



Confronting the Social Context of the Classroom: Media Events, Shared Cultural Experience, and Student Response

Author(s): Sarah Sobieraj and Heather Laube

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CONFRONTING THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE CLASSROOM: MEDIA EVENTS, SHARED CULTURAL EXPERIENCE, AND STUDENT RESPONSE*

SARAH SOBIERAJ
University at Albany
State University of New York

HEATHER LAUBE
University at Albany
State University of New York

STUDENT RESPONSE TO course content is contingent upon many factors, including the social context in which they interact with class materials. Researchers have acknowledged the role of students' and instructors' social locations in the classroom (Kramarac and Treichler 1990; Sadker and Sadker 1990) and have considered the role that campus characteristics play (Astin 1993; Feagin, Hernan, and Nikitah 1996; Hallinan 1998), but have failed to look more broadly at the ways that the historically specific social context¹ interacts with student interpretation of course content, or the prominent role that the mass media plays in mediating this environment. Instructors need to consider the ways that high-profile current events, which speak to sociological issues, interact with student response to course content. This report provides a poignant illustration of the above, describing how news coverage of school shootings (in late 1998 and early 1999) and public response to these crimes impacted student response to course material on media effects in a sociology of culture class. This note also provides three instructional techniques that integrate issues of social context into sociology courses to enhance student learning.

Our social context is always in flux. Economic trends, technological advances, politi-

cal transitions, and cultural shifts occur slowly, combining at any given moment to form a historically specific social landscape. Also important, however, are media events that enter this landscape more abruptly and ubiquitously, such as the O.J. Simpson trial, the Oklahoma City Bombing, and President Clinton's impeachment process. These events saturate the media environment and, as a result, they take the shape of collective experiences that confront virtually all members of society (Dayan and Katz 1992). While life experience and social location may lead observers to interpret these events differently, these varied readings may be patterned in predictable ways.²

A Tale of Two Classes

As part of a unit on the regulation/censorship of cultural products during two sociology of culture courses taught in summer 1998 and summer 1999, I³ conducted an in-class debate that addressed whether pornography should be protected as free speech. The 1998 class was fairly evenly divided between students who felt that pornography should be protected as free speech and those who disagreed. In sharp contrast, the 1999 class had 38 students who felt pornography should be protected as free speech and only one student who disagreed.

*The authors would like to thank Betsy Lucal, James Allen, and the three reviewers for their helpful comments on this manuscript. Please address all correspondence to Sarah Sobieraj, Department of Sociology, University at Albany, State University of New York, Albany, NY 12222; e-mail; sobieraj@nycap.rr.com

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¹By historically specific social context, we refer very broadly to the unique social, cultural, political, and economic conditions that prevail during a given historical moment in a particular community.

²For example, in the Clinton case, Democrats are likely to have had a more critical reading of the impeachment proceedings than Republicans.

³Sarah Sobieraj

The marked difference in the two responses was puzzling given the similarity of the course material in both sections,⁴ and the comparable demographic characteristics of the two groups.⁵ In addition, I noticed that during the 1999 debate, the students were not as serious as I would have expected considering the violent nature of the stories put forth by the anti-pornography team. Many students quickly discredited the experiences of rape⁶ that their peers raised, responding nonchalantly to the stories presented as evidence, and even making occasional sarcastic remarks. As a result, I felt a responsibility to reframe the issue in a more appropriate way, and to provide concrete information in a more credible context than the debate format had provided.

The next day I reopened the discussion explaining that two concurrent dilemmas exist in the debate surrounding pornography; The first addresses whether and how our cultural products should be regulated, and the second addresses the question of whether or not the media influence human behavior. I asked the students to separate these two dilemmas in their minds for the day so that we could deal exclusively with the second. We had discussed audiences and the reception of cultural goods extensively in the course,⁷ and this was an ideal opportunity for the students to apply the concepts that they had learned. Do pornographic films, sexist films, sexist advertisements and the like encourage violence against women? The students answered with an unequivocal no.

Their response provided an excellent point

⁴The students in 1998 and 1999 worked from very similar syllabi and received identical reading materials on pornography.

⁵Both sections were racially diverse, contained a slightly greater number of female students, and were dominated by traditional-aged college students. For instructors hoping to compare these students to their own, it may be useful to note that these courses were taught at the University at Albany, which is a moderately selective, mid-sized public institution in upstate New York.

