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Entertaining tensions: teaching with and learning from popular culture in professional education

Kaela Jubas[a], Donna Rooney[b] and Francesca Patten[a]

[a]Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada; [b]School of International Studies and Education, University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT

This article discusses findings from an ongoing qualitative studies about the incorporation of popular culture in university-based professional education. The focus is on how popular culture can become a curricular resource to support learning about theory or concepts and contentious or sensitive issues, at a time when neo-liberal trends of consumerist ideology and technical vocationalism influence professional education and universities generally. Students who enter programmes expecting an emphasis on work-related information risk missing content and experiences designed to foster their development as well-informed, curious, and ethical professionals. Three tensions that emerged in the analysis are highlighted: un/applied, in/attentive, and a/critical. After grounding the study theoretically and reviewing literature on university-based professional education and public pedagogy, those tensions are outlined using segments of data to suggest the potential and limitations of a pedagogical approach that can make education both critical and enjoyable.

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University-based professional education; popular culture; critical pedagogy; theory

Introduction

In this article, we attend to three tensions which have emerged in one analysis of findings to date in an ongoing qualitative multi-case study. The study involves instructors and students in university-based professional education courses where popular culture is utilised. We investigate how popular culture contributes to teaching and learning about theories, concepts, and sensitive issues, especially with an aim to foster critical thinking, reflection, and analysis.

Theoretically, this research aligns with critical and feminist theory, pedagogy, and scholarship (Enloe 2004; Freire 1998), which emphases 'not … how to work more effectively or productively within an existing system, but … calling the foundations and imperatives of the system itself into question, assessing their morality, and considering alternatives' (Brookfield 2009, 297). Such approaches highlight the complexities encountered throughout everyday life, including what are or will be students' workplaces. At the same time, we recognise that not all participants in the study understood criticality in the

CONTACT Kaela Jubas kjubas@ucalgary.ca Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada

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same way, a point that Brookfield elaborates. Rather than a problem or limitation in our study, we see variations in understanding as illustrative of the tensions we explore here.

As adult education scholars, we are based in professional faculties, where students come to gain work-related credentials or develop work-related knowledge. Professional faculties are liminal spaces between vocational training and the traditional Western academy, a location that brings neoliberal pressures and priorities (outlined below) forward in particular ways. The specifics of university-based professional education and our own base in professional faculties, along with our belief that popular culture functions as a rich educational resource, underpinned our motivation to undertake the research discussed here.

From this introduction, we continue by grounding our study theoretically and empirically through a literature review to elaborate on two topics: the current state of university-based professional education and the educative potential of popular culture in the classroom setting. Then, we offer an overview of the study, before discussing three tensions that we see in our data: un/applied, in/attentive, and a/critical. We close by considering what these tensions might mean for students and teachers engaged in university-based professional education.

Literature review

Here, we turn to two areas. First, we delve into the context of our own sites of adult education work and this study: professional faculties within the contemporary university. Second, we turn to the literature on public pedagogy, a term conveying the educative function of everyday experiences and encounters, including with popular culture (Jubas et al. 2021). Within that extensive and expanding body of work, we focus primarily, albeit not entirely, on televisual and filmic fiction and its potential in postsecondary education.

Contemporary university-based professional education

For over two centuries, the Western academy was perceived, promoted, and protected as 'a site of critique' (Readings 1996, 6), where people came together to cultivate their minds in the service of personal, civic, cultural, and economic development. In Readings' words, 'modern University' was pivotal in carrying out 'the historical project for humanity that was the legacy of the Enlightenment: the historical project of culture' (5). For Readings, this view was always problematic, an elitist ideal that rested on particular understandings of knowledge, knowers, learners, and even culture; however, the trend towards neoliberalism that surrounds and increasingly characterises higher education is not a corrective for those problems.

By 'neoliberalism', we refer to the ideology and associated policy frameworks and operational shifts that position the private market, rather than taxpayer-supported systems, as the most efficient, effective solution to establishing service priorities and delivering services. Neoliberalism aligns the logic of capitalism with the older liberal idea of freedom of choice, resting on the idea that social and material progress is an individual matter. Advancement accrues to those who merit it through decisions well made and executed. Any earlier social democratic commitment to alleviating inequities through public services, including postsecondary education, is replaced by a view of government

as hobbled by money-wasting bureaucracy. The notion that sociomaterial outcomes are linked to social structures and variations in people's starting points evaporates. One scholar, whose work was used in one of the courses included in this study, describes a 'neoliberal knowledge economy' that emerged in the 1980s (Holmwood 2014, 69) and a 'neoliberal knowledge regime' which promotes 'universities . . . able to compete within a global system of higher education' (71). Education for personal, moral, civic, and economic development is replaced by a singular emphasis on employer-defined vocational needs and economic performance.

