Entertaining Tensions: Pop Culture in Professional Education

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Abstract

In this paper, we share findings from an ongoing qualitative multi-case study about the incorporation of popular culture in postsecondary professional education to support critical learning about theory and contentious issues. The study coincides with neoliberal trends of consumerist ideology and technical vocationalism. Students who enter programs expecting an emphasis on explicitly work-related information risk missing content and experiences designed to foster their development as well-informed, thoughtful, ethical professionals. We discuss three tensions, which we refer to as un/applied, in/attentive, and a/critical. After grounding the study theoretically and reviewing literature in public pedagogy and university-based professional education, we outline those tensions, sharing segments of the data, to suggest the potential and limitations of a pedagogical approach that can make education both critical and enjoyable.

Introduction

This paper attends to three tensions emerging in our qualitative study involving instructors and students in university courses (or, in language common in Australia, subjects) where popular culture is utilized.[1] We are investigating how popular culture contributes to university-based professional education that encourages critical reflection and analysis and what is referred to elsewhere as *critical curiosity* (Jubas, 2019). We find our theoretical grounding in scholarship aligned with critical theory (Freire, 1998) and critical feminism (Enloe, 2004), emphasizing "not … how to work more effectively or productively within an existing system, but … calling the foundations and imperatives of the system itself into question, assessing their morality, and considering alternatives" (Brookfield, 2009, p. 297). This approach highlights the complexities of social life that students in professional education will and do encounter in their work and workplaces. Following a literature review, we offer an overview of the study, before presenting three tensions that we see in our data: un/applied, in/attentive, and a/critical.

Literature Review

We turn to two areas of literature to explain the scholarly grounding of our analysis: university-based professional education and the pedagogical potential of popular culture.

University-based Professional Education

In recent decades, universities have come under neoliberal pressure to replace an emphasis on personal, moral, and civic development with one on vocational needs and economic performance. The ideology of consumerism combines with neoliberalism to create an image of the student as demanding consumer, the educator and institution as producer, and the educational offering as product, marketed to students in the service of their own career and material advancement (Wong & Chiu, 2019). Efficiency, applicability, quantifiability, program revenue potential, and students' post-graduation employment outcomes overtake scholarly depth and rigour or students' actual learning as priorities (Wheelahan et al., 2022; Wong & Chiu, 2019). Today's educators double as entertainers and providers of step-by-step guidance to students on how to succeed (Wong & Chiu, 2019).

Within the neoliberal university, professional education faces particular pressures, given the emphasis on work-related competencies and technical knowledge (Kreber, 2016; Wong & Chiu, 2019; Wright, 2013). Drawing on Marx, Leesa Wheelahan, Gavin Moodie, and James Doughney (2022) refer to the outcome as a "skills fetish," which separates skill and knowledge from doer and knower and sets students up to prepare for or adapt to "a labour market in which skills are bought and sold" (p. 476). In such a classroom, social theory is seen as a superfluous addition to curriculum (Gouthro 2019) that is "difficult,

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dull, and uninspiring to students" (Wright & Wright, 2015, p. 26). Without idealizing theory as content that holds universal value and integrity, we concur that the study of theory is vital for the development of well-informed, thoughtful, ethical "professionals who are more than technicians" (Jarvis & Gouthro, 2015, p. 76; see also Gouthro, 2019). It is in pursuit of such education that we investigate popular culture.

The Pedagogical Potential of Popular Culture

Highlighting writing on how popular culture, especially fiction, has been used in university-based professional education, we concur that fiction can, with pedagogical intervention, raise "questions about pressing social issues in the world around us" (Brown, 2011, p. 233), represent complexities of social life, and provide "a basis from which to draw new, more reflective arguments and conclusions that breach the confines of textbook explanations" (Lafferty, 2016, p. 22). Filmic and televisual texts employ visuals and soundscapes to pull audience members into their worlds of characters and storylines that can seem both familiar and unknown (Brown, 2011; Tisdell, 2008). Even cultural texts that seem to reiterate hegemonic messages can be interpreted in unpredictable, possibly non-hegemonic ways (Wright, 2013). Like adult learning, engagement with cultural texts is a multidimensional process, in which emotions, senses, and experience matter as much as intellect (Dirkx, 2008; Lawrence, 2012).

