This chapter introduces the volume, provides an overview of the theory and literature on popular culture and critical media literacy in education, and discusses ways to use popular culture in adult education.

Popular Culture and Critical Media Literacy in Adult Education: Theory and Practice

Elizabeth J. Tisdell

I love a good story. I love seeing great movies and reading provocative novels, especially those relatively new and “hot” books that make me think in new ways about things I’m interested in. As an academic, I seldom have time to see movies or read novels, except during breaks. So I spent the first two days of the semester break in December 2003 reading the very hot and extremely provocative book *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown (2003). I was riveted! The book is clearly a page-turner and took me to places in Paris and London that I’d either been to before or would love to visit. In this fictional story, the main characters uncover a centuries-old conspiracy in the Catholic Church concealing that Jesus had been married to Mary Magdalene and that they had had a child. Thus, Mary Magdalene herself was actually the Holy Grail, the vessel or “cup” that carried the child. The novel provides an entertaining combination of thrill and mystery as the main characters decipher the messages of the Da Vinci code to uncover the conspiracy. The author leaves the reader hanging at the end of every chapter, so I simply had to keep turning the pages!

Needless to say, the book caused an uproar both in Christian religious circles and in more secular spheres as well. It clearly made people think and had people talking. Some said that Brown overstepped bounds in mixing religious history and fiction (Noonan, 2006). Others (both Christian and non-Christian) suggested that the book gave people insight into the way power relations might shape how history is written, how what is taught as
historical truth by a particular religious tradition might have been partially propagated by the religious hierarchy of that tradition to serve its own interests. As a result of the book’s popularity and the uproar it caused, many pastors felt the need to preach on the *The Da Vinci Code* in order to clarify the difference between fiction and historical evidence. No matter what one’s personal opinion about it, *The Da Vinci Code* clearly has had a strong influence on recent dialogues about religious history and, according to Gary Hoppenstand (2005), the book “now ranks as the best-selling novel of all time” and “has had more booklength studies written about it than has any other work of fiction published since World War II” (p. 794).

The stir that *The Da Vinci Code*, which also eventually became a movie, caused is but one example of the role that popular culture can play in society. Popular culture in all its forms is everywhere. It is most obviously present in media, such as movies, television, radio, music, comic books, advertisements, billboards, magazines, and popular fiction. Given that it’s ubiquitous, it is a “public pedagogy” (Giroux, 2004) that has far more power to educate or “miseducate” than the many formal and nonformal forms of adult education that scholars have written about and researched. The purpose of this volume is to directly consider how educators of adults can and do draw on popular culture in many different settings as an educational tool. This chapter sets the context by providing an overview of some of the literature on popular culture and media literacy in adult education and on the development of critical media literacy. In addition, it highlights the contributions each of the chapters makes and explains how the book is organized.

**The Literature on Popular Culture in Adult Education**

Popular culture has been given relatively little attention in the field of adult education thus far. This is somewhat surprising as the field includes so much theorizing and practical discussion about experiential and informal learning. Further, quite a bit has been written about the use of popular culture and entertainment media in other disciplines: in cultural and media studies, in the K–12 arena, and among those who write about the importance of developing critical media literacy. Critical media literacy is generally concerned with “helping students experience the pleasures of popular culture while simultaneously uncovering the practices that work to silence or disempower them as readers, viewers, and learners” (Alvermann and Hagood, 2000, p. 194). In essence, it’s about helping students to learn to read the world as well as the word (Freire, 1971)—in this case, how the world of the media and popular culture can both resist and reinforce the interests of the dominant culture. Much literature in adult education is concerned with challenging and resisting the dominant culture and with teaching people to read the world. Further, in the area of media and cultural studies, a number of research pieces focus on how adults construct their
identities in light of popular culture (for example, Hall, 2001; Radway, 1984; Richards, 2005). Given the natural connection between adult education and critical media literacy, it is curious that discussions about teaching people to read the world of media and popular culture are so limited.

