

Demythologizing Reality TV: Critical Implications as a New Literacy

by
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This article explores the dissonance between a high level interest, semester-long, student-centered “Reality TV” project and an institutional barrier that argued against its legitimacy as a visual literacy. Together, along with my students, we unpack the power that Reality TV has on our lives and examine its intersectionality to literacy.

For my students’ final assignment in English 121: Humanities Literature, which was themed around the idea of “Big Brother Recycled,” they were to fulfill the requirements of the Reality TV Project. On the first day of classes students were given a project for which they were expected to follow an entire season of a Reality TV show of their choice, keep a log of the episodes which reflected their observations of the show as it related to course content, and then either individually or collectively write a synthesis of their analysis, create a multi-media project, or make a video or DVD that speculated on what the outcomes after the final episode might be. While the findings from their papers were stupendous, the Reality TV project bumped up against an unanticipated institutional barrier about its legitimacy in a college English classroom. Such dissonance between high student success and interest and a critique from administration motivated me to make meaning of Reality TV--its past, current, and future implications through New Literacies (Alvermann, 2002; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Kist, 2005), and

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popular culture studies (Fiske and Hartley, 2007; Johnson, 2005; Morrell, 2004), as an emerging literacy tool (Kress, 2003) in the English classroom at the university level.

Reality TV

Primetime and cable TV are littered with Reality TV shows that have infused our sensibilities. One can view almost any topic these days. Reality TV has become a venue for classroom chats, hallway chats, office chats, bathroom chats, family socials, blogs, MTV's Punk'd, internet sites (<http://www.realtelevision.net>), and even the fashion industry. On any given evening, there is never a dearth of choices about peering into the lives of others. Shows range from home improvement, to self-improvement (obesity, plastic surgery, educational advancement), to competition (money, prizes), to family and relationship issues (marriage, divorce, infidelity), and to morality (teaching values and lessons). Currently, Reality TV accounts for fifty-six percent of all American TV shows and sixty-nine percent of all of the world TV shows, both in cable and primetime broadcast (Reiss & Wiltz, 2005). Though shows vary in length, format, and purpose, they all share some key criteria that identify them as part of this genre.

Reality TV is probably the most popular TV genre today, especially amongst the "Millennial Generation" (Hagood, Stevens, & Reinking, 2002) –youth born after 1981 whose lives are surrounded and shaped by technology. As a genre, Reality TV documents actual events rather than fiction, features ordinary people rather than actors, and is typically unscripted rather than pre-written. The genre has been heavily criticized for being anything but "real" and much evidence has surfaced to corroborate such claims (Griffen-Foley, 2004; Reiss & Wiltz, 2001). In spite of the "real" facts which are connected to the genre, that many scenes are staged, participants are coached, celebrities are purposefully chosen, and shows are highly edited in order to convey particular messages (challenging and/or affirming stereotypes, teaching lessons, saving face). Some shows have become household names.

Reality TV shows are marketed to consumers by diverse strategies. For instance, the models on America's Next Top Model were in ads for Secret Deodorant (Season 7, Episode 10) and the victor became the next Cover Girl for an entire year. The women from Real World Austin (Murray, 2005) were photographed to sell popular gadgets in *Stuff Magazine*. Merchandise from Laguna Beach can be purchased in popular clothing stores such as American Eagle and Hollister which are selling tee-shirts that read, "Team Kristen" and "Team LC." The increase in the number of plastic surgeries amongst youth in Laguna Beach, California has skyrocketed. High schools are hosting Real World look a-like-days. People can even go online and see whom they most resemble from Laguna Beach (<http://www.ym.com/jsp/quiz/aug2605.jsp> and <http://www.myyearbook.com/zenhex/quizzes.php>). If a person resembles Danny from Breaking Bonaduce and needs

help with addiction and recovery, he or she can go to the VHI site for help and recovery. It is obvious that these shows have great power and influence over identities and lifestyles.

