MEDIA EDUCATION
Studi, ricerche, buone pratiche

Firenze University Press
www.fupress.com/me

Citation: E. Friesem (2020) Teaching about power and empathy in multicultural societies. *Media Education* 11(1): 77-80. doi: 10.36253/me-9097

Received: March 2020

Accepted: May 2020

Published: July 2020

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Best Practices

Teaching about power and empathy in multicultural societies

Insegnare il potere e l'empatia nelle società multiculturali

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Abstract. This essay describes the sequence of three activities (from one U.S. university course) that aimed to (1) increase students' awareness about social injustices, (2) help them develop their empathy to see the complexity of these injustices, and (3) consider ways to change the social system through civic dialogue. The first activity was designed to explore the dynamics of cultural appropriation using principles of media literacy education and the concept of power. The second activity complicated the picture by encouraging students to reflect on the importance of empathy. Students discussed how empathy can substitute blame in conversations about cultural appropriation. The third activity connected empathy to practices of nonviolent communication (developed by Marshall Rosenberg) and Kingian nonviolence. As a result, students were able to discuss how these principles can be applied to cultural appropriation, especially when media technologies are involved.

Keywords: cultural appropriation, empathy, media, nonviolence, power.

Abstract. Questo lavoro descrive tre attività (svolte durante un corso universitario americano) volte a (1) incrementare la consapevolezza degli studenti in merito alle ingiustizie sociali, (2) aiutarli a sviluppare un atteggiamento empatico per cogliere la complessità di queste ingiustizie, e (3) suggerire percorsi di cambiamento del sistema sociale attraverso il dialogo civile. La prima attività è stata progettata per esplorare le dinamiche dell'appropriazione culturale utilizzando i principi dell'educazione all'alfabetizzazione mediale e il concetto di potere. La seconda attività ha ampliato il quadro incoraggiando gli studenti a riflettere sull'importanza dell'empatia. La terza attività ha collegato l'empatia alle pratiche di comunicazione non violenta (sviluppate da Marshall Rosenberg). Il lavoro mostra come queste attività hanno permesso agli studenti di discutere su come questi principi possono essere applicati all'appropriazione culturale, specialmente quando sono coinvolte le tecnologie della comunicazione e dell'informazione.

Parole chiave: appropriazione culturale, empatia, media, non violenza, potere.

SETTING	Columbia College Chicago
TARGET	Undergraduate students
DURATION	About 1,5 hours each (including short lecture pieces and discussions)
EQUIPMENT	Students' personal devices, the PPT used by the instructor
PRODUCTS	No material products were produced; the learning was measured by students' ability and willingness to engage in a civil conversation

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The importance of social justice education is well known (Adams & Bell, 2016). Scholars and activists point out that inequalities and imbalances of power persist even in seemingly progressive societies (e.g., DiAngelo, 2018; Godbole et al., 2018). These problems are often seen as connected to the media (Dines et al., 2017). Therefore, media literacy education is believed to offer effective strategies of dealing with social injustices (Funk et al., 2016). More specifically, critical media literacy aims to challenge the power imbalances by revealing how communication through technology feeds into the unfair social system.

Within the frameworks of social justice education and critical media pedagogy, individual disadvantages are seen as determined not by the underprivileged individual's actions but by larger forces at play. These forces function through social institutions, through the multitude of meanings taken for granted and reinforced by our seemingly benign everyday actions (DiAngelo, 2018). At the same time, according to the theory of hegemony (Marco, 2016) and system justification theory (Jost & Andrews, 2012), the status quo is reinforced through people's invisible everyday actions, even when these people are less privileged within the system. These interpretations suggest that the shift of the status quo might be achieved when the complexity behind systemic problems is acknowledged.

Analyzing media texts and practices allows educators to bring to the surface the hidden meanings that contribute to the persistence of the status quo (Buckingham, 2019; Hobbs, 2011). In particular, one can ask questions about taken-for-granted values embedded in media texts, platforms, and practices; about techniques that attract attention of audience members and often silence their critical thinking; about a variety of possible interpretations; and about relevant omissions. According to some scholars (Friesem, 2018; Hobbs, 2011), media literacy should include self-reflection, a skill that would be especially helpful for exploring the abovementioned complexity of the status quo.

Without the addition of self-reflection, important conversations about the media may result in simplistic blame (Sternheimer, 2013). The addition of self-reflection suggests that, same as we want to know how and why media messages created by others are constructed, we should explore our own involvement with mediated communication (Friesem, 2018). Awareness about systemic problems needs to be meaningfully connected to self-awareness (Banaji & Greenwald, 2016), which is a basis of empathy.

Martin Luther King Jr. himself spoke on the importance of using empathy to combat even the most serious social flaws. King believed that the purpose of nonviolence is to reach understanding with our opponents because humiliating them would not bring real justice to the world (King, 2010). King drew his inspiration from the pacifist movement of his time, which was rooted in teachings of Mohandas Gandhi. This Indian activist also influenced the approach called Nonviolent Communication (NVC) developed by Marshall Rosenberg (2015). Both King's and Rosenberg's strategies emphasize the need to overcome blame and look for ways to connect with people whose actions we want to challenge.

2. CLASSROOM PRACTICES

How can this theoretical framework be translated into classroom practices? This section describes a sequence of activities used in an introductory communication course taught in one U.S. university. The class included 25 students that differed in race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, physical ability, and socio-economic status. All students came to class equipped with computers and/or phones, which they could use for some assignments. The course was mostly discussion-based. It included small group discussion, class discussions, big circle discussions, and fishbowl discussions. Each class meeting was dedicated to one aspect of communication.

