RESISTANCE AND LEARNING IN MEDIA AND GENDER LITERACY CLASSES

RESISTENZA E APPRENDIMENTO NELLE CLASSI DI MEDIA E GENDER LITERACY

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ABSTRACT

Resistance is a known component of social justice classes, and it is often seen as impeding learning. The current case study explored possible scenarios of resistance in classrooms where media representations of gender are discussed, and teachers' reactions to such resistance. Methods used for collecting data included observations in U.S. high school classes as well as interviews with teachers and their students. Findings suggest that instructors in media and gender literacy classrooms might choose to ignore students' resistance because they see it as an obstacle for learning. At the same time, students' resistance does not necessarily mean instructors' failure. The findings also suggest that resistance in media and gender literacy classes can be both open and subtle, and may be combined with learning. This case study provides opportunities for reflection on the value of recognizing resistance and promoting the importance of a civil dialogue about controversial social issues.

KEYWORDS

Case study, media literacy, gender, media representations, resistance.

SOMMARIO

La resistenza è una componente nota delle classi in cui si affrontano temi legati alla giustizia sociale ed è spesso vista come un impedimento all'apprendi-

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mento. Il presente studio di caso ha esplorato possibili scenari di resistenza nelle classi in cui vengono discusse le rappresentazioni mediali di genere e le reazioni degli insegnanti a tale resistenza. I metodi usati per la raccolta dei dati includevano osservazioni in classi della scuola superiore negli Stati Uniti e interviste con insegnanti e studenti. I risultati suggeriscono che gli insegnanti di media e gender literacy in aula potrebbero scegliere di ignorare la resistenza degli studenti perché la considerano come un ostacolo per l'apprendimento. Allo stesso tempo, la resistenza degli studenti non implica necessariamente un fallimento dei docenti. I risultati suggeriscono anche che la resistenza nelle classi di media e gender literacy può essere sia aperta che sottile, e può essere combinata con l'apprendimento. Questo studio di caso offre l'opportunità di riflettere sul valore di riconoscere la resistenza e promuovere l'importanza di un dialogo civile su questioni sociali controverse.

PAROLE CHIAVE

Studio di caso, media literacy, genere, rappresentazioni mediali, resistenza.

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1 Introduction

Media scholars believe that there is a connection between media representations of gender and the way people construct and enact their gender identities. Different authors disagree on how exactly this connection should be interpreted. Some note that media representations force people to perform their gender in certain ways (Jhally, 2006; Levin & Kilbourne, 2006). However, many others believe that people are not forced by the media into acting a certain way, and have the power to resist media messages (see Carter, Steiner & McLaughlin, 2015; Shaw, 2014). A number of authors also point out that media representations reflect gender inequalities but do not create them (Sternheimer, 2013). At the same time, scholars generally note that media representations of gender are not neutral because of ideologies embedded in them.

The connection between media representations of gender and our gender identities as well as between media representations and gender inequalities might be complicated, but according to most media scholars it undoubtedly exists. It is, therefore, not surprising that some educators choose to examine media representations of gender in the classroom as a springboard for discussions about mediated communication or about gender, or both (Friesem, 2017; Keown, 2013; Maharajh, 2014). Examining media representations of gender can be done as part of critical pedagogy, critical media literacy, or media literacy education classes.

Educators who bring up controversial social issues in their classrooms know all too well that this causes resistance from students. Resistance comes from tackling issues of gender in general, as feminist pedagogy practitioners attest (Carillo, 2007; Copp & Kleinman, 2008; Feigenbaum, 2007; Pleasants, 2011; Riley & Claris, 2009). Analyzing media in the classroom also creates resistance, according to media literacy scholars and practitioners (Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs, 2011). A few scholarly pieces investigate the intersection of these two types of resistance – that is, challenges associated specifically with teaching about media representations of gender (Maharajh, 2014; Turnbull, 1998).

The resistance that educators encounter in media and gender literacy classes is known anecdotally. The author has encountered such resistance and heard about it from different colleagues, who are often frustrated by some of their students' reactions. At the same time, resistance in media and gender literacy classes remains underexplored. More specifically, little has been written about different kinds of such resistance, about possible interpretations of students' reactions or about the way educators deal with it in order to make these classes more effective.