A second ideology, that of consumerism, combines with neoliberalism to create an image of students as demanding consumers, educators and institutions as producers, and educational offering as products marketed to students in the service of their own careers and material advancement Wong and Chiu (2019). Technical on-the-job application, programme revenue potential, and students' post-graduation employment outcomes overtake scholarly depth and rigour or students' actual learning as priorities for educational programming and curriculum (Wheelahan, Moodie, and Doughney 2022; Wong and Chiu 2019). In line with consumerism's emphasis on keeping the customer happy, today's educators double as entertainers and providers of step-by-step guidance to students on how to succeed Wong and Chiu (2019) the only conclusion contemplated by many.

University-based professional education faces distinct pressures, given the emphasis on work-related competencies and transferability of learning – regardless of recognised cultural differences between geographic places and organisational spaces (Kreber 2016; Wong and Chiu 2019). Drawing on Marx, Wheelahan, Moodie, and Doughney (2022, 476) refer to the outcome as a 'skills fetish', which separates skill and knowledge from doer and knower and conditions students to prepare for or adapt to 'a labour market in which skills are bought and sold'. In the neoliberal classroom, social theory is often perceived as a superfluous, outdated part of curriculum (Gouthro 2019) and can seem 'difficult, dull, and uninspiring to students' (Wright and Wright 2015, 26). Without idealising theory as holding universal usefulness, value, and integrity within a critical agenda (Amsler 2014), we concur that the study of theory is vital for the development of well-informed, thoughtful, ethical 'professionals who are more than technicians' (Jarvis and Gouthro 2015, 76) and that employing popular fictions can foster development of a 'tolerance for ambiguity' (66) that they will encounter in practice.

The pedagogical potential of popular culture

The topic of public pedagogy is well represented in cultural studies scholarship and, over the past few decades, has resurfaced in adult learning and education (Sandlin, Schultz, and Burdick 2010). Public pedagogy scholars take up a wide range of cultural forms and texts, including films, television, novels, music, graffiti, and social media. In public pedagogy terminology, 'text' refers to 'any artifact or experience that we can read [or interpret] to produce meaning' (Maudlin and Sandlin 2015, 369), and we use the word in that sense.

What is it that makes popular culture *popular*? Included in (Williams's 1976; Wright and Wright 2015, 179) list of keywords, popular initially meant belonging 'to the people'. Later meanings included having '"low" or "base"' qualities and, eventually, being '"widely favoured" or "well liked"' (180). A single cultural text can alternate between low or base and high or elite culture, as norms and tastes vary over time and across places. Today's

popular culture texts can be created by ordinary people or mass producers, and enjoy audience, if not critical, acclaim. Litawa (2021, 2) explains that '[c]ontrary to elite art, which places the artist at the centre of the process . . . , popular art focuses on the audience using a broad code that is readable to the majority'.

Central to this study is the contention that popular culture, especially works of fiction, can raise 'questions about pressing social issues in the world around us' (Brown 2011, 233). For professionals, the diverse characters and scenarios encountered in popular fiction can be helpful in navigating 'highly politicised and complex environments' (Jarvis 2019, 8). Although not a replacement for scholarly texts or case studies, such texts can extend 'organisationally specific stories' and illustrate 'common realities and challenges' (Callahan, Whitener, and Sandlin 2007, 159). In representing the complexities of social life, they can provide 'a basis from which to draw new, more reflective arguments and conclusions that breach the confines of textbook explanations' (Lafferty 2016, 22).

Like adult learning, engagement with cultural texts is a multidimensional process, in which emotions, senses, and experience matter as much as intellect (Gouthro 2019; Hayes 2019; Jarvis 2019; Perry, Edwards, and Janzen 2019). The popular culture texts that interest us most – those found on television and film – employ visuals and soundscapes to pull audience members into worlds of characters and storylines that can seem both familiar and unknown (Abidi et al. 2017; Brown 2011; Callahan, Whitener, and Sandlin 2007; Jones and Hughes-Decatur 2012; Perry, Edwards, and Janzen 2019; Tisdell 2008). They allow 'the audience to participate in the events discussed and to come closer to experiencing them' (Litawa 2021, 5). Minoritised audience members can encounter characters who resemble and inspire them and audience members who witness stories beyond their immediate circumstances can deepen their awareness and understanding of social inequities (Brown 2011; Greenfield 2007; Jarvis 2012, 2019; Jones and Hughes-Decatur 2012; Jubas 2022; Jubas et al. 2020; Tisdell 2008; Tisdell and Thompson 2007; Wright and Wright 2015).

Bringing a critical interpretation to a popular cultural text is a double-edged proposition. On the one hand, even cultural texts that reiterate hegemonic messages can be interpreted in unpredictable ways (Callahan, Whitener, and Sandlin 2007). On the other hand, the sheer enjoyment of and emotional investment in popular cultural texts can interrupt critical readings of them, as audience members relate to and root for characters who enact problematic behaviour, norms, or stereotypes (Jubas 2022; Litawa 2021; Maudlin and Sandlin 2015; Tisdell and Thompson 2007). For that reason, some scholars call on instructors to incorporate popular culture texts into the curriculum, noting that facilitated engagement with popular culture can become pedagogically powerful in teaching about course ideas and foster critical media literacy more generally (Guy 2007; Maudlin and Sandlin 2015; Tisdell and Thompson 2007; Tisdell 2008).

