

# Popular Culture and the Humanities Curriculum

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The humanities are rooted in an all-encompassing concept of personal and social perfection which the ancient Greeks called *paideia*. So all-encompassing was that concept as it relates to man that the Romans chose to translate the concept with the most generic word at their disposal--*humanitas*. In essence the notion relates to the perfection of human nature and to man's infinite potential to live creatively. The concept is elitist in its implicit optimism in the potential of an individual man and in its hope for a better world. In no sense, however, is the notion elitist with respect to the realities that affect man. Everything from cosmic to finite forces, from spiritual to physical existences, from the realities of war to those of art that influence or could possibly influence the destiny of man was considered a worthy object of study. As a matter of fact, the liberal education of *paideia* was thought to free man by encouraging the individual to pursue all knowledge, sacred and profane, noble and mundane, within man's physical and cognitive grasp. Nothing was thought unworthy of man's attention if, indeed, it shaped his existence.

While effective educators have always related traditional subjects to contemporary student experiences without any pedagogical prostitution, there are, nevertheless, two trends developing in contemporary education. On the one hand educators who have lost sight of the all-encompassing nature of a liberal education, accept the elitist premise with respect to man, but arbitrarily define which realities truly help man realize perfection. This selective censorship of curricular material is a gross distortion of the original theory of a liberal education. In the humanities, curricular censorship occurs in those areas of the arts that are considered mundane, vernacular, or popular. They are judged unworthy of formal academic study. Hence, many administrators discourage popular innovations because they conflict with the community's "philosophy of education;" many parents object to such programs because they want the best possible education

for their children; and, finally, many taxpayers want only that their dollars be spent "judiciously."

The other polarized attitude is revealed in those educators who are blinded either by an illusion of relevance or by the pressure of fulfilling immediate goals. From standpoint of relevance, the use of the popular arts becomes an end in itself. It need go nowhere beyond fulfilling the student's expectation of relevance. From standpoint of pressures, teachers report to using the so-called mundane or popular as a means of fulfilling the "higher" expectations of educational systems. Hence, they fulfill the demands of a syllabi, or measurements and evaluations by making the popular means of teaching the formal aspects of learning.

In recent years, another movement within the humanities to study the popular as part of the total humanities curriculum has responded to the polarized attitudes on both extremes. To the traditionalists who want no popular materials in the curriculum, they enunciate a broad philosophical definition of the humanities. To the innovators who use the popular as an effective method of instruction, they argue that "use" for whatever reason is really placing "the cart before the horse."

These last educators contend that study of popular humanities or culture has a definite place in the humanities curriculum by nature of the fact that the popular contains, either directly or indirectly, cultural forms and values which should be learned on their own terms. In fine, they propose that the humanities curriculum contain formal courses in popular culture. Such units, they assert: (1) Would provide a broader curriculum base for the entire body of humanities knowledge; (2) would serve as a foundation for a more comprehensive understanding of traditional art and literature; (3) would place under academic scrutiny the popular contemporary art forms and icons, mores and life styles, as well as the social, economic, political, and religious systems of the contemporary world; (4) would study the colloquial manifestations of language as a basis upon which formal oral and written styles develop;

(5) and finally, would reveal the hidden pressures and manipulative elements of modern life as they manifest themselves in the popular media of the late twentieth century.

#### Innovation with Justification

Without sound philosophical justification, the implementation of popular culture in the secondary curriculum can result in "play time" chaos. Curriculum planners who are considering the teaching of popular contemporary forms and values must (a) be convinced of pedagogical relevance; (b) understand that the innovations are part of the humanities subject matter; and (c) clearly see the relationship of popular culture to the life needs of the individual student.

