ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN EDUCATION

Popular Culture, Pedagogy and Teacher Education

International perspectives

Edited by
Phil Benson and Alice Chik

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Popular Culture, Pedagogy and Teacher Education

The integration of popular culture into education is a pervasive theme at all educational levels and in all subject areas. *Popular Culture, Pedagogy and Teacher Education* explores how 'popular culture' and 'education' come together and interact in research and practice from an interdisciplinary perspective. The international case studies in this edited volume address issues related to:

- how popular culture 'teaches' our students and what they learn from it outside the classroom;
- how popular culture connects education to students' lives;
- how teachers 'use' popular culture in educational settings;
- how far teachers should shape what students learn from engagement with popular culture in school;
- how teacher educators can help teachers integrate popular culture into their teaching.

Providing vivid accounts of students, teachers and teacher educators, and drawing out the pedagogical implications of their work, this book will appeal to teachers and teacher educators who are searching for practical answers to the questions that the integration of popular culture into education poses for their work.

Phil Benson is a Professor in the Department of Linguistics and Modern Language Studies, and Director of the Centre for Popular Culture in the Humanities at the Hong Kong Institute of Education.

Alice Chik is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at City University of Hong Kong.

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1 Popular culture in informal and formal education

Phil Benson and Alice Chik

The integration of popular culture into education is a pervasive theme in educational policy and discourse from early childhood to adult education, and in a wide variety of subject disciplines. Insights into the educational significance of popular culture are also found in several areas of research and practice. These include:

- Popular culture studies. Originally based on the *Journal of Popular Culture* (founded in 1967) and the Popular Culture Association, popular culture studies focuses on the study of popular culture as an academic subject and as an aspect of other disciplines in higher education (Browne, 2005). There are now also Australasian, Canadian and European versions of the *Journal of Popular Culture*.
- Media Studies, media literacy and media education are often the contexts in which popular culture appears in school education: Media Studies as a subject in the curriculum, and media literacy or media education as themes cutting across a variety of subject areas (Buckingham, 2003; Richards, 2011).
- Literacies studies. Mainly concerned with out-of-school literacies as social practice, 'new' and 'critical' literacies studies have also been an important context for research and practice, bridging out-of-school and in-school uses of popular culture, especially in early childhood (Alvermann et al., 1999; Evans, 2005; Marsh, 2005; Marsh and Millard, 2000).
- Informal learning. Research on informal learning and public pedagogy is increasingly concerned with the roles of popular culture and media in everyday learning (Drotner et al., 2008; Sandlin et al., 2010).
- Play, games and toys. In research on play, games and toys, popular culture is examined in the contexts of both school and informal education (Gee, 2007; Goldstein et al., 2004; Willett et al., 2009).
- Digital technologies have also become an important context for research and practice on popular culture and education that often cuts across the areas listed above (Buckingham, 2007; Lankshear and Knobel, 2008; Urbanski, 2010).

In addition, we have the long tradition of cultural criticism in which the educational roles of popular culture have been discussed for two centuries or more (see Benson, Chapter 2), the long-standing tradition of 'edutainment' or 'entertainment-education', in which popular culture media are turned to educational purposes (Buckingham and Scanlon, 2003; Singhal et al., 2004) and the more recent blending of academic work and popular culture texts in series such as Open Court's *Popular Culture and Philosophy* series (74 titles at the time of writing) and Introducing Books's *Graphic Guides* (85 titles).

These different areas of research and practice are separated partly by educational levels and contexts, partly by subject disciplines and partly by underlying theoretical assumptions. Nevertheless, there are many affinities and interconnecting threads among these areas and we often find that individual researchers are involved in more than one. It is the fact that the boundaries between these areas are becoming increasingly blurred that justifies a multi-disciplinary volume on popular culture and education of this kind. The key question that the contributors address, in multiple contexts and from multiple perspectives, is a practical one: how do we get popular culture to 'work' in educational settings of various kinds? Our goal in this introduction is to try to lay out some of the principles and issues that underlie their approaches.

What is popular culture?

It is important, perhaps, to begin with the question of what we mean by popular culture. We say 'perhaps' because it is not clear that we do, in fact, need a clear-cut definition of the term for educational purposes. Attempts to define the term typically do not end up with a single definition. This is the case, for example, with Storey's (2001) discussion of the concept, which leaves the reader with six alternative definitions, all of which seem to work in their own contexts (see Miller and Peirson-Smith, Chapter 8). For educational purposes, we find that it is most helpful to adopt a broad view of popular culture as the culture of everyday life, or what Browne (2005: 19) calls the 'culture of the people'. Browne contrasts this with an understanding of popular culture as merely 'mass' or 'entertainment' culture, which implies an aspect of life that is 'not to be taken seriously'. Our understanding of this issue is that popular culture is really a matter of the ways in which we make sense of the wider world beyond our immediate experience of it. Since the early nineteenth century, our experience of the world has increasingly been mediated through books, newspapers, magazines, popular music recordings, radio, film and television – what are now often known as 'traditional' or 'legacy' media. Since the late twentieth century, it has increasingly been mediated by computers and digital networks. We now spend more and more time using media, talking about media and using media to talk about media. The content of popular culture is, in this sense, now inseparable from its mass or digital mediation.

