

From Complicity to Consciousness: Reflections on Teaching Inclusivity and Media Literacy

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"Being vulnerable in the classroom, being wholly present in mind, body, and spirit"
(hooks, 1994, p.21)

My wife, a close friend, and I watched *Green Book* (2018) after it won an Oscar and I still remember feeling a sense of satisfaction with the film's storyline, justifying it by focusing on the white protagonist's immigrant and social class status. It wasn't until later that I realized the movie was a typical white savior narrative, and I recognized my complicity as a 'white' audience. I was aware of the white savior narrative, but why did it take me so long to truly comprehend it? I am not even white¹, so why did I feel good? It took some time for me to understand the profound impact of dominant narratives.

My personal journey of teaching a general education course, EdFilm, "Education and Film", at a state college in the northeastern US taught me about the power of vulnerability to foster inclusion. I am a first-gen international student, education has always been of paramount importance to me, and I am passionate about exploring Critical Media Literacy(CML) within the context of my dissertation. This course, EdFilm, examines media systems, delves into dominant

¹ As an individual from Turkey, I occupy a space that can be perceived as "white" in certain contexts, but I position myself as a person of color in the US.

narratives, and critically analyzes media messages through the lenses of race, gender, and social class.

I started as a teaching assistant for the class in Fall 2019. My responsibilities included guiding discussion sections and grading papers. Despite my genuine interest in the subject matter, my experience in critical analysis of media was somewhat limited. However, as I immersed myself in the course materials and engaged with both my teaching team and students, I began to comprehend numerous ideas and experiences. In Fall 2021, I became an instructor for 30 students. This transition provided me agency and directed my focus towards the CML learning of teachers in the context of my dissertation research.

My learning journey is profoundly influenced by EdFilm materials. In the article, “Why Black Annie is So Significant,” Siddiquee (2014) delves into the role of empathy in movies, asserting that “watching a movie is to see the world through someone else's eyes,” particularly when the main character predominantly represents white, able-bodied, straight men. This insight was eye-opening for me. It highlighted the stark lack of diversity in Hollywood and the tendency to cultivate empathy primarily for white males. I have grown more aware of both dominant and counter-narratives but understanding them and integrating this knowledge into the classroom setting seemed like distinct challenges. As an international student, I grapple with insecurities and it took some time for me to share my personal learning experiences within the classroom, which might constitute counter-narratives. Ultimately, I was able demonstrate to my students that no one is immune to the influence of media messages. I found that sharing the following two anecdotes had an impact on some of my students.

An impactful moment occurred when we delved into racist ideas after studying a chapter from *How to Be an Antiracist* (Kendi, 2019). I felt ready to share a recent experience of “unlearning”. I recounted how I had internalized anti-Black racial stereotypes about Black men. I explained that, as an international student without the cultural codes of the United States, I had bought toxic racist narratives through American movies I consumed, and the media coverage of U.S. events in Turkey. I told them my belief that “we are living in a racist system, and we are all

racist.” It was highly unexpected for the students to hear that from me, and for a moment, my students were silent, and I did not anticipate an immediate reaction or response. I remember the feeling of relief when there was no response, and I allowed my students to have the time to process the moment.

At semester's end, Carol, a student and participant in my dissertation, recalled that classroom moment and said, "I remember that you said something that stuck out. ...you said, 'we're all racist. I'm racist.' That sentiment stuck with me because it was a stark way to convey the idea." She may not recall the exact example I provided, but the emotion of shock and the impact of my words on her understanding of systemic racism and media literacy remained with her. She added, "I believe it also resonated with others. I remember discussing it with my roommate, and we both agreed, it's undeniably true." This feedback was meaningful to me, and I started to share that example regularly.

Another example was around gender. Becoming a father deepened my comprehension of male privilege and intensified my dedication to using the classroom as a platform for growth and awareness. In the gender module, we explored documentaries such as *MissRepresentation* (Newsom, 2011) and *The Mask You Live In* (Newsom, 2015). I shed light on the detrimental representation of females and the harm of toxic masculinity on young boys, who are compelled to suppress their emotions. I shared my previous mindset where I had expected appreciation from my partner for basic house chores. I confessed that this expectation stemmed from my belief that I was doing her a favor, and thus, she should acknowledge it, and I talked about how I had deconstructed this belief. Given that most of my students, nearly every semester, are predominantly white females, I realized that my students were interested in this example.

This sharing was intentional, meant to prompt self-reflection among the male audience, especially on issues related to their privilege. While it was not directly related to this example, one of my white male students, Tom, remarked, "I greatly appreciated your openness about your feelings and emotions. It's rare for a professor to seek an emotional connection with students." As bell hooks astutely articulates in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), "In my classrooms, I do not

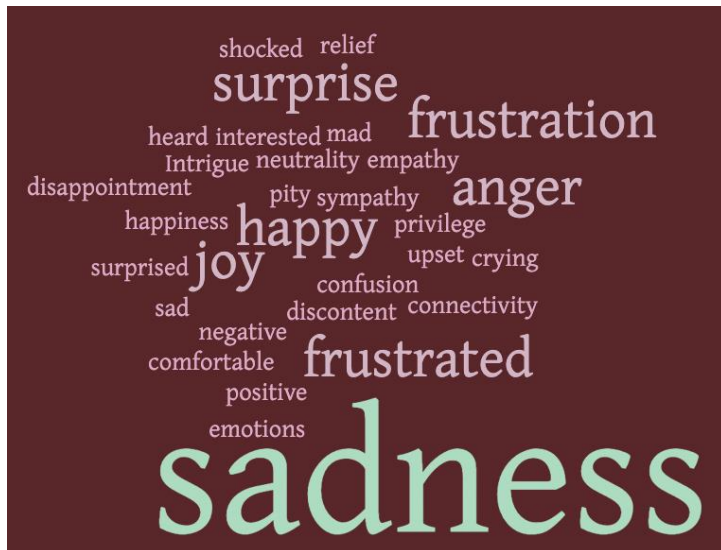
expect students to take any risk that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share” (p.21). I believe that sharing my emotions, ideas, and experience provides a space for my students to start thinking more about these issues. Moreover, I find it beneficial as both an individual and educator to have this space for critical reflection.

EdFilm has played a pivotal role in demystifying and challenging dominant narratives such as gender scripts and racism not only for my students but also for me. When I came to the US for my PhD work, I was captivated by the opportunities and the American dream. Nevertheless, my understanding of these narratives was limited, shaped by the single story, as eloquently discussed by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009). EdFilm course materials helped me realize how media works as a system, and how to recognize dominant narratives, and how to unlearn the problematic ideas. My teaching on vulnerability has assisted me in unlearning those messages and humanizing my practice, benefiting both myself and my students.

It is important to mention the role of emotions in media literacy learning, also a research interest for me. Course evaluations reveal that students experience a spectrum of emotions, including sadness, frustration, anger, and surprise (see Fig. 1). One student shared that the course fostered connectivity, attributing this to my openness in sharing personal experiences, which created a safe space for students to feel comfortable challenging their assumptions. This feedback underscores the value of incorporating my identity, empowering students to express their opinions.

Figure 1

The range of emotions of students' responses from the course evaluation survey



In my journey as an instructor, I've realized that embracing vulnerability and nurturing inclusion go hand in hand. Sharing my learning, unlearning, and relearning processes creates a safe and courageous space for my students to engage in critical reflection. I remain committed to furthering my understanding of methodologies that promote students' CML through an inclusive and intersectional teaching approach, aligning with my research.

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