



Political Correctness Unplugged: Exploring the Ethics of Representation in the Classroom

Dr Sam Pack

Assistant Professor of Cultural Anthropology, Kenyon College, USA

Abstract

In a pedagogical climate of racial and socioeconomic homogeneity, I have often found it difficult to explore issues of race and class with students openly and honestly. In response, I have developed an interactive class activity that utilises popular culture and mass media to juxtapose real events with hypothetical scenarios in order to address the ethics of representation experientially.

Introduction

Most private liberal arts collegesⁱ are bastions of privilege that tend to cultivate white liberal guilt divorced from any “real world” context. I am a professor at Kenyon College, an elite private liberal arts college in Ohio. With an annual tuition fee surpassing \$50,000, Kenyon has the dubious distinction of being among the most expensive colleges in the country. Not surprisingly, the student body at Kenyon is disproportionately white and extremely wealthy.ⁱⁱ As a scholar of a minority ethnic background who teaches and conducts research among historically oppressed populations, I have found it exceedingly difficult to discuss issues of race and class with students for whom neither has ever been an issue. Students are well versed in discussing these issues intellectually and theoretically, but always in socially sanctioned and politically correct ways. Indeed, I have often noticed a palpable degree of self-censoringⁱⁱⁱ whenever discussion revolves around who has the responsibility and legitimacy to represent others.

As a way to provoke students to talk more openly and honestly about the “ethics of representation,” I have devised an interactive class activity - or “Packtivity,”^{iv} as these have become known - called “The Grey’s Anatomy Game.” This game revolves around the central question of *who can say what to whom?* More specifically, who can represent whom, for what purposes, under what conditions, for which audiences, and, most importantly, in what ways do these representations matter to those who are being represented?

Grey’s Anatomy as a Teaching Activity

The two reasons why I chose *Grey’s Anatomy*^v for this activity are, first, because it is an extremely popular TV program that most students are at least familiar with if not view on a weekly basis. The second, and the more salient criterion, is its racially diverse cast. It enables me to highlight a series of

both real and hypothetical scenarios involving various cast members and then juxtapose those incidents with current events that either corroborate or contradict students' perceptions. The activity takes two class periods to play (50 minutes each) and is suitable for medium (25-35 students) to small sized (10-15 students) classes in Cultural Anthropology, Race and Ethnicity, or any other class that focuses on issues of representation.

Table 1. Cast Members

Actors:	Characters:
Ellen Pompeo	Meredith Grey
Patrick Dempsey	Derek Shepherd
Isaiah Washington	Preston Burke
Sandra Oh	Cristina Yang
Katherine Heigl	Izzie Stevens
T.R. Knight	George O'Malley
Justin Chambers	Alex Karev
Sara Ramirez	Callie Torres
Chandra Wilson	Miranda Bailey
Eric Dane	Mark Sloan
James Pickens, Jr.	Richard Webber

The first scenario in the game addresses a highly publicized incident during the filming of the series: the African-American actor, Isaiah Washington (who played the character of Preston Burke) had called T.R. Knight (who played the character of George O'Malley) a "faggot." After this incident, Washington was ordered to undergo sensitivity training. However, after denying that he referred to Knight by the gay slur, the producers of the show decided not to renew his contract the following season. Washington has subsequently claimed that racism played a factor in his firing from the show. Next, I ask students to speculate if the backlash would have been any different if it was one of the white actors such as Patrick Dempsey who uttered the same epithet. What if it was a white *woman*? I then insert the slang term, "fag hag," which describes a heterosexual female who frequently associates with gay men. Katherine Heigl, who played Izzie Stevens, might potentially fit this definition, as she and Knight were best friends both on and off the show. In spite of its positive connotation, students tend to object to both the homophobic ("fag") and misogynist ("hag") roots of the term. Finally, I close this first section by playing a video clip^{vi} of conservative political commentator, Ann Coulter, alluding to 2008 presidential candidate, John Edwards, by saying, "It turns out you have to go to rehab if you use the word 'faggot.'"^{vii} Needless to say, Coulter is directly referencing the Washington-Knight incident. A spirited discussion invariably follows.

