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The Use of Media in the Undergraduate-level Social Science Courses

Anna Cholewinska

Abstract

Using social and popular media and current news in the classroom can engage students and allow them to connect theory and practice. In addition, these tools can help students master critical thinking and media literacy skills. While using media and current news is not a new concept in K–12 education, it seems uncommon at the college level. This chapter will discuss some examples of how to incorporate social and popular media and current news in undergraduate-level social science courses in a meaningful way that corresponds with Bloom’s taxonomy. It will also discuss some of the possible strategies and potential benefits of that educational approach. Finally, some observations and lessons learned from the classes will be shared.

Overview

Professor: First, I love the articles you present to read, which make you think, of course. Because there's never a chance to let the instructors know what we think past the survey, I want you to know that I've really enjoyed this class and learning so much more than I ever knew about the interactions between medical entities, professionals, and policies with society. So often all we humans do is grumble about lousy service. Medicine and its many aspects are varied and complex. I believe, fully, that it is the power of the consumer that must make a solid and immovable stand for excellent healthcare and take action to ensure that medicalization and society complement rather than conflict. (Anonymous student, personal communication, June 21, 2015)

This comment, sent to a college professor in a sociology class, is evidence that students come to classes to learn practical applications, not only theoretical models and frameworks, terms, and concepts. Students immediately want to see how theory applies to what they would do as professionals. While in some classes, such as practicum or internship courses, it is possible to do activities that show students applications of the theoretical concepts to specific situations; in others, it is more challenging and requires not only a lot more planning, preparation, and creativity from instructors. However, in most classes, instructors could use news stories and real-life examples to illustrate concepts and theories that they teach. This chapter will discuss some examples of how to incorporate social and popular media and current news into undergraduate classes to enhance students' learning of course concepts and skills.

Review of the Literature

While using media, popular magazine articles, and news in the classroom is not a new concept, it is mostly utilized in the K–12 system (Tisdell, 2007). In higher education, current news, social media, or motion pictures appear to be used primarily in communication or journalism courses (Lopez & Aguaded, 2015; Considine, Horton, & Moorman, 2009; Fleming, 2014). The purpose of using this content in these courses is mainly to analyze the

quality of the professional writing and presentation of the issue or topic and to illustrate course concepts. The idea of using current news or popular and social media, such as motion pictures or blogs, to enrich college-level classes and allow students to learn from them does not seem to resonate among instructors, even though it offers a huge variety of opportunities for the instructors and students. For example, bringing news to college-level courses allows instructors to promote critical thinking skills, media literacy, and information literacy in general (Tisdell, 2007). Additionally, Vossen-Callens (2014) argued that it also allows instructors to incorporate Bloom's taxonomy with the help of popular and social media. She showed how students are not only able to learn and understand course concepts but also to master higher-level learning skills, such as analysis and evaluation.

Depending on the field and students' proficiency, various activities could be used in the classroom to promote interaction with others, engagement in the discussions and other class activities, and mastery of critical thinking skills. Furthermore, even though there is already some evidence that a hands-on, collaborative approach enhances reflexivity and advances conceptual thinking, using popular media in graduate-level classes is almost unheard of (Creamer, Ghoston, Drape, Ruff, & Mukuni, 2012). In this study, motion pictures were successfully used in a doctoral-level research methods class. As they concluded, students were challenged to see that knowledge is rarely produced in isolation or through sudden, unaccountable bursts of revelatory insight, but rather is more generally produced through a slow and meticulous process of trial and error and substantive interactions with others equally invested in a thoughtful and meaningful scientific inquiry (Creamer et al., 2012, p. 419).

Integration into the Student Experience

Social and popular media, and current news, can be incorporated into the student experience in multiple ways. As Vossen-Callens (2014) noted, students who are disengaged will not learn much in their classes. Lectures are rarely engaging enough to keep students interested. Real-life examples, offered by instructors from their own experience and practice or from the experience of others, not only keep students interested but also help them understand what they are learning. Moreover, lectures typically require students to take notes and memorize or simply understand course concepts. These are necessary as

a starting point for any learning, but analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating would be the natural next steps that students would need to take.