Popular culture is used in "teaching a variety of concepts … through a variety of means (Peacock et al., 2018, p. 602), albeit not always with a critical orientation. Participants in one large-scale study involving faculties in seven Canadian institutions generally were enthusiastic about employing popular culture texts; however, they offered cautions about balancing the entertainment function of such texts with their educational value (Marquis et al., 2020). Survey responses of 212 faculty members at a U.S. university led the researchers to produce tips for instructors about how to use popular culture effectively. They noted the importance of selecting popular culture texts that resonate with both students and instructors, establishing a scholarly focus and tailoring use of a text to overall course aims, and developing activities through which popular culture texts help students develop and apply thinking and analytical skills (Peacock et al., 2018). Stereotypes and critical media literacy were raised as prominent concerns in a mixed method study of 215 adult education instructors. The researchers noted comments made in interviews with 15 participants that "it is *the discussion* [emphasis in original] of issues raised in movies that can lead to greater understanding" (Tisdell & Thompson, 2007, p. 667; see also Tisdell, 2008).

Adult education instructors have used films such as *Crash* in teaching about social relations and critical media literacy (Guy, 2007; Tisdell, 2008). Tony Brown (2011) would stop a film partway through one class and ask students to identify scenes where characters dealt with difficult scenarios and project how the film would end, to help students interpret events, conditions, and choices. In teacher education courses, instructors have also used hip hop music (Hanley, 2007), television series (Carpenter & Sourdot, 2010), and novels (Jones & Hughes-Decatur, 2012) similarly. In business-related education, popular culture has been incorporated to support teaching on cross-cultural issues in management (Pandey, 2012) and discrimination in employment relations (Lafferty, 2016). One international review of journal articles and books describes over 20 years' use of film in medical education about addiction, poverty, family relations, counselling, and ethics (Darbyshire & Baker, 2012). Instructors of nursing and allied health courses have used films and novels in teaching about "social and ethical issues" (Abidi et al., 2017, p. 38) or television shows in teaching about professional values and identity (McAllister et al., 2015). Beyond trying to help students connect to core concepts, instructors across these fields also have found popular culture helpful in fostering the quality of empathy (Darbyshire & Baker, 2012; Erikson et al., 2020), considered vital in professional service. Finally, consistent with the conceptualization of adult learning as multidimensional, others have noted that the pedagogical power of popular culture rests in its emotional sway, which can increase memorability of course content (Abidi et al., 2017; Brown, 2011; Masters, 2005). We explore and build on this work in our study and the discussion below.

Overview of the Study

This ongoing project is a qualitative "instrumental" (Stake, 1995) multi-case study of university courses delivered in professional faculties. Methodologically, these courses serve as "multiple bounded systems"

(Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 96), each of which provides evidence about the phenomenon of interest—the pedagogical function of popular culture rather than specific instructors, students, or texts. In keeping with standard (Western) ethics protocol, participants are referred to with pseudonyms of their choosing or assigned by one of the investigators.

Collegial networks and online syllabi have been helpful in finding instructors who use popular culture at the University of Calgary (UCalgary) and the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), where Kaela and Donna are employed. Instructors who opt to participate in the study allow a member of the study team to share information with students. In addition to completing a focus group (for students) or an interview (for instructors) and having the option to complete a short, unstructured follow-up interview, participants are given a demographic form, included to understand who the participants are and to invite their possible attachment of identity to teaching and learning. Course outlines are compiled and, if possible and reasonable, an in-class observation might be conducted. Because students often balance studies with employment and family care responsibilities, focus groups have proved challenging. Sometimes, few participants have arrived for a session; occasionally, only a single participant has been present. On the advice of UCalgary ethics staff, we have proceeded with smaller-than-planned sessions, respecting those who took time to meet with us (see Toner, 2009 on "very small focus groups").

