

Creating Deeper Connections: Exploring Values and the Potential for Transformation through New Media

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“Impart as much as you can of your spiritual being to those who are on the road with you, and accept as something precious what comes back to you from them.”

Albert Schweitzer

“If I create from the heart, nearly everything works; if from the head, almost nothing.”

Marc Chagall, painter

A multi-year research project at the University of California, Los Angeles is investigating interest in spirituality and the deepening awareness of its importance among undergraduate college students. The website defines this important field of study and its impact: “Spirituality points to our interiors... Our spirituality is reflected in the values and ideals that we hold most dear, our sense of who we are and where we come from – the meaning and purpose we see in our lives – and our connectedness to each other and to the world around us.”

In my teaching I try to connect students in ways that touch their deepest values so that they can remember these deeper connections and pass this knowledge on. Media offers an excellent tool because it can help make values visible. It also allows students to feel empowered through exploring and discovering resources and sharing these resources with others.

We live in an age where new media is quickly becoming the language of a generation of students and new learners. Intense interest in new and emerging media among college students creates the potential for dialogues leading to greater awareness and transformative thought. By using the connective capacity and rich opportunities available through open source global media, educators across disciplines can utilize these connective tools, opening new pathways of understanding and allowing students to think more deeply about their values and societal connections. New media can also be utilized to explore

deeper concepts and connections among individuals from differing cultural backgrounds.

Similar to literature, visual media can provide a gateway to inner worlds, illuminating universal struggles and aspirations and bringing students' values, beliefs and assumptions about culture and the world around them into a more conscious awareness. Visual media engages students, transcending cultures and disciplines. By using new media which students are already connected to and engaged in, we can tap into the potential for transformation. Involving students in more meaningful conversations through new media can lead to greater compassion, deeper connections, and heightened awareness of cultural and societal issues.

We live in a fast-paced, commercialized society where the messages of media have become dominant in shaping cultural values. Today's college students are exposed to an average of 3,000 media messages a day (Campbell et al., 2007). These messages inform their values and ideas about the world, important issues, the relative worth and beauty of other individuals, and contribute to student's thinking in ways that formal education cannot compete or penetrate as powerfully. The frequency and volume of these messages is far more dominant than the time they spend in a particular class, engaged in formal learning. And in my college student sample surveys, a majority of students report reading far fewer books.

According to a study by Keith Anderson, staff psychologist at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, ten years ago the average college student spent approximately 100 minutes a day on the Internet (Anderson, 1998). Student surveys conducted in my California classroom in Fall 2008 suggest that this figure has risen to quadruple that time. When we include listening to music, IMing, playing video games, watching movies on computer, and other forms of electronic intake, the Net Generation of college students spends an estimated 6.5 to 11 hours a day multitasking and in digital media. (Berk, 2008). The ways in which information is processed and the forms in which it is taken in are changing, but as we shall see, this is not necessarily bad news and it can lead to new ways of learning and connecting.

My student population is made up of undergraduate communication students at California State Polytechnic University (Cal Poly). They range in age from 18-24. According to self-

reported media diaries assigned at the beginning of each new quarter, Internet use is by far their most dominant form of media. When asked to identify their favorite sites, MySpace and YouTube rank among their favorites.

At the beginning of each new class, I ask them to identify their favorite media in categories such as books, radio, television, newspapers, magazines, new technology, music, movies, and ads. If we were to analyze these responses on a bar graph, we would see that time spent with books and newspapers is shrinking dramatically, movies in theaters have begun to be identified as favorites less frequently and specific Internet sites are gaining far more prominence.

Rather than engage in a competition with the multimedia impact of sound, speech, moving images, color, speed, interactive capacity, recency, and personalization of Internet options such as MySpace and YouTube, I chose to view these interests as opportunities and potential points of connection, since interest and engagement in new media are naturally occurring in the lives of college students and can be used for deeper purposes.

