Using Popular Music as a Teaching Tool:
A Literature Review

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Abstract

By discussing some of the most notable research findings that discuss teaching with popular music, this study details the importance of using popular music and media literacy in a learning environment, the pros and cons of implementing popular music in the classroom, as well as the implications and potentials that popular music can carry as an educational agent. Because the practical use of popular music for educational purposes is still limited, this literature review aims to provide useful tips and advice for educators, parents, and scholars.

Keywords : Popular music, media, literacy, education, literature review

1. Introduction

Popular music is arguably the most universally accepted form of popular culture because not only is it important to young people in their daily routine but their main cultural interest[1]. More importantly, popular music is also a form of symbolic communication that evokes feelings, emotions, and memories. It can also be a showcase of identity and a way to show others and ourselves to which cultural and social groups we belong. Since popular music chronicles the emotions and experiences of people, especially young students, it provides them a common ground that enables personal feelings to be expressed and shared[2].

However, popular music is not so popular when it comes to education. Even many scholars and educators consider popular music as a mere part of low brow culture, which has made it historically neglected and overlooked in academia. Since popular music concerns history and aesthetic values, two of more popular areas in the field of mass media and communication, it can become an effective teaching tool to engage students in an efficient manner. The global popular music industry, with the proliferation of mass media, has become a major force to be reckoned with, not only popularity wise but also culturally and socially. Hence, it is safe to say that many different aspects of popular music can be employed for better education inside and even outside the classroom.

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2. Literature Review

2.1 Why is Popular Music Important in Teaching?

Why is popular music a significant factor for educators and teachers? It is because popular music is one way of engaging students and teachers in enjoyable, meaningful and collaborative classrooms activities. Most media literacy programs that utilize popular culture take advantage of easy access to information because it is at the core of students' lives[3]. Students find much of their information through mass media in one way or another, much more so in the age of the Internet and multimedia revolution as of late. By exploring major events, performers, songs, and other information about popular music through information highway, both teachers and students can benefit from appropriate popular culture-integrated activities in the classroom.

Today's students are educated in a drastically different way from that of any previous generation, as the use of interactive multimedia and the Internet has become such a powerful and influential tool to shape their experiences, minds, and lives. Students may not be able to develop problem-solving and decision-making skills on their own because they are more media-dependent than ever. On the other hand, this situation provides an alternative teaching solution for educators in which they can bring media products and messages into various class activities[4].

Popular music, which is created, produced and served by mass media, is arguably the single most important product that influences young students' perception of their surroundings and their identities mainly because of its ubiquity. It is readily available in many different formats and easily obtained by anyone, especially in this age of new media. Think about all the music videos on Youtube, steaming music files, and song lyrics available online. Anything music related is a click of a mouse away. Many educators are starting to believe that media literacy that uses a form of popular culture is necessary because not only is it the means by which the dominant culture is sustained but also the main source of our knowledge[5].

2.2 Huddles in Inviting Pop Music into Classroom

Even though the use of popular culture--including television, advertising, and movies--is becoming more

common in schools, there seems to be little public interest in using popular music texts in education. There are many different reasons for the lack of enthusiasm by the public, but most concerns and complaints about inviting popular music into the classroom seem to come from parents. Think about young people's fascination with popular music icons and artists that parents always worry about. And then, there is a constant debate about popular music's suggestive nature, throwaway ethics, and demoralizing effects. The so-called protectionists and worrisome parents argue that popular music only brings negative effects to students, and one study suggests that the belief is most prevalent among those who do not directly work in school settings[6].

Another dimension in which using popular music in education becomes problematic is the lack of teaching methods in media literacy. For many educational institutions, they lack a system designed for teaching students to digest and understand media messages even though some researchers have begun to consider students' interest in popular music as an important part on their media literacy acquisition[7]. Despite the fact that the growing body of research emphasizes an important role of popular music in the classroom, it is ironic that teachers are reluctant to welcome many aspects of popular music, most notably with their preconceived notion that it does not belong in a learning environment--which parallel the perception of parents--and they would not want to introduce the subject in the curriculum[8].

The problem also stems from the lack of ability of students to analyze media messages even though the most common inter-textual connections that students make outside the classroom are to mass media[9]. That is, they fail to create a learning environment that can connect the living room to the classroom. In terms of implementing media literacy skills, many students seem to have a hard time in grasping the material in a critical manner. Media literacy involves many different stages, and much of this learning process depends on students' ability to deconstruct media messages in an engaging manner. However, media literacy training is not rocket science and sometimes all that is needed may be much less than what people would expect. The following section highlights some of the examples where we can glimpse into synergistic possibilities of the use of popular music in the classroom.

