

THEORETICAL PRACTICE AND INTELLECTUAL WORK:  
TEACHING CRITICAL COMMUNICATION THEORY

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Teaching theory to undergraduate students is a steep task. The notion of theory is an unfamiliar and strange one for them, and their willingness and ability to engage in more abstract thought can by no means be taken for granted. Theory -- so it is thought -- cannot be taught to undergraduates in their first or even second year, and the prerequisites for its study have to be taught within the university. The majority of first and second year courses are taught through the medium of common sense language leaving most of their epistemological and methodological bases unexplored. No doubt there are cultural reasons for the observable absence of much care for self-expression and language use among most undergraduates.

Teaching communication theory is, therefore, part of a larger academic assault on the minds of common sensical young adults grown up in a culture of blind and pragmatic empiricism. In addition, media related communication theory finds itself taught to the most avid consumers of the object of study. Even though students might be bewildered by the object of study, they lack distance from it, by it.

The course which is the object of this paper takes this situation as its point of departure. It is a third year course in a three and four year undergraduate program (three year majors and four year Honours) in mass communication. It is part of the core curriculum of required courses, and the only one of these taught in third year. It is preceded by a first year introductory course and second year communication issues and research methods courses, and followed for honours students by a policy and an advanced methods course. I have taught the course now three times.

THE NOTION OF CRITICAL

I take the notion of critical to have two dimensions in relation to university teaching. One addresses the level of intellectual skills, the other the orientation towards the subject matter. While the first does not imply the second, I would argue that the development of the second is greatly helped by the presence of the first. That is, a minimum of intellectual skills are required in order to be able to

adopt what I call a critical orientation. I have learned that the second or political aspect of being critical is not helped at all by a lack of skills.

Critical skills include the ability to read more complex texts, to abstract the structure of arguments made in them, to identify the premises of these arguments, and to discern how evidence is constructed. These abilities are linked to the capacity to obtain distance on texts and objects of inquiry, and to consider one's own approach to them, i.e., one's methodology. Being critical means therefore to be self-reflexive about one's reading-practice and, as we shall later argue in more detail, discourse. It also means the appreciation of the difference between logic and rhetoric. The notion of critical skills is more generally connected to an understanding of intellectual activity as work, requiring a certain discipline and training. I find that most of the students I teach have no relationship to themselves as intellectual workers. They might know how to handle themselves as athletes or doing manual or bureaucratic labour, but they are rarely self-conscious about being intellectuals and training themselves in this respect. Most are mystified by it and treat intellectual ability as a natural talent which one is either born with or not.

The availability of critical skills depends obviously on a student's class/culture background and educational biography, and little can be done in one course. I assign resumes of major theoretical articles as a means of increasing the students' ability to read a text closely and to abstract the structure of arguments in it. Students have to do six such resumes, with the first as a dry run. The resumes are graded and amount in total to 20% of course mark. Resumes address the problem of distance to an already produced text and the activity of reading. They do not help the production of texts by students and the **common errors in reasoning made in writing**. Since a good twenty percent of the students getting into third year have considerable weaknesses in this area, I suggest to many that they should take a writing tutorial offered by the English Department to all undergraduates in the university.

The second dimension of critical relates to the general orientation the course adopts towards mass communication as object of study. This is reflected in the four main theoretical areas studied in the course, i.e., the political economy, ethnomethodology, semiology and cultural studies. These theories claim to and project of being critical are quite different. However, I take them to share the following basics: they all consider the social world to be human made and not the product of natural forces; they see the world to be historical and changing; they view mass communication processes and products in a social context. I am aware that some work done within these traditions does not exhibit one or the other of the three standards, but I would argue that in summary the work related to media studies has done so. This is, among others, evidenced by the fact that the category of ideology is quite central to media analysis in all four traditions.

During the course of the year students invariably question the selection of the four theoretical areas chosen for the course. The justification of the selection is a good opportunity to discuss with students what it means to be critical. Being critical is not an arbitrary choice, but a political and epistemological position taken vis-a-vis the dominant social order. It rests on the analytical judgement that we live in an unjust and unfair-inegalitarian society/world. The central question arising from this human condition is how it is possible for this condition to persist despite many hundred years of human struggle against it. This question is to be answered by work which takes the category of power to be central to all social analysis, and which advances the understanding of the nature of power, its various manifestations and understandings, its structures and hidden and overt operation. Thus, the analysis of power mechanisms, devices, flows, and effects is a critical project in the sense that it is related to the struggle for a just and fair society based on equality of all persons, no matter how this project might then be concretely formulated.

I have found it important for the success of the course and my teaching in general to reiterate this reasoning at various points during the course of the year, and to connect it with the concrete experience of injustice, unfairness and inequality the students share. This is most easily done around the issues of gender discrimination (65 - 70 of the students in the program are female), youth and student unemployment, and institutional hierarchy within the university. The predominant middleclass upbringing and the anglosaxon ethnic homogeneity of the students in the course set, however, considerable limits to any such move.

#### TEACHING THEORY

Teaching-work in the area of theory has many pitfalls. One of the most common involves teaching theory as a reified intellectual construct. For the student learning 'theory' then becomes an academic-bureaucratic end in itself centering around the devouring of a canon of 'theoretical' texts. These texts are hierarchically ordered within the canon which distributes and assigns authority and correctness according to its own parameters. Consequently, it is then possible to discriminate between right and wrong theories, and organize the intellectual universe in simplistic albeit helpfully Manichaen dichotomies. The learner's confusion about the content of the canon is compensated for by a clarity concerning the identification of enemies, i.e., theories and people belonging to other canons. 'Big' theory makes scholars become 'critical theorists,' 'structuralists,' 'symbolic interactionists,' 'system theorists,' or 'cyberneticians,' 'transformational grammarians,' or 'functionalists.' They are identified as adherents to certain schools, and/or as disciple-followers of grand masters whose works they spend their lives studying. They willingly then give their bodies and minds to names like 'Lacanian,' 'Greimasian,' 'Parsonian,' 'Brechtian,' 'Althussarian,' 'Gramscian,' 'Leavisite,' etc., etc., etc.

While I appreciate the fun of being an intellectual partisan and trendy groupie, and while I understand the advantage of a scholarly universe neatly and handily organized in right and wrong theories, I think that the 'Right School,' 'Great Man,' or 'Correct Line' conception of theory has considerable disadvantages, particularly when it comes to teaching.

One disadvantage, and not the least, lies in the effect it has on the students. First, it tends to mystify and confuse them, it makes them feel continuously inadequate, and prompts them to search for an ever receding point of 'correct' understanding, the promise of being that there is a 'right' position, a site where truth, authority, and understanding melt into each other delivering the student into the comforts of certainty and righteousness. Since this point is never attainable yet always sought, students find themselves in a mixture of being lost and addicted to the process of the search. They never gain their own voice, but always look for their master's cords. This dependency on the master and the canon makes them as unproductive thinkers as the best of the number crunching positivists. Theory understood in this way is the ground and object of intellectual warfare, intimidating and dependency creating. This effect is quite at odds with the content of many theories taught in this way which talks about emancipation. Yet the mode in which they are set up as theories and the way they are then disseminated undercut their very project.

In contradistinction to this view of theory and the corresponding way of teaching it, there is another view and way which stresses theories as tools for understanding. Theories are then not taught as part of a religiously valorized canon but as cognitive tools which can deliver certain understandings by reconceptualizing common sensical phenomena and making visible new ones, establishing new and/or different connections, arranging orders of relevancies, etc. Obviously, theories understood in this way are tied to the empirical world and evidence taken from it rather than to the authority of the canon. They are relative in their usefulness according to the task at hand. They are not universal in two ways: they are limited in the range of their applicability, and they are bound to a context from which they arise. They allow the posing of a limited set of questions, and can thus give only a limited number of answers. They can be employed, set to work, and made to deliver understanding through intellectual craftsmanship which is the first and most important step in learning. There is no one Theory, but many theories which compete with each other, sometimes complement each other, or sometimes oppose each other. Their selection is determined by socio-cultural context, training, institutional compatibility, and intellectual purpose. They imply a position from which to know, and are related to interest-structures, i.e., they are necessarily implying an epistemology and a politics. Theories have therefore relative validity, and are not sites of absolute truths.

It follows from such an understanding of theory, that the teaching effort focuses on helping students into the position so that they can use theories for understanding the world and their experiences in it.

In the course in question I teach four bodies of theories or theoretical traditions by first explaining how they conceptualize their object of inquiry, i.e., to what subject matter do they address themselves and how do they address it? Within the first lecture I include an example of this reading strategy in order to concretely show the respective theory in use. I then introduce concepts and build up to what can be called the analytical attitude of the particular theory. I demonstrate the reading strategy, analytical attitude, and the use of the key concepts by applying theory to a recent media event or ongoing media practice. Alongside, the students read books and articles suggesting concepts and demonstrating their application. I try to organize these readings in such a way that the theoretical language is first shown in their use, followed by an exposition of the theoretical position, followed by application and sometimes further development of the initial position. Students do their resume on the text which discusses/introduced the key concepts. At the end of each of the four sections of the course students apply the theoretical tradition in an assignment. They analyze routine media products like the *Ottawa Citizen*, *The Journal*, *MacLean's*, and CKCU-FM's program guide *Trans FM* from the perspective of one or the other theory. To facilitate the uncanny intellectual move, I ask the students to step into the 'boots' of the person whom we have declared for the purpose of the course the main theoretician of each perspective. For example, one assignment is entitled 'Harold Garfinkel reads *MacLean's*' or 'Roland Barthes reads *The Journal*'. By personalizing the position of the subject of theorizing and identifying it with an author the students have read, it is easier for the students to cut through most those introductory maneuvers which are normally required to set up the analytical voice in essays. It also helps the weaker students to complete an exercise which might otherwise be beyond their means by allowing them to emulate the reading strategy from one of their readings step by step. They forgo no doubt the creative use of the theory. But in this exercise, at least, they follow the analytical path laid out to them in relation to a media product which they usually approach with the natural attitude of everyday life (Schutz).

#### CRITICAL COMMUNICATION THEORY

I have already indicated above the four theories or theoretical traditions which form the context of the course. Political economy, ethnomethodology, semiology, and cultural studies are selected because they form relatively independent bodies of thought, have distinct conceptual apparatuses, clear methodological imperatives and reading strategies, and have recently shown themselves to be fruitful to further our understanding of the mass communication processes. I would claim that they can and do form the basis of critical research in mass communication studies. This claim can be justified. I shall first explain the link I make between the four theories in the way I have organized them in the course. I then shall return to the claim and justification.

In very simplified terms I take political economy to be the summary name for research into the mass media which focuses on the economic dynamics of capitalist market relations (Murdock and Golding, 1977), ownership structures and property relations (Schiller, 1973; 1981), the economic logic of profit (Westergaard, 1977), and the mechanisms of corporate control (Murdock, 1982). Ethnomethodology refers to a body of research which looks at the sense making practices and accounting methods (Garfinkel, 1967) particularly of journalists (Tuchman, 1972; 1973), at the routine structures of newswork (Tuchman, 1978; Fishman, 1980), at the indexicality and reflexivity of accounts (Leiter, 1980), and at the construction of facticity and social order (Smith, 1978). Semiology refers to work which studies the signification of texts (Barthes, 1972), rhetorical forms (Barthes, 1972) and mode of address (Hartley, 1982), narrative structures and organization of discourse (Hartley, 1982; Brunson and Morely, 1978), and position of reading (Morely, 1980). Finally, cultural studies focuses on general cultural and specific artistic forms, social relations and cultural production (Williams, 1981), technology and culture (Williams, 1974; Ellis, 1982; Bruck, 1984), and cultural practices and reproduction (Williams, 1980).

Each of the four theories centrally addresses the question of meaning as it is socially constructed in the mass communication process, but they conceptualize the notion of meaning in quite different ways. Political economists see the meaning of a message as determined by the economic dynamics of capitalism at large and of those media institutions operating within it (e.g., determinations flowing from patents of ownership or the organization of the labour process). Ethnomethodology sees meaning as constructed within particular settings and through routinized sense making practices. Semiotologists see meaning as an effect of the structuration of texts, and cultural studies views meaning as arising out of the interaction between social order and signifying systems.

The four theories can be set into relation to each other by using the theoretical continuum from text to context to show where and how they conceptualize meaning and where they place the analytical emphasis in their reading of the mass communication process. Political economy is a theory of the context with little or no conceptualization of the text and of the interface between textual structures and social structures. The meaning of texts is inferred from the origin of production within the economic and institutional structures of capitalist society. Ethnomethodology can be seen as a theory concerning the interrelation of text and context, whereby the conceptualization of the context is reduced to that of the social setting and the organizational form of work in institutions, and the text is seen as the result of the sense making efforts of newswriters or members of society. Semiology is a theory of texts, of signs and codes, which infers from their structuration the structuration of society. Lastly, I would propose to view cultural studies as a theory which encompasses the entire continuum and analyzes various aspects of it while seeing it inside a larger signifying system, culture.

If the above descriptions of the theories' key concepts and analytical foci are correct, we can assess their weaknesses in conceptualizing mass communication processes as follows. Political economy is critically flawed by its lack of a conceptualization of texts. Ethnomethodology reduces the socio-economic forces of capitalism to settings within bureaucratic institutions, and is also lacking a theory of codes (Sacks' paper on membership categorization devices, etc. was a move towards the development of such a theory (Sacks, 1972). His work and that of the 'conversationalists' has, however, thus far not been appropriated within media studies.) Semiology is too narrow a theory for media studies because of its failure to consider the structures of production of texts and the social relations of production and reception.

I would argue now that it is possible to utilize the work done within these three traditions within a cultural studies framework without committing major category mistakes. The point is not to bring different and largely incompatible theoretical traditions together and create the false impression of a theoretical homology or complementarity. The objective is that of laying out the theoretical territory that has to be covered both in communication studies in general and within individual research projects if the trap of reductionism is to be avoided. This trap, as is well known, may take many different forms, economism and structuralist theoreticism being but two of them. The mapping of the territory is necessary for guidance as well as evaluation. It is this territory which forms the basis of critical research in communication studies.

#### TEACHING CRITICAL COMMUNICATION THEORY

The emphasis on this course is on teaching theories as intellectual tools for understanding mass communication processes. Consequently, the course has to start off by considering 'what is theory'. In the first couple of years of teaching the course, I tried to approach this question directly via the use of metatheoretical readings and referring to the appropriate debates in theory of science (Hospers, 1980; Feyerabend, 1975; Popper, 1972; Thagard, 1980; Taylor, 1977; Horkheimer, 1972). But I found out quickly that these debates were too arcane for the students who were still not sure about the relation between observation and theory. Furthermore, I found that the above mentioned texts led students to conceive the notion of theory in a way which was too narrow and at least implicitly modeled on the project of the natural sciences. I thus decided to both shorten this six week section of the course, and start off in a different way altogether. I began the course this year with a historical Innis-type introduction, and used Umberto's Eco's novel, *The Name of the Rose*, as the first reading (Eco, 1983). Eco's book lured students returning from a long book-less summer back into the habit of reading, and set up for them a host of potential questions ranging from problems of observation and inference, to the practices of production and reproduction of knowledge/texts within institutions, to the embeddedness of these institu-

tions and practices within the larger social, cultural and political order. By proposing to the students to read the novel not only as a thrilling murder and detective story but also as an expose on the late medieval mass media system and the struggles in and around it, I provided them with more than enough empirical, comparative, and theoretical material to last for the first part of the course.

The novel also helped to introduce the question of representation and the crisis in representation in a non-overburdening way. Using parts of Ravetz's social history of science (Ravetz, 1971) and from Foucault's first section of *The Order of Things* (Foucault, 1970) I linked the emergence of the notions of scientific inquiry, empirical evidence, and empirically based theory to the emergence of the modern problematic of meaning. In this way the central theoretical axis of the course, i.e., the consideration of different conceptualizations of meaning, was made to relate from the beginning to different and changing notions of theory as well as representation. We then considered the effects of the mechanical reproduction of texts and images, the industrialization of cultural production, the commodification of artifacts, and the consumerization of the practice of reading. I ended this section by using Carey's now already classical farewell to behaviorist communication research to mark the beginning point of our discussion of various contemporary theories (Carey, 1977).

Each of the following sections of the course deal with one of the afore-mentioned theoretical traditions and last five weeks. They are organized so that the analytical focus will proceed from theories of context to theories of texts. Cultural studies makes up the last section and serves as well to situate the other theoretical traditions in relation to each other. This gives cultural studies the undeniable, but in my view quite justified, privilege of having the 'last word' in the course. A course such as this, designed to teach theories as analytical instruments confronts the danger of leading students to adopt an instrumental relativism towards theory, and to underestimate the extent to which theory is an intellectual activity. But I consider this approach more likely than any other to allow undergraduates to assume an active position vis-a-vis a subject matter which can easily and usually does overwhelm them.

The course could go further in situating theories in relation to each other and foregrounding their status as discourses which borrow from other discourses, interact and oppose them, and which emerge from specific contexts, etc., but neither time nor the knowledge and ability of students bring to the course allow for this.

Students are evaluated in the course in three ways by the above mentioned resumes (20% of mark), by the four reading exercises (40% of mark), and by two exams one at Christmas, the other at year's end (40% of mark). The exams are a concession to the established institution of the university and the expectation of the students. They test what I call the information base of the course through twenty short questions

regarding taxonomy, definitions of terms, and key conceptual chains. The exams assure the administration and students that the course has a concrete content, some 'objective material', besides its teaching of styles of thought, modes of inquiry, and conceptual sophistication. The better students realize the contradiction between these exams and the general objectives of critical teaching. Their challenges of the role of the exams in the course are a good starting point for considering institutional constraints on teaching and learning practices.

The course has been reasonably successful in teaching the students the skill side of being critical. This is appreciated by the students after the end of the course when job interviews or graduate entrance exams test them in this regard. It is more difficult to assess the effectiveness of the course in regard to a critical orientation. Students who are already disposed in a critical direction benefit the most, I would think. They turn in assignments which are often quite excellent, and use the theoretical map they have learned in the course to orient themselves in other courses as well.

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