
Teaching Notes

Web 2.0 and Critical Globalization Studies

By Mark Graham

I asked all of my students this year to raise their hands if they knew which country their shoes, trousers, or shirts came from. Very few hands came up. I then asked if any of them had ever been to a farm that produces food that they regularly eat. Again, only one or two hands were raised. Finally, I asked the students if any of them had ever been to a factory that produces a commodity that they have purchased. Only one hand was raised in the air.

A central paradox of contemporary capitalism is the fact that while the production of commodities has been globalized at a staggering pace, our knowledge about the production of those same commodities has shrunk. Consumers are usually only able to see commodities in the here and now of time and space, and rarely have any opportunities to gaze backwards through the chains of production in order to gain knowledge about the sites of production, transformation, and distribution.

While the opacity of commodity chains is deeply troubling, it does present university-level geography students with interesting hands-on opportunities to test out their research skills. In the introductory human geography course that I taught at Trinity College Dublin, I asked groups of students to research and then represent a global commodity chain from the points

of production in the Global South to the points of consumption in the Global North.

The assignments were graded in traditional paper form. However, all students were then encouraged to upload their work to a wiki website that I created (wiki-chains.com). The purpose of the website is twofold. First, as a wiki, it enables their represented knowledge to take on a fluid and changeable form. Second, it allows the students to share their findings with the rest of the world and thus, through their research, actively shape patterns of consumption and production.

Students were tasked with not just finding out where all of the elements that make up any one commodity come from, but also the environmental, economic, cultural, and political effects of the chain. They would ask questions like, "What are the pay levels at the headquarters versus at the sites of production?" "What are the environmental effects of the production processes?" and "Has the shape of the commodity chain shifted over time (and if so, why)?" I wanted students to represent their chain with not only published secondary textual sources, but also primary interviews, photographs, and sounds.

It was initially difficult to encourage the students to move beyond easily accessible sources of information. The first drafts inevitably contained far too many references to corporate websites and press releases. Indeed, the companies that control global commodity chains, in many ways, rely on being able to selectively make available information that presents their activities in a positive light. However, after much hard work, telephone calls, emails, and even site visits, every one of the student groups was able to uncover facts about a commodity chain that did not correspond

to the corporate representations of those same chains.

Although this has been a time-consuming and difficult exercise (for both students and teacher), I will not hesitate to run it again in future classes. Students benefit by being able to reflect on the complexities of global connections, by engaging in practical hands-on research, and above all by thinking critically about the sources of seemingly mundane knowledge. By uploading their results to the Internet, the students are having effects outside of the classroom and are enabling consumers to make informed economic decisions and be more aware of their economic, social, political, and environmental impacts.

“First, They Said”: Alice Walker’s Poem For All Seasons (Alas!)

by K. Narayana Chandran

Ever since I discovered “First, They Said” (*Horses Make a Landscape More Beautiful*, 1984), I cannot recall a single semester of teaching where it has not figured—a poem for essential reading and discussion; a handy illustration for me to wrap up a lecture on postcolonial theories; a sample of elegant understatement and explosive irony. Alice Walker’s poem is for all seasons and climes (alas!). Let us hope tomorrow’s world will prove this poem’s scenario to be too unspeakably bizarre and incredibly silly to warrant any discussion. For now, sadly, its point is embarrassingly true. The several Indian classes and contexts in which I have discussed this poem have helped us see ourselves ineluctably join the chorus that speaks the poem. There could not be

a more humbling moment.

“First, They Said” is sung by victims of sectarian prejudice and discrimination (“we”) about their perpetrators (“they”). That neither fold claims any distinctive identity in terms of nation, region, physical geography, race, color, gender, caste, class, or religion makes Walker’s song truly universal. The irony of this “universality” is easy to grasp even for students who have not yet had a decent opportunity to suffer. Walker’s language here is mercilessly plain; it generates the kind of irony for readers that they least expect. For don’t we recognize, for starters, that for all the cruelty of continuing oppression and the inhumane repressive regimes in place, “they” and “we” are on talking terms? Does it matter, my students wonder, that the poem is in *English*—easily identified in our classrooms as the colonial master’s language? No, in fact. Oppressive regimes seem to speak the same language; within such regimes we seem to hear it as ours. (Translated into another language, only the words change; the poem will still mean all the mean things rolling out from the Oppressor’s tongue.) “We” and “they” generate seemingly endless binaries without which discourses of alterity cannot be sustained—call them the Colonizer and the Colonized, the Resident and the Alien, the Native and the Other, the Globalist and the Localist. The sexists, racists, imperialists, capitalists, bureaucratic bullies, and obstructionists of social reform everywhere speak much the same language, and their victims again respond pretty much like those dignified and demure selves in Walker’s poem.

Walker may not immediately re-set the thresholds of inhibition and tolerance in any society but an English class might well be the initial site where the great

dialectic between Culture and Society works out to modest lengths. The tropic reversal of irony here is a detail to which, therefore, I draw my class's attention. If my students are apt to believe with the Identity Theorists that "We" occupy multiple subject positions, we do not, surely, in a regime that deploys universalist traps. Walker's parodic universalism makes this point, but more. We learn to speak (and respond unwittingly to) the Oppressors' insidious language. We capitulate, without dignity, without tragedy:

Here's money, they said. Raise an army
among your people, and exterminate
yourselves.

In our inferior backwardness
we took the money. Raised an army
among our people.

And now, the people protected, we
wait
for the next insulting words
coming out of that mouth.

If we can recall some recent examples from international politics, we shall easily see how Walker's poem breaks past even the discipline of irony.

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Is there a book, film, essay, poem, or story that you've found particularly useful in the classroom and want to share with other Radical Teacher readers? We are especially interested in Teaching Notes on new materials not widely known, but we would also like to hear about newly rediscovered older works, as well as new ways of teaching familiar ones.

Or has something challenging, encouraging, or frustrating happened in class? If you think our readers can learn from your experience -- whether you handled things well, handled them badly, or are still trying to decide -- we'd like to hear about it.

Contributions should run about 500 words. If you'd like to see some sample Teaching Notes, check out "Recent Issues" on our web site.

Please send a hard copy of your Note to Bob Rosen, Department of English, William Paterson University, 300 Pompton Road, Wayne, New Jersey 07470 — and also an e-mail, with the header "Teaching Note," to: bobrosen@radicalteacher.org

News for Educational Workers

K-12

The Labor History in the Schools bill, signed into law by the governor of Wisconsin on December 10, 2009, will make the teaching of labor history and collective bargaining part of the state's standards for public schools in Wisconsin (Wisconsin Labor History Society, December 14, 2009).

Mississippi, starting in the fall of 2010, will require civil rights as part of its U.S. history curriculum. The stories of the civil rights era will be taught, and tested, in all public schools (*The Christian Science Monitor*, October 4, 2009).

The beating death of a 16-year-old high

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