

## Guest Editorial: Is Community College Teaching the Road to Nowhere?

WHEN I DECIDED, IN 1995, TO RESIGN MY TENURED UNIVERSITY position and accept one at a large community college outside of Washington, DC, my colleagues thought I was committing professional suicide. “You’ll never be able to come back,” they warned. “A community college teaching job is the road to nowhere.” That road to nowhere has led me to extraordinary destinations, including a variety of publishing opportunities, a recent sabbatical spent as a visiting scholar at Michigan State University, and presidency of the Popular Culture Association. Moreover, the community college is a supreme forum to hone my craft—teaching—for at the community college, innovative, superior teaching is the rule of the day.

I currently teach at Monroe Community College, a member of the League of Innovation, and in the top one-percent of community colleges nationally. Additionally, MCC has some of the most extensive offerings in popular culture in the country; the assortment of these types of courses puts our college at the forefront of popular culture studies, especially among two-year colleges. In a recent *Philadelphia Inquirer* story on higher education costs, community colleges were praised as a suitable, even preferable alternative to the first two years at a pricier four-year school:

There is no sacrifice in quality; in fact, community college students have done better on certain professional licensing exams than students from the most prestigious universities in the Philadelphia area. And students can save close to half the cost of a baccalaureate degree by starting at a community college and transferring. (<http://www.mc3.edu>)

Currently community colleges enroll over 50 percent of first-time college freshmen and 44 percent of all college graduates.

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There are distinct advantages to a community college education. First, the tuition at a community college is more affordable, often less than half that of a four-year state school. Second, the remedial education courses offered at most community colleges keep options of degree programs and vocational training open to those learners who need improvement in reading, writing, and computation skills. People can also continue to enroll in two-year colleges at any point in their lives. A final reason to attend a community college is to increase income and opportunities. Community colleges get excellent results by letting people in, not by keeping them out (“Transfer Students Earn More” *Community College Times*, 2003).

On any given day, the community college professor enters a classroom populated with students of all ages, backgrounds, and levels of educational preparedness. How do we get everyone on the same page? How do we teach the lessons that need to be taught to such an assorted assemblage of characters? The answer can be found by utilizing common culture—the culture of everyday things, or *popular culture*.

Integrating popular culture into the curriculum at the community college provides an opportunity to learn a radically unfamiliar skill (i.e., critical analysis) through deeply familiar material (the surface of popular culture). For example, after reading *Meditations* three times, Omar, a first year student in an introductory philosophy course, still could not understand Descartes’ evil genius. At the same time, Omar could give a detailed description of the problem of knowledge revealed in the plot of the cult film, *Matrix*. It is such a small task, with huge pedagogical rewards, to discuss *Matrix* before delving into *Meditations*. It helps students like Omar to connect something quite abstract to something concrete in their lives. The teaching of popular culture gives community college instructors a much broader spectrum in which to place their students’ learning potential.

Popular culture facilitates the transmission of ideas from “long ago and far away” into recognizable social and behavioral venues. While studying the characteristics of Greek tragedy and Greek tragic plays such as *Antigone*, I sometimes have my students “experience” the modern version of tragedy—a short segment from the *Jerry Springer Show*, recently voted the worst program in the history of television. We first discuss the importance of the Greek chorus, particularly how the chorus chants and reminds the audience of the cultural values the play is trying to inspire. We even talk about the importance of the leader in

separating from the rest of the chorus and speaking directly to the audience. We then watch about five minutes of a taped episode of Springer in which audience members chant, “take it off” to female participants; additionally, the audience rebukes the guests sitting on the “high stage” by lambasting them with negative comments. Could Aristotle deny that the audience experiences a catharsis? Viewers can also stir up the emotions of pity and fear by purchasing bumper stickers with slogans such as “You think you’ve got problems,” “We talk to the freaks . . . so you don’t have to,” and “Where do you find these people?” on the Springer Web site. At the conclusion of each broadcast, Jerry sits on a stool and preaches his “moral” to the home audience. Thus, the students can perceive how the classics continue to influence even contemporary genres, such as the talk show.