Postsecondary educators have used popular culture in 'teaching a variety of concepts . . . through a variety of means' (Peacock et al. 2018, 602), albeit not always with a critical orientation. One international review of the literature describes over 20 years' use of film in medical education about addiction, poverty, family relations, counselling, and ethics (Darbyshire and Baker 2012). The 22 participants in one study involving instructors and students in six faculties and one interdisciplinary programme at a Canadian institution were generally enthusiastic about employing popular culture texts; however, they offered cautions about balancing texts' entertainment function with their educational value (Marquis, Johnstone, and Puri 2020). Drawing on survey responses of 212 faculty

members at a U.S. university, Peacock et al. (2018) generated tips on using popular culture effectively, including selecting popular culture texts that resonate with both students and instructors; establishing a scholarly focus and tailoring use of texts to course aims; and developing activities to promote thinking and analytical skills. In their mixed-method study of 215 instructors in the field of adult education, Tisdell and Thompson (2007) noted that stereotypes and critical media literacy were prominent concerns and that 'it is the *discussion* of issues raised in movies that can lead to greater understanding' (667).

Many accounts of popular culture's effectiveness in postsecondary professional education are smaller in scale. In adult and teacher education, instructors have used films, hip hop or other popular music, and novels in teaching about social relations and critical media literacy (Greenfield 2007; Guy 2007; Jones and Hughes-Decatur 2012; Tisdell 2008). In one course, adult educator Brown (2011) stopped a film partway through so that students could identify scenes where characters dealt with difficult scenarios, project the film's ending, and connect the filmic portrayals to real-life.

Instructors in healthcare fields have employed television shows in teaching about professional values and identity (McAllister, Rogers, and Brien 2015) or ageism (Hayes 2019). Results from a survey of 54 medical students in Karachi, Pakistan, indicated that films incorporated into one course became valuable resources which 'provide human connection with the issues being explored[,] ... give insight into human psychology and show a disease in its social context' (Abidi et al. 2017, 42). Researchers who surveyed 109 psychology students at a Swedish university found that reading fiction helped them test theories and concepts and build clinical skills as they related to characters' emotional states and actions; understand themselves and their tendencies; offer intellectually and emotionally accessible material; and improve the classroom as a learning environment (Erikson, Erikson, and Punzi 2020). Writing about courses they taught in various health disciplines, Perry and colleagues described exercises such as asking students to find segments from a movie, television show, or song related to course themes. Such activities fostered intellectual and emotional engagement in courses delivered online and supported students' development of 'skills and abilities such as critical thinking, attending, and discerning ... in an empathic and compassionate manner' (Perry, Edwards, and Janzen 2019, 76–77).

For management or employment relations instructors, popular culture has supported teaching on cross-cultural issues (Pandey 2012) and discrimination (Lafferty 2016). In leadership studies, popular culture's stories can have advantages over textbooks and case studies because they offer 'a powerful means of demonstrating abstract human concepts' (Callahan, Whitener, and Sandlin 2007, 157).

Scholars cited above have also found popular culture helpful in cultivating empathy and reflexivity, considered vital in professional practice. As Jarvis and Gouthro (2019, 232) explain, 'engagement with fiction ... can help professionals to build the intellectual mindsets and emotional awareness they will need to undertake complex roles and ensure their professions make the best possible contribution to global society'. Consistent with the conceptualisation of adult learning itself as multidimensional, others have noted that the pedagogical power of popular culture rests in its emotional sway, which can increase course content's memorability (Abidi et al. 2017; Brown 2011; Greenfield 2007). Like us, these and other postsecondary educators remain open to employing popular

culture, despite the view among some colleagues 'that not only does the culture lack academic legitimacy, but also that its inclusion in the classroom constitutes capitulation to destructive social forces and a degrading of the sacred curriculum' (Greenfield 2007, 242).

Overview of the study

This ongoing project is a qualitative 'instrumental', 'collective' (Stake 1995) or multi-case study of university courses delivered in professional faculties. Methodologically, these courses serve as 'multiple bounded systems' (Creswell and Poth 2018, 96), each providing evidence about the phenomenon of interest – the pedagogical function of popular culture, rather than specific instructors, students, or texts. As case study methodologists explain, the aim of qualitative case study is not 'to optimize production of generaliations' (Stake 1995, 8) but to illuminate a complex, real-life phenomenon central to the case(s). Using multiple cases might help researchers discern nuances that deepen understanding. Within a multi-case study, cases can be examined for both inter- and cross-case similarities and differences. Following standard (Western) ethics protocol, participants chose or received pseudonyms.

Popular culture includes many types of text and practices. We were open to using a range of cultural form(at)s in our teaching; however, we have a special interest in works of fiction and, even more particularly, in film and television. As the scholarship cited above notes, these works draw on multiple dimensions of learning and education and, when well produced, present complex stories that can facilitate substantive analysis, reflection, and learning. The combination of encountering familiar characters and situations and confronting new perspectives and trajectories can bring audience members into a lifeworld that is both fictional and resonant.

