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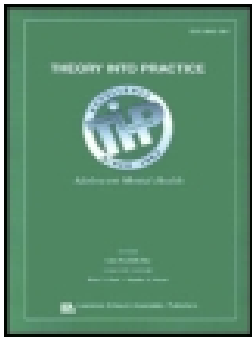
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Darnel Degand 

Stereotypes vs. Strategies for Digital Media Artists: The Case for Culturally Relevant Media Production

Digital media arts programs continue to be added to school curricula throughout the United States. Education through digital media arts also occurs outside school settings. We need to ensure that educational digital media arts programs actively and consciously teach students to critique societal stereotypes and biases they encounter in their media training as well as in their own artwork. This article argues for the inclusion of pedagogical approaches that encourage critical thinking in digital media arts

production spaces. In response to this need, culturally relevant media production is proposed as a set of criteria that media producers and instructors can use to create effective prosocial content for educational and/or entertainment purposes. The 3 criteria for culturally relevant media production are instructional methods and theories, culturally conscious content, and critical thinking skills support. These criteria and examples of existing forms of media that meet these criteria are explored in this article.

A voluntary national core arts standard for K-12 education was first introduced in 1994 (National Art Education Association, 1994). Twenty years later, media arts were added to these standards (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2014). Since then, digital

media arts programs (also known as digital arts, new media, graphic arts, and media arts) have been added to an increasing number of school curricula throughout the United States (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2018). In this article, I describe the digital media arts landscape and present a case for including pedagogical approaches that encourage critical thinking in digital media arts production spaces. In response to this need, culturally relevant media production is proposed as a set of criteria that media producers and instructors can use to create effective prosocial content for educational and/or entertainment purposes.

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Digital Media Arts

Digital media arts are distinct from painting, drawing, and other non-digital arts. Examples include digital filmography, electronic music, robotics, and videogames. They often incorporate terminology and practices common to older art forms. When designing digital media, it makes sense to “think about media arts and its techniques, skills, and concepts as building on and extending traditional concepts and ideas” (Pepler, 2010, p. 2125). Digital media arts curricula nurture creativity while teaching the technical skills required to produce digital art. Unfortunately, teachers who distrust technologies stifle students’ creativity (Kellner & Share, 2007). Incorporating critical literacies into their pedagogical approaches can help alleviate these concerns (Mirra, Morrell, & Filipiak, 2018).

Sociocultural Constructionism

Sociocultural constructionism (Pinkett, 2000) is a recommended pedagogical approach for digital media arts. It focuses on students as designers, students as members of a learning community that collaborates and shares, and “the design of artifacts rather than on the use of artifacts and tools” (Pepler, 2010, p. 2123). Sociocultural constructionism also requires that the artifacts benefit the collective community, as opposed to only serving the needs of the individual designer (Kafai, 2006; Pepler & Kafai, 2007).

Sociocultural constructionism guides my argument that learners should be encouraged to identify as creators and participate in activities that benefit their communities. Identifying as designers encourages students to analyze, critique, and redesign existing media experiences. These activities help them develop the initiative to learn and invent new media experiences (Mirra et al., 2018). Developing a “learning to learn” ability positively influences students’ education in other subject areas (Pepler, 2010) and is an effective strategy to draw minoritized groups into fields where they are underrepresented (Margolis & Fisher, 2002). Furthermore, the exchange of ideas, collaborative

teamwork, and the practice of connecting “school learning to students’ interests, knowledge, and experiences from outside of school” (Vasudevan, Schultz, & Bateman, 2010, p. 444) align well with the goals of various critical thinking pedagogies.

Critical Literacy and Digital Media Arts

Calls for more research into digital media arts education (Arts Education Partnership, 2004) and recommendations that this topic area be included in K-12 arts education curricula throughout the country are being heard and increasingly met (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2018). It is an appropriate time to step back, look forward, and ensure that educational digital media arts programs are actively teaching students to critique the societal stereotypes and biases they encounter in mass media and in their own artwork.