Reality TV in the United States can be traced to Alan Funt's show, *Candid Camera*, which first aired in 1948 (Writers's Guild), and taped him taping other people unexpectedly doing bizarre things. Other countries also aired Reality TV shows such as the United Kingdom in 1974 with *The Family*, and Australia in 1992 with *Sylvania Waters*. When we look at more recent roots in American Reality TV, though, our contemporary linkage is tied to broadcast TV with *Cops*, first airing in 1989. Soon thereafter in 1992, MTV's (cable) *Real World* would almost single-handedly transform media viewing in the United States. *Real World*, a show which places seven strangers, who come from different cultures, social classes, and who can have different sexual orientations, in a home in a different city for several months, first debuted in San Francisco. *Real World* has achieved superstar status with TV viewers, has had repeatedly high ratings for twenty-two seasons, and is now going into its twenty-third season in Washington, D.C. In fact, the next three seasons are already cast (Rogers, 2005). Since *Real World*, other shows have sprung up all over the networks and their prevalence is contagious. I myself have three favorites that I watch religiously: *Real World*, *The Bachelor*, and *The Bachelorette*. Because of the popularity and prevalence of Reality TV in society, I wanted to tap into its appeal, build on it, and apply it to my English 121 classes.

Course Design

When I was assigned to teach English 121, I was directed to teach the class in alignment with the course guidelines for the university's English Liberal Studies. At our school, each department has basic core liberal studies requirements that students are expected to take. English 121 is a survey course intended to whet students' palates about literature and expose them to an array of texts and thinkers so as to broaden their understanding of the humanities. I had the option to teach any texts I chose and thereby, to teach it thematically, was an option. For this course in particular such objectives included:

To improve critical reading and thinking skills, students should be able to

- summarize accurately;
- analyze to a better degree than when they entered the course;
- synthesize connections between various authors, themes, subject matters, and genres;
- develop and articulate criteria for evaluating the quality of authors' works;
- develop appreciation and/or enjoyment of reading as they discover the ways in which literature can be relevant to their lives;
- foster tolerant reading through exposure to points of view in literatures from other eras and other cultural or cross-cultural contexts;

- foster interpretive tolerance--interaction with other students to give exposure to a wide variety of readers and their interpretations of literature; and,
- develop literary vocabulary and critical approaches that students can use as life-long interpreters of literary works and; to reinforce effective communication skills, oral and written. (Engl, 2005) *I can not find a corresponding entry in Bib

In addition to these required objectives, I decided to build the course around the theme of “Big Brother Recycled”—meaning that the class would investigate the origins of the term “Big Brother” and unpack it through our readings and media viewings. We were not only going to investigate the concept of spying or viewing but we would become active participants by spying on or viewing a Reality TV show in order to fully embody the experience (Andrejevic, 2003, 2009). By embodying an experience, we develop our “discoursed-identities,”¹(Gee, 1992) which are socially constructed, in relationship to power, and emerge out of our experiences.

To the Liberal Studies objectives, I also added objectives from the National Council Teachers of English (NCTE) standards (NCTE & IRA, 1996) that were important to me as an English educator, and for which I had previous high student interest and engagement. These objectives included a series of questions that explored: how politics impacts students’ lives; what it means to be a viewer and a consumer of the media; how literature expands our socio-cultural awareness of the world; how authors use literary or media tools to convey meaning; and, how traditionally underrepresented people are portrayed through literature and the media.

It is my belief that students’ identities are multi-layered, complex and fluid, and they bring with them different background languages, cultures, gendered experiences, religions, languages, abilities, and social classes. Their identities are entwined with their discourses (Gee, 1992). Gee says that our discourses are more than our uses of language; they are the combinations of the “saying-writing-doing-being-believing-valuing”(p. 127), and ways of participating in a variety of social contexts. He further suggests that “each of us is a member of many discourses and each discourse represents one of our ever-multiple identities” (p. ix). Thus, discourses are socially-situated identities and are constructed in relationship to power and impacted by political (power) and social ideologies (Foucault 1980, 1986; Lefebvre 1991). Foucault (1986) and Bourdieu (1980) suggest that the effects of power construct identities, and that the embodiment of identities is vulnerable as a result of power. Our classrooms then become central to understanding an identity in terms of “race, ethnicity, social class or gender ... those identifications shape engagements in spatial tactics of power and in everyday social, cultural and literate practices” (McCarthy & Moje, 2002, pp. 234–235). Hagood (2002) contends that texts, in the broadest sense, “produce particular formations of self” (p. 248). Texts are situated within certain social and cultural groups. By

