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# Seinfeld, The Simpsons, and Seductive Vampire Slayers: A Literature Review of Adult Education and Popular Culture

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# ***Seinfeld, The Simpsons, and Seductive Vampire Slayers: A Literature Review of Adult Education and Popular Culture***

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Keywords: popular culture, informal adult learning, public pedagogy, literature review

**Abstract:** This paper summarizes a review of the adult education literature that focuses on popular culture. Six ways that scholars have engaged with popular culture emerged. The authors offer suggestions for future research.

## **Introduction and Purpose**

Whether intentional or not, adults learn from the practice of cultural consumption in their everyday lives. Jarvis (1992) argues, for example, that “the process of learning is located at the interface of people’s biography and the sociocultural milieu in which they live, for it is at this intersection that experiences occur” (p. 17). Moreover, Miller (2000a) notes that adult education has long recognized the concept that adults learn from experience, including their experiences with “work and leisure” (p. 72). Yet, she concedes that adult education researchers have paid much more attention to the learning that takes place within *formal* educational settings. Miller (2000a), therefore, calls on adult educators to focus much more on “learning from experience” (p. 83) and urges adult educators to pay more attention to the learning occurring through our everyday engagements with popular culture. Similar pleas emerged almost two decades ago from adult educators Graham (1989) and Brookfield (1986), who argued that popular culture has powerful effects on adults’ worldviews, and should thus be taken seriously by adult educators.

Despite these pleas, and despite cultural studies having its roots in adult education, relatively little empirical research has been conducted within adult education exploring popular culture and its connections with adult education and learning. There are exceptions, however, which have led some adult education researchers like Miller (2000a), Graham (1989), and Brookfield (1986) to argue that popular culture has powerful effects on people’s worldviews. In this paper, we explore the empirical research literature within adult education that has focused on popular culture. In doing so we hope to highlight the kinds of investigations that have occurred, and point to avenues of inquiry that still need to be examined.

## **Methodology**

The research for this project consists of an integrative literature review, which involves reviewing, critiquing, and synthesizing relevant literature in order to come to a new understanding of the topic at hand (Torraco, 2005). Because adult educators have just begun to focus on popular culture as a site of education and learning, we undertook a literature review on this emerging field of study in order to provide a synthesis of the work that has currently been done, and to point to some ways forward for future research. In order to get a sense of how adult educators are exploring popular culture, we examined three peer-reviewed adult education journals (*International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 1982-2007; *Adult Education Quarterly*, 1980 to 2007; and *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 1990-2007), as well as proceedings papers from the *Adult Education Research Conference* (AERC) and the *Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research on the Education of Adults* (SCUTREA), from 1990-2007.

We searched these sources using terms such as “popular culture,” “public pedagogy,” “media and “television.” We also carefully browsed the table of contents for all journals and proceedings for the years indicated. Our final data set included 21 articles from the three adult education journals, another 54 papers from the AERC and SCUTREA proceedings, and a recent (2007) *New Directions in Adult and Continuing Education* that focused on popular culture.

### **Findings**

We found that this literature has focused on four areas of research and practice within adult education: (1) *representations of adult learning and adult development in popular media*, (2) *self-reflexive practices of adult educators who consume popular culture*, (3) *effective classroom practices involving popular culture*, (4) *analyses of popular culture as adult education curriculum*, (5) *the impact of adults’ learning from popular culture*, and (6) *community-created culture as resistance*.

#### *Representations of Adult Learning and Adult Development in Popular Culture*

Researchers such as Pomerantz and Benjamin (2000), Jarvis (2005), and Miller, Armstrong, and Edwards (2005) challenge the very foundation of traditional adult learning theories by examining the texts of various popular culture artifacts that examine adults and adult learning. This research ranges from examining the portrayal of adult development in situation comedies such as *Home Improvement* (Pomerantz & Benjamin, 2000), to examining lifelong learning in the TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Jarvis, 2005), to exploring the adult learning taking place in “reality” TV shows such as *What Not to Wear* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Miller, Armstrong, & Edwards, 2005). These researchers have argued that popular culture representations of adulthood should not be overlooked by adult educators; television programs, even situation comedies, often reflect the reality of cultural changes not obvious in adults’ lived experience (Pomerantz & Benjamin, 2000). And both Jarvis (2005) and Miller, Armstrong, and Edwards (2005) locate the programs they examined within the realm of lifelong learning and highlight the relationship between learning and identity development.

#### *Popular Culture and Educator Self-Reflexivity*

Others argue that adult educators should use popular culture to foster self-reflexive pedagogical practice (Edwards & Miller, 2000; Miller, 1999, 2000b). Since media texts like *Seinfeld* help adults make sense of their own experiences, adult educators need to engage with popular media “in order to strengthen their theoretical understanding and enhance their practice” (Miller, 1999, p. 234). Miller urges us to interrogate our reactions to popular culture, and she reveals how intricately popular culture narratives are entwined with our lived experiences. Edwards and Miller (2000) illustrate this autobiographical reflection in their analysis of their personal experiences as they are informed by “the artifacts of popular culture as well as by more conventional sources” (p. 126). They stress the need for this kind of comprehensive self-reflexive autobiography for adult educators who wish to be relevant in this postmodern age.