Case Courses

This analysis includes nine case courses, eight of which were delivered synchronously at UCalgary. Although UCalgary courses were intended to be delivered on campus, two transitioned to online delivery because of COVID-19 measures. The UTS course was designed for online, asynchronous delivery. Cases include undergraduate courses in teacher education and social work, and master's or doctoral courses in adult education, counselling, and nursing. Instructors used various popular culture forms and texts to support teaching about a wide range of theories, concepts, and issues. Aside from bringing their own selections into their courses, many instructors also encouraged students to find popular culture texts and bring them into class discussions or more formal presentation assignments. In that way, instructors were using popular culture to bolster their teaching about theory and issues, as well as modelling a pedagogical technique that students could use in their own educational work, whether as students or instructors.

Participants

This analysis draws on data gathered with seven full-time instructors and 34 students. Although most instructors delivered one case course, there are two exceptions. Dr. Anderson completed an interview before realizing that none of the students in his course would participate. Kaela, the study's principal investigator (and willing to forego a pseudonym), taught three of the courses. Information shared by participants on the demographics form indicates that student participants ranged in age from their early 20s to mid 50s, and instructors from their 30s to 60s. Most participants self-identified as female (n=29), White (n=31), middle class (n=24), and straight (n=32), and engaged in study or work in the field of education (n=32). We note that some participants declined to share information about their socioeconomic status, sexual identity or orientation or racial identity, or indicated multiple racial identifications (e.g., mixed race/White/Asian).

Findings

In this discussion, we outline three tensions that we have identified: un/applied, in/attentive, and a/critical. We home in on within-case segments from focus group and interview data that speak to those tensions.

Un/applied

Building on the literature about students' reservations or challenges with engaging with theoretically oriented material, we recognize that popular culture, especially fiction, can be dismissed as divorced from reality and practice. Trinity, a student in the doctoral adult education course, explained how viewing and discussing films helped her build linkages to theoretical texts, and then to lived experience:

> The whole notion of theory for me is … an abstract idea. … So like, when I read a theory, what does that mean? … How do I connect it to real life? I think that visual piece perhaps brings a lot

> of emotions which allows me to connect the theory to real life. … As opposed to reading it [and] … trying to imagine scenarios but I don't even know where to begin. … But when the theory's introduced and then you have the cultural artefact to experience, I think the connection is a lot stronger for me.

Connecting films, academic articles, and her own experience, Trinity learned about concepts, theories, and issues, in a way that exemplifies the multidimensionality of adult learning and education.

The usefulness of popular culture in course discussions and assignments to help illustrate the presence and importance of theory in settings of practice was a point reiterated by participants. Fred, who had completed the master's course on work and learning and worked in a postsecondary institution, recalled that watching and discussing an episode of the sit-com *Scrubs* helped him see the "relevance and timeliness, and a certain sense of relate-ability" of material about Bourdieu's sociological concepts. As he stated,

> This is … not just theoretical and abstract. … I'm still thinking [back] to the *Scrubs* piece, you know, and that was an example of relationships, of doxa, of just characters interacting with each other. … Okay, this is something that has real world context, right? This is something that we encounter in our daily lives without even being aware of it. And we need to be aware of that. We need to … have an understanding of those things that are happening around us.

Other students in the same course remembered connections made between the same television show, Bourdieu's concepts, and their workplaces:

> Melissa: I do recall also when we were going with the different types of capitals, having … things being clearly connected to what we were watching. And it was a great way to take something that might be more of an abstract concept and tie it into something …. I think for a lot of us we're … referring back to our experiences in our work life, so highlighting in pop culture texts, I think sort of opened up our perspective on these different topics. …
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> Suzanne: Even on … the last day, [for] a lot of the concepts we were still trying to find our way through and figure out and make the connections. … I know I went back and actually watched some of the episodes after kind of having that reflection. And it allowed me to kind of have those "aha" moments.