Educators and laymen seeking a justification for popular culture will find that justification, then, most easily within the philosophical ideals of humanities itself. Since humanities programs attempt either to pass on an historical cultural heritage or to humanize the student to a higher degree of personal freedom, the popular culture course should be designed to fulfill either or both of these goals. In the first instance, popular culture provides the forms out of which the art of all ages rises. It is, therefore, important to teach the formulae, conventions, and genres of popular art to appreciate the artistic conversions of sophisticated cultural forms. In the second instance, art, literature, history, philosophy and music can cultivate the student only to the degree that the student is prepared to assimilate the artistic experience. The study of packaged, dollar-producing, mass circulated materials which mirror middle class values can be one of the most effective ways to awaken the sensitivities of students to the artistic possibilities of form and to the controlling forces of life. Effectively taught, the study of popular culture can enlarge the value alternatives inherent in culture and, theoretically, can make a student freer to choose his own life style.

#### A Practical Problem

Beyond the theoretical controversies that surround the teaching of popular humanities, a pragmatic problem exists that could well influence the ultimate success or failure of a broad humanities program. The problem concerns personnel, selection of a teaching staff for such programs. My personal experience planning and supervising a four-year course in two large metropolitan high schools convinced me of the unique value of the individual teacher. Twenty enthusiastic teachers were involved in the experiment. When the program was evaluated at the end of the first year by students, staff and outside consultants, evaluators concluded that the weakest part of the program lay in the teaching. Enthusiasm was simply not enough. A few teachers were uncomfortably lost in foreign materials; others were unable to synthesize the art forms with the values of contemporary culture; and some were unwilling to devote to planning the extraordinary amount of time required. The few successful teachers in the program were those with the most extensive academic experience in the cultural arts and humanities.

Following this poor evaluation after the first year, the project was cancelled. The experiment had failed, but the insights gained were invaluable. Perhaps the most significant insight was this: popular humanities can be effective only when taught by faculty with strong academic backgrounds in the humanities. It was further discovered that such teachers not only understood the purposes and goals of the program, but possessed as well the ability to integrate the popular into the total picture of culture. Their courses were neither an end in themselves, nor excuses to entertain, but claimed a significant pedagogical relationship with the entire humanities curriculum. While specialized training in popular culture certainly helps, it is not essential. Given one's willingness to prepare his materials and to learn from his students, a teacher who is knowledgeable and conversant in traditional humanities should be competent in the teaching of popular humanities.

### Scope of an Innovative Humanities Program

The popular culture course has the potential of meeting the needs of an extremely large percentage of the school population. Both college and non-college bound students can benefit from well planned programs.

The college preparatory course broadens the traditional humanities program and establishes a basis for appreciating fine art and literature. This course places the popular in a context of academic objectivity so that it can be understood in terms of both its positive and negative cultural contributions.

The popular culture course for the non-college bound student, while different in content and scope, is, nevertheless, a most rewarding course. It realizes the goals of the humanities curriculum without burdening the student with materials beyond his understanding. Such goals are frequently unattainable for the slow or tactically oriented learner in a traditional program.

A positive side effect of the non-college bound program is that learning suddenly becomes a pleasure for students who have suffered through traditional humanities courses from primary grades. In a popular culture program students identify with the course material. Perennially dormant students very often unfold creatively when they become involved in classroom presentations, discussions, and projects. Perhaps the most ennobling quality to reveal itself in the non-college bound student is his attainment of a cultural sensitivity which emerges as his humanistic awareness increases. This sensitivity, in turn, provides a basis for forming value judgements. Formal humanities programs which emphasize artistic classics and human heritage do not provide this learning opportunity.

### Resource Materials

Given the fact that most published materials are already outdated at the time of publication, teachers of popular culture are often challenged to

find and develop their own materials. Even the best teachers can become academically sterile without a good source of viable materials. To my knowledge the best resource at the present moment is the Center for the Study of Popular Culture at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. The Center publishes quarterly journals in film, music and culture, along with a number of newsletters and pamphlets. POPULAR CULTURE METHODS is one pamphlet that I recommend highly for the novice popular humanities teacher. Not only does this publication offer valuable cross-references of studies and events in popular humanities but very often it also contains syllabi units that are ready for classroom implementation.

### Unit Possibilities for Popular Culture Courses

Popular Culture is currently taught to meet the needs of diverse educational philosophies. At least five distinctly different approaches are successfully practiced today.