One of the greatest concerns about media use is that it is altering social dynamics and resulting in less face-to-face communication (Campbell 2007). According to researchers for the Quantitative Study for Society at Stanford University, “there is a steep social cost and 31 % of the U.S. population spend 70 minutes less daily interacting with family (Nixon, 2005). Historically technology has always changed social habits. In earlier eras there have been public outcries against the damaging effects of television, audio music, MTV, sensational journalism, and countless other forms of media.

These concerns are valid but as media continues to transform, people still meet, join together in social networks, care about friends, families, and social issues and seek out opportunities for growth, collaboration, and education. This becomes evident when, after identifying favorite media, students are asked to identify their most important values. Year after year and class after class, these top values, faith, family, and friends, remain relatively constant.

As an educator I realize that if students are interested and engaged with a technology or an idea, that this passion and interest can provide an excellent bridge from which to introduce

and explore new ideas and ways of thinking. Parker Palmer, the master educator who emphasizes the importance of making connections has written extensively on the importance of respect, community, and connectivity, says, “Good teaching isn’t about technique. (Students) ...describe people who have some sort of connective capacity, who connect themselves to their students, their students to each other, and everyone to the subject being studied.” (Palmer 1999).

Aware of the fascination with and potential of the new dominant favorite, YouTube, among my students, I began to explore possibilities for using this form of media as a way to connect individuals from different backgrounds, global geographies, and life experiences. As society enters the so-called global village, the demographics of human interactions are changing and instant access to world media and particularly individual postings from private individuals without the intermediate role of gatekeepers offers exciting ideas and possibilities for helping students learn some of the important distinctions between information and knowledge.

Like many communities in contemporary America, my students come from a wide variety of backgrounds and cultural experiences. The demographics of a university classroom at Cal Poly are likely to include Sikhs, Muslims, as well as students whose parents immigrated from Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and El Salvador. These students whose parents and grandparents may have come from war torn countries often have vastly different awarenesses of political issues, ways of being, and cultural norms than their American counterparts. The demographics of Cal Poly are 33 % Asian/Pacific Islander, 27 % Hispanic, 25 % white, and 4% African American. (Public Affairs, CSU Pomona, 2007).

As a professor of media and culture, one of the interesting challenges in a media class is to connect these different awarenesses in ways that allow individuals to share some of their passions and experiences. I like to implement ideas that connect people rather than separate them, as media often does, into demographic niches or ethnic groups with different tastes, values, and experiences. As media grows more fragmented with hundreds of channel choices and time shifting devices such as TIVO, how can we create common ground and share knowledge? Students with family members in the Middle East or southwest Asia often have very different concerns than California college students from middle or working class American families. How, then can educators bridge these

differences in a 10-week quarter or single semester as we explore the vast and daily changing landscape of media and culture?

One of the interesting trends in new media is that individuals are customizing information to access issues and topics in which they are personally interested and there is quickly becoming a lack of shared knowledge or common ground. To ask college freshman what the top news stories of the day are is to receive a curious collection of responses. In Southern California where electronic news media tends to focus on sensationalized celebrity stories in an effort to retain viewers, most of whom get their “news” from television, students know all about Britney Spears or the latest singer to be kicked off American Idol, but cannot name their state senator, have not heard of the concept of embedded journalism, do not know the body count in Iraq, and cannot guess the number of Iraqi citizens who have been killed since this latest war began. As college freshman, very few know about the number of AIDS’ orphans in Africa, the plight of migrant workers in China, or the causes of recurrent violence in the Middle East.

To demonstrate the gap between what students know and its relative importance, just before the last election, I asked how many could remember the Oscar Mayer bologna song,

“My bologna has a first name. It’s O-s-c-a-r...”

Forty-eight out of 52 students could sing and did recite the entire song in unison. I then asked how many knew their state senator; only 2 out of 52 raised their hands and only one had the correct answer. These classroom observations illustrate the frequency and impact of exposure to the contents of specific media. To an outsider or casual observer, this focus on the superficial may appear to demonstrate that in American culture, college students are less interested in and less aware of social and political issues but it is not the case. Students care very deeply about their friends and their families, ecology, the Green movement, Darfur, and many other important issues.

