Through a Distorted Lens

Media as Curricula and Pedagogy in the 21st Century

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CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE: CURRICULUM STUDIES IN ACTION

Volume 15

Scope

"Curriculum" is an expansive term; it encompasses vast aspects of teaching and learning. Curriculum can be defined as broadly as "the content of schooling in all its forms" (English, Fenwick W., *Deciding What to Teach & Test: Developing, Aligning, and Leading the Curriculum*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2010, p. 4), and as narrowly as a lesson plan. Complicating matters is the fact that curricula are often organized to fit particular time frames. The incompatible and overlapping notions that curriculum involves everything that is taught and learned in a particular setting *and* that this learning occurs in a limited time frame reveal the nuanced complexities of curriculum studies.

Constructing Knowledge provides a forum for systematic reflection on the substance (subject matter, courses, programs of study), purposes, and practices used for bringing about learning in educational settings. Of concern are such fundamental issues as: What should be studied? Why? By whom? In what ways? And in what settings? Reflection upon such issues involves an inter-play among the major components of education: subject matter, learning, teaching, and the larger social, political, and economic contexts, as well as the immediate instructional situation. Historical and autobiographical analyses are central in understanding the contemporary realties of schooling and envisioning how to (re)shape schools to meet the intellectual and social needs of all societal members. Curriculum is a social construction that results from a set of decisions; it is written and enacted and both facets undergo constant change as contexts evolve.

This series aims to extend the professional conversation about curriculum in contemporary educational settings. Curriculum is a designed experience intended to promote learning. Because it is socially constructed, curriculum is subject to all the pressures and complications of the diverse communities that comprise schools and other social contexts in which citizens gain self-understanding.

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Media as Curricula and Pedagogy in the 21st Century

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REBECCA A. GOLDSTEIN

INTRODUCTION

When we first conceived of this project back in 2014, we never could have foreseen the political, economic, and media environment currently confronting the United States and the world-at-large. Donald Trump, celebrity real estate mogul, reality television star, and self-proclaimed billionaire, clinched the 2016 Republican Primary and won the Electoral College vote to become the 45th President of the United States. Even though newly installed President Trump lost the popular vote by more than 2.8 million, he and his surrogates have deluged the media–news, Twitter, Facebook, and other forms–with the false claim that he won by a landslide and has a popular mandate to make real his vision of the United States, and more broadly, the world (Scott, 2017).

Since that fateful night in November, news media journalists and members of the public have engaged in an election post mortem to understand where the media "got it so wrong." Accusations of media bias, which Trump parlayed into Facebook and Twitter viral memes about the lying (liberal) media, have been bandied about both on and offline. Trump called out newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, and cable news outlets like CNN for what he asserts is false and dishonest reporting, and often employs late night Tweetstorms to get his message of distrust out to the world. He accused the press of failing to leave their silos of power and connectivity with DC political hacks, and of attending too much to the whims and whining of a liberal elite on the coasts. He promised to "drain the swamp" of corrupt politicians and the press who supported them ("Donald J. Trump's Five-Point Plan for Ethics Reform," 2016).

In response to their failure to correctly predict the outcome of the 2016 Presidential election, members of the press has scrambled to provide plausible explanations for their failure to correctly call the outcome of the election. They have turned the lens on themselves, citing the failure to adequately engage with and understand the needs, interests, and fears of "middle America," a largely white working and middle class constituency who rejected the policies, practices, and personhood of the first African American President of the United States (Boykoff & Laschever, 2011; DiMaggio, 2011). Journalists, bloggers, and social media warriors pointed to how the press failed to adequately make a case for Hillary Clinton as a viable candidate because they spent more time focusing on personal attacks, cult of personality, email scandals, and her husband's past indiscretions and current political influence than on real policy positions and qualifications. Even so, there was little press commentary

or interrogation into the ways in which candidate Trump was able to capitalize on millions of dollars of free campaign advertising and more coverage in news stories both off and online (Patterson, 2016). Perhaps most important is the role they played in putting out negative media coverage in which two arguably unpopular candidates were engaged in a struggle over who controlled what the media messages were and how they were framed. In this regard, the media served as the cultural stage in which the presidential race became a high school popularity contest as opposed to a serious election with real consequences.

And here we are.

The above clearly oversimplifies the nexus of personal and political power relations that play out within and through the media systems that shape much of 21st century life among the global elite who have access to them. For people who live in a connected world, there can be little doubt that how they engage in everyday life has been fundamentally altered by the development of media communications technology. From the first printing of the Gutenberg Bible to the laying of Marconi's communication cables across the Atlantic Ocean, the rise of radio, television, Internet, and satellite–how people communicate with and come to understand each other–have been shaped by the technologies enabling those communications (Van Dijck, 2013).