Though the literature on popular culture and media analysis specifically in adult education is scant, a small base does exist. In the mid-1980s, Stephen Brookfield (1986) wrote about the importance of developing media literacy in adult education because of the bias in television programming and production. In the late 1980s, Robert Graham (1989) discussed the importance of media literacy in analyzing both women's romance fiction and the role of power relations in shaping the content of television news programs. The fact that Brookfield is originally from England and Graham is Canadian might explain why they were among the first in the field to write about media literacy; as David Considine (2002) observes, the United States has lagged far behind Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada in developing approaches to critical media literacy.

To a large extent, our colleagues “across the pond” in the United Kingdom have been major contributors to more recent discussions as well. Nod Miller, in a paper presented at the 1999 Adult Education Research Conference, described the contributions of popular culture to the field by drawing on the sitcom Seinfeld. More recently, Christine Jarvis (2005) presented an excellent critique of the television show Buffy the Vampire Slayer from a feminist perspective, specifically examining its representation not only of formal education but of self-directed adult learning. Paul Armstrong (2005b) has also done a fascinating analysis of the role of the television show The Simpsons as political commentary and has discussed the use of satire as critical pedagogy (Armstrong, 2005a).

The United States is lagging behind, but some American scholars have begun to write about popular culture and adult education. Though not specifically identified with the field of adult education, but widely cited by adult educators, the always-on-the-cutting-edge black feminist scholar bell hooks (1994, 1996) has discussed the influence of popular culture and the importance of teaching people to read cultural images from a race, class, and gender perspective. In 2004 Talmadge Guy introduced hip hop to adult education, and Jennifer Sandlin (2005) examined consumer education of adults from a cultural-studies perspective and discussed the implications for a critical pedagogy of consumer education. In addition, Patricia M. Thompson and I have done a large mixed-methods study of the consumption of entertainment media by 215 U.S. adult educators (made up of professors and their graduate students). We examined how entertainment media affect their thinking about group identities based on race, gender, and sexual orientation and how they draw on the media in their teaching and learning. We found that adult educators are large consumers of popular culture as a source of pleasure (Tisdell and Thompson, 2007). The fifteen qualitative interviews indicated that the participants’ use of media also helped them
find alternative narratives for themselves; expanded thinking about “others” of a different race, gender, or sexual orientation; and furthered interaction and the analysis of social relations both in their own lives and in their teaching. Thus, although the literature base is limited, it appears that adult educators are consumers of popular culture, and they use it to some degree in their teaching. In this volume, several adult educators give voice to the practical aspects of doing so.

**Popular Culture and Critical Media Literacy Theory**

Popular culture is ubiquitous in society in its multiple forms and influences. All of us are affected by it as we saw in the discussion above of just one popular novel/film, *The Da Vinci Code*. In the case of books and movies, people generally have to intentionally seek out a novel or film. Yet we can be unintentional consumers of popular culture as well, through just passing by billboards and seeing advertisements or from simply being present in our homes when the television is on (even if our spouse, partner, or kids turned it on). For good or for ill, we are constantly being bombarded by messages that affect who we are and how we think, whether we are conscious of those messages or not.

Theories about critical media literacy tend to center on the unconscious effects of popular culture and media influences and on ways of educating for increased consciousness. As Nadine Dolby (2003) observes, many from both the political left and the right have written about the influence of popular culture. Those from the right often decry its evils from the perspective of sexual morality or violence. Those on the left tend to be concerned about the power of creators of the dominant culture to unconsciously lull us into submission to their own interests (Dimitriades and McCarthy, 2000). This was Frankfurt School critical theorist Theodor Adorno’s (1991) concern in many of his writings from the mid-1940s to the late 1960s, when he died. He argued that the culture industry was a tool of the dominant culture to subjugate the masses through unconscious means; the more that people are passive consumers of it and do not consciously think about its influence, the more they might fall prey to its unconscious messages. Many who write about critical media literacy and the importance of teaching people to read the world are basing their thought on the pioneering work of Adorno.