Like many scholars worldwide, we encountered hurdles in continuing this study throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, as the attention of instructors and students pivoted along with course delivery mode. Collegial networks and online syllabi proved helpful in finding instructors who used popular culture at the institutions where we work or study. Instructors who opted to participate in the study allowed a member of the study team to share information with students. In addition to completing a focus group (for students) or an interview (for instructors) and having the option to complete a short, unstructured follow-up interview, participants were given a demographic form to help us understand who they were and to invite their attachment of identity to teaching and learning. Course outlines were compiled and, if possible, an in-class observation conducted to help us understand how popular culture was used. Although included as a data collection method in the study's ethics application, we treated observation as an information source that helped us understand what participants described rather than as a rich data source itself.

Because students often balance studies with other responsibilities, focus groups proved challenging. Sometimes, few participants arrived for a session; occasionally, only one participant was present. On the advice of the ethics staff, we proceeded with smaller-than-planned sessions, respecting those who took time to meet with us (see Toner 2009 on 'very small focus groups'). All sessions with participants were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Case courses

In this article, we discuss nine case courses, eight of which were delivered synchronously at Kaela's (Author 1's) institution. All these courses were intended to be delivered on campus, but two transitioned to online delivery because of COVID-19 measures. The remaining course was designed for online, asynchronous delivery at Donna's (Author 2's) institution. Cases include undergraduate courses in teacher education and social work and master's or doctoral courses in adult education, counselling, and nursing. Table 1 provides further details about the case courses and participants.

Instructor participants used various popular culture forms and texts to support teaching about a wide range of theories, concepts, and issues. Many encouraged students to bring their own selections into class discussions, presentations, or written assignments, modelling a pedagogical technique that students could use in their own educational work, whether as students or as instructors themselves.

Participants

The analysis discussed here draws on data gathered with seven full-time instructors and 34 students. Information shared on demographic forms indicated that students ranged in age from their early 20s to mid-50s and instructors from their 30s to 60s. Most participants self-identified as female ($n = 29$), White ($n = 31$), middle class ($n = 24$), and straight ($n = 32$), and engaged in study or work in adult or teacher education ($n = 32$). We note that some participants declined to share information about their socioeconomic status, sexual identity or orientation, and racial identity, or indicated multiple racial identifications (e.g., mixed race/White/Asian).

Generally, each instructor participant delivered one case course with corresponding student participants; however, there were two exceptions. Dr Anderson completed an interview before realising that none of the students in his course would participate. Kaela, the study's principal investigator (and willing to forego a pseudonym), taught three courses. Before presenting our findings, we pause to consider the uniqueness of Kaela's positionality in this study.

Table 1. Case courses and participants (as of February 2022).

Instructor	Students	Course topic	Level	Modality
Dan	Maryanne, Sherry, Vanessa, Maria	Family dynamics	Undergraduate	On campus
Dr Anderson	-	Counselling	Masters	On campus
Samantha	Alyssa, Gary, Rebecca	Literacies	Undergraduate	On campus
Martin	Bonnie, Yvonne	Methodology (hermeneutics)	Masters/Doctoral	Online (COVID-19)
Leanne	Madison, Margot	Diversity	Undergraduate	Online (COVID-19)
Emma	Chezmiester, Ravi, Charles, Ryan	Innovation	Masters	Online
Kaela	Betsy, Isabella, JC, Jessica, Rhonda, Fred, Melissa, Suzanne	Work and learning	Masters	On campus
	Cameron, Robert, Alicia, Natasha, Linda	Community	Masters	On campus
	Abigail, Maggie, Cindy, Drew, Gemma, Maureen, Renata, Tanya, Trinity, Wendy	Adult learning and education survey course	Doctoral	On campus

Positionality and bias: on being a researcher-participant

Kaela's participation in this study created some interesting distinctions, including delay of participant recruitment until her courses had ended to avoid any appearance or feeling of coercion. Also, she led the focus groups and conducted many follow-up interviews with student participants from her courses. Through their contact with Kaela as an instructor, those participants developed an understanding of her research and pedagogical interest in popular culture, occasionally using her publications on public pedagogy in their courses. Clearly, Kaela had a unique relationship with those student participants, and they had unique knowledge related to this study.

In an initial review of this manuscript, one reviewer asked about the implications of those facts for bias. That question hints at 'the politics of evidence' (Denzin 2013). We concur that bias in research is inevitable. In qualitative research, 'evidence is not bound by facts' (Altheide and Johnson 2013, 392) but is 'about an argument, a narrative that is appropriate for the purpose-at-hand' (393) and 'always already partial, moral, and political' (Denzin 2013, 538). That does reduce research to an opportunistic exercise, but evidence is understood as relationally *and* analytically constructed, 'contextualised and part of a bounded project' (Altheide and Johnson 2013, 393).