Communication technologies like cell phones, tablets, and personal computers have propelled connected humans to become cyborg-like in their interactions with the world (Haraway, 1991). Much of daily life is mediated and remediated with, through, and by these technologies (Bolter & Grusin, 1999; Van Dijck, 2013). People awake in the morning and turn off their alarms, switch over to their favorite social media apps, check their email, and confirm their daily schedule. They experience the world on multiple technological platforms often carrying a phone, a tablet, and a computer or other Internet capable device on their person at all times. People internalize daily sound bites each morning as they watch the news. They not only encounter visual imagery to support news stories, but they also encounter anchor narratives and news outlet kickers across the bottom of the screen that highlight the most pressing issues of the moment. At work they may rely on some sort of media technology to get through the day, whether it's email, the Cloud where people and companies house their digital information remotely, their cell phones or landlines, and word and data processing applications. Upon returning home, they shift or return their attention to news and entertainment again, turning to YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Hulu, Netflix, and others for access to and distraction from the worlds in which they live. For those who are connected, media are everywhere (Gitlin, 2007).

For many, media are as central to daily life as breathing. Media do not simply inform. They entertain. They connect individuals and groups to each other. They distract a populace, turn their attention away from the real, and enable them to engage with a virtual experience that allows them to set aside the thoughts and activities of the day (Postman, 2006, 2011). Media also serve as sites for and spaces in which people come together to organize and act, to affirm, reject, and transpose

elements of local, national, and global cultures (Bird, 2011; Jenkins, 2004; Sandlin & Milam, 2008).

But the media also distort. They distort points of view, perceptions of reality, and can also spread false information, propaganda, and "alternate facts" (Waldman, 2017). Quite literally, the media can create a reality simply by putting something on record (Bourdieu, 1996).

The ability of the media to shape what their consumers consider to be reality has occurred against a backdrop of media destabilization in which the changes in media production and platforms reflect both a shift in who controls the media and a shift in the role the media play in society. In 1983 more than 50 corporations controlled 90% of the media accessible in the United States. As of 2012, only five corporations control that same 90% and function more as cartels than they do media outlets (Bagdikian, 2014). The impact of such consolidation means that powerful internationally controlled oligopolies largely determine the content, delivery, and means of media production (Jenkins, 2006; McChesney, 2015). Consequently, consumption is also affected, with people experiencing an oversaturation of seemingly varied sources, covering a wide range of issues from multiple viewpoints. People have choice in media sources, that is, they can opt to engage with many perspectives or rely on niche news providers who specialize in very narrow topics or points of view (Dimmick, Chen, & Lee, 2004; Stroud, 2011). Such choice perpetuates an illusion that media communications are expanding when in reality they are contracting and flattening the information landscape.

As a result, the relationship between media and their consumers is based on a false assumption that "individuals possess immediate control; they have control only through assenting to an asymmetrical relationship to various agents who structure the choices in the communicative environment of cyberspace (Bohman, 2004, p. 142). Indeed many would argue that media outlets rely on using spectacle, crisis, and symbolic and institutional violence to capture and retain consumers' attention (Debord, 1998, 2012; Kellner, 2015). Their purpose is not necessarily to present accurate narratives to inform the public about what's going on in the world. Rather, the media are profit-driven, and stories that are clicked on provide revenue. Further, media systems like the news no longer simply serve to inform, they are expected to entertain; that is, they have transitioned to the role of infotainment (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001).

The authors in this text take up the media as a site of cultural production, resistance, reproduction, and transformation to uncover the ways in which different media forms function as curricula and pedagogies packaged for and by the public. They strive to extend the reader's understanding of how media themselves have become a central organizing structure of meaning making and not simply transmitters of value-neutral information between agents of power and the public:

> Firstly, the media broaden the natural limits of the capacity for human communication; second, the media replaces social activities and social

institutions; third, in social life the media amalgamates itself with several non-media activities; and fourth, the actors and organisations of all the sectors of society bow to the logic of the media. (Shulz, 2004, p. 98)

In other words, mediatization as process and practice is both both curricular and pedagogical, and all-encompassing. It shapes and reflects both what we learn and how we will learn it and bounds how we come to understand ourselves and the roles we play in a mediatized society and a digitized world.

