

IPEL Project Summary Report

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Turning It Off: Teaching Media Criticism Through Ethnography

PURPOSE

The project purpose was to increase student engagement in the media criticism part of a key senior-level Mass Communications core course titled "Ethics and Press Criticism." The idea was to have students conduct honest, disciplined and rational self studies — studies meant to build insight regarding how media use can affect people's values, beliefs, actions and relationships. I hoped that 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 would develop a deeper understanding of a range of media effects.

RESULTS

My plan involved retooling the spring 2007 second half of the course, which had an enrollment of 20 students. In the project's first two weeks I detailed message-oriented media-effects studies. I also emphasized 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. In addition, I addressed 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 trained students in ethnographic observational methods and the anthropological concept of "reflexivity" – the analysis of one's own perceptions and assumptions during research. Students also completed an in-depth survey on their media use and media-effects understandings. The eight-page survey consisted of Likert-scale and short-answer questions.

During the fourth week students began detailed journaling through recording "field notes" of their daily media use and contexts. In the fifth week for a total of four days students attempted to eliminate all non-instructional electronic mass communication from their lives — no TVs, radios, iPods, stereos, movies or Internet. They were to record field notes of their experiences. Students then resumed normal media use and continued field notes in week six. During the last two weeks, students wrote analyses of their data, based largely on field-note entries. I initially planned to have them complete another in-depth survey at the end of the project, but I eventually found such a tool to be unnecessary.

The overall assessment goal was 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 were 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.

I originally planned to apply four-point rubrics to help me assess each outcome, but because the project evolved as I implemented it in class during the second half of spring term, I found my rubrics and assessment tools needed refinement. In the end, I felt I did not have enough congruent pre- and post-project student data to work with in terms of rubrics.

Still, through the use of several assessment tools, I am certain my project enhanced students' critical thinking skills regarding media effects. For example, early in the project, I had each student complete an eight-page media-use survey. In this survey students estimated the amount of time spent each week with various media, the number and type of media in their households, etc. Students also wrote about their level of media use as children and how they felt they could cope with the upcoming experimental period of media deprivation. The survey results and initial class discussions provided me with a great baseline.

In general, students underestimated the amount of time, money and energy they devoted each day to media — in particular television, recorded music, radio and the Internet. They also had misconceptions concerning how media use affected their relationships and activities. For example, they did not see much of a connection between socializing and media use, or (lack of) adequate studying and media use.

However, by the end of the term the students came to realize the large role media use played in their lives. They understood they were exposed to more media much more often than they had thought. They perceived how media grounded much socializing. They saw how media use ate many hours that could have been devoted to study. Students emphasized these critical points during many class discussions, as well as through their completed research-project papers and final essay-exam answers.

Student evaluations of the overall course also indicated that I met critical-thinking outcomes. As I wrote in my proposal, I believe critical thinking means intellectual clarity and honesty. It involves reason, discipline and the will to explore what we'd sometimes rather leave alone. The evaluations for this particular course in spring 2007 were very high. Many students reported great appreciation for the research project — they felt very engaged in learning about media effects through the gateway of their own media use. Several suggested the "media-deprivation" period should be increased from a few days to a few weeks. I found this to be particularly striking because nearly every student had stressed in field notes, research papers and final

essay exam just how painful the deprivation period had been. Yet, at the end of the term, they suggested it should be increased.

ISSUES

The greatest challenge for me was trying to implement the project in the same term during which I was exploring critical thinking through my IPESL community of practice. I found myself scrambling throughout the term as I revised aspects of the project because of material gleaned through community-of-practice presentations or discussions.

I hope to find the going easier this fall, as I am again using the project in a section of "Ethics and Press Criticism." I have revised the survey as well as some class presentations and assignments. I've also tinkered with the project timeline. Overall, I'm really looking forward to it, and I can see the students are already intrigued.

DISSEMINATION

I would be happy to share my results in some sort of MSU or MnSCU gathering in the near future. Also, I do 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. However, I would like to use the project in several sections of the course before I feel comfortable enough to parade it to my peers in communication studies and instruction. This would also give me time to further refine the project.

CONCLUSION

Please note I am willing to share supporting documentation related to this report, such as media-use survey results and instructional-evaluation results. Finally, I'd like to thank all those who made MSU's IPESL program possible, in particular co-directors Stewart Ross, Tracy Pellett and Brenda Flannery.