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Commentary on Slade

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COMMENTS ON CHRISTINA SLADE'S PAPER

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This paper is based on the assumption of the importance of argument in a free society; and, the concomitant importance of having access to accurate and appropriate information in conducting that argument. In her paper, Christina Slade makes us aware that non-print media, the television in particular, report the 'news' in many ways that are as akin to those of television soap operas as they are to traditional news formats; and, that this has ramifications for the kinds of news information which is being assumed as 'truth' by viewers. As she says, 'Television sells consumers to advertisers, not news to citizens.' Rather than trying to resist this formatting of news broadcasting which she implies is an impossible task due to the economic realities of television, she pragmatically recommends that we see television as part of the wider common culture and that we sue television news culture in teaching students critical reasoning skills. In this way, students will be able to identify informal argumentative strategies that are used in television news and to critique the validity of the news that is being presented.

As a teacher educator and non-narrative language person myself, I would agree with her that using popular culture is an effective way for teaching critical reasoning skills. From my point of view there are two reasons for moving in this direction: (1) Many adolescents find popular culture compelling, for it is, after all, their culture. Thus, by using topics and genres that are appealing to students, we gain an initial interest in motivation for the reasoning activities in which we wish them to engage. There are very important from a teaching standpoint. (2) Since many adolescents and adults receive much of their information from television, it is important from a reasoning perspective that they are able to judge the validity of the media they are consuming and that they are able to gain a critical distance from that media in order to assess it. Those involved in media literacy teaching have found these to be true; and, have found that students as young as 10 and 11 years of age have the interest and ability to begin learning critical viewing skills. Slade's proposition that we use this medium as our entry point to developing reasoning skills therefore makes a lot of sense from what we know through education research.

The difficulty that I have had is that most of the paper I have been given explores the reasons why this approach would be a good one but does not give examples of just what criteria would be taught nor of how it would be taught. We do get glimpses through her differentiation of private and public world characteristics and the conflation of 'the public' into 'the private,' and through differentiating news values from entertainment/economic values. These are very tantalizing in their potential for powerful discriminations. As well, Slade talks about truth(s) and truth correspondences, bringing in issues of postmodernism and relativism. In our pluralistic world(s), these issues are important ones for students to consider as well. The difficulty is that we are not shown how television news broadcasts could be used to teach these issues and address these philosophic positions.

I would suggest that frameworks which already exist for teaching of reasoning through print media might be adapted to television media. The difference would be that students would need to be conversant in visual analytical terminology in addition to spoken language. For instance, in speaking of written argument, Fulkerson (1996) refers to the STAR approach to assessing the quantity and quality of evidence. The acronym stands for the following traits:

- S - Sufficiency of grounds: Is there enough evidence to warrant the claim drawn?
T - Typicality: Are the data representative of the group of data being argued about?
A - Accuracy: Is the information used as data true?
R - Relevance: Is the claim asserted relevant to the information about the sample? (Fulkerson, 1996; 44-45.)

It seems to me that these same traits might be used in assessing the validity of television news, with the caveat that Slade's categories of public/private moral framings and virtues be distinguished, perhaps under Fulkerson's accuracy and relevance categories. Similar specific attention could be given to other issues she raises, such as whose truth is being represented in various television clips, whose viewpoint is missing, whose/which reality is being presented and whether or not this is more a fiction than reality.

In summation, Christina Slade offers a compelling argument for using popular culture as a vehicle for teaching reasoning skills. It will be exciting to see a more complete version of what these reasoning skills will include and samples of the kinds of things that students will actually do.

References

Fulkerson, R (1006). *Teaching the argument in writing*. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English.

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