This broad view of popular culture points to the ways in which our experience of the world is increasingly 'mediated', but also to a widening of this experience through developing media technologies. With respect to the knowledge that we develop outside school, it has become difficult to separate what we know about the world from what we know about popular culture, and it seems that young people, in particular, have a good deal of this kind of knowledge. In this context, the need for education to engage with popular culture is mainly one of relevance. In the introduction to their popular culture reader for composition students, Hirschberg and Hirschberg (2002: vii) declare their 'pedagogical belief that composition students do their best work when they are reading, thinking, talking, and writing about topics they are most familiar with and knowledgeable about'. The word 'knowledgeable' is significant, in our view, because it highlights the fact that popular culture and education involves not only relevance to students' everyday lives and interests, but also relevance to domains of everyday ***knowledge*** that education can hardly ignore.

Popular culture pedagogies

Within this broad understanding of popular culture, what pedagogical options do we have and how should we choose among them? In an attempt to make sense of these questions, Alvermann et al. (1999) outline four approaches to the use of popular culture in the classroom.

The first views popular culture as 'detrimental to youth' and uses critical media literacy activities as 'opportunities to expose students to the degradation of their young minds' (p. 23). The second recognizes the importance of popular culture in students' lives, but uses 'critical discourse practices' to teach them how to 'critically analyse' media texts (p. 25). The third avoids analysis and critique and 'emphasizes the pleasures that popular culture can provide students' (p. 26). The fourth approach, which Alvermann et al. (1999) favour, involves a combination of these approaches and draws on the 'expertise that students bring to the learning environment, the pleasures that popular culture produces for students, and the multiple readings that students produce from popular culture' in order to achieve a balance in which 'critical media literacy is not purely a cognitive experience, nor is it solely experiencing pleasures without challenges to extended learning' (p. 28). In outlining these approaches, Alvermann et al. (1999) confront two persistent problems in the design of popular culture pedagogies: the first concerning educators' stance towards young people's engagement with popular culture and the second concerning the notions of pleasure, critique and learning.

Our attitudes to popular culture as an educational resource evidently depend, in large measure, on its role in our own lives and the degree of distance between our own interests in popular culture and those of our students. In an interesting study of adult educators' uses of popular culture, Tisdell and

Thompson (2007) found that these educators used popular culture as an educational resource in their own lives and that this informed their practices in adult education classrooms. In a school-based study, on the other hand, Lambirth (2003: 9) found that teachers were reluctant to use popular culture texts in the classroom, and while they 'spoke with warmth and affection of the music, comics and television shows of their own childhood', they 'showed revulsion to the music and television enjoyed by children today'. This suggests that perceptions of generational difference have a particular importance in popular culture pedagogies. In the context of popular culture and education, generational differences between teachers and their students are translated into differences in the experience of popular culture. In particular, it seems that it is difficult for teachers to see students' experiences of new forms of popular culture as having the same depth of impact as their own experiences of older forms have had. Research suggests that popular culture is, in fact, becoming more cognitively demanding over time (Gee, 2007; Johnson, 2006). The pedagogical problem, therefore, is often one of seeing the educational value of popular culture from our students' perspectives; of facilitating the modes of engagement that we would value in our own lives, but with forms of popular culture that are valued by the students themselves. As Hoechsmann and Poyntz (2012: 8) argue, in the context of media education, good popular culture pedagogy is largely a matter of 'bring[ing] strategies, concepts, and frames to the teaching context, but with an open mind towards media content that is often better known by young learners'.

Choices from the pedagogical menu will also depend on attitudes towards pleasure in learning. Gee (2007: 10) suggests that the idea that pleasure and learning are opposed is 'a mistruth we have picked up at school, where we have been taught that pleasure is fun and learning is work and, thus, that work is not fun'. This idea also appears to underlie 'critical' approaches towards popular culture in the classroom, which, as Alvermann et al. (1999) point out, tend to alienate students by denying the pleasures they take in it. They are, however, equally sceptical of the third, 'celebratory' approach, which appears to be an abdication of the teacher's duty to 'educate'. In consequence, they argue for a somewhat problematic blend of pleasure and critique, or what Buckingham (1993: 151) calls 'a constant movement back and forth between...celebration and critical analysis'. The pedagogical problem here, therefore, is one of understanding how students engage with popular culture both to experience pleasure and to learn more about the world, and to design strategies that allow students to enhance both the pleasure and the learning that they experience through this engagement.

These broad pedagogical options are, however, always made in the messy and unpredictable arena of classroom practice, and at this level teachers face a range of choices that are again related to assumptions about the educational value of popular culture. Popular culture is often presented as a motivational stimulus – students are, for example, shown an entertaining video or played a song in order to introduce a theme that then becomes the subject of 'serious'

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