all intents and purposes, texts are imbued by larger sociopolitical issues of power that are associated with cultural and social groups. Texts then reflect the changes in society, such as in how power may change within particular ethnicities, classes, and/or social patterns. In other words, as perceptions of ethnicities change and as they may each gain access to positions of power and authority, texts reflect those changes. Our identities are impacted by their transactions with those texts and when the texts shift along with the changes in society, so too do our identities shift. This means that from a poststructural/postmodern perspective identities are constantly in flux and vulnerable to blindly consuming competing ideologies and perpetuating social, political, and economic ideologies.

Varying political ideologies, dominant social reproduction agendas and beliefs, and economic agendas of companies are deeply embedded in the dominant messages that come through in Reality TV and for English teachers not to disrupt such topics, we become complicit in perpetuating status quo beliefs and manufacturing identities (Apple, 2002). Discoursed-identities then is something then that is co-constructed through competing forces and that one's position in a space is "offered, accepted, rejected, and otherwise continuously negotiated" (Leander & Sheehy, 2004, p. 116) as individuals engage in social spaces. Within these spaces, such as a classroom, identities are "produced, negotiated and hybridized within the flow of dialogue" (Leander, 2001, p. 637).

Gee's research on identity deepens our emerging awareness about discoursed-identity in schools by helping to distinguish between the tensions of "d" and "D" discourses. "d" discourse is our primary discourse or primary identity, that we generally acquire through our homes, cultures, families, friends, and languages. "D" discourse is our secondary discourse or secondary identities, and is generally acquired through organizations, such as churches, political parties, gangs, schools, offices, jobs, professions, clubs, fraternities, athletic teams, cliques, hobby groups, and leagues. "d" and "D" discourses often clash in school but as many of us know, good teaching tells us to build upon what students bring from their lives outside of school (Tremmel, 2006), from their homes, and from their social cultures or their funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). By providing students with the tools to negotiate their identities, by unpacking the hidden sociopolitical, gendered, capitalist, and heteronormative messages embedded in Reality TV, students gain power to make informed decisions about their lives. With this in mind, I decided to build a bridge between students' "d" and "D" discourses and their funds of knowledge by inviting them to share their expertise about Reality TV-- because I suspected that most of them would have had some affinity and /or exposure to the TV genre.

Course Rationale: New Approaches to Literacy

Freire and Macedo, in *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, suggest that we read the world before reading the word and that literacy must begin with what is

important to peoples' lives. They see literacy as far more complex than reading and writing for different audiences and purposes; rather, they see it as continually expanding in scope to include its intersection to politics, power and how together, they reinforce or generate social relations and cultural practices that catalyze democratic change. In their text, they describe how illiterate workers in Brazil who could not read words, applied their background knowledge to decode meaning from the visual world. This type of literacy is generated through the lens of the individual as s/he manipulates any set of codes including language, symbols, or images. If we look even more closely then at what literacy entails, Bakhtin's (1986) definition of text is relevant to building newer approaches to literacy. According to Bakhtin (1986), texts include all written or visual material, are created with specific audiences in mind, and are produced in anticipation of particular responses so they are, therefore, interactive.

Combined, Freire, Macedo, and Bakhtin, significantly inform New Literacies, which suggests that "students should be able to both read critically and write functionally, no matter what the medium" (Kist, 2005, p. 11) and that includes, according to new literacy studies, both "non-traditional and non-verbal literacies (Gee, 2005; Kist, 2005) practiced either in school or out" (Tremmel, 2006, p. 35). New Literacies embraces an emerging concept of literacy since the mainstream increased different usages of technologies in the early 1990s to include information and diverse communication technologies. It also takes into consideration the transactional nature between literacy and technology, that learning is socially constructed, and that new skills are required of students so that they can make meaning of New Literacy Practices (Kist, 2005). If we go a step further here in its definitional breakdown visual literacy, visual rhetoric, and critical media literacy make up New Literacies (Alvermann, 2002; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Kist, 2005).