In particular, current news offers a great opportunity for instructors and students to master those skills. Through a series of projects, students can learn how to work with different sources and information gathered from them. Learning how to determine which sources of information are reliable and which are not could serve as an initial activity for the students in their learning of information literacy. Additionally, the analysis of the sources could lead to other activities—summarizing articles, differentiating between facts and opinions, supporting opinions with facts, learning how to identify cause and effect, or comparing and contrasting topics and issues in the news. These are basic critical thinking and information-literacy skills taught in many college-level classes. They are also typically required by professional organizations creating guidelines or accrediting college programs.

The American Psychological Association (2013), for example, listed information literacy as one of the learning goals and outcomes for undergraduate psychology students (APA, 2013). Learning these skills in hands-on, practical activities would be a significant experience for students. It is important to note that, while in college, students typically have access to their school library and selected scholarly databases. Furthermore, students could ask for the librarians' help to locate appropriate and applicable resources. After they graduate, students will need to do all that work themselves as they may not have access to scholarly databases. For this reason, information literacy and critical thinking skills are essential for them and, therefore, should be mastered in various courses.

Current news, and personal blogs, could be incorporated into teaching in a form of case analysis. Using the most current examples would allow instructors to see how students learned that process and how they analyze specific cases on their own. More advanced students might also be tasked with identifying additional cases for the analysis and sharing them with their classmates for a collaborative analysis. In this process, they will also learn how to search for information and select appropriate cases and work collaboratively with others. Similarly, books, motion pictures, and documentaries could serve as cases for analysis with the use of course concepts and theories. Using those will offer students an experience of observing certain social issues, similar to what they could see in the society.

Social media—such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and blogs—also offers valuable opportunities for instructors or their students and could

be used to promote social networking and intellectual growth. As Chou (2012) noted, there is already research that shows benefits of self-reflection about learning and professional activities. Therefore, encouraging students to create personalized blogs about their own learning, course content, or course-related activities is a valuable learning experience. Additionally, it also supports collaborative learning and trains students in peer reviewing as they should also submit commentary posts to their classmates. YouTube, Flickr, and Khan Academy are rarely viewed as social media tools, even though they are widely used for personal, professional, and teaching purposes (Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2013).

Photos, documentaries, and movies from YouTube and Flickr are often incorporated into courses. In their recent versions, learning management systems such as Blackboard allow seamless embedding of video clips and pictures from YouTube. It is also worth noting that YouTube allows instructors to record their own lectures and other instructional materials to share with students directly from learning management systems. These videos are not available to the public as they are hidden on the private channels. They could be personalized and directly address specific students or groups. Since the process of creating and embedding such instructional resources can be done without any special skills or equipment, it is easy for instructors to use these options. Finally, educational organizations, such as Khan Academy, offer databases of instructional resources for various classes, including math, science, medicine, art, and history. Videos with micro-lectures in more than thirty subjects, created for Khan Academy, are widely used by educators at all levels. According to the Khan Academy website, there are more than thirty-seven million learners using its instructional materials.

Proven Practices, Examples, and Results

While all instructors teaching in the Bachelor of Arts in Applied Psychology program at City University of Seattle use real-life examples in their classes, some are proficient in incorporating current news and popular social media into their classes. Those instructors are typically perceived by their students as highly engaged and their classes as interesting. In end-of-course evaluations, such as the one quoted at the beginning of this chapter, students have expressed their appreciation for additional materials from the popular media and current news. Students do realize

that these real-life stories not only help them truly comprehend the course concepts but also allow them to master their practical skills, and see how these cases, presented by their instructors, apply to specific situations.