One of our premises in this study is that, as they engage with theory, students find that it offers a language to understand and discuss their encounters and experiences. Instructor participants agreed that popular fiction's ability to illustrate concepts and issues is what makes it so helpful pedagogically. Through what Martin, instructor of a graduate nursing course in hermeneutics, called "backstories," works of fiction can present characters who embody and enact real-life complexities and "dilemmas." Dr. Anderson, who taught counselling courses, noted that, while textbooks, articles, and case studies describe symptoms "in a very distant, … pseudo-objective style" and offer "no sense of the personal, human experience emotionally," filmic fiction opens a "point of engagement that is really powerful." Dan, who taught a course on the family, echoed that point in discussing the film *Fences*, which he believed was helpful in

> de-mystifying, taking these polysyllabic words … like morphostasis or whatever and mak[ing] them real. … [M]y belief is that that will help … [the students] become better social work practitioners when they work with families, because now they kind of are grounded in some ways of seeing the family, not as just a bunch of freestanding actors that are separate, you know. … There's things happening between them that are important to understand.

Dan's aim of demystification and application seemed to have been realized for Maria, a student in his course. She remembered talking about the film *Fences* in "every single class" and then being

> given some definitions and vocabulary, which I think definitely helped in my understanding, because oftentimes you might see something, … see the different family dynamics, but you don't know what the label is to that type of relationship, or what's going on, really. … And I noticed that, after having gone over those vocab terms, I was able to kind of pull those out of the movie

> and apply them to my life. And even apply them to, like, what I saw or heard about going on in friends' lives. … So those were very applicable.

Similarly, Cameron, a student in the adult education course on community, thought that, while academic texts can seem intangible, "our lives are lived in the … physical world. And so the more that we can see manifestations of an idea in the physical world, I think the easier it is to understand its human implications." Bonnie, a student in the hermeneutics course, which attracted students from various faculties, found that, even with works of fiction, "we were looking at real things. We were nursing students, social work students and education students, so the issues that we're looking at is care work." Even cultural texts not designed for work-related study proved applicable to professional learning and practice.

In/attentive

Even participants who were open to the incorporation of popular culture in curriculum had cautionary notes about that pedagogical practice, echoing the concern raised in other studies that popular culture texts can draw attention away from theoretically or issue-oriented discussions (Jarvis, 2012; Marquis et al., 2020; Tisdell, 2008). Dr. Anderson recalled using a segment from a *Star Trek* film with a previous class and a student's reaction to a handsome actor:

> One of the students … said, Well, hello! [laughs] … [N]ot the kind of engagement you're necessarily [aiming for] … but it's what Hollywood does well. … [S]ome people can simply see it as entertainment, and if you don't do the work for some students, to push them to a deeper level of reflection about it, then all you've done is taken them to the movies.

Personal or cultural history and preferences also influence in/attention to scholarly ideas and popular culture. As Peacock et al. (2018) advise, choosing cultural texts, whether dramatic or comedic, that will resonate with students is an important consideration. Tanya, from the doctoral adult learning course, had used *The Office* in her own teaching on organizational behaviour and remembered that "it really resonates with the North American students, but the international students didn't get it because office behaviour is so culturally dependent that they didn't get the *funny*." Gary, a student in the teacher education literacy course, intended to specialize in physical education (PE). He mentioned the tendency for popular culture to represent PE teachers as lazy and incompetent. For him, that image is personified by the lead character in the Canadian sit-com *Mr. D*, who is "like, this awful teacher, and he teaches phys ed. It's almost kind of insulting to me … because I hope I'm like, just better than that." Powerful representations can, in Dr. Anderson's words, "re-traumatize or trigger" students. Drew, a student in the adult education doctoral course, wondered if texts that seem to be "pushing boundaries," such as a "gritty" film like *Moonlight*, used in that course, might "close the individual off to … be[ing] open to that experience or then discussion of the themes afterwards." Similarly, Natasha, a student in the course on community, thought that "content … that is a little bit too far, you know, over the edge or whatever for some people … might make them disengage from the content. Or make them upset or whatever."