The current paper aims to contribute to this important conversation. The small size and brevity of the case study described on the following pages does not make it representative and does not allow the author to make broad generalizations about the dynamics of resistance in media and gender literacy classes. The aim of this study is, therefore, to offer some possible scenarios and explanations, as well as to encourage other scholars to further exploration of the issue.

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2 What we know about students' resistance

Students' resistance in classes where controversial social issues — in particular, race, class, and gender — are discussed is a well known phenomenon (Buffington & Lai, 2011; Chizhik & Chizhik, 2005; Davis, 1992; Holloway & Gouthro, 2011; Rodriguez, 2009; Young, Mountford, & Skrla, 2006). Vast literature exists about resistance in feminist classrooms — that is, in classrooms where instructors use texts and principles of feminism to educate students about gender inequalities (Carillo, 2007; Copp & Kleinman, 2008; Feigenbaum, 2007; Lee, 1993; Markowitz, 2005; Pleasants, 2011; Riley & Claris, 2009; Webber, 2005).

Scholars describe different kinds of resistance, noting a variety of manifestations. For instance, students argue that sexism does not exist, and accuse instructors of creating a problem out of nothing (Buffington & Lai, 2011). Educators who teach about gender issues find themselves receiving bad student evaluations (Carillo, 2007; Webber, 2005). They report students' negative emotional reactions in response to their teaching, such as anger, shame, guilt, despair, and frustration (Young, Mountford, & Skrla, 2006). Capper and Young (2007) group all kinds of resistance to learning about social justice into three types: distancing, opposition, and intense emotions.

Resistance is often seen as negative because it impedes learning. Authors offer different strategies for reducing it. Buffington and Lai (2011) discuss the importance of finding untraditional approaches to the topic, teaching through meaningful confrontations, contextualizing issues of gender, and considering students' expectations. Copp and Kleinman (2008) offer such strategies as «establishing trust», «facilitating student ownership of the course», «getting students to apply feminist insights to the world through writing», «sharpening students' analytical skills through humor», and «having students connect feminist knowledge to their future actions» (p. 103). A few scholars, however, believe that resistance is a natural part of the learning process. For example, Young, Mountford, and Skrla (2006) argue: «[t]he fact that students resist indicates that they are engaging with the course material» (p. 267), which is better than silence that comes from indifference. They also note that resistance does not necessarily go away by the end of the course as teachers may discover that few students have been significantly transformed by this learning experience. This, however, does not mean that no learning has happened.

Feminist educators, whose primary goal is to fight gender inequalities in their classroom and beyond, find it useful to approach gender issues by analyzing texts of popular culture (Buffington & Lai, 2011). Media literacy scholars note that media education is well suited for helping students explore controversial social issues (Friesem, 2016; Scull, Malik, & Kupersmidt, 2014). What do we know about resistance in media education classrooms – both those whose primary goal is to help students develop critical thinking in regards to mediated communication, and those that use media literacy principles to tackle specific social issues?

Buckingham (2003) and Hobbs (2011) note that resistance in media literacy classrooms can be not only open but also subtle. In cases of subtle resistance the teacher might be unable to correctly interpret students' behavior, and believe that young people uncritically accept her message. Hobbs (2011) noted that young people do not appreciate it when teachers make them feel ashamed of their media tastes: «When teachers choose to deconstruct media messages that students consider to be pleasurable, there can be an emotional fallout» (p. 119). According to Buckingham (2003), because students understand that they are supposed to be critical of the media, they might assume a critical stance to please the teacher. This does not mean that they are immune to ideologies embedded in media texts. He also discussed that young people often challenge teachers' authority simply to raise their own prestige among peers. In this case, students may actually be learning even though they are being oppositional. Buckingham (2003) noted that problems in media literacy classrooms often arise when «ideological analysis… fails to connect with students' lived experience» (p. 115). In this case, students might not be openly resisting, but they will not be learning.

Few studies explore resistance in classes where media representations of gender are discussed (Maharajh, 2014; Turnbull, 1998). In the most recent study, Maharajh (2014) does not focus as much on students' resistance as on their inability to overcome «postfeminist sensibility» (p. 681), to define themselves as feminists, and see the value of feminist activism. The most comprehensive and nuanced account of different kinds of resistance in media and gender literacy classes comes from Turnbull (1998), who collected her data in an Australian high school.