How Kaela's positionality figured into data collection and analysis is an interesting question, albeit one that cannot be answered definitively. In our discussions, we agreed that transcripts related to her courses seemed different from the others. Interjections with questions about the meanings of acronyms or terms that student participants used were less frequent and conversations seemed livelier. Did the liveliness reflect the relationship that participants had with Kaela or the fact that focus groups with students from her courses were often larger and, by extension, more diverse than those related to other courses, or both, or neither? Should somebody else have conducted sessions with student participants from her courses? Donna was not yet on the study team, and there was a changeover in research assistants. Waiting to find another first case course was weighed against the risk that a further delay in speaking with students might have compromised their ability to attend to the study questions as deeply as students from other courses could.

Conducting analysis has been a collaborative process involving Kaela, research assistants, and Donna. Such collaboration mitigates Kaela's 'take' on the data. In the following section, we describe the analytical process used in developing this article – somewhat novel in case study – before sharing our findings.

Analytical process and findings

Although we continue to seek courses and participants, we have begun to engage in analysis. Typically, researchers conducting a qualitative case study employ a coding process to identify themes in the data. Codes might be based on the research questions or might emerge *in vivo* through careful review of the data or might combine both. Findings from this study following such an analytical strategy are discussed elsewhere (Jubas 2022; Jubas et al. 2020). For this article, we pursued a different approach. We were drawn to narrative inquiry's approach as we thought about how this study can be understood as an example of 'tellings' (Connelly and Clandinen 2006)—of the 'temporality', 'sociality', and 'place' of stories in popular

culture, recollections of students and instructors, and encounters and interactions that unfolded in the research conversations. More particularly, we were interested in tellings of tensions that became apparent to us as we read slowly and purposefully through transcriptions. Looking for tensions helped us move beyond the inclination to view popular culture as either a contribution to or a diminishment of pedagogical soundness. In presenting our findings, we home in on segments from focus group and interview data that speak to three identified tensions: un/applied, in/attentive, and a/critical.

Un/Applied

Building on the literature about students' reservations or challenges with tackling theoretically oriented material, we also recognise that turning to popular culture, especially fiction, might not be seen as a sound pedagogical approach. As previously mentioned, popular culture can be dismissed as unapplied to both scholarship and real-life jobs. Like scholars cited above, participants both recognised *and* took issue with the rhetoric that popular culture is inapplicable to real-life, including the workplace. Trinity, a student in the doctoral adult education course, explained how viewing and discussing films helped her build linkages to theoretical texts, and then to lived experience:

> The whole notion of theory for me is . . . an abstract idea. . . . So like, when I read a theory, what does that mean? . . . How do I connect it to real life? I think that visual piece perhaps brings a lot of emotions which allows me to connect the theory to real life. . . . As opposed to reading it [and] . . . trying to imagine scenarios but I don't even know where to begin. . . . But when the theory's introduced and then you have the cultural artefact to experience, I think the connection is a lot stronger for me.

Connecting films, academic articles, and her own experience, Trinity learned about concepts, theories, and issues, in a way that exemplifies the multidimensionality of adult learning and education.

Instructor participants were convinced of the importance of theory as part of the curriculum and many shared our commitment to critical theory and pedagogy. One of our premises in this study is that, as they engage with theory, students find that it offers a language to understand and discuss their encounters and experiences. Instructor participants agreed that popular fiction's ability to illustrate concepts and issues is what makes it so helpful pedagogically. Through what Martin, instructor of a graduate nursing course in hermeneutics, called 'backstories', works of fiction can present characters who embody and enact real-life complexities and 'dilemmas'. Dr Anderson, who taught counselling courses, noted that, while textbooks, articles, and case studies describe symptoms 'in a very distant, . . . pseudo-objective style' and offer 'no sense of the personal, human experience emotionally', filmic fiction opens a 'point of engagement that is really powerful'. Dan, who taught a course on the family, echoed that point in discussing the film *Fences*, which he believed was helpful in

> de-mystifying, taking these polysyllabic words . . . like morphostasis or whatever and mak[ing] them real. . . . [M]y belief is that that will help . . . [the students] become better . . . practitioners when they work with families, because now they kind of are grounded in some ways of seeing

> the family, not as just a bunch of freestanding actors that are separate, you know. . . . There's things happening between them that are important to understand.

Consistent with the literature reviewed above, though, some student participants were either annoyed or apprehensive about the appearance of theoretically oriented material on a reading list, puzzled by the appearance of popular culture in the curriculum, or both. Also, consistent with a point made above, discussions and other activities were vital in helping student participants link the popular culture texts to theory and practice and justify time spent engaging with both popular culture and theoretical texts. Fred, who had completed the master's course on work and learning and worked in a postsecondary institution, recalled that watching and discussing an episode of the sitcom *Scrubs* in class helped him see the 'relevance and timeliness, and a certain sense of relate-ability' of material about Bourdieu's sociological concepts. As he stated,

> This is . . . not just theoretical and abstract. . . . I'm still thinking [back] to the *Scrubs* piece, you know, and that was an example of relationships, of doxa, of just characters interacting with each other. . . . Okay, this is something that has real world context, right? This is something that we encounter in our daily lives without even being aware of it. And we need to be aware of that. We need to . . . have an understanding of those things that are happening around us.

Other students in the same course remembered connections made between the same television show, Bourdieu's concepts, and their workplaces:

> Melissa: I do recall also when we were going with the different types of capitals, having . . . things being clearly connected to what we were watching. And it was a great way to take something that might be more of an abstract concept and tie it into something . . . . I think for a lot of us we're . . . referring back to our experiences in our work life, so highlighting in pop culture texts, I think sort of opened up our perspective on these different topics. . . .
>
> Suzanne: Even on . . . the last day, [for] a lot of the concepts we were still trying to find our way through and figure out and make the connections. . . . I know I went back and actually watched some of the episodes after kind of having that reflection. And it allowed me to kind of have those 'aha' moments.

In Dan's class, the aim of demystification and application seemed to have been realised for Maria. She remembered talking about the film *Fences* in 'every single class' and then being . . .

> . . . given some definitions and vocabulary, which I think definitely helped in my understanding, because oftentimes you might see something, . . . see the different family dynamics, but you don't know what the label is to that type of relationship, or what's going on, really. . . . And I noticed that, after having gone over those vocab terms, I was able to kind of pull those out of the movie and apply them to my life. And even apply them to, like, what I saw or heard about going on in friends' lives.

Similarly, Cameron, a student in the adult education course on community, thought that, while academic texts can seem intangible, 'our lives are lived in the . . . physical world. And so the more that we can see manifestations of an idea in the physical world, I think the easier it is to understand its human implications'. Bonnie, a student in the hermeneutics course, which attracted students from various faculties, found that, even with works of fiction, 'we were looking at real things. We were nursing

students, social work students and education students, so the issues that we're looking at is care work'. Even cultural texts not designed for work-related study proved applicable to professional learning and proved useful in learning about the applicability of theory to practice.

In/Attentive

Even participants who were open to the incorporation of popular culture in curriculum had cautionary notes about that pedagogical practice, echoing the concern raised in other studies that popular culture texts can draw attention away from theoretically or issue-oriented discussions (Jarvis 2012; Marquis, Johnstone, and Puri 2020; Tisdell 2008). Dr Anderson recalled someone's reaction to a handsome actor from a *Star Trek* clip that he showed in class:

> One of the students … said, Well, hello! [laughs] … [N]ot the kind of engagement you're necessarily [aiming for] … but it's what Hollywood does well. … [S]ome people can simply see it as entertainment, and if you don't do the work for some students, to push them to a deeper level of reflection about it, then all you've done is taken them to the movies.

Likewise, familiarity or lack thereof can also affect attention and distraction, a point raised by participants in a focus group of students from the work and learning course, where an episode of *Scrubs* was shared:

> Melissa: I am a fan of *Scrubs* and so the first episode that we watched in the classroom, I found myself just laughing and enjoying it. And I recall having a moment about six minutes in, having to remind myself that I was watching this for a purpose, not you know, pulling out popcorn. … It's like brain candy and I was having a hard time making those connections. …

> Fred: I think for me, something that potentially got in the way of making those connections was the fact that I *wasn't* well versed in the show. I mean I'd heard about it, but … I don't think I'd really ever watched it. So I didn't have the perspective on the characters, the relationships between the characters, and the history, and so on. So that maybe made it a little more difficult for me to just get a sense of what I was observing, the dynamics and so on.

These segments from the data continue to illustrate how popular culture can distract students' attention from theories and concepts covered in a course.

Some students might find a popular culture text off-putting or disturbing. Gary, a student in the teacher education literacy course, intended to specialise in physical education (PE). He mentioned the tendency for popular culture to represent PE teachers as lazy and incompetent. For him, that image is personified by the lead character in the Canadian sitcom *Mr D*, who is 'like, this awful teacher, and he teaches phys ed. It's almost kind of insulting to me … because I hope I'm like, just better than that'. Powerful representations can, in counselling instructor Dr Anderson's words, 're-traumatise or trigger' students. Drew, a student in the adult education doctoral course, wondered if texts that seem to be 'pushing boundaries', such as a 'gritty' film like *Moonlight*, used in that course, might 'close the individual off to … that experience or then discussion of the themes afterwards'. Similarly, Natasha, a student in the course on community, thought that 'content … that is a little bit too far, you know, over the edge or whatever for some people … might make them disengage from the content. Or make them upset or whatever'. In attending to a popular culture text, students' focus might be redirected to

their own experiences and anxieties which, if not addressed, might lead to their disengagement from the course or even deep emotional upset.

Personal or cultural history and preferences also influence in/attention to both scholarly ideas and popular culture. As Peacock et al. (2018) advise, choosing cultural texts that will resonate with students is important. In diverse classrooms, cultural sensibilities and habits vary, as do understandings of topics presented in popular cultural texts. That is a point that Armstrong (2008) makes in his analysis of different national versions of the television series *The Office* and representations of the office workplace. An individual does not begin working life as '"a blank sheet"' (379), he explains; rather, people anticipate what is expected of them as workers, in part because of what they see in popular culture. Coincidentally, Tanya, a student from the doctoral adult learning course, had used an episode from *The Office* in her own teaching on organisational behaviour. She remembered that 'it really resonates with the North American students, but the international students didn't get it because office behaviour is so culturally dependent that they didn't get the *funny*'. Not understanding what they are watching or why, students might spend more time attending to their sense of confusion than to other course materials, activities, and ideas.

On the other end of this tension, students' attention to theory can be aroused by the addition of popular culture texts to curriculum. Rebecca, a student in the teacher education literacy course, saw popular culture resources as augmentations to 'the articles that we were reading. So, it was … an enhancement to help us gain a little bit deeper understanding'. For Yvonne, a student in the hermeneutics course, incorporating cultural texts into a course that transitioned to Zoom during COVID-19 'captured my attention a bit more because it's not just words or on a slide'.

Indeed, the multidimensionality of popular culture texts and engagement with them made challenging content more accessible and memorable. The cultural texts became, for Dr Anderson, 'touch points' or, in Dan's words, 'a touchstone' for students as they revisited ideas throughout a course. On their own, theory-based articles might not be easy for students to digest and remember. Recalling the connections of the film *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* to articles on transformative learning, doctoral adult education student Maggie explained that she came 'to understand and own that material more. Versus, for example, if we had just been given the article on transformational learning and the 10 points included in it, I probably would've forgotten that those even existed now'. Similarly, Isabella, a student in the master's course on work and learning, talked about course content during her focus group:

> Like doxa and illusio and habitus, which were pretty challenging to begin with. So you know, we did the reading … and you explained those concepts in more detail. And then we watched … the *Scrubs* … clip. We would watch it, but then we talked about, you know, specific examples in that video clip and how it related to those concepts. And I remember that being very helpful to, like, have a very specific example of, oh when this character did this … or this was an example of this.

Jessica, another student in that course, chuckled as she commented, 'Once you do a media analysis, it never actually leaves you'.

Linda, a student in the adult education course on community, was not a native English-speaker. For her, watching the film *Chocolat* in class 'gave me opportunity to even, like, analyse . . . people's facial expressions and different settings, the atmosphere, . . . the body language and the behaviours' that can accompany controversies arising when newcomers enter traditional communities and 'really helped me to understand the concepts and theories better and also remember for a longer time'. In that comment, she echoed scholars' points about the importance and power of multidimensionality, of both learning and televisual or filmic texts.

Finally, participants acknowledged the importance of clarity in purpose and explanation. When deciding to incorporate popular culture, an instructor needs to 'choose it with intent', in Melissa's words. That intent can be articulated in a syllabus, as it was for Samantha's teacher education course on literacy, in which students were expected 'to represent . . . some of those higher-order conceptual thinking, ideas . . . and to put that into practice via cultural texts'. Students in Kaela's courses mentioned the importance of both lead-in and follow-up questions and activities to help them attend to popular culture texts in a scholarly manner. What design innovation instructor Emma called 'teacher talk' guided students towards 'what I want you to look out for. . . . And then they would watch it and then it'd be some sort of reflective activity'. Connor, a student in that course, agreed that the purpose of a text 'has to become obvious' through explanation, discussion or other activity, to help students attend to material and processes educationally.

A/Critical

This third tension emerges from the fact that much popular culture is produced by huge corporations with a profit-making motivation; ergo commercially produced popular culture serves hegemonic interests despite potential counter-hegemonic representations and messages. Regardless of a producer's motivation and intention, even challenging, provocative cultural texts can be dismissed as unscholarly and unsuitable material in postsecondary education. Trinity, a student in the doctoral adult education course, summarised, but disputed, that view: 'I think there is a certain tone to what constitutes academic learning. And maybe cinema is billed as entertainment and it is not serious enough'. In one focus group of students from the work and learning course, Melissa explained that, in her experience, popular culture was often used if an instructor 'hasn't prepared a whole lesson' and Suzanne described popular culture as a 'time filler' for many instructors.

Sometimes, people who start with that mindset change their views as they employ popular culture in academic settings and begin to see its potential in advancing a thoughtful, potentially critical educational process. Cindy, one of Trinity's classmates, described herself at the beginning of the course as 'a bit of a non-believer' and 'a bit of a sceptic' about the pedagogical value of popular culture. 'Oh, we're just gonna watch a movie! Fine. And then it clearly was more than that for me', she said.