#### *Popular Culture as Effective Classroom Practice*

The power of popular culture to aid educator self-reflexivity is intimately connected to educational practices. Some researchers have focused on the use of popular culture in formal educational spaces (Tisdell & Thompson, 2005, 2006, 2007) while others have focused on popular culture as a portal for learning in informal spaces (Jarvis, 1999, 2000). Adult educators’ descriptions of effective classroom practice highlight the benefits of using popular culture to promote learning. For instance, Tisdell and Thompson (2007) found that the adults they interviewed agreed that the media stimulated interaction and new understandings of social issues

when they used media such as films in their teaching. Tisdell and Thompson (2007) also found in their own teaching that using the film *Crash* to stimulate discussion in adult education classrooms led to deeper analysis of issues surrounding diversity in education.

#### *The Analyses of Popular Culture as Adult Education Curriculum*

A small but growing body of research within adult education has examined particular popular culture products and spaces as “public pedagogy” (Ellsworth, 2005; Giroux, 2000) or curriculum that educates adults in informal and incidental ways. Researchers examining popular culture in this way see it as a site where education and learning happen outside formal classroom settings. This research typically consists of content analysis of products or spaces, including soap operas, television, and popular magazines, highlighting how this public curriculum operates as a site of education and of learning. Authors enacting this perspective focus on fiction novels (Jubas 2005, 2007a, 2007b); non-fiction products such as radio, newspapers, magazines, and television histories (Sandlin, 2005; Coles & Armstrong, 2007); video games and virtual communities on the internet (Hayes, 2006); movies, television programs, and cartoons (Armstrong, 2000, 2005a, 2005b; Carter & Howell, 1998); and music (Hemphill, 1999; Price, Jr., 2005). Like similar work that has been conducted in the K-12 arena—where educators have examined how popular culture reproduces hegemonic values and practices such as racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, machismo and violence—much of the work within adult education focusing on popular culture products and services as a space where public pedagogy occurs has also investigated popular culture’s reproductive functions. However, other adult educators draw more from a Gramscian view of popular culture, which posits that popular culture is a site where there is both reproduction of and resistance to hegemony (Armstrong, 2005a; Coles & Armstrong, 2007).

#### *The Effects of Popular Culture on Adult Learners*

An emerging area of study involves examining the actual self-directed learning experiences of adults as they engage with popular culture. We located recent research in the field (Armstrong, 2000, 2005a, 2005b; Wright, 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b; Sandlin, 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Tisdell & Thompson, 2005, 2006, 2007) offering evidence that adults learn about critical social issues from television and other popular culture products. This research is beginning to show that adult learners construct their adult identities, in part, by identifying with particular characters, that they relate their lived experiences to the experiences acted on the small screen, and that they are exposed to a variety of ideologies, attitudes and characteristics from which they choose particular elements to incorporate into their lives, identity development and actions.

#### *Community-Created Culture as Resistance*

Finally, some researchers have examined how communities and social movement groups create their own “popular” culture as a means of resistance. This work falls roughly into two different, yet related, categories. First, researchers have investigated social movement groups that are grounded in or reacting to popular culture. For instance, Sandlin (2007a, 2007b) has examined the resistance tactic of “culture jamming” that is used by activist groups such as *Adbusters* and *Reverend Billy* as a form of critical adult education, focusing on how such groups use the forms and strategies of popular culture such as advertising to critically analyze the hegemonic aspects of popular culture, with a specific focus on consumerism. Similarly, Walter (2007) examined activists such as *Mr. Floatie* and *Save our Surf*, who use creative symbolic tactics reminiscent of culture jamming, in order to raise public awareness about “corporate ideological hegemony,” particularly with regard to environmental issues (p. 613). Finally, Hollenbeck (2005) examined online anti-brand communities that use the Internet to protest against three brands that shape popular culture—*Starbucks*, *Wal-Mart*, and *McDonald’s*.

## Discussion

Our review reveals that while adult educators are increasingly investigating popular culture and its intersections with adult education and learning, much work remains to be done in this area. While heartened by the increasing numbers of studies in recent years, and while noting some very strong pieces in terms of methodological and theoretical rigor, our literature review revealed a need for stronger, higher quality empirical research and a deeper engagement with the theoretical literature from fields such as critical media studies and cultural studies. Adult education theories of self-directed learning, informal learning, incidental learning, experiential learning, and women's learning all acknowledge that learning happens in all aspects of adult lives. Our literature reviewed also revealed that a few adult educators have, thus far, focused their efforts on incorporating popular culture in their practice as a technique for reaching students in the classroom. But despite the insistence by some that most learning is happening in the public sphere, far fewer adult educators have combined their research with their practice and studied popular culture as a site of informal, self-directed and, sometimes, transformational learning.

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