Visual literacy is a set of skills used to interpret and critique images (Gitlin, 2001). Visual rhetoric, while it reads similarly to visual literacy, is the examination of the relationship between images and text and how individuals are influenced by visual cues which position and live through them (Hill & Chambers, 2004; Hocks, 2003; Wysocki & Jasken, 2004). Critical media literacy is the application of a deconstructionist framework to media images along with attempts to understand the subtext of sociopolitical agendas as they attempt to construct identities (Beach, 2007; Hall, 1993; Hobbs, 2006). Critical media literacy gives students new technological "reading" skills such as access, analysis, and evaluation as they transact with the media. All three of these fields cross discipline lines and appear throughout academia in technology, history, rhetoric, art history, mass communications, journalism, foreign languages, women's studies, and English.

NCTE has adopted the New Literacies movement and has included visual literacies into standards 4 and 12. 2 Taken a step further, The Conference on English Education Summit made a call for the inclusion of technologies into preservice teaching methods classes in order to prepare both preservice and inservice teachers to create opportunities for "meaning-making by using a variety of rep-

resentational, interpretive, and communicative systems, but also to consider the synergistic relationships that exists between readers, writers, texts, contexts, and the situations in which texts, in their many forms, are written and read” (Beliefs, 2005). Results from the Summit also suggest that “it is essential for English educators to turn a critical eye toward the benefits and affordances; the limitations and liabilities of integrating these newer technologies into our teaching” (Beliefs, 2005). This means that English teachers must be open to writing or projects that include sound, image, and video clips, and multiple modes of expression, such as music, artwork, poetry, and first person narratives of historical fiction, all providing different perspectives on the topic under study because:

Multimedia texts that make use of technological innovations and integrate multimodal⁵ literacies provide a broader and more dynamic representation of ideas than afforded by the limitations of print; they also provide boundless, creative ways of connecting various forms of expression and, in turn, help to forge critical new understandings and meaning-making. (Beliefs, 2005)

As an English educator teaching a required course for all students, I appropriated what I valued as timely-- teaching theories and bringing suggestions from my field into the course while simultaneously wanting to empower students, which has always infused my liberatory pedagogy. Ultimately the infusion of these fields into classroom practice develops and heightens students’ access and understanding to (1) how power is used and misused in the literacy practices and (2) provides students with the tools to negotiate what is being fed to them through Reality TV. I spent a significant amount of time selecting texts and articles for this class and developed a critical media literacy component with a solid rationale. When it came time for me to be observed by my chair, all of this preparation and prior research was challenged by my department chair, who questioned the legitimacy of Reality TV in English 121.

The Reality TV Project and Conflict

On the first day of class students were given their final exam project. They were asked to deconstruct a Reality TV show of their choice by watching a minimum of eight episodes. I was concerned about access to TV, so I suggested that they partner with a friend who had a TV, rent past seasons on DVD, or when possible watch at their family homes or in the dorms. Additionally, I asked them to space out the episodes during the season so they could see the beginning, middle and end of the series. They were required to take notes and keep a log of the dates of the episodes they viewed for collection at commencement of the project. I suggested that they might want to tape the shows for further reflection. They had three choices for the final form of the project as it related to the following criteria: write a five-to-eight-page paper that reflects their learning about their Reality TV, create a multi-media project about the Reality TV show that would be viewed in class, or make a twenty minute video that reflects the episode following the final episode to be viewed in class.

Figure 1: Criteria for Reality TV project

1. integrate a reflection on issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression, national origin, ability, and/or religion.;
2. consider how individuals either mirror or counter stereotypes in their positions on the show;
3. explain the appeal of the viewer/consumer of the show;
4. reflect on your role as the viewer and consumer of the show as it relates to course content (readings, theories and discussions);
5. ask and reflect how does this show perpetuate myths or lead into a new way of considering humans and the media;
6. ask yourself what was it like to be a spy or viewer and how does that make you think any differently, if at all, about Reality TV;
7. reflect if you would let your children view this show, why or why not;
8. reflect and explain you would/n/t recommend this show to;
9. reflect and answer what you learned about yourselves in this process; and
10. what are the ethics involved in viewing, spying, consuming that which is not yours?

