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Recommended Citation

Hornberger, Peter (2016). "I'll Ride The Wave Where it Takes Me: A Cyberethnography of Pearl Jam Fan Communities," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2016/roundtables/8>

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I'll Ride the Wave Where it Takes Me: A Cyberethnography of Pearl Jam Fan Communities

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Abstract: This paper explores the learning processes of adult fans of the music group Pearl Jam and their potential development of critical consciousness. The confluence of popular culture, music, fan culture, and digital media that occurs within these fan spaces is rich for exploration of contemporary forms of critical public pedagogy.

Keywords: popular culture, critical public pedagogy, cyberethnography

Artistic expression of all kinds contains the potential of making social, cultural, and political statements. While the statements do not always take a critical form or call for resistance efforts, the messages communicated through art are often among the few media not supporting the status quo. Art, in its many varied forms, is particularly powerful in that it is not only created within and perpetuates throughout cultures of oppression, but it is also capable of viewing reality from perspectives different than those that are dominant (Marcuse, 1965). Because of this ability to carry messages divergent from the hegemonic base, music and art are often important vehicles used to carry and promote social change and messages of resistance (Olson, 2005).

One such artist that I believe carries these messages of change and resistance within their music is Pearl Jam. While their commercial success from the sale of over 30 million records is what many will remember, the band has a long history of battling established ideologies. Beyond their music and lyrics, Pearl Jam followed their words with action by vigorously challenging the injustices of which they sing (Bonoguoire, 2011). Further, the band creates powerful fan experiences by being one of the few performing artists to not only allow but encourage recordings of their live performances (Kot, 2013). They have an in house managed fan club and an active online forum for fans to interact and socialize. There are also numerous fan organized and managed social media accounts that discuss the work of the band and the social topics they touch upon.

While there is clearly a high level of activity and engagement between Pearl Jam and their fans, the extent to which it is contributing to the fans' development of personal identities, construction of world views, and offline behaviors related to social change requires further study. This seems to support the recommendations of Wright & Sandlin (2009) when they commented that future research into the learning that occurs with and through popular culture and music needs to be based in well-established research methodologies and to be connected with appropriate theoretical underpinnings.

One way to examine the impacts of the art and music of Pearl Jam has on its fans is to examine the interactions of the band and their fans within the online and digital spaces they have established. Since this study is interested in the online activities of a group of fans and how their critical consciousness may be influenced by online activities, popular music listening choices, and social interactions, cyberethnographic research is proposed as a pathway to better understand how online activities may shape offline behaviors of fans. Since cyberethnographic studies explore both the culture of a group online and the related behaviors of those individuals occurring in the offline world (Teli, Pisanu, & Hakken, 2007), the research design appears

appropriate.

As part of popular culture, music stands aside television, movies, and art as a means for the masses to access similar messages. Understanding the context of popular culture is critical from an education perspective as “significant learning is taking place during all that time spent engaging with the products of popular culture” (Wright & Sandlin, 2009, p. 135).

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