This is where open source media such as YouTube can become valuable in connecting people from different experiences and cultural backgrounds. In recent classes I have taught more students from the Middle East, such as Melissa B., a Political Science major and student activist in social justice. Highly politically aware, she suffered through what

she would term, “fluff comments from unaware students.” To illustrate, Melissa expressed these feelings in a paper, “Suspicion and discrimination hits us from every angle, every day. We as Muslims need to be on our game at all times and stay on top of what is going on in the world and why. While many college students are worried about which baby belongs to Britney Spears, Muslim students are worried about how many of their family members were killed in Palestine today. While most college students are gabbing about their hot new iPods and music download discounts, Muslim students are thinking about whether or not a war with Iran will lead to internment camps for American Muslims, much like what happened with the Japanese in World War II.” How can we as educators help connect these vastly differing life experiences?

By using open source media in the classroom such as the following site, <http://sociologicalimages.blogspot.com/2008/01/humanizing-american-muslims.html>, the diversity among Muslims and other important alternative perspectives can be conveyed so that other students may be exposed to professionally produced images of diversity in ways that might otherwise take years of living to learn, experience, and integrate. When it seems as if others don't care about sensitive issues of real value, groups with shared experiences tend to coalesce along cultural and ethnic lines. Sharing images on YouTube can open students' eyes and connect them to shared awarenesses.

The Muslim images media clip shows a series of images of individuals holding hand written signs. Viewers see a burkha-clad woman holding this sign, “I, too, shop at Victoria's Secret.” A second image shows a college girl and the sign, “Terrorists hijacked my religion.” A little boy with a scrunched face is framed with a sign, Broccoli is my personal jihad.” A single red rose fills a screen with the words, “My sister died on September 11.” A black-clad teen puts a knife at his throat and holds the sign, Islam inhibits my suicidal thoughts.” A young mother is curled on a couch facing a television with a sign above, “Islam tells me to help the less fortunate but sometimes I'd rather watch Gray's Anatomy.” These images create an opening to consider alternative perspectives. By linking media images to personal values, students begin to see deeper commonalities.

Another clip known as “Occupation 101” graphically depicts some of the violence in the Middle East in ways that can be easily understood by students who have no interest in reading about it in the local newspaper. This clip depicting women running and children

lying in the street, coupled with an impassioned discussion of how these images connect to a particular student's life and values is a way of communicating commonality, sharing values, and transforming our relationships to the world around us.

(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pV_T551jw88). YouTube offers a wealth of opportunities for turning individuals on to people, media, places, and concepts in ways that can create deeper connections. For those who may not know, YouTube offers a virtual world of expression, containing the speeches of Martin Luther King, demonstrations of Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication, artistic sand painting in Asia, and a myriad of clips that people can view and share comments about.

Recognizing the power and potential of this and other open source media to connect people's passions and differing life experiences, I ask my college communication majors to select a short clip, analyze it for impact on audience, and then to connect it to their values and to the values of their audience. This becomes a five-minute assignment called the "Hip Clip." The five-minute time frame is divided into two and a half minutes of clip and two and a half minutes of values' analysis.

For example, a student who loves the artist Pink, might show a five-minute YouTube clip of Pink's latest song and then talk about how and why the lyrics connect with her values and how it might connect to the values of the audience. This heightens awareness that values may differ, offering an opportunity to reflect on how to negotiate these differences through media and in public presentation. The following is an example from a student's written paper on Pink's clip, *Dear Mr. President*, "It was not until I heard this song that I really realized how much I should really start becoming more interested in politics and vote. I need to make myself more aware of the type of president and government I want. Everyone does, because it affects me, my family, and my friends as well as yours." So, instead of anguished and polarized discussions about the war, a YouTube clip can speak to the audience through an artist's voice. This allows students to take information in, consider it, and process it in their own ways. They also appreciate being turned onto new clips that they can show to their friends and have further extended discussions. One of the hallmarks of this Generation Y demographic is that they love to discover new media, especially messages that are not yet mainstream or commercially popular. (Merchants of Cool, 1999.)

