2012

Transforming Student Engagement Through Documentary and Critical Media Literacy

Jessie Daniels
CUNY Hunter College

Recommended Citation

Transforming Student Engagement through Documentary and Critical Media Literacy

Jessie Daniels[1]

Young people entering college today have grown up in a multimedia environment, yet the classroom they most often encounter reflects nineteenth-century pedagogy. This paper explores the paradigm shift that is making documentaries more widely accessible for use in the classroom; describes a pedagogical strategy for connecting a critical media literacy 'reading' of documentaries with more traditional reading of written texts; investigates the effectiveness of this method to engage students through critical media literacy in ways that encourage transformation. Effectiveness was measured in a voluntary, self-reported questionnaire, emailed to students after the semester they took Introductory Sociology. Students in the sample favored the use of documentary films in the classroom, reported seeing connections between assigned readings and films, and said that because of the films they were more able to grasp core sociological concepts. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: journal@transformativestudies.org Website: http://www.transformativestudies.org ©2012 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.]*

KEYWORDS: Sociology, Documentary, Pedagogy, Critical Media Literacy.

[1] **Jessie Daniels**, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Urban Public Health (PhD, Sociology, University of Texas-Austin), and a Senior Fellow at the Center for Health, Media and Policy at Hunter College. She is the author of two books White Lies (Routledge, 1997) and Cyber Racism (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), both dealing with race, gender/sexuality and various forms of media. **Acknowledgments:** I would like to thank Paul Dean, Caroline Persell, Julie Netherland, Megha Ramaswamy, and Rebecca Tiger who read and commented on earlier drafts of this paper. Address correspondence to: Jessie Daniels, Hunter College, 695 Park Avenue, NY, NY 10065; e-mail: jessiedanielsnyc@gmail.com.

INTRODUCTION

Young people entering college today have grown up immersed in a multimedia digital environment. Yet, the classroom environment they encounter often reflects nineteenth-century pedagogy of "walk and chalk," of a lone professor standing in front of a chalkboard. Research indicates that students learn more deeply and retain knowledge longer from visual media than from spoken words alone (Mayer 2001). For at least a decade, educational scholars have urged teaching critical media literacy through popular culture (Alvermann, 1999; 2000, Kellner, 2005; 2004). Popular culture is often an easy pathway to student engagement because it has already captured young peoples' attention, and then instructors can scaffold more difficult concepts around that interest. The images that drive much of popular culture may be part of the key to this as a pedagogical strategy. Despite this research there is resistance to the visual in classroom instruction, especially in the social sciences. Although there is long tradition of using films in the classroom, this practice is viewed with disdain by some because it makes students "passive" rather than "active" learners (Pippert and Moore, 1999). Implied in this criticism are a number of interwoven ideas about the book as text and the visual as text. It suggests, first, that students are *actively* engaged in reading books in a way that they are not, indeed cannot be, with visual media. It also suggests that written texts, such as books and scholarly articles, are separate and disparate from visual texts, such as documentaries. In this paper, I take issue with both these notions through an investigation into the pedagogical effectiveness of using documentaries along with texts to engage students through critical media literacy in ways that encourage transformation.

My focus here is on documentaries to the exclusion of feature (or narrative) films as a method of teaching and learning. This presents certain advantages and challenges. Any discussion of documentaries must include addressing the problem of "truth," as it is a medium that by its very nature asserts a claim to truth-telling. This claim to truth is what led one scholar to refer to documentaries as containing a "seductive veracity" (Banks, 1990). In some ways, the seductive veracity of documentaries makes them especially well suited to the college classroom, when coupled with instruction in how to critically read these visual texts because it encourages students to challenge media messaging.

PARADIGM SHIFTS:
DOCUMENTARIES, DIGITAL MEDIA & DISTRIBUTION

This research is situated at the nexus of two distinct yet overlapping paradigmatic shifts: 1) the burgeoning field of documentaries along with the simultaneous democratization of the form; and, 2) the emergence and widespread adoption of Internet technologies which have profoundly changed the distribution of documentaries at the same time that these technologies are changing the way students approach learning. Today, there are simply more documentary films in existence than ever before due to the rise in the independent and documentary film industry (Renov 1993), widespread use of digital video cameras by the general public (Bernard 2007), and the rise of documentary-style television (Hogarth, 2006). Prominent documentarians such as Michael Moore (e.g., *Sicko,* 2007; *Farenheit 9/11*, 2005), Davis Guggenheim (*Waiting for Superman*, 2010; *Inconvenient Truth*, 2006), and Morgan Spurlock (e.g., *Supersize Me*, 2004) have experienced mainstream commercial success with the theatrical release of their films. In addition, documentary-style television shows (e.g., Discovery Channel's *Dirty Jobs* and *Deadliest Catch* are just two examples of an entire genre) and made-for-television documentary series (e.g., *Transgeneration* for Sundance Channel) abound on cable channels (Arthur 2005; Austin 2005; Hogarth 2006). HBO Documentaries led by Sheila Nevins, an arm of the cable powerhouse HBO, has built an impressive archive of documentary entertainment over twenty years, many of those titles concerned with social issues. For instance, in a landmark collaboration between National Institutes of Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, HBO launched *The Addiction Series* (2007), an award-winning collection of documentary films by some of the leading directors in the field (Bauder 2007). The ascendancy of the documentary form has led some commentators to suggest that we are experiencing a "golden age" of documentaries (Howker 2008).

At the same time that professionally produced documentary television and films are rising in prominence, the price of digital video cameras and digital editing software are falling, effectively lowering the barrier to would-be documentarians. The shift from more expensive analog celluloid film stock to less expensive digital video, and the equally important shift to digital editing software, has meant that more people are producing, directing and creating documentaries. Indeed, digital video technologies are becoming commonplace in American households. According to one report, 35 percent of U.S. households with children

own and actively use a digital video camera ("camcorder").[1] The proliferation of digital cameras and digital editing software has meant a democratization of documentary filmmaking (Bernard 2007). For example, documentaries like Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation* (2003), which Caouette made by recording large chunks of his life and editing them on his home computer at very little cost, would simply not have been possible thirty years ago (Bonastia 2005). The do-it-yourself digital video technology allows almost anyone to document the most microscopic details of their existence and make them available to the larger public, in effect becoming a new, visual form of memoir (Bonastia 2005). This democratization of documentaries further contributes to their wide availability for the sociology classroom and increases the likelihood that beginning students will have some familiarity with the documentary form.

Taken together, the rise in the number and the success of professionally-produced documentaries alongside the DIY (do-it-yourself) documentary and digital video means that today there is an ever increasing array of documentaries from which instructors may choose. Given this greater selection, it is now likely that there is a documentary film that addresses nearly every topic covered in the typical introductory sociology class. Not only is it likely that there is a documentary for each unit in an introductory sociology class, it is also now possible to acquire said documentaries through a shift in distribution networks.

Distribution networks for films shape the way they are used in the sociology classroom. Sociologists have used feature films to teach upper division courses such as race relations (Loewen 1991) and medical sociology (Pescosolido 1990); drawing upon the multimedia widely available at the time, these authors exclusively used feature films. At least in part, this pedagogical practice was shaped by the distribution networks for feature films produced by Hollywood studios. Conventional distribution networks, such as chain video stores and cable television channels, made feature films widely available to the general public and thus more accessible for sociologists interested in using films in the classroom. Since the early 1990s, much has changed in the landscape of film and video distribution. The explosive growth in the production of documentary films means that there are simply more documentaries to distribute. And, the commercial success of a few of those documentaries released in theaters has made distributors more aware of the broad audience for the non-fiction film. Most importantly, vastly diversified distribution networks mean that many of the economics of the "long tail" work to the advantage of documentaries without a wide theatrical release

(Anderson 2004). According to Anderson's theory of the long tail, creative products and content of all kinds with a smaller than mass-market appeal can find modest commercial success through distributed networks; so, for example, one can now find obscure tunes via iTunes which would have once been difficult to locate in record stores based on old distribution networks that relied on mass-market appeal. And, this shift in distribution networks has affected documentaries as well, most notably through the online retailer Netflix which has gained a reputation for distributing relatively hard-to-find documentaries (Liedtke 2004). In addition, literally millions of short documentary films and clips from longer documentaries are available at no cost through online video portals, such as Hulu.com, PBS.org, and YouTube.com. Together, these shifting trends in digital video technology and distribution networks have led to an increase in the number of non-fiction films being produced, and this increase in the number of films has driven down the overall cost of acquiring documentaries for individual instructors and educational institutions.[2]

The emergence and pervasiveness of Internet technologies also shapes the use of documentary films in the sociology classroom in some unexpected ways that highlight the importance of critical media literacy. In the 1990s, the Internet was a text-only niche experience, but today it has become a massified and predominantly visual technology (Nakamura 2008). Increasingly, students look for information using an Internet search engine rather than with a trip to the library (Rheingold 2006), often expecting to find visual images as part of their online search for information (Author 2009). The Internet's pervasiveness of visual and interactive culture is changing the way young people look for, learn and retain knowledge (MIT Press 2008); a paradigmatic shift prompted the MacArthur Foundation to sponsor a 50 million dollar initiative to develop a new field for digital teaching and learning (http://digitallearning.macfound.org). This new terrain of digital teaching and learning has led some scholars to call for a "re-visioning" of education (Kellner 2004; Kellner and Share 2005; Livingstone 2004) and another scholar to point to the need for an expanded definition of literacy (Hobbs 2007).

TRANSFORMING THE INTRODUCTORY SOCIOLOGY COURSE THROUGH THE USE OF DOCUMENTARIES

The wider accessibility of documentaries has transformed the way I approach the classroom. Now, I combine documentary films with peer-

reviewed articles or other assigned readings around key concepts in medical sociology. There is some overlap between the films and the readings, this repetition is designed to reinforce the material for students, as well as provide opportunities for insights about the connection between the films and the readings. In order to highlight the importance of authorship and credibility, near the beginning of the semester I describe for students the process of peer-review for publication and contrast this with the publication process for print-based journalists and for new media journalists, such as bloggers. In lecture and class discussion, I drive home the importance of peer-reviewed literature and emphasize that this is the research that professionals consult and rely upon for their work. I challenge students to master the ability to find and read the peer-reviewed literature as a basic standard for becoming a college-educated and engaged citizen. As I introduce the first documentary to the class, I revisit the issues of authorship and credibility in visual texts. For each film, I provide students with a *"Video Worksheet"* prior to the class the day the film is shown through the campus course management software (e.g., Blackboard); students are required to bring the worksheet with them and to complete the assigned reading before the class. The *"Video Worksheet"* includes questions about the key concepts, the content of the film, the connections between the film and the assigned reading, and asks about the mechanisms the filmmaker employs to convey their message (See Appendix B). After the film, class discussion – either in small groups or with the class as a whole – focuses on answering the questions on the worksheet. I collect these worksheets and grant participation points based on completion, but do not grade them closely for accuracy; rather I rely on the class discussion following the films to drive home the correct answers. Questions from the worksheets are often adapted as exam and quiz questions. *The "Video Worksheets"* also develop students' critical media literacy skills by helping them understand the "point of view" (POV) of the director by analyzing the component parts that make up the documentary.

As just one example of this approach, I will describe how this pedagogical strategy works in addressing key concepts in the introductory course: medical sociology and race. Race, a socially constructed category, is nevertheless an important determinant of health. This can be a difficult concept for students to understand. By providing some historical context for contemporary health disparities, a deeper understanding of racial discrimination in the U.S., as well as the ethical violations in medical experimentation can be an effective strategy for

teaching this concept. To address this topic, I show "The Deadly Deception" (Denisce Di Ianni, writer, producer and director; Films for the Humanities & Sciences, 1993, 60 minutes), a documentary that deals with the Tuskegee Syphilis Study conducted by public health officials in the U.S. from 1932 to 1972. The film features first-person accounts of African American men who were enrolled in the study and a number of doctors who were investigators on the study – some of whom objected to the study and one white doctor who still defends the study as a worthwhile scientific endeavor. In addition, the film features archival footage and interviews with experts in medical sociology. The documentary is quite affecting and holds up well even though it is now over ten years old. For most traditional-aged college students (born between 1993 and 1989) who are unfamiliar with the history of the Tuskegee study, the film is compelling.

For an introductory sociology class, the power of this documentary is further enhanced through the assigned readings and there are a number of articles that work well with this film. For an early undergraduate course, "The Tuskegee Legacy: AIDS and the Black Community," (1992) is a short (three page) article written in easily accessible language. For medical sociology classes that are cross-listed with public health courses, Thomas and Crouse Quinn's article, "The Tuskegee Syphilis Study, 1932 to 1972: Implications for HIV Education and AIDS Risk Education Programs in the Black Community," (1991) works well as a companion reading to the documentary. Both articles provide a connection between the historical background on the Tuskegee study and contemporary distrust of medical intervention on the part of African Americans. Rather than seeing resistance to medical professionals as an artifact of social isolation, lack of education, or cultural superstition, these readings provide students a way of seeing the deeply rooted, systemic racial oppression that pervades the U.S. and the consequences this has for the lives of African Americans (Feagin 2006; Kreiger 1999).

The film "The Deadly Deception" provides medical sociology students with an engaging and critical background to the history of racial discrimination in the U.S. and its attendant health consequences. The film also raises important questions about the ethics of medical experimentation and about public health research that focuses exclusively on one racial or ethnic group. The peer-reviewed readings take the background provided by the documentary film as a given, and add further complexity by exploring the implications of this history for the health of contemporary African Americans. Without the film, most students unfamiliar with the history of the Tuskegee experiments would

have a more difficult time with the peer-reviewed readings; without the peer-reviewed literature, students who only saw the film might erroneously assume that the lessons of Tuskegee were confined to a remote historical period. The "Video Worksheet" and class discussion build on these lessons and introduce students to critical media literacy concepts by asking questions about the point-of-view of the filmmakers and the way they used particular filmic techniques to construct an argument visually. Combining teaching sociology using documentaries and written texts, along with critical media literacy – addressing how directors, editors and authors construct a narrative or an argument with images and word choice – can transform learning for students.

THE STUDENTS & THE INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

The students included in this study were attending an open-admissions liberal arts college in New York City and ranged in age from 18-22 at the time the data was collected (Fall, 2008 and Spring, 2009). I contacted 100 students via email after the conclusion of the semester in which they took Introduction to Sociology of which 64 completed the open-ended questionnaire (See Appendix B). Those in the sample were mostly non-majors who had enrolled in the beginning sociology class in order to fulfill general education requirements.[3] The students in the study roughly reflected the gender composition of colleges nationwide with 65% (42) female and 35% (24) male, compared to the national average in which 62% of all college students are female and 37% are male. The race and ethnicity of the sample reflects the racial composition of the college in that it is much more racially and ethnically diverse than colleges nationwide which on average are comprised of 70% white (Caucasian) students. The racial/ethnic composition of the sample included 3% (2) Asian/Pacific Islanders, 26% (17) Whites/Caucasians, 29% (19) Latinas/Hispanics, and 40% (26) Blacks/African Americans. I did not ask directly about their family or household income, but based on other data I collected for this study and in informal conversations with many students, I can infer that those in the sample come from economically impoverished backgrounds. For example, in paragraphs in which students wrote about their lives, most included some reference to public housing, either growing up in or currently living in the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA). A recent study conducted by researchers at New York University found that children who lived in NYCHA properties are more likely to be living in poverty than their peers (IESP and Furman Center 2008). The students in this sample, unlike the

majority of college students in the rest of the nation who come from households earning $50,000 per year or more, are more similar to those 15% or so of all college students who come from households earning less than $25,000 per year. Thus, this sample includes students who are typical of college students nationally in terms of age and gender, yet different in terms of income, racial and ethnic background.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: RESULTS

The results from the self-report surveys suggest that documentaries increased student engagement in course materials. All of those surveyed said that they thought the documentaries enhanced their learning, although a few expressed displeasure with individual documentary selections. Analysis of the self-reported responses reveals that students found that the documentaries helped them grasp basic sociological concepts by incorporating emotional content, by providing a wider knowledge about the world, and improving their analytical skills through the critical media literacy component.

Part of what students found powerful about the documentaries was their ability to convey the emotional context of sociological concepts. One student describes the strong impact that seeing *Quiet Rage* about Phil Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment, had on her:

> *"The films helped a lot. It is always very helpful to be able to see things instead of reading them. In all of the films you are able to see people talking about how specific issues are affecting their lives. For example, in the very first film we saw about the experiment, we (the audience) could see / hear how the test subjects were made to feel, and how it affected their lives after the experiment was over."*

Here, this student articulates the way that the emotional impact of this classic experiment is a crucial part of the learning process for her. Further, this student remarks very specifically about how "test subjects were made to feel," both at the time of the experiment and in the years afterward, stands in stark contrast to the textbook which does not include "emotional" information. This insightful observation is consistent with research that demonstrates emotions are a powerful component of effective learning and retention of complex ideas (Dirkx 2001). By incorporating emotional content about the impact of an unethical research project on the subjects, students were able to better understand

the concept of research ethics as presented in the text book and in the lecture.

Documentaries also enhanced learning in the introductory sociology class by providing students with some knowledge of a wider world. For first-year students, many sociological concepts may seem overly abstract and difficult to grasp. Documentaries can offer a proxy for broadening lived experience because of its immediacy. As one respondent noted:

> *"The films and videos in class did enhance my learning. I learned many new things about the ways other cultures and ethnicities live their life. In some films, I did see connections between the films, text book and lectures."*

In this response, a student indicates that the documentaries served to introduce them to "other cultures and ethnicities," and this can be a useful aspect of documentaries, especially for students who may have little knowledge of cultures beyond their own. For example, several of the documentaries I use in the introductory class address the subject of religion across a variety of cultural milieus. The subjects of these documentaries are also represented in very different ways by the directors of each film (e.g., the shamanism of Hmong immigrants in *The Split Horn;* the Amish culture in *The Devil's Playground*; the evangelical Christians in *Jesus Camp*). Juxtaposing different cultural expressions of religion through documentaries helps reinforce basic sociological concepts such as 'ethnocentrism,' often covered in the introductory class in the unit on culture. In addition, these documentaries prompt students to think about religion more critically by seeing different forms of religiously organized life. Thus, viewing documentary accounts of the influence of religion across cultural contexts, even within the U.S., can strengthen basic understanding about basic sociological concepts such as "ethnocentrism," as well as about religion as an institution. In this way, students without much life experience can draw on examples from the films to both grasp and illustrate sociological concepts.

Beyond facilitating understanding about basic concepts, documentaries can also help build critical thinking and writing skills about sociology. Here another student in the experimental group describes it this way:

> *"I believe that the films were a good way of teaching. The videos helped me because I can use them in my essays to explain the concepts of sociology."*

What this student is remarking on is part of a larger skill set of analytical thinking. According to this student, the "videos help me explain the concepts of sociology," but prior to that act of "explaining" the student must first "understand." Clearly, the documentaries have helped this student understand sociological concepts well enough so that now s/he feels able to explain them. Another student-respondent in the experimental group echoes the previous one:

> *"The films I saw during the semester were interesting and informative. They helped with understanding the text by giving examples of things like gender inequality, religion and family. It gave me the opportunity to see how strong religion and family can affect the life of an individual especially from a different view than I was brought up with."*

While the previous student reports that the documentaries helped them think of illustrative examples necessary for essay writing, this student says that the documentaries helped him/her understand the text and then lists several sociological concepts, "gender, inequality, religion and family." The student does not mention specific documentary titles but does articulate several key sociological concepts covered in the introductory sociology class – "gender, inequality, religion, and family." The fact that this student reports using the documentaries in this way indicates that the documentaries contribute to students' learning critical thinking skills.

A few of those in the experimental group also wrote about the critical media literacy component included in the "Video Worksheets" and the discussion following the documentaries. For these students, the analysis of the components of documentaries and examining how they are constructed enhanced their learning:

> *"My experience with videos has been something different I've never come across. Before this class I never actually knew how to analyze a movie and pick out the central message and observe small details."*

Here, the student remarks on an important shift in the way s/he views media, "something different" and that "I've never come across." The change in how this student views media after the class, to be able to "observe small details" and "pick out the central message" suggests a substantial development in her/his critical media literacy skills. These

skills expand the grasp of key sociological concepts, as this student describes:

> *"The videos helped because they were usually taking a stance on an issue, while the text briefly described the arguments/positions. Seeing and hearing video is much better than reading the text because the historical footage, impassioned speeches, and other interviews are relayed with much more clarity. The videos are easier to watch for 90 minutes than 90 minutes of reading the text, so even if the information was the same, I grasped more of it."*

In this response, the student expresses a preference for learning through documentaries compared to the text because of their strong POV. This indicates a grasp of the critical media literacy component that emphasizes understanding that an individual with a particular standpoint creates each media product. Here, the student finds this preferable to the textbook that "briefly described the arguments/positions." This student, like the one that mentioned the Zimbardo film, emphasizes the importance of emotion conveyed through documentaries making them a more effective device for learning when s/he writes about the "impassioned speeches," and again, this is consistent with the extant research linking emotions with effective learning (Dirkx 2001). Students' experience of textbooks, assigned readings, and lectures that rely on logic and reason may find these devoid of emotion and thus "boring." The capacity of documentaries to convey powerful emotions along with logic and reasoning is not a replacement for text books and lectures. But, emotionally powerful documentaries may engage students in learning about sociology who might not immediately see the appeal of the discipline's enduring questions.

The student-respondent quoted above also mentions attention span, an important issue when it comes to documentaries in the classroom. Here, another student-respondent addresses the issue of paying attention to a variety of course offerings:

> *"I believe documentaries are a great idea because it makes the class a little bit more interesting and not so boring. The films are better compared to the lecture or spending one hour reading, because these [lecture and reading] make the student fall asleep."*

In this quote and in the previous one, the students observe that it is easier for them to pay attention to documentaries than to course material in other formats. In the previous quote, the student even asserts that although it would be difficult to pay attention to reading a text for ninety minutes they would be able to pay attention to a documentary for that long. In actuality, ninety minutes is generally too long for students to pay attention to a book or a documentary.[4] There is some research which supports the idea that the use of Internet technologies, and in particular SMS (or texting), are contributing factors to shortening the attention span and affecting how we learn, especially for those born after 1982, sometimes referred to as "the net generation" (Oblinger and Oblinger 2005). Given students' shortening attention spans, many find it increasingly difficult to concentrate on tasks that take longer than a few minutes and this includes paying attention to documentaries. While all the students in the experimental group favored the use of documentaries, three students expressed dismay at particular documentaries they deemed especially "boring" or "too long." While I initially thought that documentaries might have an inherent advantage over textbooks in terms of students' short attention spans, over time I have observed students struggling to give their undivided attention to even the most compelling documentaries. I tried to use the documentaries, and more importantly how they watch documentaries, as a lesson in learning to pay attention. Here, I would acknowledge the sometimes-bored looks on faces and ask them where they lost interest in the film and see if they could tell me *why* they lost interest using their critical media skills (e.g., where there too many 'talking heads' featured? Was the music, pacing or editing too slow? Was the film visually uninteresting? Or, were the subjects uninteresting?). So, while students may express a preference for paying attention to documentaries over lectures or the textbook, the use of documentaries is less than perfect solution for dealing with the short attention spans of the net generation.

Overall, the results from three different measures indicate that using documentaries along with a critical media literacy component is an effective method for teaching and learning introductory sociology. Those in the experimental group who viewed the documentaries scored higher on the 10-item quantitative measure and on the evaluation of the paragraphs about the sociological imagination than the students in the control group who viewed no documentaries. Furthermore, those in the experimental group consistently reported a strong preference for learning through documentary films.

LIMITATIONS & CONCERNS

There are a number of limitations and concerns to this research. The self-reports from students here are merely initial attempts at measuring learning in the introductory sociology course. The data presented are not generalizeable to all undergraduates in New York City, or even to all undergraduates enrolled at that institution. These students may have been swayed by any number of factors not taken into account here. Thus, self-reported measures are, by definition, partial and limited.

The sample used here represents a limitation to the study in a number of ways. First, the sample size was small (>75) and the study should be replicated with a larger sample. This may have been further confounded by the institutional setting of this study, a small, urban, open-admissions liberal arts college in New York City, in which students attend a variety of campuses, both during the day and at night. Still, even with these limitations, the results here indicate that using documentaries along with a critical media literacy component creates student engagement and warrants further investigation.

For those who wish to use documentaries for teaching in the college classroom, there are several cautions to be aware of before implementing this pedagogical strategy. As Pippert and Moore (1999) have noted, the introduction of multimedia elements in the classroom may encourage more passive learning for those who have grown up watching television passively. Furthermore, Hobbs' (2006) research indicates that the "non-optimal use of video," such as to fill class time, to keep students quiet, as a break from learning, or as a reward for good behavior, diminishes the value of film and video viewing as an effective tool for teaching and learning. Many of my students have had these kinds of experiences with films in other classrooms, so my strategy is to use a multi-pronged approach to energize students and get them to re-imagine the documentaries as active learning activities rather than passive events. At the beginning of the semester, I include language in my syllabus and reinforce verbally the idea that the documentaries for this class are considered *"visual texts"* that are as important as the textbook and the lectures. I tell students that when we are screening a documentary together, they are expected to stay awake, lean forward, put their digital devices away and give their full attention to the films. I remind them that all material in the films is potential exam material, and I encourage them to take notes and answer the questions on the *"Video Worksheets"* as the film is being shown. I also keep the lights on in part of the classroom and frequently walk around the room to gently remind students who may

have momentarily forgotten about the importance of documentaries in the class.

Time, preparation and budget may also present administrative barriers to implementing this teaching method. An instructor who plans to teach using documentaries should screen each documentary prior to the class for which it will be used. Ideally, the instructor should also prepare either a handout or some other guideline for questions to help students make the connections between the assigned readings, lecture and documentary. This involves time and planning, which may be in short supply for faculty who are already over-scheduled.

Documentaries cost money. At an institution with a limited budget for film and video, the cost of purchasing some documentaries may be prohibitive (some cost $200 to $400 for a copy with an institutional license). However, some sociology instructors may want to consider investing in their own copies of widely available and inexpensive documentaries (some cost as little as $20 to $40 dollars for copies with an individual license); this is what I have often done. Buying one's own copies of documentaries is convenient because the instructor can easily grab it on the way to class rather than having to take the additional trip to the library or a/v department on campus. Doing this also raises the issue of whether or not to make films available to students who miss class for whatever reason. My practice has been to not allow the films that I own out of my possession and to require that students attend the class when the films are screened. This also raises issues of intellectual property restrictions; showing most documentaries to sociology classes as part of required and relevant course material and without charging students an additional fee falls within the fair use educational exception to the copyright law.[5] Whenever possible, I encourage my institution to purchase institutional copies of documentaries to support the work of filmmakers.[6]

Recently, many short videos have become available online. This type of distribution has tremendous potential for transforming teaching and learning for those who are inclined to use documentary films in the classroom while also overcoming the barrier of cost. For example, PBS has recently made many of the documentaries from its "Frontline" series available online at no cost, and many of these are suitable for sociology classes. However, using online videos as individual (rather than classroom) assignments raises a number of concerns. Viewing online requires an audio-enabled computer and for students who may wish to view online videos on a computer in a setting where other people are working (e.g. library, dorm room), the audio portion of online videos

may prove disruptive to others. This can be solved easily with the use of headphones, which most students have. A bigger concern with viewing online video is that it requires broadband access. While students living on campus will typically have such access, students living off campus may not have broadband access, but many rely on dialup, which makes online video so slow as to be unwatchable. Individual viewing on a computer may work in some contexts, such as an online course, but in the traditional face-to-face classroom discussed here tasking students with watching videos as individual homework assignments is problematic. Even if students remember to do this homework assignment, it is unlikely to be as effective as the films screened by the class as a group. Screening the films together provides a collective experience for students and offers the scaffolding of class discussion, which many students will need, to make sense of what they have seen in the documentary and make the connections to core sociological concepts.

CONCLUSION

College students who are part of the "net generation" (born after 1982) have come of age immersed in multiple forms of visual media. This represents an important shift in teaching and learning that sociologists are just beginning to take into account (Wynn 2009). Simultaneously, documentaries are experiencing a "golden age" (Howker 2008) and increasingly those who wish to influence public opinion do so through the documentary form (Bauder 2007). Given this context of a shifting learning environment and media saturation in which multiple and varied vested interests are trying to influence public opinion through documentaries, it is increasingly important to foster the development of critical media literacy in the introductory sociology class. Teaching introductory sociology through documentaries with a critical media literacy component offers a way to address the teaching goals of sociology faculty and meet the learning needs of students by presenting them with new ways to use the sociological imagination in a multimedia environment.

While there are some early adopters and innovators (Benson et al., 2002; Wynn 2009), sociologists are often not on the leading edge of adopting new technologies because we (sociologists) tend to see such new technologies as "unscientific" (Becker 1995). However, I would argue that we ignore digital media and technology in the sociology classroom at our peril because it is changing how students learn and, if used well, can improve student engagement in class content (Wynn

2009) and civic life beyond the classroom (Bennett 2008). Using documentaries in the class may be a way to build student engagement while also improving critical thinking about the kind of information found online.

In the self-reports about their learning experience of the documentary films discussed here, students were overwhelmingly positive about documentaries as an element that enhanced their learning. In particular, several of the students noted that the documentaries enhanced their ability to comprehend the sociological concepts presented in class lectures and read in the textbook. In addition, several students reported that the critical media literacy component, that is, understanding how documentaries are constructed, was a major benefit of this approach.

Documentaries are no panacea, however. Students who have grown up with digital media still face serious difficulty paying attention for more than a few minutes at a time. Documentaries used as time-fillers or placeholders can have an adverse effect on students' willingness to take media seriously for learning sociology (Hobbs 2006). And, documentaries require time, money and preparation on the part of the instructor (and the instructor's institution). Bell schedules and short classroom periods may also prohibit showing full-length documentaries and place an additional burden on instructors to find relevant clips and shorten them for available class time. Together, these may prove to be prohibitive administrative barriers to incorporating documentaries into the classroom.

Overall, this research indicates that using documentaries with instruction about critical media literacy can be an effective method for engaging students and encouraging critical reading of both visual texts and the written word. Based on reports from students, documentaries appear to facilitate a greater understanding of difficult and abstract concepts. When combined with learning about critical media literacy, documentaries may help students engage in higher order learning. Whether or not this finding can be replicated with a larger sample and more systematic analysis remains a question for future research. What remains clear is that just as "video killed the radio star," digital media in the classroom marks the end of "walk and chalk" pedagogy.

WORKS CITED

Adler, Ronald B. 1995. "Teaching Communication Theories with 'Jungle Fever'." *Communication Education* 44 (2):157-64. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03634529509379007

Jessie Daniels

Anderson, Chris. 2004. "The Long Tail." *Wired* 12:10 (October). Retrieved November 12, 2004. (http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.10/tail.html).

Arthur, Paul. 2005. "Extreme Makeover: The Changing Face of Documentary." *Cineaste* Summer, Volume 30 (3):18-23.

Ault, James M., Jr. 2005. *Spirit and Flesh: Life in a Fundamentalist Baptist Church*. New York: Knopf Publishing Group.

Austin, Regina. 2005. "Foreword: Engaging Documentaries Seriously." *Fordham Intellectual Property Media & Entertainment Law Journal*, 16:707-714.

Author. 2009. (Removed to ensure blinded review.)

Bauder, David. 2007. "Private Pain Fuels HBO Addiction Docs." *Forbes.com* (March 13). Retrieved March 15, 2007. (http://www.forbes.com/feeds/ap/2007/03/13/ap3511745.html).

Becker, Howard. 1995. "Visual Sociology, Documentary Photography, and Photojournalism. It's (Almost) All a Matter of Context," *Visual Sociology* 10:1/2:5-14. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14725869508583745

Bennett, W. Lance (Ed.). 2008. *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth*, Digital Media and Learning Series, MacArthur Foundation. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Benson, Denzel E., Wava Haney, Tracey E. Ore, Caroline Hodges Persell, and Aileen Schulte. 2002. "Digital Teaching." *Teaching Sociology* 30:140-157. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3211379

Bernard, Sheila Curran. 2007. *Documentary Storytelling: Making Stronger And More Dramatic Nonfiction Films.* St. Louis, MO: Focal Press / Elsevier.

Bonastia, Christopher. 2005. "Is Documentary the New Memoir? A Sociologist's View from the Couch." The Independent (December 1). Retrieved January 8, 2007. (http://www.independent-magazine.org/node/331).

Champoux, Joseph E. 1999. "Film as a Teaching Resource." *Journal of Management Inquiry* 8 (2):206-218. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/105649269982016

Daressa, Lawrence. 2009. Personal communication. Director of Acquisitions, California Newsreel.

DeFronzo, James. 1982. "The Film-Augmented Course on International Social Movements." *Teaching Sociology* 9 (2):169-188. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1317319

Demerath, N. Jay, III. 1981. "Through a Double-Crossed Eye: Sociology and the Movies." *Teaching Sociology* 9:69-82. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1317013

Dikli, Semire. 2006. "An Overview of Automated Scoring of Essays." *The Journal of Technology, Learning and Assessment* 5 (1):5-35. Retrieved May 15, 2008. (http://www.jtla.org).

Dirkx, John M. 2001. "The Power of Feelings: Emotion, Imagination, and the Construction of Meaning in Adult Learning." *New Directions For Adult And Continuing Education* 89:63-72. http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/ace.9

Erwin, T. Dary, and Ricardo Rieppi. 1999. "Computers in Teaching: Comparing Multimedia and Traditional Approaches in Undergraduate Psychology Classes." *Teaching in Psychology* 26 (1):58-61. http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15328023top2601_18

Gitlin, Todd. 2001. *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives*. New York: Henry Holt & Co.

Grady, John. 1996. "The Scope of Visual Sociology." *Visual Studies* 11(2):10-24. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14725869608583762

Grimshaw, Anna. 2001. "Teaching Visual Anthropology: Notes from the Field." *Ethnos* 66:237-258. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00141840120070958

Hannon, James T. and Sam Marullo. 1988. "Education for Survival: Using Films to Teach War as a Social Problem." *Teaching Sociology* 16:245-255. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1317526

Harper, Douglas. 1982. *Good Company.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Harper, Douglas. 2001. *Changing Works: Visions of Lost Agriculture.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Hobbs, Renee. 2006. "Reconceptualizing Media Literacy for the Digital Age." In A. Martin and D. Madigan (Eds). *Literacies for Learning in the Digital Age.* London: Facets Press, pp. 99 - 109.

Hodgetts, Darrin, and Kerry Chamberlain. 2006. "Developing a Critical Media Research Agenda for Health Psychology." *Journal of Health Psychology* 11:217-327. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1359105306061190

Hogarth, David. 2006. *Realer than Reel: Global Directions in Documentary*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Howker, Ed. 2008. "Is this a golden age for documentaries?" *The Independent* (December 15). Retrieved January 3, 2009. (http://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/tv-radio/is-this-a-golden-age-for-documentaries-1066699.html).

Institute for Education and Social Policy and Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy. 2008. *Public Housing and Public Schools: How Do Students Living in NYC Public Housing Fare in School?* Policy Brief, (November). Retrieved November 28, 2008. (http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/iesp/briefs).

Kahn, Richard and Douglas Kellner. 2005. "Reconstructing Technoliteracy: a multiple literacies approach." *E-Learning* 2:238-251. http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/elea.2005.2.3.4

Kellner, Douglas. 2004. "Technological Transformation, Multiple Literacies and the Re-visioning of Education." *E-Learning* 1:9-37. http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/elea.2004.1.1.8

Kellner, Douglas and Jeff Share. 2005. "Toward Critical Media Literacy: Core Concepts, Debates, Organizations, and Policy." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 26:369-386. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01596300500200169

Liedtke, Michael. 2004. "Netflix Founder Has a Blockbuster Plan," *RedOrbit*. Retrieved April 28, 2009. (http://www.redorbit.com/news/technology/50234/netflix_founder_has_a_blockbuster_plan/).

Livingstone, Sonia. 2004. "Media literacy and the challenges of new information and communication technologies." *The Communication Review* 7:3-14. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10714420490280152

Loewen, James W. 1991. "Teaching Race Relations from Feature Films." *Teaching Sociology* 19 (1):82-86. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1317580

Mayer, Richard E. 2001. *Multi-Media Learning*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Miller, Michael V. 2009. "Integrating Online Multimedia into College Course and Classroom: With Application to the Social Sciences." MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching 5 (2). Retrievied July 2, 2009.(http://jolt.merlot.org/vol5no2/miller_0609.htm).

Mills, C. Wright. 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.

MIT Press. 2008. *Digital Media and Learning Series of Edited Volumes*, MacArthur Foundation, multiple editors and authors. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Nakamura, Lisa. 2008. *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Oblinger, Diana G. and James L. Oblinger. 2005. *Educating the Net Generation*.

Educause Report. Retrieved June 28, 2009. (http://www.educause.edu/educatingthenetgen/).

Persell, Caroline Hodges and Sarah Damaske. N.D. "Using Video to Teach Sociology: An Appraisal and Agenda for the Future." *Unpublished paper.*

Persell, Caroline Hodges, Kathryn M. Pfeiffer and Ali Syed. 2007. "What Should Students Understand After Taking Introduction to Sociology?" *Teaching Sociology* 35 (4): 300-314. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0092055X0703500401

Pescosolido, Bernice A. 1990. "Teaching Medical Sociology Through Film: Theoretical Perspectives and Practical Tools." *Teaching Sociology* 18:337-346. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1317736

Pippert, Timothy D. and Helen A. Moore. 1999. "Multiple Perspectives on Multimedia in the Large Lecture." *Teaching Sociology* 27:92-109. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1318697

Renov, Michael, ed. 1993. *Theorizing Documentary*. New York: Routledge.

Rheingold, Howard. 2006. "Keynote Speech." in *Digital Media & Learning Conference*. Retrieved October 26, 2006. (http://www.nmc.org/cal/2006-nmc-online-conference-digital-media).

Rojas, Hernando, Michael Schmierbach, Heejo Keum, and Homero Gil-De-Zuniga. 2005. "Media Dialogue: Perceiving and Addressing Community Problems." *Mass Communication & Society* 8 (2):93-110. http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15327825mcs0802_2

Scherer, Robert F., and Bud Baker. 1999. "Exploring Social Institutions Through the Films of Frederick Wiseman." *Journal of Management Education* 23:143-153. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/105256299902300204

Smith, Don D. 1977. "Teaching Undergraduate Sociology Through Feature Films." *Teaching Sociology* 10:98-101. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1316999

Stoddard, Jeremy and Alan Marcus. 2005. "Based on a True Story: The Use of Hollywood Film in History Classes." *Wisconsin Journal of the Social Studies* 4 (1):40-46.

Stoll, Clarice S. 1973. "Videotape as an Aid in Sociology Instruction." *Teaching Sociology* 2:38-47. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1317332

Ten Have, Paul. 2003. "Teaching Students Observational Methods: Visual Studies and Visual Analysis," *Visual Studies* 18 (1): 29-35. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1472586032000100047

Tischler, Henry L. 2006. *Introduction to Sociology, 9th Edition.* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Wagenaar, Theodore C. 2004. "Is there a Core in Sociology? Results from a Survey." *Teaching Sociology* 32 (1):1-18. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0092055X0403200101

Wagner, Jon. 1979. *Images of Information: Still Photography in the Social Sciences.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Wynn, Jonathan. 2009. "Digital Sociology: Emergent Technologies in the Field and the Classroom." *Sociological Forum* 24 (2):448-456. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1573-7861.2009.01109.x

Yahnke, Robert E. 2002. " 'Involve Me and I'll Understand': A Learner-Centered Approach to Teaching Documentary Film." Hawaii International Conference on Arts and Humanities, October 25, Honolulu, HI.