Figure 2: grading rubric

Final Project

Eng 121

Dr. XX

Name of student:

Choice: 1, 2, 3

Grading as follows:

Selected a Reality TV show (50): name it ____

Submitted log of eight episodes with dates and notes(15) ____

Integrated a reflection on issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression, national origin, ability, religion in your discussion(50) ____

Considers how individuals either mirror or counter stereotypes in their positions on the show(10) ____

Explain the appeal of the viewer/consumer of the show(10) ____

Reflect on how the show either perpetuates myths or leads into a new way of considering humans and the media(10) ____

Reflects on what was it like to be a spy or viewer and how does that make you think any differently, if at all, about Reality TV(10) ____

Reflects on would you let your children view this show, why or why not(5) ____

Reflects on who would/n't recommend this show to(5) ____

Reflects on what did you learn about yourselves in this process(5) ____

Reflects on the ethics involved in viewing, spying, consuming that which is not yours(5) ____

Includes cited sources(5) ____

Includes pics (5) ____

Hands me back this rubric with your name on it and your assignment choice circled(5) ____

Hand in assembled project: stapled or in a folder, or make a copy of the project on disk or send via the Internet (5)

If video, showed video (25) ____

If paper, handed in paper (25) ____

If multi-media, showed project (25) ____

Total and comments (245): ____

Students' Initial Perceptions of Reality TV: "d" Knowledge

In order to distinguish what makes Reality TV a genre to itself, I first asked my students how many of them watched Reality TV on a regular basis. The two classes divided along a 3:1 ratio; 30 students watched and 10 didn't. Students were eager to answer this question with expert, empirical knowledge. They said that what makes Reality TV a genre unto itself include following criteria: based on actual events, unscripted, hidden cameras are used, and that people selected to participate in the show thereby expose their lives for public scrutiny.

Students' views also varied in their opinions of Reality TV when they first entered the class. Some already had favorites they watched, others had never heard of it, and some flat out detested it. When first discussing the project a frustrated student asked, "Where is our Reality? Where is the Reality of the middle-class family who wakes up, goes to work, and comes home?" Another student quickly retorted, "It's too real so it's not on. No one wants to watch what's actually real" (*italics added*). Such a dialogue made me stop and ponder if I should reconstruct the activity that I'd pre-designed, one that I thought was probably better suited for an urban population of students. However, then I thought that these students' keen observations, which were indicative of a mostly rural working class population, had much to offer each other and myself, and that one of my goals for the assignment, after all, was to help them develop their critical reading skills. I decided to stick to the original plan. By developing critical lenses through the use of Reality TV, I inferred that they could apply that to our readings for the course. I was reassured about this decision as I observed throughout the semester that students' opinions of Reality TV were either strengthened, or changed, while in some cases they became expert critics of the genre.

Class Time and a Visitor

Definitions of literacy have evolved over the years but not everyone is privy to such changes. To illustrate this point, I draw from a personal experience. During

a regular observation of me for my evaluation process, my department chair, who hails from the field of English studies, came to observe me during a closing unit on *The Handmaid's Tale*. As we transitioned from lively activities where students were trying to imagine what a utopia would look like, we revisited a discussion from a prior class about how the media portrayed images of African-Americans affected by Hurricane Katrina. Since I am from New Orleans and had family who had either lost their homes or had been evacuated, I had a personal investment in all of the media attention and portrayals of the citizens of New Orleans. I used these images because they were current and would prepare students to look in, and more closely read, their Reality TV shows.