Familiarity or lack thereof can also affect attention and distraction, a point raised by participants in a focus group of students from the work and learning course, where an episode of *Scrubs* was shared:

> Melissa: I am a fan of *Scrubs* and so the first episode that we watched in the classroom, I found myself just laughing and enjoying it. And I recall having a moment about six minutes in, having to remind myself that I was watching this for a purpose, not you know, pulling out popcorn. … It's like brain candy and I was having a hard time making those connections. …
>
> Fred: I think for me, something that potentially got in the way of making those connections was the fact that I *wasn't* well versed in the show. I mean I'd heard about it, but … I don't think I'd really ever watched it. So I didn't have the perspective on the characters, the relationships between the characters, and the history, and so on. So that maybe made it a little more difficult for me to just get a sense of what I was observing, the dynamics and so on.

On the other end of this tension, students' attention to theory actually can be aroused by the addition of popular culture texts to curriculum, a point noted in the previous section and reiterated by Rebecca, a student in the teacher education literacy course. She saw popular culture resources as augmentations to "the articles that we were reading. So, it was … not an add-on per se, but an enhancement to help us gain a little bit deeper understanding." For Yvonne, a student in the hermeneutics course, incorporating cultural texts into a course that transitioned to Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic "captured my attention a bit more because it's not just words or on a slide."

Indeed, the multidimensionality of popular culture texts and engagement with them made challenging content more accessible and memorable, as the cultural texts became, for Dr. Anderson, "touch points" or, in Dan's words, "a touchstone" for students as they revisited scholarly ideas throughout a course. Linda, a student in the master's adult education course on community, was not a native English-speaker. For her, "watching the movie [*Chocolat*] … gave me opportunity to even, like, analyze … people's facial expressions and different settings, the atmosphere, … the body language and the behaviours" that can accompany controversies and conflicts arising when newcomers enter traditional communities and "really helped me to understand the concepts and theories better and also remember for a longer time."

On their own, theory-based articles might not be easy for students to digest and remember. Recalling the connection of the film *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* to an article on transformative learning, doctoral adult education student Maggie explained that she came "to understand and own that material more. Versus, for example, if we had just been given the article on transformational learning and the 10 points included in it, I probably would've forgotten that those even existed now." Similarly, Isabella, a student in the master's course on work and learning, talked about course content during her focus group:

> Like doxa and illusio and habitus, which were pretty challenging to begin with. So you know, we did the reading … and you explained those concepts in more detail. And then we watched … the *Scrubs* … clip. We would watch it, but then we talked about, you know, specific examples in that video clip and how it related to those concepts. And I remember that being very helpful to, like, have a very specific example of, oh when this character did this … or this was an example of this.

Jessica, another student in that course, chuckled as she commented, "Once you do a media analysis, it never actually leaves you."

Finally, participants acknowledged the importance of clarity in purpose and explanation. When deciding to incorporate popular culture, an instructor needs to "choose it with intent," in Melissa's words. That intent can be articulated early, as it was in the syllabus of Samantha's teacher education course on literacy, in which students were expected "to represent … some of those higher-order conceptual thinking, ideas … and to put that into practice via cultural texts." Students in Kaela's courses mentioned the importance of both guiding and follow-up questions and activities to help them attend to popular culture texts in a scholarly, critical manner. What design innovation instructor Emma called "teacher talk" directed students' attention with guidance about "what I want you to look out for. … And then they would watch it and then it'd be some sort of reflective activity." As Connor, from Emma's course explained, the purpose of a text "has to become obvious" through explanation, discussion or other activity, to help students feel that they can attend to pedagogical material and processes in a meaningful way.

A/critical

This third tension emerges from the fact that much popular culture is produced by huge corporations with a profit-making motivation, so that any commercially produced popular culture serves a hegemonic interest even if it also offers representations and messages that seem counter-hegemonic. Of course, not all popular culture is produced by huge corporations with profit-making motivations; however, even cultural trends and texts that counter the mainstream in some way can be dismissed as unscholarly and trivial. Trinity, a student in the doctoral adult education course, summarized that view: "I think there is a certain tone to what constitutes academic learning. And maybe cinema is billed as entertainment and it is not serious enough. That sounds silly but I think maybe that's why [it isn't used more]." In one focus group of students from the work and learning course, Melissa explained that, in her experience, popular

culture was often used if an instructor "hasn't prepared a whole lesson." Suzanne agreed, describing popular culture as a "time filler" for some instructors.