The next part of the class game begins with a hypothetical scenario: I ask students to imagine what would happen if white actor Justin Chambers (Alex Karev) called black actress Chandra Wilson (Miranda Bailey) a "nappy-headed ho." Students immediately recoil in horror. But what if James Pickens, Jr. (Richard Webber), an African-American, said the same thing? After all, I remind students, Isiah Thomas, former basketball coach of the New York Knicks, asserted that there is a difference between a white man and a black man calling a black woman a "bitch" in his sexual harassment trial.^{viii} While the former is "highly offensive," the latter is presumably permissible. That double standard may explain why there was such a massive outcry when radio host Don Imus characterised players on the Rutgers University women's basketball team as "nappy-headed hos." The next day, CBS cancelled Imus' nationally syndicated talk show. In his defence, Imus claimed that rappers and hip-hop artists routinely refer to women as "bitches" and "hos" and make millions of dollars in the process. To demonstrate this point, I play Nelly's "Tip Drill" music video^{ix} in which the rapper swipes a credit card along the posterior of one of his female dancers. Most students have become desensitised to such misogynistic displays, and a few male students even smirk during the screening.

For the sake of comparison, I ask students to ponder another hypothetical situation in which Chambers calls Asian-American actress Sandra Oh (Cristina Yang) a "slanty-eyed slut." Would there be the same

kind of outcry as the “nappy-headed ho” remark directed to Wilson? Students tend to disagree on possible outcomes. In order to elucidate the discussion, I mention another pair of nationally syndicated radio talk show hosts, Opie and Anthony, who played a song parody that mocked the victims of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami that decimated parts of Indonesia, Thailand, and India, killing over 230,000 people. Lyrics included repeated references to drowning “chinks.” Asian American advocacy groups demanded an apology, which Opie subsequently issued in a way that once again paraded a series of insulting epithets: “Anthony and I regret the insensitivity of our bit, and are deeply sorry if we offended any gooks, chinks, slopes, slants, charlies, nips, or banana chiggers.”^x Unlike Imus, these shock jocks did not miss a day of work as a result. Interestingly, Opie and Anthony did *not* make a song parody ridiculing the victims of Hurricane Katrina a year later. But what if they did? What if they derided the largely African-American residents who were displaced along the Gulf coast? Students unanimously agree that not only would Opie and Anthony no longer be on the air, they might even no longer be living on the planet!

At this point, I ask the students to metaphorically turn the tables and imagine scenarios in which the minorities in the show insult or otherwise slander their white co-stars. What is the *worst* thing that James Pickens, Jr. can call Eric Dane (Mark Sloan)? What is the *most offensive* slur that Sandra Oh can utter to Ellen Pompeo (Meredith Grey)? What is the *nastiest* invective that Sandra Ramirez (Callie Torres) can direct to Katherine Heigl? Honky? Cracker? Redneck? Students usually laugh at the relative innocuousness of these terms. Eventually, a student will make the observation that the most derogatory thing that a minority can call a white person is a racist.

Of course, due to inherently unequal power relationships, the more incendiary scenarios invariably involve whites disparaging minorities. Perhaps the most shocking racist rant in recent memory is actor and comedian Michael Richards^{xi} racist tirade in which he directed the following outburst against a couple of African-American patrons who were heckling him during his stand-up comedy routine: “Shut up! Fifty years ago, we’d have you upside down with a f^\$%@*# fork up your ass!” followed by repeated exclamations of “He’s a n*\$\$^#!” What the footage shot by a cell phone camera^{xii} lacks in production quality, it more than compensates for by capturing the unintentional self-sabotaging of a celebrity’s career. Like the members of the audience in the comedy club, students are both shocked and angered by Richards’ verbal explosion.

As another point of contrast, I then screen a clip of comedian Sarah Silverman during a guest appearance on *Late Night with Conan O’Brien* sharing an amusing anecdote of “getting out of jury duty” by writing “I love chinks” on the form for prospective jurors.^{xiii} Neither the host, the studio audience, the viewing audience, nor my audience of students protested the casual utterance of this racial slur, and Silverman’s career has only grown in popularity since.

Next, I shift the discussion into a different direction by asking students: who can say what to whom between different minority groups? For instance, are there certain things that Washington can say to Oh, his former on-screen love interest, that an Asian-American can not get away with saying to an African-American? For that matter, does Ramirez, as a Hispanic-American, have greater license to speak in a certain capacity towards Wilson, her black co-star? Or vice versa? These questions typically engender a great deal of heated debate amongst the students. Some will point to stand-up comedians to support their case, arguing that a black comic can make jokes about Asians or Hispanics but not the other way around. One particular student mentioned the example of Jin the MC, a Chinese-American “battle rapper” who has complained that his black and Hispanic competitors frequently and mercilessly ridicule his Chinese heritage but that he is not allowed to respond in kind.