Turnbull discussed how during media and gender literacy classes, students may display subtle resistance; for example, they would agree with the teacher only because they do not want their peers to laugh at them. Turnbull argued that students may say what they think the instructor wants to hear because they are unwilling to be ridiculed by peers or get a bad grade. Similarly to Buckingham (2003), Turnbull suggested that young people might not be engaged in a conversation and remain silent simply because the teacher fails to connect class material to their experience. She also noted that when students discuss issues that are bound up with their life experiences, it is difficult for them to be detached and analytical. Because gender identity is a highly personal issue, students may resist teachers' interpretations of media texts that contain gender stereotypes. Turnbull discovered that female students' relationships with media texts criticized by teachers were more complex than the teachers thought. Students criticized these texts during class discussions, but continued to value their messages. Media texts chosen by teachers were problematic from a feminist point of view, but at the same time they provided role models beyond traditional gender roles that the female students' families favored.

The case study discussed in the current paper aimed to contribute to filling a gap in research on resistance in media and gender literacy classes. Continuing this conversation is important because, as the existing studies reveal, students'

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resistance can signal not only their unwillingness to engage with the classroom material but also educators' inability to connect with students' experiences and respond to their needs. To make things even more complicated, resistance might actually coexist with learning, while the lack of resistance does not mean that students' attitudes and behaviors are changed. The research question that guided the data collection and analysis was: *How does students' resistance manifest itself in media and gender literacy classes, and how is it correlated with their learning?* Without attempting to provide comprehensive answers, the goal of this small case study was to help media literacy educators who choose to talk to students about media representations of gender to reflect on their practices.

3 Methods

I used the case study approach to collect data for the current study. Yin (2017) suggests that this methodology is best suited for studies that seek to explain how a social phenomenon works, and when an extensive description of the phenomenon is required. Since there is little literature on resistance in media and gender literacy classes, it was necessary to provide initial information on how such resistance happens and how it is experienced by educators. My goal was to create thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of classroom interactions and teachers' perceptions in order to explore different forms of resistance and a variety of explanations of its occurrence. In the case of this research project, advantages of the case study, in particular its ability to provide an in-depth explanation of a phenomenon in question, outweighed its limitations (mainly, its low generalizability).

I collected the data over a period of two months in the fall of 2014. I focused on three units (parts of three separate classes) taught by two teachers in a suburban high school located in an East Coast of the U.S. Each of the three units involved analysis of media texts and discussions about media representations of gender based on principles of critical pedagogy. More specifically, students watched and analyzed *Toy Story* and *Pocahontas* using several critical lenses (including the gender and feminist lenses), and then analyzed popular magazines and created collages as part of a «hacked ads» activity. To strengthen validity, I used triangulation of participant observation in the classroom, interviews (mostly group and occasionally individual) with students taking the units, and interviews with the teachers. The depth of the case study was ensured by the amount of time I spent observing the classes and interacting with the teachers (outside of their interviews) during the period when I was visiting the school.

Following the rules set forth by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which had previously approved the study, the participants were orally informed about the nature of the study and asked to sign consent forms giving me permission to interview, digitally record, and quote them. On the following pages I use pseudonyms (I call the two teachers «Michael» and «Rosey»), and call the school where I conducted my study *West Cityville High School*.

3.1 Research context and participants

West Cityville High School teaches students from grades 9 to 12. During the data collection, the school had about 1,000 students and 90 teachers. The school's population included 75% of White students, 7% of Black students and 15% of Hispanic/Latino students.

For my case study I observed and interviewed students from three classes: English II taught by Michael (E-II-M), American Experience taught by Michael (AE-M), and English II taught by Rosey (E-II-R). The ratio of different races in the classes I observed was representative of the ratio of races in the school. AE-M and E-II-R consisted of 10th-graders, and E-II-M consisted of a combination of 10th-graders and 11th-graders. E-II-M had 25 students — 19 male and 6 female. Of these students I interviewed 19 — 5 female and 14 male. AE-M had 23 students — 12 male and 11 female. Of these students I interviewed 12 — 8 female and 4 male. E-II-R had 21 students — 13 male and 8 female. Of these students I interviewed 10 — 5 female and 5 male.