We need educators with artistic skills, technical abilities, and teaching experience to help students develop designer identities. However, we also need teachers well-versed in pedagogies that encourage students to collaborate and think critically about technical, artistic, and sociocultural topics. Although it has “explicit ties to the arts and design, constructionism has not heavily influenced the existing work on the arts and arts education” (Pepler, 2010, p. 2122). Fortunately, constructionism’s emphasis on designer identities, designer communities, and the design of artifacts for collectivist practices complement more widely used pedagogies that encourage critical thinking, such as critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), critical media literacy (Kellner & Share, 2007), and restorative teacher education (Winn, 2016).

We must reflect critically on today’s digital media arts educational spaces because those environments too often reflect the negative effects of societal stereotypes and biases. Research has consistently shown that harmful stereotypes about students from disadvantaged groups negatively influence learning environments (Buechley, 2014). For example, some teachers describe Black students’ learning abilities as “undesirable,

intolerable, [and] far from ideal” (Youdell, 2003, p. 18). These negative assumptions are influenced by broader discourses about young people of color, particularly Black males, who are routinely depicted through pathologizing lenses in media contexts (Bogle, 2016). Media arts spaces need pedagogies that insist that artists think critically about society’s influences on media production, consumption, access, and reception.

Exclusionary Versus Accessible

Vasudevan and Hill (2008) believe that “As young people develop their facility with new technologies, geographies, and communicative modes, so too must their spaces of education grow and expand to accommodate this evolution” (p. 5). Artists, students, and instructors must become aware of the social and educational influences of media artwork, as well as exclusionary behaviors that occur within their production spaces. For instance, lauded as an egalitarian community easily accessible to all socioeconomic groups, the maker movement claims to offer inexpensive equipment, open-source sharing, and a welcoming environment (Hatch, 2014). Yet, 1 in 6 women in a recent study reported they had been turned away from maker-spaces because of their gender (Wittmeyer, Faulkner, & McClard, 2014), and the maker-space community continues to be predominantly comprised of high socioeconomic status, male, White participants (Dayton, 2017).

Hence, as educators, it is imperative that we cultivate digital media arts experiences that enable learners to bypass gatekeepers, provide them with tools and resources to help them combat stereotypes and biases, cultivate critical thinking skills that will inspire their artwork, and make space for their creativity to flourish without forcing them to compromise their uniqueness. Admonishing the maker movement for specious claims that maker-spaces are all-welcoming, inexpensive, accessible, and diverse, Buechley (2014) summed up the frustration of many individuals from disadvantaged communities when she stated: “I’m really tired of setting up structures where we tell young women,

and young Black and Brown kids, that they should aspire to be like rich White guys” (22:45). Instead, our society needs to establish truly egalitarian production spaces that encourage the development of creators with the desire and expertise to make media products, artwork, and experiences that achieve collectivist goals. To get there, educators, mentors, students, and artists need media production development guidelines that will guide and assist them.

Toward this end, I conducted a phenomenological study about students’ media experiences and conducted document analyses (Bowen, 2009) about the production of their favorite media (Degand, 2013, 2015). Analyses of their media experiences suggest that: (1) aspirations influenced students’ media choices; (2) media served as resources to help students pursue their goals; and (3) media narratives about role models and communities simultaneously contradicted, supported, and influenced students’ evolving aspirations and beliefs in stereotypes. The document analyses of their favorite media revealed that the professional production of these products involved various mediums used for intrapersonal processing, interpersonal communications, and broadcast communications. Personal and collaborative decisions made at these 3 communication levels influence whether stereotypes are used. Next, my analyses considered how real-world business objectives might align with prosocial media goals. My findings indicate that four factors are important: (1) producers’ goals, (2) preliminary research, (3) target audience research, and (4) available resources. These results, alongside Ladson-Billings’ (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy, undergird the criteria that make up the culturally relevant media production approach I now propose.

