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# Commentary on Slade

Drake

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**Author:** [Susan Drake](#)

**In Response To:** Christina Slade's [Speaking of South Park](#)

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Slade has written an interesting paper advocating the controversial cartoon series "South Park" as a vehicle to teach reasoning skills to adolescents. In contrast to Postman (1993) and Rushkoff, she believes that there is more than one form of reasoning than one that is linear and can only be found in print. Rather she defines reasoning as fundamentally a feature of discourse and action - how we act and rationalize these actions. Both definitions of reasoning would be considered important by curriculum developers today.

There are two current movements that encourage thinking such as Slade's: interdisciplinarity and constructivism. First, the move toward interdisciplinary curriculum is based upon the rationale that with the ever-increasing knowledge base, there is too much content knowledge to ever be able to teach it all. Instead the focus on teaching cross-disciplinary skills that emphasize the transfer of learning to many walks of life. Included in the list of skills are literacy, numeracy, technological literacy, ecological literacy and media literacy. Each of these literacies includes basic and higher order skills. The importance of media and ecological literacy is somewhat obfuscated by the current furor on increasing math/science/technological skills. Yet in a world that is rapidly being destroyed by our own hands, it is hard to argue that ecological literacy should be left on the back-burner and as consisting of "soft:" skills. Similarly, when the average North American (for example) is reported to watch between 4 and 5 hours of television a day, media literacy has to be considered a critical life skill.

In recent curriculum ventures, the acquisition of higher order skills is stressed. Given Bloom's (1956) classic taxonomy, these interdisciplinary higher-order skills include analysis, synthesis and evaluation. These skills are not value-free and applying them to the deconstruction of a show like South Park could be a valuable and prosocial act as Slade suggests is possible.

The constructivist perspective in education also suggests including South Park in the curriculum may have some merit. Although there may be a true reality out there, we all construct our own meaning to understand it (Ornstein & Hunkins, 1998). Some of the key concepts of constructivism are:

- the student constructs his or her own learning and knowledge is socially constructed,
- knowledge is subjective and continually being developed and modified,
- new ideas are integrated into existing knowledge structures,
- the teacher's role is to create disequilibrium or provide stimuli for students to examine, expand and modify their existing knowledge

(Heuwinkle, 1996).

Given new constructivist ways of teaching and learning, one of the key principles is using relevant material. Relevancy relates to topics that engage the learner and are often in a real life context. This approach precludes material chosen because it will be needed for some distant task or because the teacher put it on the test. Slade makes a good argument that South Park passes the relevancy test.

Beyond the relevancy test, it is crucial that students acquire a deep understanding of the skills they are learning (Perkins, 1991). Otherwise, they will remain isolated skills and not transferable to real world problem-solving or making important life decisions. I suggest that Slade does not go far enough in her use of South Park as a critical thinking tool. She claims that we can criticize content and argumentation strategies in TV offerings "... but even better we can train students to identify rational and irrational moves themselves" She continues on saying that this can be done in the familiar mode of logic exercises in a classical framework. Yet much though the creativity of her web page may be lauded I don't think she has provided this vehicle.

Slade sustains the same fallacy as many other educators when she claims that students go through a process of inquiry through her question-based model available on her web page. She has provided the reader with the questions. (Indeed she leaves the task of question creation to another expert on a topic with which she has little expertise). She does not address the critical skill of creating the questions with which to critique. To strengthen her position, Slade could look at various methods for teaching students to ask meaningful questions and therefore to be able to "identify rational and irrational moves themselves". This ability to generate alternatives and to distinguish among explanations leads to the highest order thinking (Sternberg, 1994). By addressing this missing aspect, she will be teaching students how to truly think for themselves rather than just to respond to questions provided by the expert.

Finally, Slade may wish to revisit some of her own arguments for including South Park in the curriculum. I question its value as a regular diet. In watching four episodes, I had to agree that "right sort of always wins'. And so there may be a message worth ferreting out. But, it is also hard to believe that the blatant racism, homophobia and sexism will be edited out by students. Schools are rife with prejudice as it is. Given the peer pressure to conform, it seems that while students mock some of the biases that are commonplace on the show, it would also be unpopular to take a stand against it. As a teaching strategy, I believe she needs to juxtapose South Park with other vehicles that attend to the same topic. For example, various selections that deal with racism could be presented to students. These could include newspaper articles, movies, news, personal experiences etc. Students could generate questions to explore these different selections and synthesize the results to reach a more palatable view of racism that exists on the show.

Another powerful example for this approach would be exploring violence. Slade tends to dismiss violence on TV; to her it is a moot point if viewing violence has any effect at all - or at the very least it may only desensitize students to violence. She claims that cartoons work because they are not real and by implication, South Park cannot have deleterious effects on adolescents.

Theory aside, South Park was created by two young men from South Park, near Denver, Colorado. The characters are agglomerations of the kids known during the two creators' childhoods. Kenny, the "most incomprehensible and sophisticated kid" is killed in the first and every subsequent episode in increasingly bizarre ways. A cute gimmick perhaps, as the show goes on to explore potentially substantive issues such as homosexuality and euthanasia. Kenny's deaths are defining moments of the show. Yet, South Park is uncannily close to Littleton, CO. It would not be hard to extend the violence argument to see the influence such a show might have on neighboring Columbine High students. And the disastrous consequences.

The lessons of South Park can be juxtaposed with other sources such as the nightly news, sports broadcasts, and legal dramas. Students themselves might then develop critical questions. Does violence increase in society as we are exposed to it more and more on TV? What difference does it make if a character is a cartoon, a fictional one or a real person involved in violence on the nightly news? What can I do to make a difference?

This approach of exploring different material and developing questions based on the material was used in a grade 12 class I once taught. Students deconstructed different forms of media to disclose the implicit values embedded in the media stories being told on a topic that interested them. They then presented this to the class in a creative format. This happened at a time when two girls had disappeared from the high school. One group showed splices from hockey games broadcasted on TV; the series of slice after slice clearly demonstrated an advocacy of violence for the players (although this may not have been apparent when one watches only one game). This was followed by a presentation that used a part of a show on serial killers; here the host was using the same way of talking as the hockey broadcaster. It was a chilly realization to see this show, a prime-time documentary, actually promoting this most vile form of violence at a subtle but clear level. Worse yet when we discovered that it was a despicable serial killing that had taken the life of one of the girls. It had not been that far a cry from the hockey game to the student's fate, and it had been promoted by the implicit values in our society.

The real point seems to me that South Park has the potential for both positive and negative learnings. If we want students to acquire reasoning as a life skill that transfers beyond the classroom or web page, we need to offer a variety of strategies and opportunities to apply the skill in a real life context. South Park is only one such context. The classical framework that Slade mentions needs to be developed to apply across contexts and in a way that facilitates deep understanding in our students. Only with this deep understanding and

application of the reasoning process can we expect students of today to behave any differently

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