The scholars in this collection communicate the complexities surrounding 21st century media via the historical and contextual references points found in cultural, media, literary, and educational studies. They fully embrace the reality that

[P]edagogy is not simply about the social construction of knowledge, values, and experiences; it is also a performative practice embodied in the lived interactions among educators, audiences, texts, and institutional formations. Pedagogy, at its best, implies that learning takes place across a spectrum of social practices and settings. (Giroux, 2004, p. 61)

In *Part One: Probing the Media: Contexts, Theories, and Problems in the 21st Century*, our authors probe and situate the changing roles and modes of media in the late 20th and 21st centuries. The chapters in this section examine what it means to be human and the normalization of that definition. The first chapter by Jim Paul and Susan Beierling critically explores how Western mediations within an increasingly digitized public pedagogy normalize particular instantiations of personhood. They highlight how schools and schooling have been and continue to be a primary institutional sorting apparatus whereby one's sense of self, otherness, and worldliness are made, adjusted, and confirmed, even as external media impact the classroom learning environment. People are sorted, publically and privately, into categorizations of positive and negative capital goods. As sites of public pedagogy schools are increasingly saturated by digital tool-technologies, implicit and explicit mediations of personhood construct individuals as highly connected but mindless followers – a zombification of one and all (Giroux, 2010, 2011). They consider how Pinar's (1975) Method of Currere, might open up these meditated and meditating public pedagogies to critique, whereby people might develop a critical skepticism of the sorting mediations that construct cyborg-like, zombie identities.

Julie Gorlewski, Catherine Lalonde, and David Gorlewski grapple with multimedia representations of educators in the second chapter. They explore the formation of professional identities in action within the panopticon of contemporary media through an examination of *Undercover Boss*, *Frontline: The Education of Michelle Rhee,* and *Teach: Tony Danza*. Employing the practices of critical media literacy, they reveal hidden curricula grounded in neoliberal ideologies that portray teachers as powerless pawns subject to the demands of the market and the whims of boss/celebrities. Teaching is reduced to the false positivism of test scores and profit metrics with challenges being presented as opportunities to prove worthiness by

overcoming them. The authors challenge the authenticity of meritocracy as a valid and authentic social construct and in doing so highlight how 21st century media images of teaching strip educators of their role as cultural workers. They reject the notion that teachers are mere technicians who overcome obstacles to higher test scores by employing grit and persistence, pluck and spunk by challenging the notion of the neoliberal self, and consider what the hidden curricula of these programs mean for the profession of education.

Sarah Wasserman and Todd Bates return the reader's attention to the important intersections of self and identity, visual imagery of the media, and constructions of (dis)ability. Their chapter explores how people's understanding of disability is shaped by their interactions with visual depictions of 'normalcy' in advertising. Since the media contribute to individual and collective senses of self and other through the use of imagery unpacking the messages that the media "sell" about normalcy provides valuable insight into critical disability studies. Wasserman and Bates make explicit how visual advertisements define what it means to be "normal" by equating it with being able-bodied. Such images privilege certain physical traits and thus "disable" individuals whose bodies deviate from this perceived norm. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the shifting trend in advertising toward more frequent—albeit still complicated—depictions of disability, and the authors highlight ways that advertisements can become powerful tools to positively depict disability and expand public perceptions of what it means to be normal.

Part Two: Learning to "See" the Curricula and Pedagogy of the Media: Uncovering the Official and the Hidden extends the interrogation of the hidden and unseen in order to frame curricula and pedagogies across a multiplicity of sites and terrains. People who engage with media, regardless of their age, are exposed to messages everywhere, as these chapters illustrate. They watch television serials, post updates to their Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media accounts, attend Hollywood blockbusters in huge numbers, read maps online, and pour over ads in print and digital spaces that are embedded within the media they consume. Each of these sites is sponsored and owned by corporations who purchase ads on the various platforms: commercials for television shows, smart scrolling ads on Twitter, and previews, product placements, and sold posters for movies. Often, educators hear students ask questions about the things they have seen, read, or attended—sensing that something bothers them or their friends. Other times, youths surprise adults with the things they say—unwittingly echoing racist statements made by characters or presidential candidates, espousing opinions as facts because they read it on social media, or taking umbrage at an actor's casting in a role because of race or gender (while ignoring other characters).

The chapters that comprise this section explore the hermeneutics of mediatized content and make explicit the slippery yet important connections between the visual content of the screen (television, social media, and film) and social engagement in real life, and vice versa. The authors highlight how visual and digital media present opportunities (for those who have access) for different levels and types of social

participation, some of which favour a paradigm shift that privilege the virtual and the individual over the communal and participatory. The first chapter by Kaela Jubas, Dawn Johnston, and Angie Chiang highlight two important aspects of convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006), that is, the border crossings of media and the ways in which transnational media can muddy local understandings of important issues. Using *Grey's Anatomy* as a sensitizing artifact, the authors spurred conversations about what people knew about Canadian health care and their sources of information. In doing so they illustrate the connections between contemporary capitalism, popular media, and adult learning.

In the second chapter, Monique Liston emphasizes how social media platforms like Twitter can function as critical safe spaces in which to interrogate media constructions of race. Employing Black Feminist Epistemology as described by Patricia Hill-Collins, Liston discusses how Black Twitter functions as mbongi, a third space in which knowledge is created, validated, and/or critiqued. She highlights how such communities of practice operate by relating this space to the popular television program Scandal. She discusses opportunities to recognize the epistemological framework of Black Feminism as a valid knowledge source, illuminating the radical and emergent understandings of a community whose lived experiences and constructions of self are frequently denied authenticity. This hidden yet readily apparent practice is an example of 21st century knowledge that operates beyond normative mainstream narratives.

Like Liston, Laura Nicosia also grapples in her chapter with the contested terrain of racial identities and being by examining the vitriolic debates on Twitter surrounding the movie production of *The Hunger Games*. Nicosia lays bare the ways in which assumptions about whiteness lead to purposive deflections of characters' racial identities, particularly that of Rue. Twitter users attacked the movie, the director, and the actress, Amandla Stenberg, for her Blackness, even though author Suzanne Collins limned the character as dark skinned and curly haired. Using specific Tweets, Nicosia reveals not only a range of misreadings of the novel, but also a palpable rage against the notion of a Black actress playing the role of an angelic and beautiful heroine. Such misreadings were also reflected in scholarly and journalistic sources that focused on the factual elements of the text and ignored the issues of race endemic to the text, the movie, and the audience. Nicosia reveals a disturbing pattern of veering away from discussions of racial bigotry and invisible Whiteness in favor of less uncomfortable topics and lessons that focus on students' lack of close reading and their purported weak textual analysis.

The final chapter in this section turns the reader's attention to the ways in which new media use maps as part of the visual landscape of news reporting. Serina Ann Cinnamon challenges the common sense narrative that maps constitute a technically accurate tool that offer an authoritative and neutral graphic representation of geographic and demographic truth. Instead, she invites readers to engage in employing a critical lens through which to examine maps as socially constructed objects. Cinnamon argues that maps are deployed in specific ways to communicate

and shape ontological notions about space and place. The embedded power/knowledge relations often go uncriticized and unexamined for most people both in media and in educational settings. She discusses how thematic maps communicate ideas about the relationship between space and population distributions that may not be wholly accurate and illustrates these inadequacies with maps used in the 2000 United States presidential election, and highlights how maps can be used as weapons to justify election outcomes and support political agendas. Cinnamon concludes with a discussion about how the spatialization of information deployed on election result maps itself functions as a political act that can highlight or mask elements of oppression by relying on viewer (mis)perceptions about map symbolization and space. Her chapter is particularly relevant given how maps were deployed in gerrymandering and electoral results in the 2016 presidential elections, and highlights important democratic implications for future elections, especially in regard to understanding voting patterns demonstrates and the role of maps as powerful visual communiqués about the political landscape.

Part Three situates and plumbs the interstices of public and educational forums, and explores how the public/cultural/political become transformed within society and classrooms. We entitled this section: *Transforming Media Curricula, Pedagogies and the Public* because these chapters explicate various visual media and tackle varying perceptions of educational settings. Chapters employ numerous theoretical lenses and methods of discourse analysis to critique and evaluate the messages constructed within and through different media. These chapters uncover how public pedagogies are as powerful, pervasive, effective, and important as those pedagogies practiced and deployed in formal schooling environments. In doing so, they highlight the need to challenge the corporatized, marketized and commodified public pedagogies that enforce a politics of social disempowerment. They further the call to consider how public pedagogies might act as positive ideological forces for social good.

