traditional education. Doing so will result in making our youth's education more meaningful, more relevant to the world in which they live, and will allow our youth to truly understand more of what they learn. This article explains why the study of popular television programs, movies, music, and literature will greatly enhance the learning experiences of our students.

Educating the American youth is and always has been a significant challenge. Obviously, it would be wise of us as professional educators to use as many techniques as possible in order to be successful in our mission. It is tempting to become so concerned with the standardized tests that are so much in vogue at present that we don't strive enough to make education truly meaningful to our youth. We need to do more than just teach facts and mathematical formulas; we need to provide an education to which our students can relate. If we do this, our students will not only learn more, but they will retain more, and they will be better able to apply what they learn after they graduate from high school or college.

By integrating study of the American popular culture into the education of our youth, we can better provide a means for them to take what they learn out into the world as adults. Our students obviously understand the popular culture in which they live; by merging the study of this cul-

ture with traditional education, they will be better able to grasp concepts, make sense of what they learn, and acquire perspective of the world in which they live.

Furthermore, our students will have a better attitude in regards to their education if we can emphasize relevance to the world in which they are familiar. Also, integrating traditional education with the things in society that they see as important will better motivate them to learn.

Additional benefits of this approach will include elevation of marginalized groups in the American society. If we de-emphasize elitism and promote the education of those students who will perhaps only acquire an adequate education by relating the world in which they live to what they are learning, then society will truly benefit. Students who are familiar exclusively with urban life need to acquire an education to which they can relate by having the culture they know brought into the classroom. And we need to obtain the attention of those students who live in the

world of today's entertainment media, popular novels, and music that they feel is their own. From a philosophical point of view, we need to apply an educational philosophy that endorses this approach of emphasizing the popular culture within our educational system, the philosophy known as postmodernism (Ozman & Craver, 2003, p. 351).

It is no secret that the youth of our country are immersed in the world of television. There are an abundance of television programs that one could legitimately view as being a significant part of the existing popular culture. One of the many programs that can be included is *South Park* (Parker & Stone, 1997-2003). There are, of course, many who assert that this is a program that our youth should not be viewing. However, the fact is that many of our youth do view it and hence it is part of the popular culture.

How can we use the fact that so many of our students watch *South Park* as a means to enhance some part of their education? One teacher had a group of seventh grade social studies students present a project about this program. How could that be positive? One of the group members explained to the class, "This is not intended for Jewish people. Cartman, one of the main characters of the show, always picks on Jews and teases Kyle because he is Jewish" (Stevens, 2001). We may not approve of *South Park*, but here students are actually emphasizing an aspect of the program from which the students can learn.

And what about movies that are a part of the American popular culture? In college courses, study of and reference to movies such as *The Matrix* has not been

uncommon. Anne Collins Smith, a professor of philosophy and classical studies at Susquehanna University in Pennsylvania says, "I find it much easier to teach Cartesian philosophy-of-knowledge now that most of my students have seen *The Matrix*" (Maurstad, 2001). This technique will assist students in not only understanding concepts, but will also motivate them to value the concepts because the instructor is using material to which the students can relate.

Certain types of music, of course, are a very large part of the American popular culture; especially rock and rap. The music that our youth call their own is an extremely helpful tool for engaging their interest in their education. And popular artists often address themes that relate to the lives of our children. Hanson and the Backstreet Boys address romantic dreams; Jewel and Christina Aguilera address themes of wishfulness (McParland, 2000). The lyrics in this music assure the young people that there is someone who understands exactly how they feel.

Bringing the music of artists such as Whitney Houston, Celine Dion, Mariah Carey, Lauryn Hill, Matchbox 20, and Third Eye Blind into the classroom will undoubtedly result in a high level of interest in terms of why the teacher has chosen to incorporate the study of these artists and their music into their lessons. A teacher of writing skills could have her students express in writing how certain songs make them feel. Or the students in another class could have a discussion of how certain songs are relevant in terms of the students' lives.

Perhaps students would best appreci-

ate certain important literature if they understand how many songwriters find their inspiration from this literature. McParland (2000) says, "...Sting drew upon Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 ('My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun') for his song 'Nothing Like the Sun.' Paul Simon refers to Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost in his song 'Old Friends/Bookends,' and he adapted the theme of Edward Arlington Robinson's 'Richard Cory,' about a wealthy and unhappy man, in his song of the same name..."