Alvermann and Hagood (2000) summarize four threads that run through some of the current theoretical influences and thinking about critical media literacy. In particular, they point out that authors’ definitions of critical media literacy depend on their theoretical perspectives and on the primary discipline that informs their work. The first thread highlights the notion of pleasure and focuses on people’s ability to reflect on the pleasures associated with being either creators or consumers of media (for example, movie or television viewers or video-game participants). A second thread is from cultural studies and focuses on how media reproduce or
resist the dominant culture (Luke, 1999). A third thread is more postmodern than the others; it emphasizes how individuals and groups construct meaning differently depending on their interests, their positionality (their gender, race, class, sexual orientation) relative to the dominant culture, and the historical and social context. Finally, those coming from feminist educational perspectives highlight how media produces gendered and other group-based identities through power relations that students can either use or resist. Educators can use all these perspectives to find ways of drawing on popular culture in their teaching and to develop critical media-literacy skills; their students can use these skills to make active, conscious choices to resist or draw on cultural images in the ongoing construction of their own identities (Buckingham, 2003).

These theoretical threads overlap considerably, and elements from each of them are important. Pleasure is a primary reason people are active consumers of popular culture. It was the primary reason I read The Da Vinci Code and the motivation for most people to see particular movies or to tune into their favorite TV shows. Critical media scholars note that because of the pleasure element it is unrealistic to expect people not to be consumers of popular culture. Rather, from an educational and media-literacy perspective, it’s important to teach people to analyze popular culture’s unconscious messages (Hamston, 2002). Henry Giroux (2004) goes even further and argues that educators have a responsibility to do so because popular culture is a mass-produced form of public pedagogy. The three other theoretical strands that Alvermann and Hagood discuss are based on cultural studies and on postmodern and feminist perspectives rather than on pleasure. They collectively highlight how power relations between and among groups inform constructions of media, as well as the ability of individuals to produce their own meaning while still being affected by these power relations between dominant and oppressed groups.

In summarizing the thoughts of numerous critical media scholars, Tara Yosso (2002) offers a helpful framework for both the theory and practice of critical media literacy. She emphasizes that critical media-literacy scholars generally make the following assumptions about entertainment media, particularly in helping students to learn to analyze media: the media are controlled and driven by money; media images are social constructions based on interacting influences on directors, actors, and other media makers; media makers bring their own experience with them in their construction of characters, including their perceptions of race, gender, and class, and those constructions affect how characters are portrayed; consumers of media make their own meaning of media portrayals in light of their own background and experiences and are not strictly passive recipients of media; unlike print media, entertainment media such as movies and television are a combination of moving visuals, sounds, and words that combine in facilitating meaning; it is possible to acquire multiple literacies in becoming media literate, and acquiring these multiple literacies is part of the purpose of education.
In analyzing entertainment media, most authors note that the media tend to reinforce the images and values of the dominant culture. As Scott Coltrane and Melinda Messineo (2000) note, “Media images provide a diffuse confirmation of one’s world view, promote acceptance of current social arrangements and reassure people that things are the way they ought to be” (p. 364). But when some entertainment media, overtly or covertly, deal with current social issues regarding race, class, gender, or sexual orientation, they, in some ways, challenge the dominant culture and, in other ways, reproduce it. For example, many movies filmed in the United States (and often broadcast internationally) have overtly dealt with race/ethnic relations or interracial romantic relationships, or they center on women in powerful roles. Many feature main characters who are openly gay or lesbian and portray them as happy and as well adjusted as their heterosexual peers. However, these portrayals often appeal to the dominant culture in that they reinforce that culture’s notion of class or other relations. For example, Will & Grace focuses on the relationship between a gay man and a straight woman and not on Will’s relationships with other gay men (Quimby, 2005); many of the lesbians portrayed on television shows are thin, with long hair, and conform to dominant-culture notions of feminine beauty. Thus such shows may bring visibility to social identities based on sexual orientation, race, class, and gender and may challenge dominant social relations to some extent, but they also reinforce dominant social relations at the same time. As David Buckingham (2003) suggests, media makers dance the dance between their own politics and the funding sources and politics that will keep shows on the air. Exploring the intersection of these issues and the politics involved is part of critical media literacy.