2.3 Examples of Teaching Media Literacy with Popular Music

One of the most interesting results of using popular music in media literacy training was found in an experiment by O'Brien[10]. One of his students, Dan, had a hard time with the class material, especially in deconstruction and recognition of vocabularies. Although he socialized well with his friends, he had a negative attitude on academic activities which he had felt mundane and boring. After self-producing a multimedia documentary about his favorite popular music artist Ozzy Osbourne, who struggled with personal tragedies and triumphs as seen from the MTV show, The Osbournes, Dan gained a lot of confidence soon after and excelled in academics as a result. This finding suggests that by using popular music as a symbolic communication tool

that students can strike a chord with, they are able to take their ideas and feelings and represent them with enthusiasm.

Another teaching tool in media literacy training is using music videos. Since music videos present textual narratives and stories, students can make informed decisions on their own in more empowered rather than passive ways[11]. In other words, reading a music video involves processing various visual images, musical components, and symbolic elements all at the same time and also enhances students' multitasking skills. In addition, the visual and aural messages give students a deeper understanding of their surroundings, thereby helping them develop critical and independent thinking along the way[12]. By using music video texts that students can enjoy and identify with, not only can teachers generate opportunities for students to engage themselves in a proactive manner during class but help them mingle with other students in a positive environment as well.

Sometimes, popular music becomes much more than just music and encourages students to look beyond the surface of culture and examine the ways in which popular music is used to convey social messages. Popular music can carry such powerful and lingering messages that many artists and songs have often been the subjects of discussion when it comes to their historical, social and cultural impact. One study suggests that making students listen to the songs or learn about the artists that bear historical and social significance and drawing discussions on them can spark their interest to a great deal. For instance, several music artists that raise awareness about social issues, such as Bob Dylan, Aretha Franklin, and Credence Clearwater Revival, engaged students in productive discussions about privilege, democracy, war, race, religion, and social justice[13]. Through this kind of interdisciplinary training, not only can students and teachers close the generational and hierarchical gap, but also they can communicate in an interactive manner as well, which may not be as productive in a common class setting.

2.4 Educators and Parents' Roles

With the ever-growing popularity and overwhelming use of mass media among young students, sometimes it seems as if no special media literacy skills were required for them at all. Because media messages have become much more receiver-oriented in recent years, a plethora of media products, including television shows, movies, and popular songs, can be viewed or listened to without acquiring new skills[14]. However, without purposefully teaching the necessary skills to decode the meanings behind those messages, we may put ourselves in the tenuous position of leaving media to construct our reality. This is the main reason why the roles of educators and parents become so important in the highly media-driven new millennium.

The most important figure in leading students to the right path is definitely a teacher[15]. Media literacy education really depends on the urgency and courage of individual teachers who hold the key in understanding

the nature of mass media and popular culture in society. With the advent of technology, a range of diverse popular culture texts can be easily obtained and help create authentic learning environments[16]. It is teachers' discerning ability and responsibility to come out with the best possible teaching methods and materials because there is simply too much to choose from. They can also prepare specific guidelines, rubrics, and check lists that can work as a road map.

A number of studies emphasize the role of parents as well because it is difficult for students to ignore the influence of mass media outside the classroom. Students face constant peer expectations in order to stay up-to-date with the latest popular music news, popular music videos, and fashion trends[17]. Since popular culture is a big part of students' daily lives and can provide a rich source of narrative pleasures, parents can develop their own home-schooling programs using popular music as a main subject and motivate their kids to engage with the resources in their home[18]. This means that parents should know and assess students' strengths and weaknesses, provide proper guidance, set rules, help cope with anxiety, and launch the next step accordingly.

3. Conclusion

In the age of globalism, the international popularity of popular music proves that it has become a major influence on our cultural beliefs and social attitudes, especially in youth culture[19]. The recent explosion of Korean popular music artist Psy around the world shows us that popular music can be an amplifier to speak to the world because it has the ability to bring different generations, nations and races together. If popular music can bring the entire world together, it also has the ability to educate. For better or for worse, there will continue to be interest in promoting the development of institutions and practices that contribute to a better world through popular music. In education, popular music can deepen students' engagement and provide a definitive interdisciplinary learning experience with the help of the latest technology and various teaching methods.

The effort to bring popular music into the academic world is essential, as communication in our world is increasingly happening through and with popular music because it is a universal language that has no boundaries. With the ever-growing influence and importance of popular culture, teaching with popular music is more necessary than it has been in the past. More than any other form of art, popular music can stimulate and excite students' interest, imagination, and creativity. Still, it is the responsibility and role of individual educators and teachers to decide whether any particular text is appropriate to the accepted standards of their school and community.

This literature review has focused on illustrating how teaching with popular music inside and outside the classroom may help facilitate better education in many different ways. It is important to note that helping adopt

popular music into curriculum is a collective effort by students, educators and parents as discussed throughout the study. We need to continue to encourage students to draw on their experiences and to participate in exploring those experiences if they are to help us construct a relevant curriculum in media literacy. At the same time, it is crucial to integrate new technology and proper teaching methods to enhance teaching and learning experiences and to cope with the rapidly changing landscape of this multimedia-driven society.

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