⁶During the debate, the students constructed violence against women as sexual violence,

of entry for the discussion of rape. I presented a variety of statistics on rape in the United States and asked how they might be explained. The students quickly dismissed the social-structural and cultural explanations and generated a profound number of rival hypotheses, ranging from the uniqueness of male anatomy to drugs and alcohol as causal forces. After one student expressed a distrust of statistics, I suggested that we move away from statistics to look at a case study from a recent issue of *Time* magazine. I then read the class this passage:

...it seemed that sexual assault would be the ugliest motif of Woodstock '99...There were apparently numerous other incidents [other than the 4 rapes reported that were being investigated] of sexual assault. David Schneider, a rehabilitation counselor from Jessup, MD, told the Washington Post that during a performance by the group Korn on the first night, he saw a "very skinny girl, maybe 90 or 100 lbs.," get pushed into the mosh pit, where "a couple of guys started taking her clothes off...They pulled her pants down and they were violating her." Schneider claims that he also saw other women raped and that the crowd seemed to be cheering on the offenders: "No one I saw tried to go in and rescue them." A crisis-services director for the YWCA said the heat, sleeplessness and readily available drugs and alcohol were "a perfect breeding ground for sexual assault." (Morrow August 9, 1999)

I explained that as sociologists, we must question whether heat, sleeplessness, and alcohol do indeed breed sexual assault, because the acts of violence were not randomly

bringing up sexual assault, rape, and child molestation several times, but non-sexual forms of violence were absent from the discussion.

⁷The students were presented with two contrasting approaches to understanding audiences: the work of those at the Annenberg School on cultivation (e.g., Signorielli and Morgan 1990), which assumes a strong cumulative effects model, and the work of John Fiske (1987) on active audiences, which explores texts as open, and emphasizes the agency of the viewer and the diversity of the audience in terms of social location.

distributed; Women were not raping men, and not all men were raping women.

The first student responded by saying: "Now they are going to blame it on the band. Poor Korn, like it's their fault!" She did not express shock or anger that the attack had happened, but rather expressed concern that the band would be held accountable. Another student commented in agreement. I explained that I had not selected the article because a concert was involved, but instead because it recounted an egregious example of violence. After much discussion, I decided to respect their resistance—unraveling the causes of rape is not something that could or should be done in an hour, and I felt modestly satisfied that the students were taking the issue seriously.

What perplexed me was not the class's unwillingness to hold pornography accountable for rape. In fact, I would have been concerned if the opposite were true as I had devoted a substantial amount of class time to illustrating the limitations of explaining complex social phenomena with simple causal arguments. What puzzled me was that the summer-1999 students, who were virtually refusing to consider the role of the media in the greater social landscape regarding issues of rape and pornography, were the same students who, in other contexts, had *overestimated* the role of the media in informing our thoughts and actions.⁸ I was unable to reconcile this unexpected contradiction.

I discussed the events of these class sessions with a colleague⁹ who had provided me with references for the class session on rape. In her own class, sociology of gender, she had anticipated opposition when she covered rape. Instead, she encountered students who seemed to be particularly receptive to social-structural and cultural explanations for rape. We were intrigued by the different recep-

tions we had received. My colleague and I had presented almost entirely the same information.¹⁰ What was different?

Some of the variation in student response can be attributed to the context in which the material on rape was introduced in each course. In the gender course, rape was discussed in the context of socially and structurally based gender inequality, leaving the students more prepared for sociological explanations of violence against women. In the culture course, rape was addressed in the context of media effects and regulation. This variation in context explained a great deal of the difference between our classes, but could not explain why the 1999-culture students related to these issues so differently than the 1998-culture students, since both groups had interacted with the same material in a similar context of debates surrounding media effects and regulation. Further, the class dynamic in both culture sections was similarly positive and discursive, allowing me to rule out resistance to the instructor as an explanation.

The key to understanding the response of the 1999-culture students was not exclusively variation in the social or substantive class environment. The broader social world, as highlighted by the media, had changed. The student's comment about the band at Woodstock helped elucidate the connection. Between summer 1998 and summer 1999, a debate over the causes of teen violence had ensued in the media, and the "violence in the media" refrain had impacted my students. The interaction between the extensive news coverage of the school shootings (specifically those that took place in Littleton, Paducah, Pearl, Jonesboro, Springfield, and Conyers) and the substance of the course, which examined the role of media in society, engendered a different student response to questions about media effects on human behavior.