When I put up an image from a PowerPoint slideshow, without a caption, of eight African-Americans exiting what appeared to be a sporting goods store in downtown New Orleans—a place traditionally habited by a large African-American population—I noticed a look of confusion on my chair's face. I asked my students to create a chart and reflect on what they suspect the caption might read if written by the media. I then asked them to consider how other captions might read if the images contained all senior citizens, Asians, GLBT people, firefighters, teens, or whites. I then varied the question to also include age, dress and appearance of each said group. Students inferred negative captions about African-Americans and teens using such adjectives as "stealing" and "looting." But when I mentioned African-Americans in business suits, answers included "helping" or "finding." For senior citizens and firefighters they inferred positive phrases such as "helping others" and "getting necessities." For homosexuals they inferred lighthearted terms such as "shopping" or "decorating." They were stumped on what terms the media would use for Asians but said it would likely be positive. Every once in a while I would glance askance toward my chair, and saw her face with the same look of confusion that I had observed a few minutes earlier. For teens they suggested negative terms but when asked about how they dressed, they said it would depend on what they were wearing. For white people they inferred such adjectives as "taking" or "obtaining." Upon hearing each others' answers and how similar they were to one another, the class became infuriated at how images in the media perpetuate stereotypes of individuals. Collectively, they deduced that the media is biased against age and perceived social class and has tremendous power over constructing dominant ideologies and perpetuating perceptions of teens and those from a lower social class. As my inner monologue noted that there was something here that merited more attention and that students had expert knowledge on media distortions that I would build upon throughout the remainder of the course, my chair waved goodbye and said she would be in touch. I did not take that as a good sign.

The next day, after my chair's observation, she asked to see my syllabus because she was concerned not about the content I was teaching but about the use of media and Reality TV as part of a literature based "reading" class. After she had reviewed my syllabus, I received follow-up emails asking for explanations about

New Literacies and how it helps to develop critical lenses that can be applied to reading texts in all forms (and that through negotiating discoursed- identities against images in the media, students gain powerful ways of reading/viewing and developing their own informed identities), I demonstrated how course content aligned with NCTE and IRA standards, department standards, English Education program objectives, and the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (model standards for beginning teacher licensing and development). Her field is discipline-focused English studies, which is not necessarily a field to which New Literacies has yet cross-pollinated. Part of the dissonance we experienced, and hence the confused look I noted when she observed me, was due to this lack. After careful explanation and lengthy emails addressing her concerns and rearticulating the standards, we agreed that there is room and legitimacy for such learning which in fact does expand emerging types of literacies that can be taught in English 121. When colleagues heard about the tension, many remarked that our department, which houses both English studies and English educators, would benefit from more communication about New Literacies, perhaps at faculty brown bag luncheons or through a classroom demonstration.

Student Responses to Reality TV

At semester's end, an across the board commonality shared by all students was that the Hurricane Katrina exercise helped them more critically "read" their Reality TV shows, the texts for the course, and other media images with more critical lenses, which I also observed during class discussions and student presentations. Through course readings, deduction and observations, students concluded that Reality TV is not real. Based on this major finding, they deconstructed their shows according to the rubric that they were initially given. What we found was astounding and enlightening. Of the approximately seventy students, twenty-four chose multi-media presentations, two made a video, and forty-four wrote papers for their final projects. Students reported on several different Reality TV shows. A breakdown of what they watched is as follows in descending order of popularity: Laguna Beach, Real World Austin, America's Next Top Model (Season 5), The Newlyweds: Nick and Jessica (Season 2), Wife Swap, Making the Band 3, Biggest Loser, Family Bonds, Survivor, Big Brother, Breaking Bonaduce, Rides, Run's House, Tommy Lee Goes to College, Brat Camp, Surreal Life, Girl Next Door, and Fear Factor.

I asked students prior to their presentations why they had chosen a particular show and answers varied from: the show reflected personal interests or reflected ethnic identity; students had gambled on the show based on its reputation; they were longtime fans; their friends watch it; and lastly, curiosity. When they were asked what they believed appealed to viewers, they answered that shows target different age groups, ethnicities, social classes, sexual orientations, abilities, and genders. They noted that shows tended not to target religion. We speculated the reason for this was that several Reality TV shows are implicitly moralistic and

that such morals were trans-denominational. According to students, the shows appealed to audiences on the basis of a hybrid of many of these factors: competition, self-improvement, drama, entertainment, fashion ideas, hobbies and interests, cliques, hooking up,⁴ addictions such as substance abuse, wanting what one doesn't have, fixing one's life by learning from the mistakes of others, feeling more appreciative about what one has, learning not to take things for granted, projecting what one doesn't have, teaching life lessons, and on some occasions, voyeurism.⁵ Students also discovered that these shows seduce viewers by preying upon these appeals that manipulate them to choose sides. Based on that, viewers decide if they like or dislike someone. Such relationships between viewers and characters invite us to watch the successive episodes, with or without sympathy or empathy and we begin to root, predict, suspect, anticipate, and even sometimes loudly or quietly vote people off of shows. As viewers side with, or are against certain characters and situations, they are likely to watch successive shows.