Culturally Relevant Media Production

Culturally relevant media production aims to assist digital media artists with the design of prosocial media artwork, products, and experiences. Ladson-Billings (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy is a blueprint for this approach

because of its focus on the development of students' critical thinking skills. It is "a pedagogy of opposition not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual empowerment" (p. 160). Culturally relevant pedagogy aims to support students' academic success, development and/or maintenance of cultural competence, and development of "a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order" (p. 160). I posit that a similar approach can be used to produce media that will help youth develop positive self-identities and acquire the skills and traits needed to navigate media messaging and media experiences.

A culturally relevant media production approach features 3 criteria:

1. **Established instructional methods and theories.** Media producers and instructors should build on established instructional methods and theories to determine design considerations appropriate for the specific media format through which the product and/or experience will be delivered.
2. **Culturally conscious content.** The content presented should be accurate and respectful of all cultural groups; when possible, multiple cultural perspectives should be provided.
3. **Critical thinking skills support.** Media producers and instructors should include content that supports the development of critical thinking skills and helps promote positive self-discovery.

Instructional Methods and Theories

Media artists should learn and use proven instructional media production methods and theories grounded in solid research design and experience. I will briefly introduce Fisch's (2004) Capacity Model for educational narratives as an example, and then outline a similar discussion from Meadows (2003) that addresses important design considerations for interactive narratives.

Fisch's (2004) Capacity Model for children's comprehension of educational television content addresses what happens when instructional content is introduced alongside narrative content. Fisch argues that when the educational content is distinct from the narrative, they both compete for viewers' limited working memory resources, making it harder to comprehend and retain the educational content. Alternatively, when instructional content is intertwined with narrative content and included as a vital part of the story, the 2 processes of comprehension become cooperative and the educational content is more easily understood and retained.

Correspondingly, digital media arts often include a great deal of interactive content, therefore, digital media artists should also be thoughtful about how they introduce interactive features into their products. Meadows (2003) notes, "the less the story and the interaction design are separated, the better the end result" (p. 230). This approach complements Fisch's Capacity Model. Just as educational and narrative content should be interwoven, interactivity needs to be an essential element that further supports the story and the instructional components of the media experience. This approach helps producers of educational interactive content ensure that interactive features do not hinder the processing of educational and/or narrative content.

A growing community of media scholars, researchers, and producers are actively sharing production- and consumption-related instructional resources; I list a few at the end of this article. Such resources are intended for producers and educators interested in the practical and theoretical uses of media, as well as the role of media within society, education, culture, and entertainment.

Culturally Conscious Content

Culturally conscious content disrupts media's perpetuation of social stereotypes by attempting to portray individuals of all ethnicities, races, genders, and other social groups accurately and respectfully. Media can combat social

stereotypes and biases by portraying scenarios from multiple perspectives (Bowers et al., 2015). Doing so helps audiences understand that cultures, groups, and/or individuals who experience the same phenomenon can still result in each person interpreting the experience differently. Furthermore, individuals within the same group can have drastically different experiences. Numerous media products containing culturally conscious content exist. I offer Nickelodeon's *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2008) as one example.

Avatar: The Last Airbender contains a balanced female-to-male ratio amongst its core characters. Co-creators DiMartino and Konietzko (2008) incorporate these characters' perspectives into the narrative in meaningful ways, and each of the core characters play a significant role in the story's progression. This was not their intention at the outset. DiMartino stated, "It was gonna be a ... boy-centric ... program" (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2008, Season 3 Bonus DVD). Fortunately, head writer Aaron Ehasz disagreed. He challenged the initially overly-masculine plot and the co-creators eventually agreed. Reflecting on this decision, Konietzko stated, "... women just love the show. And um, sadly I think there aren't a lot of shows that treat female characters with respect and complexity. *Avatar* wouldn't be the same without all of these main characters who are women" (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2008, Season 3 Bonus DVD).