Examples from Practice: The Book’s Organization

Most of the literature on critical media literacy has focused on youth education. A few studies have focused on how direct teaching of critical media literacy through analysis of film affects the ways traditional-age college students construct meaning and the identities of themselves and others. This literature includes Nancy Pauly’s (2003) study of preservice elementary teachers, Yosso’s (2002) study of Latino community college students in the United States, and Ali Nihat Eken’s (2002) study of how analysis of popular film at a university in Turkey affects the critical-thinking skills of his students. Such studies do begin to help us understand how educators have used critical media literacy in practice and how it works. The authors in this volume make a large contribution of their own in this regard, particularly as they describe ways to draw on popular culture to facilitate the development of critical media literacy with adult learners.

As mentioned previously, in spite of relatively limited discussion in the adult education field, in our study of educators of adults (Tisdell and Thompson, 2007), we found that they do draw on popular culture and
multiple forms of media in their teaching. This opening chapter provides a foundation in the primary theoretical influences and intents of critical media literacy, and the closing chapter by Patricia Thompson provides a summary of the main themes of this volume. As discussed in the Editors’ Notes, the chapters in between are rich descriptions of how the authors draw on particular forms of popular culture in specific adult education contexts.

Chapters Two through Five deal with the use of different aspects of popular culture with adult learners in various types of higher education settings. In Chapter Two, Talmadge Guy discusses how popular culture influences people’s thinking about group-based identities and how he uses popular culture to deal with diversity and equity issues in his classes. In Chapter Three, Heather Stuckey and Kelly Kring discuss their own experiences as a teacher and a learner in a class that used popular film and semiotics to develop critical media literacy in graduate education students who were themselves either classroom teachers or educators of adults. Mary Hanley, in Chapter Four, discusses how she uses hip hop with teacher educators as a way of helping them learn about culturally responsive education and the importance of drawing on learners’ creative expression. Then, Maxwell Fink and Deborah Foote in Chapter Five describe using the popular animated show The Simpsons with undergraduate humanities students who are primarily members of Gen X and Gen Y as a way to teach humanities themes and to help the students analyze the influence of the media in their own lives.

Chapters Six through Eight deal with adult education in less formal venues. Barbara Heuer in Chapter Six discusses how to use aspects of popular culture with adult-literacy workers in professional-development workshops. Robin Redmon Wright in Chapter Seven discusses how British women who watched the popular 1960s British television show The Avengers drew on the positive influence of the strong and powerful female image of the lead character, Cathy Gale, to construct their own identities as powerful women. Finally, in Chapter Eight, Jennifer Sandlin discusses how popular culture can be used as a tool for cultural resistance, specifically in anticonsumption activities. All these authors highlight how popular culture can be a vehicle of cultural reproduction and cultural resistance at the same time.

Conclusions and Implications for Practice

Popular culture has an important role to play in adult education as a vehicle of critical media literacy. I know that when I teach about gender and diversity issues, students learn far more from analyzing portrayals of characters in television and film as an initial assignment than they do from initially reading high theory about cultural reproduction and resistance. Further, they begin to learn to read the media and to understand the powerful influence the media have both in their own lives and in the lives of those they teach.
Using popular culture can also serve as a bridge by drawing on everyday experiences of the pleasures and influences of media and connecting those experiences to theory. Just as I was riveted by the pleasure, adventure, and mystery of the popular novel and movie *The Da Vinci Code*, students can enter the world of theory through experiences with popular culture that are equally riveting to them. In so doing, they begin to understand the strong influence of popular culture in new ways as they develop their own critical media literacy. Often the association with popular culture facilitates deep theoretical understanding and the discovery that theory is both fascinating and applicable to practice. Just like popular culture, sometimes it’s even fun!

References


ELIZABETH J. TISDELL is associate professor and coordinator of the Adult Education Doctoral Program at the Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg.