Poliliteracies: teaching immigration in the social media age


Abstract

This research explores the purpose of the ‘teacher’ in an increasingly mediated world. It focuses on the teaching of immigration and explores a pedagogic response attuned to the conflicting attitudes aroused by this controversial topic. Given the pendulum swings between ‘knowledge’ and ‘skills-based’ forms of study, this research explores the political nature of media learning and the role of media teaching beyond instrumental transmission on the one hand and mere facilitation on the other. Following the work of Biesta (2016), it emboldens the teacher to not shy away from an engagement with ‘difficult questions or inconvenient truths’ inherent in teaching a topic such as immigration.

This practitioner action research contrasts traditional (Media Studies 1.0) and ‘new’ (Media Studies 2.0) approaches to the study of film, press and social media through the teaching of media representations of immigration and immigrants in a predominantly White school in the South of England over a nine month period as part of an A level Media Studies course. In doing so, the research reassesses a conceptual model of media study for the social media age. There are many threats to media studies as a school based subject. Some of these emanate from within the subject itself. The Media Studies 2.0 (Gauntlett, 2007) manifesto argues that formal media studies has failed to grapple with a qualitatively changed media ecology augured by the shift from broadcast to online/social media. This, the critique contends, has resulted in the conflation of the previously fixed phases of media production, distribution and consumption and their pedagogic cousins of teaching, classroom and learning. Within school-based education, media studies is thus seen as losing its distinctive edge with other curriculum subjects using media forms as intrinsic components of the e-Learning experience for both teachers and students. This research questions this overly positive view of social media’s potential to act as a nascent pedagogic space for students to develop new technical skills and engage in meaningful cultural debate.

The topic of immigration invites explicit teaching through the media concept of representation contrasting two pedagogical approaches. Through the lens of teaching this potentially socially divisive issue, the distinctive features of media studies are explored in presenting a complex, nuanced and sensitive position from which to foster civic engagement in young people. Using a Critical Realist (Bhaskar, 1975) ontological and epistemological framework, the research constructs a theoretical position rooted in what to study (a modified version of the influential BFI model, Bowker, 1991), how to study media (Multiliteracies, Kalantzis, 2008), the purpose of media study (framing and classification, Bernstein, 1975) and anti-essentialist classroom relations as they pertain to race (Critical Race Theory, Ladson-Billings, 2004). This research asserts the importance of developing a self-reflexive pedagogical response to issues of racial tolerance, social justice and economic power. Additionally, the research presents insights into the multimodal teaching and learning that traverse traditional divides between home/school, public/private spaces and real/imagined spaces. In this context, it reasserts the value of school-based media study as fostering critical, analytical, practical and technical competences that offer the structured self-reflexive space not afforded in general social media consumption practices.
What social media does not communicate is whether the image, video, or story is real or staged—misinformation and fact coexist. Public opinion can be easily manipulated by using misinformation to promote an agenda. Absent filters that separate fact from fiction, social media can become the most powerful propaganda tool the world has ever seen. This poses an existential threat to democratic societies and the rule of law. The recent US election is illustrative. During the latter stages of the campaign, there were as many fake articles shared on social media as stories in mainstream sites like