Figure 3: the shows they watched

Moralistic

Breaking Bonaduce
 Family Bonds
 Girl Next Door
 Real World Austin

Competitive

Survivor
 Big Brother
 Making the Band 2
 America's Next Top Model
 Fear Factor

Improvement

Tommy Lee Goes to College
 Brat Camp
 Rides
 Biggest Loser

Family/relationship

Run's House
 The Newlyweds: Nick and Jessica- Season 2
 Laguna Beach

Moralistic and Competitive

Wife Swap

The Reality TV shows the students watched can be conceptualized into five meta-categories, although many of these shows fall into multiple categories. The shows displayed significant emphasis in one of the following determinants: moralistic, competitive, family/relationship, improvement and moralistic/competitive. By moralistic, we deduced that the shows were trying to teach lessons or values about lifestyles and families whether it was by challenging or perpetuating stereotypes. By competitive, we deduced that shows offered some type of financial reward, whether individually or in a team, for winning a task by accomplishing or achieving a goal. By improvement, we decided that individuals were trying to improve something about their personal appearances, their families, or their hobbies, e.g., homes, cars, children's behavior. By family/relationship, we decided that the shows were almost always highly dramatic and involved love affairs, "hooking up," divorce, and inter/intrapersonal issues. By moralistic/competitive, we decided that while individuals or teams were competing for a payoff, the show was also trying to teach values about lifestyles or challenging stereotypes. Based on our categories we noticed that there were more Reality TV shows about competition which suggested to us that our society values competition and money over most other things.

Figure 4: other popular Reality TV shows- past and present

Moralistic

Trading Spouses: Meet Your New Mommy
Cops

Competitive

Celebrity Fit Club
So You Think you can Dance
Hell's Kitchen
70's House
Amazing Race
Contender
Being Bobby Brown
Hogan Knows Best
Apprentice (Donald Trump)
Appentice (Martha Stewart)
American Idol
Joe Millionaire
Mr. Personality
Bachelorette
Bachelor
Amazing Race
The Gauntlet

Improvement

Trading Spaces

Extreme Makeover Home Edition

The Swan

Super Nanny

Three Wishes

Family/relationship

The Osbournes

True Life

Moralistic and Competitive

Road Rules

Who's Your Daddy?

Analysis of Who is Not There

While students paid close attention to how Reality TV shows perpetuate and also challenge stereotypes, they also analyzed who was not on each of these shows and speculated reasons that motivated the TV producers. For example, on a show like the Real World, arguably the most popular Reality TV show to date, the show typically included mixed genders and deliberately tokenizes diversity as either queer, “extraordinarily” hot, fashionable, homely, popular, “oddballish,” and any ethnic minority. Over the seasons, the show has grown from perpetuating stereotypes to now challenging them by introducing hybrid identities that misalign with popular understandings of people. Real World Brooklyn, Season 21 did something unprecedented. It included a female Iraqi veteran with PTSD, a significant other in a wheelchair, two ethnic minorities, and no queer person. Students deduced that Real World is leading the charge to challenge popular perceptions of individuals and has great influence over catalyzing change through their casting. What they hoped they might see in future seasons included: a one-eyed model, an obese person, a dwarf or midget, or someone ‘otherly-abled’.⁶

Like Real World, each Reality TV show intentionally casts people based on the messages they want to convey or the audiences they hope to draw in. Such fascination, while it has great staying power, also marginalizes and alienates certain audiences. For instance, one student wrote about Wife Swap, a show that swaps mothers from two different families and social classes: “Conflicts arise because of breaks in the stereotype. In most cases, one family has a stereotypical pattern while the other family does not have a conforming pattern.” She is right in that the moralistic aspect to this show is apparent and the producers’ values come streaming across the TV network into homes, thus challenging families’ belief systems. She goes on to write that the show demonstrated very little cultural awareness, few queer issues, and no families that were ‘otherly-abled’. She speculated that

that the show does not want “to give the wrong ideas about other kinds of families” because it would be an attack on traditional American family values. As a class we concluded that what is not and who is not on the show says as much as what is and who is on the show.