⁸For example, during the content analysis section of the course, many student papers described television viewers as passive recipients of stereotyped depictions of minority groups, unable or unlikely to engage in critical thinking.

⁹Heather Laube

¹⁰As a result of shared instructional materials and consultation, the two presentations were markedly similar.

Student Response to Media Effects Discourse

During the year that passed between the two sociology of culture courses, media effects had been opened for debate, thrust into the public discourse by the coverage of the school shootings. The cultural products under the microscope, in more cases than not, were those consumed by young adults in the United States. The media devoted column inches and airtime to discussing the role of popular youth culture in high school violence. Particular emphasis was placed on video games such as *Doom* and *Mortal Kombat*; lyrics and videos of groups such as Marilyn Manson and Pearl Jam; and films including *The Basketball Diaries*, *Natural Born Killers*, and *The Matrix*. Those working in the entertainment industry rarely implied a causal relationship between these products and youth violence, but institutions and prominent individuals whose statements and actions were covered in the news emphasized this connection.

News organizations reported the results of polls showing public approval of censorship in response. For example, in July of 1999, *ABC News* reported a poll revealing that more than 84 percent of the American public supported an independent ratings system for violence, sexual content, and inappropriate language. Politicians weighed in on preventing future violence largely according to party lines; Democrats calling for gun control, and Republicans calling for the entertainment industry to take responsibility.¹¹ Experts on both sides of the issue offered different assessments of the role of media violence. For example, on *CNN* in March of 1998, a child psychologist explained: "What we see happening is that there is so much...realistic type violence portrayed in movies and in other situations that does affect certain kinds of kids who can't tell the difference between reality and fantasy. They think if you shoot somebody, they get up..."

¹¹With the notable exception of Bill Clinton, who called for both gun control and entertainment industry culpability (see Babington 1999; Harris 1999).

This link between popular culture and violence had placed traditional-aged college students in the position of having to defend their popular culture, not from benign accusations, but rather from the implication that their cultural products incited murder.¹² Imbedded in these accusations were questions about the ability of young adults to consume cultural products with intelligence, depth, and responsibility. This context meant that the questions I asked my students about pornography and violence against women were perceived as incredibly personal. Are people vulnerable to the media? Causal arguments made by politicians, experts, and person-on-the-street interviewees has been leading sound bites all year long. The students did not focus on the public violence of the rape at Woodstock; for them, the presence of a band was the significant issue. Whereas I saw the description of the band as part of the crime scene, they interpreted it as an accusation. The implication that listening to a certain band leads to shooting or raping was ludicrous to them. Why? Because they listened to these bands. To assert that a causal link existed between media and behavior in this context was at odds with their lived experience and an insult to their sense of agency. They were defending their ability to consume the cultural products under criticism. It seemed that perhaps the 1999-culture students were not talking about rape, but rather, agency.

The next day I pointed out that for students who seemed quite concerned about the role of the media in society, they seemed unusually eager to reject the idea that violence against women could be encouraged by sexism in the media. I revealed to them that I believed their reaction was in part a response to the press coverage of the recent spate of school shootings, and the subse-

¹²Sample headlines included: "Young and Violent: Alienated and Angry, Teens Get a 'Rush' From Crime" (Bahls, Graha, and Giordano 1998) and "Violence of Culture Mirrored by Students: Alienated Teenagers Often Copy the Adults They See Lashing Out at Society, Experts Say" (Mahoney and Miller 1999).

quent rush to place the blame on music, movies, and video games. A tidal wave of discussion ensued. A few students expressed frustration with the recent calls to censor certain music and movies. Others talked about the ubiquitous references to popular culture in the wake of the school shootings. The student who had expressed concern that the band Korn would be blamed for the sexual assaults at Woodstock, said that she felt frustrated and angry during class the day before, but had not been able to explain why. One student addressed our class experience directly; acknowledging that he had felt determined to “prove” that the media was not to blame for rape.