3.2 Data collection

In order to ensure the depth of the case study, throughout September and October of 2014, I visited West Cityville High School 17 times, and each time stayed for 4 to 7 hours observing the classes and conducting interviews. During the observations, I took detailed notes of classroom interactions, as well as of my communication with the teachers and students. This allowed me to create thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) as part of the case study that later served as a basis of formulating explanations of students' resistance as well as the teachers' reactions to it.

I interviewed most of the students in groups of three, which allowed them to interact, and at the same time let everybody participate in the conversation. In the beginning of the quarter I used one set of questions, and once I felt that I had reached saturation I switched to the second set. The purpose of the first set was to find out what students thought about media representations of gender. I asked them about gender stereotypes in the media and outside of the media, and about the role of media representations in people's lives. The second set of questions was intended to show what students learned in class. Each of the interviews lasted for 20-25 minutes.

I interviewed Rosey and Michael separately using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview with Michael lasted for 2.5 hours and the interview with Rosey was 40 minutes long, due to the differences in the teachers' availability, personalities and style of talking. I asked them to describe their teaching philosophy, instructional approaches, and motivations for teaching about media and gender. As part of these interviews, both teachers also talked about their interpretations of interactions in the classes that I was observing.

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3.3 *Data analysis*

To analyze the data, I used elements of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Studies that use grounded theory start with a broad question followed by qualitative data collection that allow themes to emerge naturally. This approach suited the current project particularly well because of the latter's exploratory nature. Rather than starting with a specific hypothesis, I was interested in exploring interactions in media and gender literacy classes in general, and their challenges, such as students' resistance, in particular. Grounded theory also fit well the case study methodology as it allows exploring social phenomena in-depth, without limitations that the hypothetico-deductive approach may present.

Describing coding techniques, Strauss (1987) recommended rereading data and analyzing it into emerging conceptual categories. I started re-reading the data I was collecting from the very beginning of my project. This way I was able to formulate early on emerging themes that informed subsequent data collection. Having finished the data collection, I reread my notes and transcripts several times in order to further make sense of the thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) I was accumulating. The themes that emerged in the process of data collection and initial analysis were then used for further coding. In the case of students' perceptions and actions, I focused on such themes as «open resistance», «subtle resistance», and «resistance as learning». As for the teachers' perceptions, the themes I formulated were «resistance as negative», «frequency of resistance», and «real resistance».

On the following pages I use quotes that I recorded while observing the teachers and students in the classroom, and talking to them during interviews and focus groups. The quotes allow me to illustrate the main themes that my findings revealed.

4 Teachers' expectations and perceptions

Scholars who study resistance in social justice classes often describe it as something negative, a reaction that impedes learning and needs to be dealt with appropriately in order to ensure that classes are effective (e.g., Carillo, 2007; Copp & Kleinman, 2008). The teachers that I observed in West Cityville High School expressed similar sentiments.

During the interviews, both Michael and Rosey described resistance as a pesky but rare side-effect of learning critical theory, especially as it related to issues of gender. When I asked Michael about resistant students, he said that he seldom came across them: «If I had to put it in terms of numbers, that's, like, one out of a hundred, that I'm gonna have such hard opposition that I feel at the end of the day that I didn't reach that kid». Rosey and Michael told me that, in their opinion, most students were enthusiastic about critical theory and learned it with ease. For instance, Michael said: «Once they start to apply it, half the students are starting to get it now, they are starting to see what the goal is, that it is to uncover this sort of hidden messages». Like Michael, Rosey also believed that

most students were immediately affected by critical theory and excited about the critical lenses: «Usually they are blown away that they haven't seen these things before. Like, you start pointing [these things] out, and then they start recognizing them on their own, almost instantly». Both teachers appeared to believe that students' resistance is problematic, but that «real» resistance seldom happened in their classes. Mild cases of resistance did not worry Rosey and Michael because they felt that they could usually get through to students.

There is a difference between acknowledging resistance but seeing it as part of learning, as Young, Mountford, and Skrla (2006) suggest and ignoring it. Although Michael and Rosey saw resistance as a problem, on a number of occasions they appeared not to acknowledge resistance when it happened. Several times I saw students arguing with the teachers about their interpretations of media representations of gender. In particular, I witnessed one heated debate in Michael's class. However, during the interview, Michael told me about it: «I saw recognition in eyes of students who were arguing yesterday». In his interpretation, «they all laughed… but to me, the reason they laughed is [be]cause it struck a chord with them». It is possible that, if teachers perceive resistance as something negative (as Rosey and Michael did), they may unconsciously choose not to see it, as they naturally would like their classes to be transformative for students.