Helping to create deeper connections in a classroom of diversity, YouTube also has the capacity to showcase art forms from other countries. International students can use this media to allow their classmates to see some of the interesting accomplishments taking place in their home countries. An excellent example is Sicaf Handy, sand painting from Korea. (http://youtube.com/watch?v=VKJ_68q_Me). This site offers a beautiful display of a Korean artist creating a rapid succession of exaggerated animal poses as sand drips from his hand. To be able to see this art form without paying to go to a live event or traveling to Korea can create interest in other cultures, encourage dialog, and enhance appreciation for people and places in the world that students often don't know much about. It can create a shared experience.

The use of YouTube and other Internet clips to showcase ideas in combination with an analysis of how and why they connect with values is a distinctive and engaging way to open students to new knowledge and to connect their experiences in ways that encourage exploration, build new insights, and tap into ideas and concepts to which students can relate. Building bridges of awareness among individuals from diverse backgrounds can be one of the greatest challenges of 21st century education. Helping students to realize the commonalities that lie below external differences can help to create a deepening spiritual awareness of our humanness, our vulnerability, and our longing for community.

I will discuss two more clips that illustrate the breadth of possibilities in sharing open source media, particularly as it is paired with a well-thought-out values' analysis. The messages of media can be a powerful source of persuasion in important areas such as drug and alcohol abuse, often even more so than PSA's created by agencies such as the Ad Council, as demonstrated by the number of hits on specific clips. We have only to think of the power of James' Brown's song, "Heroin" as an example from another generation:

"Heroin, it is my wife. It is my life."

I can still remember these lyrics from 30 years ago. Recently, a student showed a powerful illustration of the dangers of drug abuse done by another artist in this generation. "Dance with the Devil" with lyrics by rapper Moebius speaks to this generation of the potential wasteland of drug abuse. Backed by a montage of images of Harlem and the grim realities of blighted urban landscapes, students can take in scenes and sensibilities from someone

of their generation who embodies these experiences and to discuss them in meaningful ways. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qggxTtnKTMo>). Because the Internet does not ban obscenity or graphic images (Campbell 2007), I ask students to do a disclaimer in advance for the comfort level of their classmates who may have different religious or cultural sensibilities. This is an important element in making these kinds of connections comfortable for all.

Another clip which led to deeper thought and greater understanding of volatile issues surrounding the war in Iraq is the American Friends Service Committee's short clip on the costs of war and possible alternatives to war spending. The one-minute and forty six second video features a ticking clock with a header showing the daily cost of war (720 million dollars) mounted at the top of the screen followed by a series of options which could be achieved with the same amount of money such as 34,904 four-year college scholarships, a powerful inducement in a student population, most of whom are working full-time in low wage jobs and taking out large student loans to help pay for the cost of their school. For this generation accustomed to processing information quickly, a one-second image, backed by music can plant the seeds of new thoughts as well as new admiration for the person who discovered and presented the clip, in this case, an otherwise shy but very passionate student. Associating a clip with an individual can serve as an excellent shorthand for getting to know one another and the kinds of deep caring about issues that is not always visible. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wnq6cD5jk1Q>).

Since the sources of information to which people are exposed are so broad and vast and because newspaper readership is declining among college students (Campbell, 2008), YouTube offers a fast and almost endlessly diverse alternative. When college students are allowed to select what is meaningful in their lives and then show it to others, an interesting connective synergy occurs. People become associated with the values and sensibilities in their clip and students begin to connect in new ways. Unlike sharing clips on MySpace, the emphasis on analysis of deeper values takes this sharing and sense of discovery to a deeper level. Students are prompted to analyze and consider the connective capacity of the media and images, which speak to them.

By creating an environment of discovery and reflection, the college classroom can be opened up in new ways to a deeper sense of connection and understanding. Perhaps

another way to understand this new generation and their way of interacting with media is to listen to their perspectives and to discover what they are interested and why. This simple activity with YouTube can accomplish important things such as empowering students, letting them know that their voices matter, and deepening their own awareness of and connections to the media they love. It can begin to transform worldviews.

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