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IPEL Grant Application
(Initiative to Promote Excellence in Student Learning)
Minnesota State University, Mankato

PROPOSAL COVER PAGE

Title of Project: *Turning It Off: Teaching Media Criticism Through Ethnography*

Name: Dr. Charles Lewis

Are you full-time faculty in 2006-2007?
(fixed-term faculty are not eligible to apply)

Yes No

Do you plan to return to MSU in 2007-2008?

Yes No

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Campus Address: Nelson 136

Campus Phone: 389-5524

College: Arts and Humanities

Department: Mass Communications

Spring Semester Schedule:

List times when available to participate in Learning Communities and workshops.

Mondays: 9 to 11 a.m. and 4 to 6 p.m.

Tuesdays: 8 to 11 a.m. and 3 to 6 p.m.

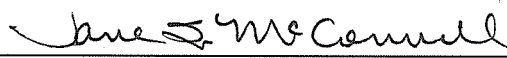
Wednesdays: 9 to 11 a.m. and 4 to 6 p.m.

Thursdays: 8 to 11 a.m. and 3 to 6 p.m.


Fridays: 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.



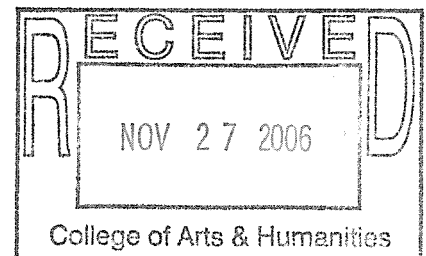
Signature of Applicant



Signature of Department Chair/Director/Supervisor



Signature of College Dean/Vice President



1. *Turning It Off: Teaching Media Criticism Through Ethnography*

2. To me, critical thinking means intellectual clarity and honesty. It involves reason, discipline and the will to explore what we'd sometimes rather leave alone. It's the determination to see and properly evaluate that man behind the curtain who claims to be a great wizard. In my field of mass communications, critical thinking helps practitioners disseminate fair and accurate information. It also helps media producers and consumers understand how communicative processes affect individuals and society.

I plan to enhance my teaching of a key senior-level Mass Communications course titled "Ethics and Press Criticism." As one who regularly teaches this course, I've successfully encouraged students to explore media ethics through the use of case studies and group projects. I hope to develop similar student engagement in the "press criticism" part of the course. ("Press" in the course title is rather anachronistic because course content has evolved over time to encompass all mass media rather than just print media.)

I plan to increase student engagement in the media criticism part of the course by having them conduct honest, disciplined and rational self studies — studies that should build insight regarding how media use helps to shape their values, beliefs, actions and relationships. Through the observation and analysis of their own media use and through the self-experiment of eliminating for a time electronic-media use from their lives, students should develop a deeper understanding of a range of media effects. They should also better understand the value of critical-thinking skills through their applied use.

3. This project is a retooling of the second half of a regularly offered four-credit course of 25 students, starting in spring 2007. In the project's first two weeks I'll detail message-oriented media-effects studies. I'll also discuss the pervasiveness of media through discussing media-use research such as a Ball State study indicating the average American spends nine hours a day with media. I'll also address audience studies indicating how a media-rich life impacts people in many ways beyond message effects. For example, living in a media-saturated environment affects patterns of interactions, relationships, time use and even living-space design.

During the third week I'll train students in ethnographic observational methods and the anthropological concept of "reflexivity" — the analysis of one's own perceptions and assumptions during research. Students will also complete an in-depth survey on their media use and media-effects understandings. The survey will consist of Likert-scale and short-answer questions.

During the fourth week students will engage in a form of detailed journaling through recording “field notes” of their daily media use and contexts. In the fifth week students will attempt to eliminate all non-instructional electronic mass communication from their lives — no TVs, radios, iPods, stereos, movies or Internet. They will, of course, record field notes of their experiences. Students will resume normal media use and continue field notes in week six. During the last two weeks, students will write an analysis of their three-week odyssey, based largely on field-note entries. They will also complete another in-depth survey.

4. The overall assessment goal is to develop students’ abilities to critically analyze and understand media effects, which in turn should help them to become more socially responsible media practitioners. The project’s outcomes are for students to: 1. Understand the value and limitations of various research methods; 2. Know and be able to use basic ethnographic methods and concepts; 3. Better understand media uses and effects; 4. Develop a better knowledge of and appreciation for their own media use and social responsibilities as potential professional media practitioners.

A four-point rubric for each outcome will be applied, and several assessment tools will help me to use the rubrics. The initial media-use survey and the post-research survey of students will provide much information, as will student research-project analyses and field notes, which are to be submitted with analyses. Class discussions throughout the entire eight-week period will also help me in the assessment process.

5. I am very excited about the project and would be happy to present it through a variety of venues, including the IPESL Web site and university, college and/or department colloquiums. I also plan to produce a conference paper and/or journal article on the project because I know it will be of interest to those in professional organizations such as the AEJMC. In addition, I plan to use the implementation of the project in the “Ethics and Press Criticism” course as the basis for developing an MSU honors course devoted to an in-depth study of reception-oriented media effects.

6. Our departmental goals include helping students understand media effects and develop into ethical, responsible and competent communicators. These reinforce the university goals of preparing students for careers and lifelong learning. My project, with its focus on developing critical-thinking skills regarding media use and effects, strongly reinforces all of the above.