Based on Michael's words, I assume that he saw only open resistance as resistance *proper*, which he described in the following words: «They are saying: «Oh, you are grasping a straw, you are making a big case out of something that isn't really there»». When I asked the teacher whether he thought that students might be resistant in subtle ways, he replied: «I think, is that it's really hard to [bullshit] your understanding of it… you are instantly exposed as a fraud once you start talking about critical theory if you don't know what it is». Similar to Michael, Rosey claimed that she could always recognize students' resistance. She told me that when students did not understand critical theory, it showed in their reactions and actions, «because I think they are aggravated or they feel kind of out of the loop when they don't get it». Therefore, it appears that the teachers saw three possible reactions from students. Either students understood critical theory and enjoyed using it (the majority), or they openly resisted the teacher's message (a rare occurrence), or pretended that they understood it — presumably to get a better grade.

These perceptions contradicted my classroom observations and results of interviews with students. In particular, I witnessed students question the teachers' interpretations of media representations on several occasions: either openly (during the classroom discussion), or as they were working in group or pairs during the class, or during interviews with me.

5 Contradictory resistance

In contrast with the teachers' simplified perception of resistance, my classroom observations and interviews with students revealed that their reactions

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were complex and contradictory. I saw them argue with the teachers or question their messages more often than Rosey and Michael seemed to acknowledge. At the same time, even very open kind of resistance was often combined with signs of interest, understanding, and learning (albeit, perhaps, not the easy transformation that the teachers were hoping for).

Rosey was often openly questioned by three students, whom I shall call Kevin, Roger, and Melissa. These students doubted the value of the fight for gender equality (especially the boys), and disagreed that there is a problem with the gender difference (Melissa). Melissa's boyfriend Anthony shared her critical stance; however, his resistance took subtler forms. For example, he was goofing around while working on the «hacked ads» assignment (creating collages out of fashion magazines) with Melissa and did not seem to take Rosey's call to analyze media representations of gender seriously.

Roger and Kevin opined that feminism is not necessary in the United Stated anymore. During the interview with me, Kevin said: «I always see men and women are pretty much already equal, at this point… Actually, technically in the United States women have more rights than men if you look at it». In the classroom, the boys also questioned Rosey's statement that feminist causes are important worldwide. For example, Kevin told Rosey: «I think we should put money into [fighting against] hunger, and then into feminism, [because fighting hunger] is more important».

Kevin and Roger were the only two students in Rosey's class who explicitly said that they did not like using the critical lenses. During the interview, Kevin described it this way: «Well, I don't really like the critical lenses. I try to, like, forget about them when I am watching TV». However, the boy then added: «[B]ut... I always notice, like, when there's [a media representation of gender]... I always notice the gender stuff now every time I watch commercials... But a lot of times I try to keep it away». Roger described a similar attitude: «I don't really like the critical lenses 'cause I'd just rather kind of see things, like, how they are presented. But if I had to pick, like, one [critical lens] I see the most, it's probably gender». Notably, although both Roger and Kevin claimed that they did not like noticing problematic representations of gender, it appears that, thanks to Rosey's classes, the students could not unsee them.

Rosey was trying to persuade the class that gender representations in women's magazines are problematic. However, Roger had a different interpretation. He told me during the interview that women's magazines empower their readers by giving them useful advice about their appearance:

> Some women actually enjoy reading those, listening to the advice, taking the advice and putting it in their everyday life… There's, like, audiences that go with the magazine so they wouldn't be too happy if all of a sudden, people are, like, «Oh, we are gonna change this around cause they are sending a wrong message». To the audience… it's sending the right message 'cause… that's what they like.

While this stance can be interpreted as resistance, it also raises some valid questions. Scholars note that consuming problematic representations of gender is often pleasurable for audiences (Radway, 1984). Therefore, what seems like resistance could be potentially used to enrich the classroom conversation.

Melissa's resistance to Rosey's classes was similarly contradictory. It appeared that this girl liked learning about the critical lenses — to a certain extent. Giving me an example of how she was using these new insights outside of the classroom, she described a video about an amusement park: «They were, like, on a rollercoaster and then he is, like, «Wow, you scream like a girl». I was, like, «What?». Why does a girl has to scream like that, why can't a guy?». In this instance, she shared Rosey's critical stance towards representations of gender that present women as inferior to men.