What about within minority groups themselves? For example, can blacks say anything they want about other blacks? Framed as an imaginary confrontation between black actors Pickens, Jr. and Washington, I segue into Chris Rock’s (a well-known African-American comic) stand-up routine where he distinguishes between “black people” and “niggas.”^{xiv} Here is only one brief excerpt: “You know the

worst thing about niggas? Niggas always want credit for some shit they supposed to do. A nigga'll brag about some shit a normal man just does." It is a notoriously hilarious bit, yet what I have found most interesting (and illuminating) is that students do not laugh during this performance. It is almost as if they are afraid that a public display of laughter might be interpreted by their classmates as acquiescence or even agreement with Rock's dichotomizing diatribe.

I follow this up with a scene from an episode on the popular television program, *The Office*, entitled "Diversity Day" in which an imitation of Rock's act by the clueless white manager, Michael Scott, results in a mandatory racial diversity seminar for the entire office staff.^{xv} The students laugh uproariously as they witness the cast members negotiate the very serious matter of racial politics in a characteristically unserious and flippant manner. Although this was a clip that most students had already seen as fans of the show, they now experience these interactions through a different lens.

Finally, as a way to distil all of these seemingly disparate topics together, I present a clip of Borat Sagdiyev, a fictional news reporter from Kazakhstan played by actor-comedian Sacha Baron Cohen, singing a song titled "Throw the Jew Down the Well" to a crowd of patrons at a country and western bar in Arizona.^{xvi} Initially, the customers are confused but they gradually embrace the performance (and the performer), ultimately singing along with the blatantly Anti-Semitic lyrics. Baron Cohen has stated that the Borat character, by virtue of being so unabashedly racist, sexist, homophobic, and Anti-Semitic, compels others to lower their guard, thereby exposing their own prejudices. He has quoted Ian Kershaw's statement that "The road to Auschwitz was paved with indifference."^{xvii} In other words, catastrophes of the scale of the Nazi Holocaust do not happen because of the wickedness of a few evil individuals but the weakness of many "good" people. Thus, my goal here is to demonstrate that silence equals complicity, or what, following Noam Chomsky, I call "manufacturing consent."

Discussion of teaching and learning challenges

Having conducted "The Grey's Anatomy Game" with students in my Introduction to Cultural Anthropology courses every semester since the fall of 2007, I have been able to observe a number of trends during this period.

Students perceive a continuum or perhaps even a racial hierarchy when it comes to this question of "Who can say what to whom?" African-Americans sit on one end of the continuum and Muslims/Arabs on the other. In between, the racial/ethnic groups seem to be situated according to the following order: Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans. And, of course, it goes without saying that all of these groups can freely criticise whites (but not the other way around). By virtue of being the most historically oppressed minority group as well as being the most powerful politically, blacks maintain a status seemingly above reproach when it comes to the ability and right to dispense ridicule but not be on the receiving end (at least publicly). Diametrically opposed are Muslims and/or Arabs. In our post 9/11 world, anybody can say virtually anything about this constituency without much fear of recourse. My students often notice the ease with which they and their classmates utter such slurs as "chink," "spic," or "raghead," with impunity but would *never*, under any circumstances, say the actual "n-word." Indeed, the n-word is *always* the "n-word" even for demonstrative or pedagogical purposes.

These distinct categories of representation are not fixed but situational; that is to say, they can and do change over time. The most salient example of this is the word "fag." Readers will recall that the "The Grey's Anatomy Game" begins with the incident in which Isaiah Washington calls T.R. Knight a "faggot." Three years ago, I had no qualms about repeating this word. The social and political landscape has discernibly shifted since then such that my students and I are now uncomfortable uttering that word in public. October of 2010 witnessed a rash of gay teen suicides, highlighted by the death of Rutgers University student, Tyler Clementi, who took his own life after his roommates surreptitiously recorded his sexual encounter with another man and broadcast it on the Internet. Recently, I have noticed that even news agencies are opting to use the more politically sensitive term,

“gay slur” or “homophobic epithet,” in place of the word “fag” or “faggot.” Indeed, those words are gradually approaching the stigmatised status of the “n-word” (though they will never reach that level of social taboo). The great advantage of “The Grey’s Anatomy Game” is that there will always be new events and examples from which to solicit discussions.

The acknowledgement of complicity by students is an integral component of the activity. Students have a tendency to qualify their responses in terms of “people do this” or “people believe that.” What they really mean, of course, is “*those* people do this or believe that.” As long as they continue to adhere to this “us (or me) versus them” dichotomy, discussions of this sort will remain entirely theoretical. Not coincidentally, the students that have gained the most from this discussion are those who accept personal accountability and responsibility. For instance, instead of dismissing the bar patrons in the Borat clip as backward hillbillies (as is the initial temptation), some students will admit—albeit sheepishly—that they would have reacted in the exact same way.