I had devoted hours of class time to emphasizing the role of social context in the production, consumption, and regulation of cultural products,¹³ but had overlooked the role of the social context of the classroom. This critical oversight turned out to be a valuable teaching experience. Recognizing the connection between the students’ resistance to considering the impact of the media on deviant behavior and the coverage of the school shootings resuscitated the teaching of a key concept—the problems inherent in attempting to explain complex social phenomena (such as a series of shootings in American high schools) with simple causal arguments. The intense media coverage of the school shootings and the interpretations of experts, community members, and public figures, which began as an inhibiting force, restricting student openness and shaping their arguments, ended as a valuable teaching opportunity.

¹³Throughout the semester, I utilized Wendy Griswold’s (1994) cultural diamond as a heuristic device to illustrate the importance of considering the multiple relationships between the social world, the producers of culture, cultural objects, and the audience. This approach, in combination with the material they studied to illuminate each of these relationships, emphasizes studying the relationships between all of these forces simultaneously.

Addressing Social Context Issues in the Classroom

Public speculation about the effects of popular culture on young adults in the United States was a key element in the media events surrounding the school shootings. While media violence was one of the dominant frames for this particular series of events, virtually all social issues are filtered through media outlets. Through this process, students are frequently presented with explanations and solutions to social problems (at moments overtly, and at others more subtly through emphasis and omission) and, as a result, their interpretation of and response to course content may be affected. Instructors can enhance student learning by considering how current events and their mediation impact the way that students respond to related topics raised in class. If the relevant current events take on the prominent and ubiquitous character of media events, then failure to address the widely circulating descriptions and explanations would be a serious oversight.

Instructors should address current events on their own terms in addition to addressing the way information about these events is gathered, produced, and disseminated. The media plays an important role in the framing of social issues, highlighting certain aspects of the social world while filtering others. As the title of this paper implies, we contend that the most effective way to address the influence of the media on the public’s understanding of social phenomena is to directly confront it in the classroom. This method is challenging because it requires instructors to step outside of their own social locations in an attempt to see current events from a student’s point of view. This perspective creates an opportunity for instructors to concretize the role of the media by incorporating media literacy exercises when course content overlaps with current events, particularly those topics that receive more intensive scrutiny. For example, if an instructor had been teaching a substantive course on race during the O.J. Simpson trial, we believe it would have enhanced the course to

draw out and challenge the way racial issues were mediated by mainstream news sources around the trial. Or, if an instructor had been teaching a course on social movements during the protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle, the course would have been enhanced by a critical examination of the coverage of these events. Our intention is not to encourage instructors to bring scathing critiques of the corporate media into the classroom, but instead to help students understand news production as a necessarily selective social process rather than an unfiltered reflection of the world. Our goal is to encourage students to consider the ways in which the news, as a source of information, mediates between public events and personal knowledge. We hope that these exercises will demystify the news production process, and help students to reflect upon their personal responses to the media and to consider possible alternative readings of the social landscape.¹⁴

We recommend augmenting classroom discussions of current events with three teaching techniques that guide students to reflect on the role of the media in society. The first assignment encourages an initial critical consumption of news items, the second helps students conceive of a broader range of coverage possibilities, and the third prompts a thorough examination of the overall trends in press coverage of a given event.

1) Critical consumption. To highlight the mediated nature of our understanding of social issues, ask students to perform a thorough analysis of one news article on a topic of substantive interest to the class. For example, a criminology instructor might ask

students to read an article on a recent crime. Ask the students to answer a series of questions: Who is making statements about the issue? Is the person an expert? A politician? An activist? A religious leader? What are their qualifications? Who might benefit from these statements? Who might be harmed? How do the statements characterize the group being discussed? Are the group members characterized as victims, heroes, or deviants? Does the discussion focus on individual or systemic explanations? Does the discussion focus on individual or systemic solutions? How else might the facts in the article be interpreted? This exercise can be completed as in-class group work or as an individual writing assignment. This deconstruction will help students grasp how public understanding of current social issues is in part shaped by the explanations and solutions touted by those prominently cited in the media.