One of the topics for research and discussion in this class was cultural appropriation (CA), which is a serious issue in multicultural societies. The three activities (that took place during three different classroom meetings dedicated to intercultural communication, interpersonal communication, and NVC) aimed to help students understand why this phenomenon can be detrimental, to analyze the potential harm done by shaming that often happens when cultural appropriation is suspected, and to think of alternative strategies based on principles of nonviolence.

2.1. Cultural Appropriation: An Issue of Power

As part of a class meeting dedicated to *intercultural communication*, students were asked to do in-class research using their personal devices about debates around CA. They were to formulate reasons for why it can be considered a problem but also asked to consider why some may speak against the negative reaction that follows when CA is suspected. Students first shared their findings in small groups, and then participated in a whole-class discussion.

Topics that were brought up during the discussions included: difference between appropriation and appreciation; conspicuity of some forms of CA and potential invisibility of others; cultural dynamics and natural diffusion of cultural forms and meanings throughout history. The students suggested that CA happens when power inequalities are involved.

Media literacy was an important part of the analysis, as many examples brought up by the students represented instances of mediated communication. For instance, the students talked about the phenomenon of "blackfishing" (Jackson, 2018), which involves white women posing as black in order to attract followers on Instagram.

Towards the end of the activity, the students started discussing the unhelpfulness of "call-out culture" and "cancel culture" – boycotting and/or harassing a person online for doing something considered unacceptable (Romano, 2019). The students concluded that in many cases of CA it might be more helpful not to automatically assume bad intent and have a civil discussion instead.

2.2. The Role of Empathy

The instructor connected this suggestion to the concept of empathy that was explored during the class on *interpersonal communication*. Empathy is described as the ability to relate to another person emotionally and/or understand their actions within their framework of reference (Davis, 2018). The instructor reminded the class about their criticism of the call-out culture and cancel culture that accompany debates around CA.

The students were invited to discuss situations when it was challenging for them to use empathy – to understand why somebody acted the way they did. After conversations in small groups, the students formed a big circle so that everybody could see each other. They then shared and discussed their experiences reflecting on why it is difficult sometimes to be empathic, and why it might be important to practice empathy despite these challenges. CA was used as one example that the students were invited to reflect upon.

Debriefing after the big circle activity, the class returned to the question of why it is important to complicate the conversation about CA by using our empathy. While CA should be understood through the concept of power and the analysis of media texts, it is essential to use empathy when we ask: (a) why somebody can do something that others see as CA; and (b) why people can be offended by CA and decide to publicly shame or boycott somebody as a result. The instructor did not provide any definitive answer but let the students grapple with these questions in order to understand their complexity.

2.3. Lessons of Nonviolence

Finally, during the class dedicated to *nonviolent communication*, the class learned about the strategies of Kingian nonviolence and the specific steps of NVC developed by Rosenberg (2015). These steps include: (1) expressing observations not mixed with evaluations; (2) clearly stating your emotions; (3) connecting emotions to (hidden) needs; (4) making a request based on your needs. Rosenberg argued that, apart from following these steps when we talk to others, we should also be ready to listen carefully and recognize what other people need instead of being caught in words they say. Kingian advocacy of nonviolence (King, 2010) was further used during the short lecture piece to explain why NVC is essential for creating positive social change.

As the instructor was explaining this framework, the students were encouraged to practice steps of NVC outlined by Rosenberg when talking about CA. This exercise was connected to the importance of finding ways to challenge power inequalities with direct action while remaining empathic towards people who engage in CA with more or less detrimental results. The students acknowledged that using the framework of NVC is challenging and it is often easier to resort to blame.

This last activity involved a fishbowl discussion with five students sitting in the center of the circle and having a conversation about CA using the steps of NVC, and others observing the discussion. The students were able to leave the "bowl" after the contributed to the discussion in a meaningful way. This approach allowed students to practice NVC while moderating their own conversation, while the instructor was (mostly) a silent observer outside of the fishbowl. Finally, the students had a chance to debrief and share their highlights and lowlights of the conversation. Although no material results (papers or presentations) were produced as a result of the final activity, the students' ability to practice the steps of NVC while discussing CA can be interpreted as a sign of learning.

3. CIVIC DIALOGUE

In their chapter about teaching critical media literacy in ideologically diverse classrooms, Brayton and Casey (2019) note that students often avoid discussing controversial issues. True opinions never get to be voiced and students do not learn how to engage in civic dialogue. Unsurprisingly, this challenge is very relevant when the class is asked to make sense of as topic associated with mediated communication and power, such as CA.

When brought up in class, such issues can either lead to silence or to heated debates that leave everybody frustrated. The framework outlined in this essay provides some strategies for making the discussion more productive. These strategies involve analyzing the concept of power, understanding the importance of empathy, and practicing specific steps of engaging in a civil conversation. Ideally, these steps should help students not only develop their awareness of social problems but also see the complexity of these problems and have a dialogue across ideological divides that plague multicultural societies.

NVC and Kingian nonviolence do not imply that systemic inequalities are imaginary or that the status quo will never change. However, if we want to challenge power inequalities, we should be ready for a dialogue. This does not mean that a dialogue is always possible; sometimes drastic measures need to be taken for the disadvantaged side to be heard (King, 2010). But if we do not recognize situations when a dialogue based on empathy can happen, those same drastic measures may do more harm than good by deepening misunderstanding and polarization.

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