Connecting anthropological concepts to a popular television program helps students recognise the relevance and utility of anthropology to everyday life. I am an ardent proponent of what has become known as the “anthropology of everyday life.” Students need to realise that our discipline is not limited to the exotic and the distant; instead, we are just as concerned with the familiar and the deceptively banal. Most US introductory anthropology courses survey a wide variety of cultures around the world. It is my belief that this form of ethnic snacking may be hazardous to the goals of cultural understanding. After a semester of vicariously exploring foreign cultures, I have witnessed too many students remain ethnocentric and self-righteous. Indeed, even serious students have trouble remembering all of the exotic names much less gain any empathetic understanding about the culture of the given week.

As an alternative to trying to make the strange familiar, “The Grey’s Anatomy Game” takes the opposite tack by successfully making the familiar strange. After experiencing first hand what it *feels* like to be on the other side of the anthropological gaze, students start to blur the line of demarcation between “us” and “them.” In the process, anthropology is no longer compartmentalised or ghettoised as something “academic” and, by extension, impractical or irrelevant.

Conclusion

On a final note, it is important to point out that no two classes or two individuals, for that matter, will engage with this activity in the exact same ways. The key here is flexibility. In fact, there is no reason that the activity has to revolve around *Grey’s Anatomy*. Any popular television program featuring a racially diverse cast will suffice. Similarly, they can adapt the activity for their own purposes. The ultimate goal is simply to utilise popular culture and mass media to juxtapose real events with hypothetical scenarios in order to address the ethics of representation experientially, thereby demonstrating that affective engagement and enjoyment are not mutually exclusive.

References:

Marrus, M. (2000), *The Holocaust in History*, Toronto: Key Porter.

Notes:

ⁱ The purpose of a liberal arts education is to expose students to a wide variety of academic subjects. At Kenyon, for instance, students are expected to fulfil distribution requirements in the humanities, fine arts, natural sciences, and social sciences in addition to demonstrating proficiency in a second language and quantitative reasoning. The emphasis on developing broad knowledge stands in stark contrast to curricula with professional or vocational objectives. For this very reason, however, a liberal arts education has been criticised as impractical and elitist, particularly during difficult economic times, because it does not properly prepare students for the work force.

ⁱⁱ According to the college's web site: "At Kenyon, nearly 12 percent of students identify as students of colour: 4.6 percent are Asian American, 3.4 percent are Latino/Hispanic American, 3.3 percent are African American, and 0.5 percent are Native American." <http://www.kenyon.edu/x1658.xml> (last accessed 09.11.11).

ⁱⁱⁱ Nobody wants to be considered insensitive or intolerant—or worse, labelled a racist. Indeed, I never cease being amazed at how radically different class discussions on race are if there happens to be a black student present.

^{iv} A "Packtivity" is, of course, a play on words combining my last name, Pack, with "activity."

^v For those not familiar with this popular program, *Grey's Anatomy* is an American medical drama television series that premiered in 2005. It follows the lives of a group of physicians in a Seattle hospital as they attempt to balance their professional careers with their personal struggles. The show remains both a commercial and critical success.

^{vi} <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58vC2bTjTLA&feature=related> (last accessed 09.11.11).

^{vii} Students are initially shocked at the enthusiastic reaction to Coulter's utterance of the slur—until they realise that the speech was delivered at the American Conservative Union Political Action Conference.

^{viii} http://www.nydailynews.com/sports/basketball/knicks/2007/09/18/2007-09-18_isiah_explains_double_standard_on_slurs.html (last accessed 09.11.11).

^{ix} http://www.myvideo.de/watch/839263/Nelly_Tip_Drill (last accessed 09.11.11).

^x These are all ethnic slurs historically directed at Asians and Asian-Americans.

^{xi} Richards is best known for his role as Cosmo Kramer on the American television sitcom, *Seinfeld*.

^{xii} <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOtU6EjHjoY> (last accessed 09.11.11).

^{xiii} <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8bYOWVLWybk> (last accessed 09.11.11).

^{xiv} http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zRwK_XVfm0I&feature=related (last accessed 09.11.11)
(last accessed 09.11.11).

^{xv} <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hb-meG47XWM&feature=related> (last accessed 09.11.11).

^{xvi} <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vb3IMTjzfo> (last accessed 09.11.11).

^{xvii} Cited in Michael Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (Toronto: Key Porter, 2000), page. 91.