#### I. Genre Approach

The most successful and widely used approach examines various fictional genres from the viewpoint of formula and structure. In this approach formulated conventions of plot and character are identified and traced through four or five work of the same genre. Such a unit prepares the student to think in terms of structural formulae. Uncomplicated conventions of popular fiction often reveal the simplified value alternatives of the marketplace and provide a touchstone for comparing popular literature with works of art. Units of study could include examination of these genres:

1. western
2. detective mystery
3. domestic romance and soap opera
4. science fiction
5. comics
6. comedy
7. advertisements
8. occult fiction

9. pop poetry, pop lyrics and greeting cards
10. icons and symbols of popular culture

## II. Media-Genre Approach

Communication media is a vehicle of culture. It is not itself a popular art. The relationship between media and popular art is, however, more than an interesting phenomenon. The popular arts have consistently and necessarily adjusted to the limitations of media. This approach emphasizes formula variations of popular fiction both within a single medium and among competitive media. The popular romance or western genres, for example, have distinct convention patterns in pulp fiction. Stories and characters change but the essential structural and thematic elements vary only according to the dictates of a specific medium. The same genres traced through radio, television, movies, music and theater reveal the interesting formula variations as the limitations change. Value articulations which are always central to art when mass communicated are distilled to conform to the broadest possible audiences.

<u>Media</u>	<u>Genre</u>
1. print	Any popular genre can be
2. radio	traced through a number of
3. theater	media: western, mystery,
4. movies	romance, science fiction,
5. pulp paperbacks	comedy, occult fiction,
6. television	popular poetry, advertise-
7. music	ment, etc.

## III. Issue Approach

The issue approach is the easiest to organize and present. It is an approach which is especially valuable for the flexible teacher who wishes to address curricular materials to crises situations. A unit or course in Indian or Black literature, in the literature of Women's Liberation, or the abuse of political power are prime examples of issue-oriented curricula units. Success in such courses, however, often depends upon timeliness and student interest. Language or rhetoric, for example, is one workable emphasis in this approach. The rhetoric of

power in all its manifestation, for example, affords provocative material for discussion in any of the following issues:

1. race--Indian, Black, Chicano
2. women's liberation--pros and cons
3. community--social pressures to follow patterns, mores
4. social drop-outs--prisons, communes, sub-cultures (hippie, drugs, occult, religious, etc.)
5. politics and political images
6. language of advertisements--status, nostalgia, sports, etc.
7. role playing--personal and social pressures to conform
8. stereotypes, myth and hero figures
9. youth versus age, generation gaps, etc.

## IV. Comparative Literary Approach

In this approach a comparative study is made of both fine and popular literatures with emphasis upon form, enigmatic themes, characterization, and assumed and expressed values. The professional challenge of the approach is to sustain academic objectivity by accepting each work on its own terms, not by "putting down" the inadequacies of the popular. With objectivity such a comparative study can increase the student's appreciation for the subtleties and complexities of art. Units of study could include:

1. John Donne's love sonnets and Rod McKuen's popular verses
2. Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet and West Side Story
3. The Song of Roland and The Umbrellas of Cherbourg

## V. Historical Approach

The historical approach is usually done within a history unit but may be used in a literature course. This approach views world events of the past in the context of the popular culture. The Great Depression or World Wars could be studied, for example, in terms of the popular music of the periods. Shakespeare could be studied in terms of clothing styles, social customs, sanitation facilities, or penal practices of the period. This approach has the capacity to bring remote events and

and personalities alive. It helps the student understand realistically and with a social and human perspective not attainable in courses that study art and history in a cultural vacuum. Historical units could isolate phenomena as:

1. changing hero figures and types
2. changing social values
3. changing life styles and institutions
4. the relationship of art to distribution markets or new technological inventions

## April Sneaked In

April sneaked in when I wasn't looking.  
She is shaking the trees  
With a hint of warm breeze;  
Returning the finches, the robins, and such  
And is giving the willows a pale yellow touch;  
There's proof of her coming in each sound, in each sight  
From earlier dawn to longer twilight.  
April sneaked in when I wasn't looking!

Mrs. A. C. Hoppert  
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