Exploring popular culture provides commonsense building blocks to more traditional studies, especially for students in their first year of college. Analyzing a current hit song or film bridges logically into analyzing a poem or novel; studying a street or mall subculture creates a conduit for wider studies in sociology or anthropology. Learners who become savvy about mass media develop an equivalent understanding of information-based economy.

Often dismissed as simple and crude, popular culture can be rewarding if respected and examined more closely. When a professor includes popular culture in the curriculum, it authenticates the culture that students already value. There ceases to be a “we—they attitude.” Learners do not have to choose between watching television and appreciating Greek tragedy because there is room for both. Taking away the common culture that students are aware of and accustomed to is counterproductive. Utilizing it constructively produces an environment where students are involved, motivated, and willing to become engaged because they are already “experts.” Think of it in this way: many “old books” deal with the same issues that we still wrestle with today. For example, in 1818 Mary Shelley raised questions about the dignity of life and the limits of human experimentation in her enduring classic, *Frankenstein* (which, by the way, was considered at the time to be a work of popular fiction). More recently we have dealt with this issue of “humanity” or the lack of it, in films such as Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* and Steven Spielberg’s *Artificial Intelligence: AI*. Where it might take days or weeks for the student to become familiar and somewhat accommodating to Shelley’s stylized discourse, after viewing

these films just once, the student gets the message—what exactly defines “life” and from what perspective do we humans really understand it? And at the same time, while human beings are not inherently evil, they are capable of acting without regard for their fellow man; therefore, is humanity’s future really guaranteed? While Shelley’s novel is a difficult read for many college freshmen, viewing the replicants’ fight to survive in *Blade Runner* or the android boy David’s search for love and acceptance in *AI* immediately captures a student’s imagination. This becomes a catalyst for serious discussion and exploration—thus a long-standing ideology becomes vital, accessible, and fresh.

With the most widely diverse population in higher education, community college students often have very little in common except for their immersion in popular culture. A humanities instructor trying to demonstrate the pursuit of the American dream might be hard-pressed to find a teaching method that will reach both the 16 and the 60 year old; popular culture eliminates this dilemma. Using contemporary examples, such as Carrie Underwood’s victory on *American Idol*, an enormously popular Fox Network reality based show viewed by a wide-ranging cross-section of Americans, illustrates that anyone—even a working-class girl from Oklahoma—can realize her dreams with hard work and perseverance.

Another reason to incorporate popular culture in the classroom is because of its interactive nature. Community college students engage with its manifestations, perform and observe its practices, and produce and consume its artifacts. It is the perfect laboratory for hands-on learning. An integral assignment in my popular culture course is the creation of a popular culture game. Students invent a board or video game based on some aspect of common culture. They fashion a playing board, game pieces, and other components based on a subject they have carefully researched. Complete game instructions are also provided, including the object of play. This exercise develops critical thinking skills, encourages proficiency in library and Internet research, and provides practice in writing. One memorable example was a board game based on the exploits of former senator Robert Packwood. Entitled *What About Bob? The Game of Sexual Harassment*, the student inventor thoroughly researched the political career of the senator and examined sexual harassment laws that govern the workplace. The object of the game was to determine whether Senator Packwood was actually guilty of violating sexual harassment laws in his everyday

dealings with female employees. The game board was both original and colorful; in the center was a large picture of Senator Packwood with a ponderous look on his face. The game pieces were representations of his female employees. Through this exercise, the student honed his critical thinking and writing skills, learned valuable lessons about politics, the law, and the judicial system, and had fun in the process.

This brings me to my final motivation for employing popular culture in the community college classroom. Even when you work with it intensely and rigorously, popular culture is, by its very nature, *fun*. If you were a two-year college student carrying 15 or more credit hours and working 25–45 hours a week at a minimum wage job, would it kill you to have a little fun? Popular culture perpetually promotes discussion, participation, imagination, and evaluation.

Put another way, popular culture is essentially multidisciplinary. One cannot conduct a popular culture course exclusively through lecture. Done well, the teaching and learning of popular culture occurs in the linguistic as well as the visual, auditory, and musical learning domains. These last three domains are where I find most of my community college students. They need to see the material and hear the material in order to understand the material. This is the true value of teaching popular culture in the community college—it allows me to go where my students are. And no matter what my university colleagues may believe, I choose to stay in that realm just a bit longer.

## Works Cited

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