Unfortunately, problematic biases and stereotypes that contribute to the lack of interesting, complex, and diverse main characters in our media have been taught in art classrooms for years. Art instructors and art instructional media default to teaching students how to draw White male characters, and encourage depictions of characters in stereotypical and gendered roles. Some art educators actively work against the spreading of negative stereotypical beliefs (Kraehe & Brown, 2011; Lee, 2012), but others fear backlash. In a study of preservice art teachers' attitudes about LGBTQ issues, Hsieh (2016) found that educators are "ready and willing to discuss sensitive LGBTQ issues with students. However, the challenges they face in doing so seem to come mainly from

anticipating potentially conservative schools, administrators, and communities" (p. 131).

Instructional resources that counter the biased and stereotypical lessons prevalent in many mainstream media production spaces are increasingly available to digital media artists and instructors. Examples include Brown's (2016) illustration books, which teach artists how to draw a wide range of characters of African descent. Although Black cultures throughout the world have a wide range of skin tones and facial characteristics, Brown (2016) specifically deters artists from using thin lips, slim noses, and long straight hair as heroic visual qualities. He also discourages using large noses, thick lips, and kinky hair as the characteristics of antagonists. The Bechdel-Wallace Test is an additional resource, often used to identify poor usage and/or a lack of female characters in media (Bechdel, 2008). It first appeared in a 1985 comic strip:

I have this rule, see ... I only go to a movie if it satisfies three basic requirements. ONE, it has to have at least two women in it ... who, two, talk to each other about, three, something besides a man. (Bechdel, 2008)

This simple metric is a red flag for gender bias, but should not be the sole benchmark used to ensure that women (or any other minoritized group) are thoughtfully included in our work; the real goal should be the creation of meaningful, well-developed characters with significant roles.

Critical Thinking Skills Support

In addition to helping students learn to critique the technical and aesthetic properties of artwork and media, instructors should encourage students to reflect on the sociocultural factors that influence decisions made during the creative process. Moreover, artists should strive to create products that encourage their audiences to reflect critically on their media experiences. Art is often created to challenge various aspects of society and question the objectives and roles of "previous ideas and images" (Freedman, 2007, p. 204). However,

when we analyze how some of these critiques happen, we find that a limited number of societal segments and topics are unfairly prioritized and valued over others, reflecting the same sociocultural biases that affect other parts of our society. A discussion of the decision-making that occurs during the creative process is necessary to understand how sociocultural factors might influence that process.

The creative process is a complex experience shaped by the artist's inspirational sources, skill level, and constraints. Artists make numerous conscious and subconscious decisions as their artwork evolves from conception to presentation, with multiple, decisive, goal-oriented actions occurring alongside free-flowing experimentations. The inspirational sources that influence an artist's decisions during the creative process include their art education, their social experiences, and their past exposures to media and art. Furthermore, an artist's art education is/was impacted and inspired by the instructors' academic backgrounds, media experiences, and social backgrounds, and the constraints and objectives of the instructional environment (e.g., supplies, curricula, workspaces).

While honing their craft, the artistic and technical methods artists employ are visible. For example, when they are learning artistic techniques such as drawing hands, shading objects, lighting scenes, and incorporating color theory, artists reproduce multiple iterations of their artwork to master that skill. While the final result may be a work of art, a varying amount of repetitive, almost robot-like, technical abilities are required and observable until the artist masters the desired skills. As artists grasp each technical aspect of the artform they are working in, constraints that existed before they became proficient in those specific skills are removed, giving the artist more freedom to focus on the experimental and visceral aspects of artmaking. However, the creativity and authenticity that is expected from artists at this stage remains compromised because artists are required to conform to expectations and values set by society, their culture, their classrooms, and the art community (Brown & Thomas, 1999). As a result, the

skillsets artists find available to them during production often determine or motivate decisions related to symbols and representations they choose to include in their media.

When teaching artists about the importance of incorporating culturally conscious content into their artwork, connections between what is valued in society and in art should be explored. Preferences that emerge during an artist's training can contribute to biases and stereotypes perpetuated in and through their work. For example, learning to draw a face requires becoming familiar with how to draw noses, ears, lips, hair textures, and the many angles a head can be drawn in. An artist who focused specifically on learning to draw facial features common to Whites may default to illustrating White characters out of convenience, especially when under time constraints. Even an artist capable of drawing a number of different ethno-racial facial characteristics may still default to using non-White features to portray villains if s/he believes this is what the audience expects.