At the same time, Melissa thought that most differences between men and women are meant to be and therefore should not be questioned:

> Some things are just normal. For a girl to wear pink and a guy to wear blue when they are newborn and everything... that's how things became. You don't have to look at it and investigate why it's like that. There's just gender differences. Yeah, everybody wants to be equal but just the way [Rosey was] making it sound… One's a girl, one's a guy, there has to be some difference.

So while Melissa supported challenging gender inequality, she did not see a problem in emphasizing gender differences that appeared not to demean women. She voiced her doubts in the interview with me but did not phrase them this way in the classroom, where her resistance took subtler forms.

As I mentioned earlier, she worked on the «hacked ads» assignment with her boyfriend Anthony. When I asked them why they decided to create their collage (man's head attached to woman's body) Melissa replied, laughing: «I don't even know!». But Anthony was quick to make a connection to the theme of the class: «Because we want to show that men and women are equal». The subtlety of this resistance prevented Rosey from noticing it and engaging these students in a deeper conversation about media representations they were analyzing.

Melissa's resistance also manifested itself in her belief that Rosey and students who agreed with the teacher were imposing their interpretations on the girl. For example, she told me during the interview: «Like [Anna], I got into a fight with her… because she was, like, taking it so far». As I was probing to learn more about Melissa's sentiments, she explained: «[Anna] says, 'People come to school and... if they are in a dress, you can just tell, they are trying to get a guy's attention.' No. I want to get my own attention!». Melissa saw Anna's kind of feminism as too aggressive, and felt that it was attacking her way of constructing a feminine identity. Interestingly, this particular disagreement is reminiscent of the debates within feminism itself about the merits of self-expression through markers of femininity.

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Michael had his share of resistant students in the classes he was teaching. During the classroom discussion his passionate criticism of media representations of gender was challenged by different young people on multiple occasions. Here I would like to focus on two cases of open resistance coming from students whom I shall call Steve and Rodrigo.

Steve was often oppositional in Michael's classes; as I learned from the teacher during our interview, the boy assumed the same behavior with many other teachers and students. Michael also explained that Steve was acting out because of the problems he was having at home. While the teacher showed this understanding in the conversation with me, in class he appeared aggravated by Steve's reactions, which made the boy's resistance even worse. My observations showed that the boy had no problem expressing his disagreement and flaunting his disobedience. When I interviewed him, however, he revealed very different aspects of his personality, perhaps because by chance I had an opportunity to talk with him one on one.

It turned out that, although Steve did not agree with everything Michael was saying, the boy did value many of the teacher's messages. For example, Steve told me about Michael's analysis of fashion magazines: «He was just going too much into this… Like, some of the stuff he was saying was correct, but once he got too much into it, it was, like, all right, now you are seeing stuff that's not even...» He also mocked Michael's emotional way of arguing with students: «Cause he was just, like: «The critical theory!» and…. just going on with it... And it was, like, a' right, now you are making us too much understand it to the point where we can't understand it». Steve seemed to be bothered by Michael's tendency to present his opinion in an authoritative manner, not letting students question his interpretations.

At the same time, the boy reproduced many of Michael's ideas about media representations of gender. When I asked Steve how he understood the purpose of the gender lens, he told me:

> [To] look at certain stuff a certain way. Like, the way how girls are portrayed. In… almost every movie you see, the girl is played as… she is scared of this, she is fearing that, she is weak. The guy is always like… And that's basically what its point is, to tell us: «Look at how they're making kids grow up». Kids grow up looking at that. Once they see that, they think that that's the way to act.

Steve assumed the interpretation that Michael hoped his students to get in his class. It was particularly interesting for me to see that Steve shared Michael's position regarding negative media effects on children. In fact, he emphasized his concern about young viewers, saying that media representations are «mentally kind of destroying them already». During the interview, the boy also talked about standards of masculinity as problematic: «They feel like, oh, they gonna be strong, or they can't feel no type of emotion, like a man... is gonna think that, «Oh, I gotta be all mad all the time»… It's brainwashing». Steve was hardly a people-pleaser and could easily become oppositional if he wanted to. Therefore,

I believe that his words during the interview with me can be interpreted as an evidence of learning, which was, however, hidden from Michael.