APPENDIX A

Filmography for Introductory to Sociology

Split Horn: The Life of a Hmong Shaman in America (2001) Directed by Taggart Siegel.

Quiet Rage: Stanford Prison Experiment (n/d) Directed by Philip Zimbardo.

Deadly Deception: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment (1993) Directed by Denisce DiAnni.

The Devil's Playground (2002) Directed by Lucy Walker.

Jesus Camp (2006) Directed by Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady.

The Corporation (2004) Directed by Mark Achbar, Jennifer Abbott & Joel Bakhan.

The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter (1980) Directed by Sue Davenport.

For the Bible Tells Me So (2007) Directed by Daniel Karslake.

The Heart of the Game (2005) Directed by Ward Serrill.

The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces (1988) Directed by William H. Whyte.

Berkeley in the Sixties (1990) Directed by Mark Kitchell.

APPENDIX B

Worksheet for VIDEO: "The Deadly Deception"

Background. This documentary chronicles the Tuskegee Syphilis study, an important event in U.S. history. **Directions.** Watch the video closely, and answer the following questions. Questions on this worksheet are likely to appear on the next exam.

1. Who were the people (researchers) who conducted the Tuskegee study? What was their position in society and what motivated them?

2. What was the stated purpose of the study?

3. What reason were the men given for the tests and treatment they received?

4. How does the Tuskegee study conflict with the ethical standards of research discussed in class?

5. In what way was this study an example of the combination of prejudice and institutionalized discrimination?

6. In the first article you were assigned, "The Tuskegee Legacy: AIDS and the Black Community," the author writes about the way the experiments at Tuskegee continue to have an impact on the way that some people in the black community respond to the AIDS epidemic. Drawing on examples in the article, briefly explain this connection.

7. In the second article, "The Tuskegee Syphillis Study, 1932 to 1972: Implications for HIV Education and AIDS Risk Education Programs in the Black Community," the authors set out some very clear implications from the study for HIV education today. Briefly, list two of these here.

Media Literacy Questions:

Everything you see in a film (or any form of media) represents an intentional choice by the director, editor or cinematographer. Since we get most of our information about the world from media, it's important to understand how to make sense of media images. Use these questions to help you make sense of these images.

1. What are the physical qualities of the motion picture (check where applicable):

____ Music
____ Narration
____ Special effects
____ Color
____ Live action
____ Background noise
____ Animation
____ Dramatizations
____ "Talking Heads"
____ Historic Footage
____ Subject Interviews
____ Newspaper Headlines

2. Note how camera angles, lighting, music, narration, and/or editing contribute to creating an atmosphere in this film. What is the mood or tone of the film?

3. Does this film appeal to the viewer's reason or emotion? Does it intend to make you think or feel? How does it make you feel?

4. What is the central message(s) of this documentary?

5. Consider the effectiveness of the film in communicating its message. As a tool of communication, what are its strengths and weaknesses?

6. How do you think the filmmakers wanted the audience to respond?

7. What information do you gain about this event that would not be conveyed by a written source? Be specific.

8. Documentaries are often criticized for using too many "talking heads," that is experts on the subject of the film who are shown talking. Different filmmakers have come up with a variety of ways to solve the problem of "talking heads." How does the filmmaker address that problem in this film?

APPENDIX C

Open-Ended Questionnaire

1. Do you see a connection in between assigned readings, the writing assignments and the visual text (film)?

2. In terms of the visual texts (films) for this class, do you feel as if you are learning from these assignments?

3. Compared to other classes in which you do not see films, how would you evaluate the use of visual texts (films) in this class?

Would you like to films to be included in future classes or would you prefer fewer films in future classes?

NOTES

[1] And, more than 75 percent of all U.S. households (with or without children) own a digital still camera. The NPD Group's new report, *Household Penetration Study: Ownership Landscape 2008*, September 23, 2008, Available online here:
http://www.npd.com/press/releases/press_080923a.html.

[2] An important countervailing trend in documentary production and distribution exists in the case of not-for-profit distributors of educational and social activism documentaries. For the distributors of the most widely used titles in academic settings, costs have actually increased. Currently the average cost for a documentary funded by a major public or private foundation (e.g., NEH, NSF, PBS, Ford and MacArthur Foundation) is between $500,000 and $1,000,000 per hour. This type of documentary usually requires four years of full-time work by a professional production crew to create. Rising costs have meant that almost all professional documentary production must be largely underwritten by a small number of television networks - PBS, HBO, the History Channel and Discovery. Television production, often scoffed as docutainment, obviously has different intentions and expectations from educational or instructional media. It tends to be too long (60 or 90 minutes) for easy classroom screening, dramatic not conceptual in structure and hesitant to overly tax its viewers' attention (to be "boring.") Thus, while overall submissions of documentaries are on the increase at a distributor such as California Newsreel, the actual number of annual acquisitions by this distributor is declining. (Personal Communication with Lawrence Daressa, California Newsreel 2009).

[3] The study design followed the practices of the field known as the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. This paper is part of a larger study and other papers, including other parts of the study, are under review elsewhere.

[4] Ninety minutes also exceeds the time constraints in most classes so documentaries of this length are often not feasible for the classroom.

[5] The TEACH ACT (2002) expanded the scope of educators' rights to perform and display works in the classroom, thus it is legal to use documentaries in the classroom as long as they do not alter the film or profit from showing it.

[6] In reality, I usually own a personal copy of the film and my institution owns a copy. This is the best possible solution for me because it supports the filmmakers and offers me the convenience of owning my own copy, but this is not always feasible.