When compared to the experiences of art students from the past, today's art students are more likely to receive art training that encourages the investigation of topics relating to racism, homophobia, gender stereotyping, and other pervasive social issues (Lee, 2012). Fortunately, these practices are not limited to art instruction classrooms. Teachers of other subjects are also providing non-arts students opportunities to engage in similar educational experiences by incorporating arts-based inquiries into their assignments (Kraehe & Brown, 2011). Common arts-based inquiry assignments include "creating collages; drawing diagrams and depictions; writing fiction and non-fiction narratives; developing storyboards; and recording, acting, and editing a film" (Kraehe & Brown, 2011, p. 494).

Such class assignments are not focused on artistry. Instead, the objective is to provide students with multiple opportunities to reflect on the learning material. For example, Kraehe and Brown's (2011) social studies course used arts-based inquiries to encourage activities that included "investigating how sociocultural factors

played a role in the students' own K-12 schooling experience, considering the historical struggles faced by different groups to access equitable schooling, and illuminating the dominant messages of gender circulated across mainstream, popular discourse" (p. 495). Past research has shown that students who have the opportunity to participate in multiple forms of educational activities are able to retain a higher percentage of the educational content than students in courses comprised solely of lectures, readings, and writing assignments (Brooks & Brooks, 1993).

Digital media offer artists more methods and resources to choose from than traditional arts, especially when stand-alone support for critical thinking is a desired aspect of media experiences. When producers attempt to create static visual experiences that do not require guidance from instructors, they are dependent on textual instructions, shared understandings of symbols, and/or emotion-evoking visual design techniques. Similarly, solitary consumption of music, spoken word, and other forms of sound art are dependent on voiceover instructions and/or audio designed to stimulate emotions. The multimodal nature of digital media enables us to create stand-alone experiences that can incorporate all these methods. Interactivity, animation, and simulations are examples of additional features available to digital media artists. Youth Radio (2015) *West Side Stories: Gentrification in West Oakland* is an excellent example of digital media created to encourage critical thinking. Its textual instructions, interactive map, voiceover narrations, animated visual designs, and story submission features provide a multimodal experience that helps the audience reflect, critique, and participate in stories collected about West Oakland's past and present.

Conclusion

Traditional art education and digital media arts courses cover society's influences on art and the roles that politics and cultures play in artists' development. However, greater values are attributed to

White and European cultures, and more attention is focused on the accomplishments of artists who abide by those value systems. Although this article discusses the importance of formal art instruction for budding digital media artists, I also stress the importance of educating all students to become familiar with art-related concepts, critical media literacy topics, and the practice of critiquing social stereotypes and biases. To this end, culturally relevant media production is offered as a set of guidelines that can assist media producers and educators with the creation of media products and experiences that can achieve these goals.

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Additional Resources

1. Common Sense Media (www.commonsensemedia.org) helps families make smart media choices by offering independent, age-based educational ratings and reviews for movies, games, apps, TV shows, websites, books, and music. Educators and parents who sign up for their newsletter will receive updates about media that has been reviewed by the organization along with their recommendations on how to analyze and discuss them with kids. Digital media arts educators can visit the site to find examples of media that can be incorporated into their production class discussions and analyses.

2. The Joan Ganz Cooney Center (<http://joan Ganzcooneycenter.org>) is an independent research

and innovation lab that conducts original research on emerging education technologies and collaborates with educators and media producers to put this research into action. Digital media arts educators can use their site as a resource repository for finding established instructional methods and theories as requested by the first criteria in Culturally Relevant Media Production guidelines.

3. Extra Credits (<https://becausegamesmatter.com>) is a weekly YouTube show that teaches viewers about various subjects, (e.g. video game production, history, politics, and mythology). Digital media arts educators can use this website as an example of educational video essays that utilize the same research methods that entertainment industries use to create successful media experiences.