Finally, another resistant student in Michael's class was Rodrigo. He liked telling his opinions directly, even when he knew that they might irritate the teacher. I saw him arguing with Michael on several occasions. At the same time, my conversations with Rodrigo showed that, like Steve, he mostly agreed with the teacher and even adopted the vocabulary that Michael wanted students to use.

> Author: «[Michael] says that these portrayals of men and women are mostly problematic... Why do you think he is saying that? »
> Rodrigo: «Maybe because it's establishing... normalcy of something that doesn't need to be... considered normal».

At the same time, Rodrigo found that Michael was sometimes going too far: «Some of the things that he says, I feel like he exaggerates it a little bit, and he points out things that don't necessarily have to mean anything. And he just assumes that it all does». Similarly to Steve, Rodrigo did not like that the teacher imposed his interpretations on students.

Rodrigo himself sometimes offered interpretations that could be considered problematic. During the interview with me he claimed that, according to some research, women are worse drivers than men. During one of the classroom debates, when Michael was pointing out how women on magazine covers are sexualized, Rodrigo referred to another study: «When guys look at girls, they look at their face, it is scientifically proven». Both remarks can be interpreted as resistance; however, it is possible that they also revealed the boy's interest in details and his curiosity. His opinions did not always match those of Michael, yet under the right circumstances they could be used to have deep discussions about important media literacy important issues, such as evaluating different sources of information.

Roger, Kevin, Melissa, Steve, and Rodrigo can all be labeled openly resistant students. Some of them got into arguments with the teachers, others displayed resistance in conversations with me — and all had some opinions that contradicted what Rosey and Michael were saying about issues of media and gender. At the same time, their resistance did not mean that they disagreed with the teachers' every claim or did not care about the topics discussed in class. All these resistant students showed signs of interest and learning. They were not ready to agree with the teachers' every word, and opined that Rosey and Michael were taking their arguments too far. At the same time, they engaged with the material presented by the teachers, and even shared many of their opinions.

6 Making resistance a part of learning

The case study described in this paper has many limitations: it was short and focused on two teachers and several students. Therefore, its findings can hardly be used for a generalization about all media and gender literacy classes. At the same

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time, the study offers some insights about potential scenarios of students' resistance and teachers' possible reactions. In combination with other literature on media literacy and social justice classes, these findings provide material for reflection.

In particular, I found that the students displayed contradictory resistance. Even though the students did not accept all ideas and interpretations presented by the teachers, they did agree with the latter in some aspects, enjoyed the classes, and deepened their understanding of the subject. Ironically, the teachers did not always see learning in their students' resistant acts and words, which might have led them to miss valuable teaching moments.

Although most scholars and educators are worried about students' resistance, some note that it is an essential part of learning. Reactions displayed by the students that I observed could be confusing or frustrating for their teachers, but they did not mean the latter's failure. It is understandable that educators (especially if they are passionate about their subject) want to see students visibly enlightened. However, such changes take time, and it is unlikely that students will be miraculously transformed as a result of one unit or even a course.

Teachers who choose to bring up such controversial issues as mediated communication and gender should not be surprised by resistance, or see it as a pesky exception. Rather, they should anticipate such reactions and think of ways to use them for enriching classroom discussions. It is important to remember that conflict can be a productive educational practice. When instructors allow students to express a range of opinions, the latter receive an opportunity to practice their communication and argumentation skills. Debates can be turned into valuable lessons about the importance of being civically engaged citizens in a democratic society. For example, teachers can start a school year by creating, together with students, rules for having a productive dialogue about controversial issues. This was something that Rosey and Michael did not do, but that could have potentially improved classroom interactions as well as the relationship between the teachers and their students. Creating rules for an empathic dialogue can be used as separate activity, as a teaching opportunity to emphasize the significance of valuing each other's voices and discussing all issues calmly and respectfully.

If teachers see resistance as something negative, they may choose to ignore or downplay it. Perhaps what they should be really worried about is the lack of resistance, because it would either mean that students do not care about topics discussed in class, or that they are afraid to voice their opinions. These two reactions can impede learning much more than open resistance that stems from natural differences in students' interpretations, or from their backgrounds and personalities.

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