Having watched and discussed *Chocolat* in the course on community, Linda wondered whether the film, which intersperses light-hearted scenes with stories of family violence, ageing and death, and attacks against migrants, was meant to bring 'underlying . . . tensions or problems to the light through the fiction'. She found herself thinking about relations between Indigenous and settler people in Canada, an issue now prominent in

public discourse and her own workplace. Reiterating Dan's earlier comment, Dr Anderson saw something 'authentic' in popular fiction that, when well-made, represents important aspects of 'the human condition'. For Leanne, an instructor in the teacher education course on diversity, popular culture can cue students about the prevalence of problematic ideas and help students consider important questions: 'What kinds of forces are acting on this particular situation? Who is it benefitting? And how is this power institutionalized?' Kaela explained her view of popular culture as a resource that helps students 'make sense of a concept that can be *tricky* but is, I think, important for practice'.

Some students found that, after using popular culture in one course, they reached for cultural texts when encountering challenging material in other courses. Margot, from the teacher education diversity course, stated

> with everything that we were exploring in this course and really figuring out, the complexities surrounding things like classism, racism, sexism, internalized oppression and dominance, I started *seeing* those things *everywhere. Seeing* them in popular culture, seeing them in the TV shows I watched

Similarly, Jessica, from the work and learning course, described her 'very intentional' process of relating 'a particularly *heavy* text . . . to what I would see in pop culture' and looking for illustrations of scholarly concepts in television shows that she watched. Her classmate, Rhonda, characterised critical analysis of popular fiction as a process that 'flexed that muscle' required for building analytical strength and agility, whether in academic settings, professional practice, or leisure life. These examples illustrate that instructors and students can repurpose commercially produced cultural texts to move beyond acritical interests and messages in critical teaching and learning.

Discussion and closing thoughts

We concur with both participants in this study and scholars cited above that using popular culture texts can be beneficial in professional studies curricula and developing a more robust sense of professionalism. Even so, engaging with such popular cultural texts in the classroom is thorny. Participants recognised some, but not all, of the complexities and complications that accompany that pedagogical move. Echoing points raised in previous studies, participants clearly advised us that the incorporation of popular culture into curriculum requires clarity of purpose, time for focused class discussion and other activities, and a supportive approach from instructors who ask students to engage with challenging ideas and material (Peacock et al. 2018; Tisdell 2008). Ideally, a resource in covering theories, concepts, and issues, popular culture can divert, as well as focus, students' attention, for various reasons. Sometimes, diversion can become so extreme that it leads to disengagement. That is a pedagogical problem, but not one unique to the employment of popular culture; as we noted earlier in this article, many students in professional education initially find theoretically or critically oriented scholarly resources daunting (Gouthro 2019; Wright and Wright 2015). Understanding class composition and expectations, as well as priming students for texts that will be used seem like good early steps for instructors.

The fact that using commercial popular culture continues to immerse students (and instructors) in capitalist relations of work, education, cultural engagement, and social life

in general (Greenfield 2007; Tisdell 2008) was not mentioned by participants but seems important. As Greenfield points out in his comments about hip-hop, even if popular culture presents a critique of racialised poverty or other aspects of current hegemony, it can also ignore its own integration into capitalism. Popular culture texts can have a critical edge *and* reiterate hegemonic ideas about race, gender, and other sorts of social relations. Further to that, we note participants' view of the empathy-fostering and perspective-broadening capabilities of engagement with popular culture as entirely beneficial; however, as Jarvis (2012) and Nakamura (2020), caution, understanding and empathy have limitations. People can empathise with fictional characters and, presumably, real-life people who remain appealing despite their deplorable actions. Moreover, feelings of empathy can create a superficial, false sense of kinship that replaces deep analysis, personal experience, or active alliance. Perhaps the absence of these points from our findings suggests that greater, more explicit emphasis on them and attachment of them to core course topics is warranted.

Still, we continue to support the purposeful insertion of popular culture into theoretically and critically oriented university-based professional education. Although not all case courses and instructor participants were equally critical or approached criticality in quite the way we conceptualise it, they all found that popular culture enriched students' engagement with theory and issues and enlivened their participation in their courses – something that student participants generally recognised about their experiences in the courses. One question that remains is just how memorable and easily applied students' theoretically and critically oriented learning is in the workplace long term. Our conversations with participants happened close to the time of course completion and, from them, we cannot ascertain the persistence of memorability and relevance.

Instructors whose understanding of criticality aligned with Brookfield (2009), Enloe (2004), and Freire (1998) saw the employment of popular culture as helpful in building what we refer to elsewhere as 'critical curiosity' (Jubas 2022; Jubas et al. 2020) among students who might otherwise have been impatient with or resistant to critical analysis and contentious issues. In illuminating the tensions that have surfaced in our analysis, we have suggested how, with careful, thoughtful preparation and follow-through, using popular fiction and other cultural forms, itself a complicated move, can bridge the ends of the tensions between applicability and inapplicability, attention and inattention, and criticality and acriticality. Consistent with previously published literature cited above, this pedagogical strategy can promote openness to new and difficult content and foster critical media literacy. In highlighting the potential and the limitations of a pedagogical model that can make education work, even as it entertains, we have suggested that serious teaching, learning, and curriculum can be enjoyable *and* thoughtful, whimsical *and* sobering.

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ORCID

Kaela Jubas http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2852-8267
Donna Rooney http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7668-0936

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