Discussion activities gain a lot of depth when they begin with short videos presenting specific content. For example, in the Sociology of the Family course, short documentaries created by *National Geographic* are presented to students to discuss various marital and nonmarital arrangements, such as polyandry, polygyny, or free love. Students, instead of just reading about these arrangements in the text or in the lecture notes provided by the instructor, are able to see a family of each type and understand the benefits and challenges of such families. Therefore, students are not limited to just memorizing definitions, but they make a connection between a definition and a real family they've observed. Similarly, the instructor can share various articles found in the popular media to illustrate concepts taught in the class. Some of those articles generate rich discussions with a significant number of posts. For example, a supplementary discussion of a child abuse case, based on a video and article from the news, generated nineteen additional posts in the class of thirteen students, even though it was not mandatory to comment in that particular thread. It is important to note that there were also several additional threads that week, initiated by the instructor who posted supplementary materials for students. Altogether, thirty-five extra posts were generated in all additional threads that included ancillary resources.

Moreover, as mentioned above, popular media could be brought into courses in the form of books or motion pictures. The Applied Psychology program has utilized these sources in several courses as major assessments in which students were tasked to analyze them from the social perspective. For example, in the Abnormal Psychology class, students analyzed the main characters of an assigned movie in the context of the presenting circumstances and symptomology relevant to abnormal and maladaptive behavior. Students were to clearly indicate comprehensive provisional diagnoses of the characters by summarizing interpretations and perceptions of the characters' experiences based on course learning. In this paper, students were expected to demonstrate their ability to synthesize learning into an analytical essay that covered an overview of abnormal psychology and the study of maladaptive behavior.

Finally, posting popular magazine articles and current news can motivate students to actively participate in the discussions. Posting articles also

models behavior that allows students to find articles to enrich discussions and other course activities. It can empower students to be active learners by seeking and sharing information with others and consequently contributing to various course and collaborative activities. For example, it was observed in several sociology courses in which the instructor shared supplemental articles from the news and popular magazines that, within about two sessions, students started sharing similar resources as well. By the end of the course, most students shared at least one additional article with the rest of the group.

Lessons Learned, Tips for Success, and Recommendations

Incorporating social and popular media and current news into teaching is not difficult, yet it requires reflection and caution. As Fleming (2014) noted, there are several strategies that help with incorporating articles and current news into courses. It is important not only to start with the students' interests but to also clearly discuss why certain articles or cases were shared with them. Therefore, instructors should ask thought-provoking questions about the shared information and establish a connection between the class and the community (Fleming, 2014). Additionally, educators need to introduce ancillary articles or information by elaborating why they were important to share and their relation to the course concepts. That could model similar actions by students, who could not only offer information to the class but also explain why it was worth sharing with others.

It is important to avoid overwhelming students with too many supplemental materials. Often, educators create their own bank of articles or information that they want to share with students. They must be careful about what to share with a particular group of students as the composition of the group and class dynamics might affect how specific information or cases are received and perceived by students. Additionally, sharing too many cases or articles with students might lead to students' fatigue and, in fact, decreased participation in the activities. Moreover, timing of the addition of supplementary information is important. Ideally, those additional resources should be shared in the middle of the session as students are the most attentive at that time. For example, in the Sociology of the

Family class, materials shared on the second, third, fourth, and fifth day of a weeklong session were more often viewed and commented on than those shared on days six and seven. A closer look at the patterns of participation in the activities revealed that while students were active on these days, they seemed to be more concerned with fulfilling activity requirements as prescribed by the syllabus and thus responding to fellow students and to additional questions posed by their instructor.

Conclusion

Using social and popular media, and current news, could enrich courses and students' learning experiences. They offer multiple opportunities for various practical activities for students, such as critical thinking exercises, case analysis, and case studies. Finally, they also contribute to establishing connections between theory and practice, and class and the community. It is important, however, to remember that they are only supplemental resources and should never replace scholarly resources that students need to use to create their work.

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Author Biography

Anna Cholewinska is an Associate Professor and Academic Program Director at City University of Seattle. She has spent more than twenty years teaching students in undergraduate and graduate programs. She has also trained teams in multiculturalism. She earned an MA in sociology from the University of Warsaw, Poland.