Sometimes, people who start with that mindset change their views as they experience the incorporation of popular culture in academic work and begin to see the potential of popular culture in advancing a thoughtful, even critical educational process. Cindy, one of Trinity's classmates, described herself as "a bit of a non-believer" and "a bit of a sceptic" about the pedagogical value of popular culture. "Oh, we're just gonna watch a movie! Fine. And then it clearly was more than that for me," she said.

Having watched and discussed *Chocolat* in the course on community, Linda wondered whether the film, which intersperses light-hearted scenes with stories of family violence, aging and death, and attacks against migrants, was meant to bring "underlying … tensions or problems to the light through the fiction." She found herself thinking about relations between Indigenous and settler people in Canada, an issue now prominent in public discourse and her own workplace. Echoing Dan, Dr. Anderson saw something "authentic" in popular fiction that, when well-made, represents important aspects of "the human condition." For Leanne, instructor in the teacher education course on diversity, popular culture can cue students about the prevalence of problematic ideas and help students consider important questions: "What kinds of forces are acting on this particular situation? Who is it benefitting? And how is this power institutionalized?" Kaela explained her view of popular culture as a resource that helps students "make sense of a concept that can be *tricky* but is, I think, important for practice."

Some students found that, after using popular culture in one course, they reached for cultural texts when they encountered challenging material in other courses. Margot, from the teacher education diversity course, stated "with everything that we were exploring in this course and really figuring out, the complexities surrounding things like classism, racism, sexism, internalized oppression and dominance, I started *seeing* those things *everywhere. Seeing* them in popular culture, seeing them in the TV shows I watched." Similarly, Jessica, from the work and learning course, described her "very intentional" process of relating "a particularly *heavy* text … to what I would see in pop culture" and looking for illustrations of scholarly concepts in television shows that she watched. Her classmate, Rhonda, characterized critical media and scholarly analysis as a process that "flexed that muscle" required for building analytical strength and agility, whether in academic settings, professional practice, or leisure life. These examples illustrate that instructors and students can repurpose commercially produced cultural texts to move beyond acritical interests and messages in critical teaching and learning.

Discussion

We do not adhere to the Frankfurt School's perspective, from which commercial popular culture is seen as serving existing hegemony (Jubas et al., 2021); however, we recognize that engaging with corporately produced popular culture continues to immerse both students and instructors in capitalist relations of work, education, and cultural engagement (Wright, 2013). Moreover, even if they present critiques of one aspect of hegemony, such texts often ignore the problems created by capitalism and reiterate some hegemonic ideas about race, gender, and other social relations. Despite the possibility that engagement with popular culture can encourage the development of varied perspectives and the quality of empathy, understanding and empathy have limitations; people can empathize with fictional characters and, presumably, real-life people who remain likeable and appealing despite their deplorable actions (Jarvis, 2012), and feelings of empathy can create a superficial, false sense of kinship that replaces deep analysis and personal experience or active alliance (Nakamura, 2020).

Still, we continue to support the purposeful insertion of popular culture into theoretically, critically oriented university-based professional education. Practised well, a pedagogy of critical curiosity requires clarity of purpose and a supportive approach from instructors who ask students to engage with challenging ideas and material. Although not all case courses were equally critical or approached criticality in quite the way we conceptualize it, for instructors whose understanding of criticality aligned with Brookfield (2009), Enloe (2004), and Freire (1998), employing popular culture could help build

critical curiosity (Jubas, 2019) among students who might otherwise have been impatient with or resistant to critical analysis and contentious issues. In illuminating tensions that have surfaced in our analysis, we have suggested how, with careful, thoughtful preparation and follow-through, using popular culture, itself a complicated move, can bridge the ends of the tensions between applicability and inapplicability, attention and inattention, and criticality and acriticality, promote openness to difficult content, and foster critical media literacy (Tisdell, 2008; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007). In highlighting the potential and the limitations of a pedagogical model that can make education work, even as it entertains, we have suggested that serious teaching, learning, and curriculum can be enjoyable *and* thoughtful, whimsical *and* sobering.

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