Future Implications of Reality TV in University English Courses

The media has unconscionable power over humanity. What is viewed does actually affect real lives. Though the future of Reality TV is unknown, we can assume that the genre will regenerate and adapt to shifts in social, ethnic, economic, and political values. If current trends in viewing hold out, its permanence and popularity are likely to regenerate as well, which means that teachers must continue to build on current trends in the media for inclusion in English language arts learning and preservice teacher training. We can build on emerging New Literacies as a way to cultivate critical lenses for analysis of all mediums and in all levels of our English teaching experiences, whether for our undergraduates, graduates or preservice teachers. While we teach the Reality TV genre, we must be mindful that shows can both promote and hurt the struggle for social equity and so we must teach them cautiously, critically and carefully. English teachers can ask students critical questions during viewing such as: What is Reality TV? What are the motivations of the producers and writers of the show? What stereotypes are perpetuated and how are they challenged? What is the show trying to market? Who isn't on the show? What does that imply? Who is the audience? What makes the show appealing? What does the show appeal to? What are the sociopolitical and sociocultural implications of the show,;i.e., which issues are addressed and which aren't? Why might that be the case? And, What is the future of Reality TV?

Today's students need to be prepared to cope with a complex mix of life situations which calls for instructors to help provide lenses and tools that will help students interpret and analyze the emerging literacies that surround them, by building on the “d” expertise they have. In closing I turn to a student paper in which she wrote:

After completing this project, I'm glad that I had such an opportunity to look into what a Reality tv [sic]show actually consists of. Wife Swap showed such perfect examples of how the media skews ideas to make viewers think or do almost anything the makers want. Not only is there no such thing as a perfect family, but even Reality tv [sic] isn't completely real. Conversations, situations, and even personal feelings are deleted or changed in order to make the viewers more likely to watch. While I know that this won't stop me from watching Reality tv [sic], it will make a difference in how I view the individuals and situations during each episode.

Such wisdom and expert knowledge that students acquire on their own—the “d” discourse-identity, is something that I did not teach them, but that I capitalized on and turned into an activity in which students participated with high enthusiasm and involvement. The “d” that students bring to class provides a wealth of oppor-

tunities for teachers to continue to utilize. As Gee, Freire and Macedo all suggest, we need to tap into “d” and keep bridging it to “D.”

Since the time I taught the class, conversations have taken place in our department about emerging technologies and its use in English 121. Many faculty have, in fact, integrated film, TV, and social networking sites into the course. As a department we have grown more technologically savvy and have become more effective at sharing teaching strategies and research related to our respective disciplines. While research such as this can help, more transdisciplinary studies, or disciplinary research that crosses disciplines and modes of thought, can merge fields by bringing in emerging literacies that challenge other literacy practices to shift ideologically. As we stay open to the “d” that our students bring to the classroom, ultimately, we all become more empowered and informed about how to translate the “d” into the “D” world of our classroom practice, and our students benefit by learning about how they can negotiate their discourses-identities with the literacy practices surrounding them. Reality TV is such an influential, viable, and timely medium, available with just a simple touch of our fingertips, that its place in the English language arts can make an indelible difference in our classrooms now and in years to come.

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Notes

1. The term discourses-identity is something that I coined with permission from Gee on 12/14/05 via email correspondence.
2. From NCTE standards: (NCTE and IRA).
3. Multimodal means interface provides the user with more than a single mode of interaction (Beliefs, 2005).
4. Hooking up means when two people meet each other and it becomes intimate.
5. Voyeurism is over the period of six months the recurrent intense, sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges or behaviors involving the act of observing an unsuspecting person who is naked, in the process of disrobing or engaging in sexual activity (Diagnostic, 2000).
6. ‘Otherly-abled’ is a positive term that challenges the term disabled which tends to infer that someone cannot do something, while ‘otherly-abled’ means the opposite, that the person does it differently.

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