Writers in this section explore how people might interrogate mass and popular media (using humor, fame, satire, and critical pedagogies) to develop ideas of alterity and difference while accepting the existence and validity of their and other viewpoints. The first chapter, penned by Jacqueline Bach, turns the lens back on reality television and the program *Teach: Tony Danza*. Like Gorlewski, Lalonde, and Gorlewski in Chapter Two, Bach strives to uncover the ways in which reality programming about education function ideologically to construct and reflect particular truth-claims about the topics they cover. Reality television shows, with their claims to represent real-life experiences have been accused of being scripted and therefore not really real, of negatively impacting the business of television because they cost less to produce than other shows, and of depicting extreme examples of human behaviour. Even so, educational researchers and consumers of reality programming must pay attention to how their narrative arcs are constructed, for what purposes, and for whose benefit. Such attention becomes increasingly important as reality television shows assume the role of educating audiences on

topics from looking beautiful to achieving success. Bach introduces the reader to her theorization of reality television pedagogy, and analyzes the complex and often contradictory elements used to construct reality television shows. Using *Teach: Tony Danza* to uncover the educative/ miseducative aspects of such programs, Bach considers the implications of trying to capture the realities of the education profession while relying on a format that encourages viewers to negotiate the real and not real elements that, in a way, ultimately prevents it from capturing the reality it claims to reflect.

Teresa Capetola and Maria Pallota-Chiarolli bring readers back to the formal learning environment to illustrate how different media can be used as curriculum and pedagogy in a tertiary (college or university) educational context. Expanding on the triple entendre of "Let's Face It," the authors discuss how students might become critical consumers and producers of media in the pursuit of social justice and the promotion of health. They adopt Anzaldua's agentic notion of "interface" to explore the necessity and possibility of cultivating intellectual vigilance in challenging, resisting and subverting hegemonic media constructions of identities. The multiple layers of meaning in "Let's face it" include: reading, facing up to and confronting media, and draw upon critical theoretical frameworks such as discourse and power analysis (Foucault, 1977, 1988), Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 2002) and Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2002). Capitola and Pallota-Chirolli engaged students in grappling with issues like youth suicide; violent and sexual crimes against women; and transgender issues as they were constructed within different media contexts. As a result of engaging in the process the authors describe, students showed increased confidence in critiquing dominant media messages; were empowered to post alternative or critical media representations; and displayed evidence of transformative thinking (Mezirow, 2000; Hunt, 2013).

Ashley Boyd and Amy Senta also bring an examination of the curricula and public pedagogy of the media to the formal learning environment. Their chapter illustrates how détournement, a short film consisting of juxtapositions of existing media, can be used in to challenge dominant myths in popular educational discourse. The authors describe how the pairing of clips from contrasting documentaries affected students' perspectives regarding the Teacher As Savior trope, a common theme in many popular Hollywood movies like *Stand and Deliver, Dangerous Minds*, and *Freedom Writers*. They extend their critique to the Guggenheim documentary *Waiting for Superman*, and discuss how implementing détournement engaged students to shift their views from stances of teacher savior to perspectives on structural responsibility, from reliance on meritocratic ideals to awareness of broader inequity, and from uncritical acceptance of appeal to emotion in media to the articulation of cinematographic choices. The authors conclude that critical interrogation (steeped in a self-study of pedagogical practice) informs efforts in teacher education to draw upon media studies and facilitate critique, and points to the ways in which teacher education

students are implicated in their own constructions of what it means to be a good teacher.

In the final chapter, Jacob W. Greene attends to the power of comedy and satirical programming like Comedy Central's *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart. These two shows, popular among the coveted 18–34 year-old viewing bracket, examine daily news items and issues employing satire to uncover some their contradictions. Colbert's character, constructed to reflect the views and beliefs of conservative-minded individuals stands in contrast to Jon Stewart's unapologetic commentary regarding elements of political life. Building off Sophia McClennen's work in *America According to Colbert: Satire as Public Pedagogy*, Greene emphasizes the importance of humor not only in the canons of style and delivery but in the initial stages of political and social invention. He argues that it is through a revitalization of invention through the formal elements of parody media (e.g. language play, fictionalized personas, uncanny juxtapositions) that critical public media pedagogies can move past the "entertainment/news" binary that has barred their entry from "legitimate" public discourse. For Greene this historical moment calls for a revitalization of the analytical skills central to composition studies and shows like Colbert and Stewart are well-aligned to demonstrate such skills within the context of a media ecology that propagates a volatile blend of diverse perspective and ideological entrenchment. He concludes that the practice of satiric invention popularized by parody media coupled with the creation of one's own parody media critique, empowers students to explore the holes in the border between playful and "legitimate" analyses, mirroring the illusory entertainment/news divide erected between parody and traditional news media.

Clearly the current political and educational landscape is ripe for critical interrogation about the limits and possibilities of media functioning as sites of contestation, oppression, and liberation. The authors engage in dangerous work in dangerous times, when the limits of public discourse and civil liberties are under siege. We hope that readers consider this text an invitation and call for reflection, diligence, and action to fight the ways in which media distort the worlds through which we traverse.

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