2) Comparing media sources. The second exercise compares mainstream and alternative media sources to encourage students to recognize the range of possible ways in which the media can cover an event. If students are to gain an appreciation of the role that the news plays in mediating our social context, they must understand that news workers and organizations make consequential decisions about where to look for news, who to interview, what questions to ask their sources, and how prominently the stories should be featured. To begin, break the students into small groups, providing each group with a selection of stories on the same event from a variety of mainstream news sources. Ask each group to answer a series of questions related to the headlines, content, use of experts, main points, and the overall impression of the most pressing concerns that they, as readers, take away from the articles. Ask each group to report their findings to the class.

Depending on the course background of the students, it may be useful to draw a parallel between social research methods and the news production process: Journalists and editors sample, construct questions,

¹⁴These exercises are informed by the earlier work of Papademas (1983), who urges instructors to assign context analysis in addition to content analysis to help students understand the patterns present in media contexts, and by Hor-top (1994), who developed several insightful and provocative exercises for elementary school students whose themes can be drawn on for an undergraduate classroom. For an excellent exercise examining news stories that stay below the radar, see Kaufman (2001).

gather data, and analyze the information that they collect. Discussion questions can probe this analogy further: If this story were a research article, what else would you want to know before you accepted the information as reliable and valid? Can you offer any critiques of this story as a piece of research? If the "researcher" had sampled differently or asked different questions, how might the story be different? Next, hand out a selection of articles from relevant alternative publications¹⁵ that cover the same event and ask the students to read them individually or in groups. Facilitate a class discussion by exploring the differences and similarities between the mainstream and alternative publications in terms of the key questions presented at the beginning of class. This illustrative exercise enhances student ability to envision alternative readings of events at which they were not present. The alternative articles will likely offer a different view of the same event, demonstrating that reporting varies tremendously based on the individual journalist and the constraints under which they work.

3) *Analyzing overall news coverage.* Finally, we recommend having the class conduct a content analysis of the overall news coverage surrounding a particular event. This is easily accomplished using the full text Lexis-Nexis database. Ask students to search for articles on a given event and then to select a sub-set of articles from among the relevant citations through systematic sampling; reading every *k*th article will reduce the magnitude of the task while preserving the chronology of the coverage. Next, have students code each article according to key questions with a carefully developed standardized instrument (e.g., causes suggested or implied by the article, solutions suggested by sources, topics covered, people quoted, source, length, location in paper, etc.). Ask the students to write a reflection paper in response to the patterns found in the coverage: Which stories were most prominent? At

what point in the event was the coverage most extensive? Which topics received the most space? What are the consistencies across the coverage? Are there missing pieces? If time constraints do not permit students to complete such an assignment, as an effective alternative the instructor may conduct the analysis independently, then present their findings to the class. The instructor should highlight the fact that the news production process does not construct current events *per se*, but that it connects us to the broader social world in a somewhat imperfect way. These exercises should help students to be mindful of the way that this process mediates our personal understanding of social issues.

CONCLUSION

The techniques discussed above are valuable when applied to any current event, but when current events expand into high-profile media events that relate to the substantive content of a given course, exploring this mediated environment becomes critical. As collective experiences and shared knowledge, major media events impact the way students understand course material and may influence their receptiveness to sociological analysis. The case presented in this report, the impact of the school shootings coverage on sociology of culture students in the summer of 1999, serves as a hyperbolic instance¹⁶ of an ongoing process in which the mass media read social problems and present them to the public. As sociologists, our cognizance of the social context of the classroom allows us to respond to our students in a more productive manner and to take advantage of important teaching moments.

¹⁶This effect was pronounced for two reasons. First, the substantive information was wide reaching as a result of the superfluous coverage and analysis characteristic of media events. Second, because the group under scrutiny was not a fraction of the class (e.g., black men), but rather encompassed all the traditional-aged college students in the class, there were more opportunities for diverse responses to the substantive information to emerge.

¹⁵The Alternative Press Index is useful for locating appropriate contrast pieces. It can be found on the Internet at <http://www.altpress.org>.

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Sarah Sobieraj is a doctoral candidate in the department of sociology at the University at Albany, State University of New York. Her research interests include political sociology, cultural sociology, and the mass media. She is currently working on her dissertation, which examines civil society and civic engagement during presidential campaigns.

Heather Laube is a doctoral candidate in the department of sociology at the University at Albany, State University of New York. She is currently working on her dissertation, which explores the strategies feminist academic sociologists employ as they strive to reconcile their professional and political identities.