McParland (2000), who is not only a college English teacher but is a composer-lyricist as well, stresses that a song's lyrics are closely paralleled to the words of a poem. What better way would there be to study and learn to appreciate poetry than by comparing it to lyrics in songs that the students cherish?

In order for many educators to really be in touch with many of the youth who have their roots in large urban areas of the country, these educators need to be somewhat familiar with the form of music known as rap. This music is well-grounded in the popular subculture (known as the hip-hop subculture) of these inner-city areas and, of course, many of our youth either live in these areas or have lived in them, resulting in them fully embracing rap as an art form.

Rap music began in New York City's Bronx approximately 30 years ago. It is "...a mix of Jamaican reggae's dancehall, America's funk music, the inner city's pent-up frustrations and Black folks' general propensity to love a good party" (Evelyn, 2000). Obviously, there is no reason why educators need to study this music or bring

it into their classrooms unless they teach students whose background includes rap. However, if an instructor teaches youth who live in urban areas, or have lived there, the instructor could use this form of music as a means to connect and be more successful with these students.

Although many artists rap about negative or even vulgar themes, it is important to note that there are artists who rap about positive themes as well. Artists of this genre who are known to produce music that is positive – music that many students would prefer for their faculty to recognize – includes Lauren Hill, Common, Mos Def, Dead Prez, Erykah Badu and Kweli (Evelyn, 2000). Many of these same students also do not want their instructors to dismiss the entire genre of rap as being worthless.

It is difficult to discuss the music of today's popular culture without discussing music videos as well. In 1981, MTV (Music Television) became a part of the world of cable television. However, the world of music videos was far removed from the world of education (Stevens, 2001). It should be pointed out that, if educators are going to bring the world of popular music into the classroom, they could also be bringing the world of music videos into the classroom as well, at least to a certain extent. Many popular songs are interpreted by television resulting in the images - music videos - which accompany these songs.

Certain literature is also part of the popular culture. A prime example would be the books in the Harry Potter series, especially since the fifth book in this prodigiously popular series has recently been released (Rowland, 2003). A school

librarian can best explain why there is educational benefit to students reading these books: "...the most exciting aspects of the Harry Potter phenomenon are that it has lured children from computer screens to books, has enticed boys from nonfiction to fiction...and has gotten families communicating about the books and wider issues in a way I have not seen before" (Nicola, 2001). The books in this series (Rowland 1997, 1999a, 1999b, 2000, & 2003) allow students to identify with familiar themes of school, teachers (both admired as well as feared), friendship, family, competitive sports, unfair treatment by authority figures, and so on, according to Nicola (2001).

Fortunately, many scholars are beginning to see the benefits of integrating the American popular culture into education. In fact, for at least the last two decades, some college professors have taught courses about film and popular television programs, and then at times had to endure ridicule from their colleagues. According to Wertheimer (2003), the University of Dallas, Southern Methodist University, and the University of Texas at Dallas are teaming with each other in order to teach a literature class about Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy (1994a, 1994b & 1994c). Interestingly, the three schools will link the class to medieval philosophy and religion.

And, Wertheimer goes on to say, there now is a course at the University of Texas at Austin entitled "The Linguistics of Tolkien's Middle Earth." There are two sections of this class, both of which are full, and hundreds of students are on waiting lists in hopes of somehow getting into

the class!

Wertheimer continues making her point by noting that every other year a professor by the name of Dr. Don Spector teaches a class called "Beam Me Up, Einstein: Physics through Star Trek." Dr. Spector teaches the course at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York. Also, David Gaines, chairman of the English Department at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, teaches a literature class based on the work of the American folk musician Bob Dylan.

There is proof, a fine example being the hundreds of students wanting to take the Tolkien course at the University of Texas at Austin, that the American youth will respond very positively to a chance to integrate popular culture into their education. It would be irresponsible of us as educators to not study and embrace this culture because the result will be that our youth will learn more, retain more, be better motivated, and most importantly of all, they will obtain an education that very much is relevant to the "real world" and one that is meaningful to them. Additionally, the marginalized youth in our society will be included in an educational system that they once viewed as one that intentionally excluded them (At least that was their perception.).

The study of popular culture has many benefits with there being few or perhaps no reasons to exclude it from study. It seems that it would be irresponsible of us as educators to ignore the popular culture and to instead keep our educational system as traditional as possible. Many would argue that there are a lot of things wrong with education in our society; perhaps we can

shorten the list of things wrong while making some substantial improvements to the system.

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