ENACTING A CRITICAL MEDIA PRODUCTION PEDAGOGY

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ENACTING A CRITICAL MEDIA PRODUCTION PEDAGOGY

A Dissertation Presented

By

J.D. SWERZENSKI

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2022

Department of Communication
ENACTING A CRITICAL MEDIA PRODUCTION PEDAGOGY

A Dissertation Presented

By

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ABSTRACT

ENACTING A CRITICAL MEDIA PRODUCTION PEDAGOGY

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This project draws upon earlier calls—particularly in the critical pedagogy, critical media literacy, and cultural production fields—to outline a teaching approach that balances technical media production practices and critical media studies. I refer to this synthesis as critical media production pedagogy. This blending of critical analysis and technical skill, I argue, is especially important at the university level where my research is focused, as students in these courses will likely enter industry fields in which they can influence culture on a mass level. Creating opportunities for a media theory/production synthesis enables students to translate critical ideas beyond the academy and into a wider cultural discourse.

Starting with an inventory of why media production and media studies courses have remained separated in many media-focused departments, the project then documents the specific means by which many collegiate educators have overcome these challenges in order to enact critical approaches in their media production teaching. This documentation process comprised primarily of 22 long-form interviews with instructors currently teaching video, graphic, audio, and photographic production through a critical
lens. As a supplement to the interview transcripts, data collection also included gathering teaching artifacts from each interview participant including syllabi, assignment descriptions, and grading rubrics. Through a long interview and thematic analysis of the transcripts and artifacts respectively, the goal of this project is to detail how this approach works in practice: how instructors overcome a transmission style emphasis on mastering technical skills by including reflective assignments within projects and valuing conceptual consideration in their rubrics, how they facilitate meaningful dialogue through critique sessions by scaffolding who speaks when and how to provide constructive feedback, and how they blend critical discussions with software training software, basing issues like colorism and body image within tools like Photoshop and Final Cut where problematic representations are often rendered. The overall aim of this work is a pragmatic one: to create an accessible guide for instructors from either the production or theory side of media to use and apply in their own teaching.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

I’m pacing the narrow aisle in our department’s rather cramped, windowless production studio, looking over students’ shoulders in an effort to monitor their process. All twelve of them are running the same program—Adobe Premiere—and completing the same task. Having spent the first half of class working in groups to plan out and shoot scenes for a short film, they’re now in the crucial process of editing everything together: sequencing clips, adding transitions and titles, tweaking lighting levels and audio channels. I occasionally break their concentration to check in on their progress or help them through a technical issue.

Though the students and the studios have changed, this “pacing through the production lab and peering at screens routine” is one I’ve done for almost a decade. Because of my professional background in production, I’ve mostly been assigned to teach these sorts of production classes as either a T.A. or instructor. I feel comfortable in these spaces, and I do get a sense of satisfaction even in these moments where I’ve got nothing to do but pace around. Unlike the sea of disinterested faces I’m likely to encounter in a typical university lecture or seminar, these students are fully engaged in the course material. As they drag video clips into place to create their final videos, they’re also gaining valuable multiliteracy skills by learning to read, write, and comprehend video and other visual media content (Jenkins, 2009). In line with the university’s goal of “expanding career development opportunities” (UMass Amherst, 2020), video editing practice also offers the sort of ‘job-ready’ skills that students increasingly demand (Boulton, 2016). Plus, students like it. Working with cameras and editing software is
often an easier sell to students than writing research papers (Zanker, 2007; Hobbs, 2010; Boulton, 2016).

Yet I’m also aware of all the things that aren’t happening in labs like this one. For all the value of the technical production skills students may be building, we’re passing right by a number of critical issues. Reviewing the footage from a group in the back of the lab, I see that the video they’ve made leans heavily into the Hollywood gender trope of the nagging girlfriend. Another plays same-sex attraction for laughs. Production classes tend to be majority male, an anomaly given the predominantly female demographic of our department. Even when paired in groups with women, men often take the lead in production projects by leveraging their “greater technical expertise” (Orwin & Carageorge, 2001). Though these power dynamics aren’t instantly recognizable through the interactions of these groups, I see it in the final videos they submit: in their choice of protagonists, the genres they choose to emulate, the fixation on violence. Now in the editing stage, I notice that, despite devoting no teaching time to narrative structure or editing conventions, these students are reproducing something pretty close to a typical Hollywood-style film. Premiere itself has mostly taken this instructor’s role from me via its built-in tutorials that walk students through how to turn their raw footage into a ‘professionalized’ final product (Swerzenski, 2021). Many others seem to have internalized these filmic conventions to the degree that reproducing conventional editing, narrative, and other production styles is fully automatic.

Labs like this one don’t have to act as these sorts of ‘reproduction’ labs where students practice how to recreate culturally dominant tropes and representations. In theory, these classes can offer spaces in which to unsettle or even resist these ‘standard’
practices. Video editing and other production activities offer a tactile method of understanding how meaning is constructed within video texts (Buckingham, 2013; Morrell, 2008). From this understanding, students can use production techniques and software to expose the ‘common sense’ beliefs underpinning many multimedia texts and pose critical questions: Why is it the same character representations and narrative tropes are continually repeated by the media at large? And why is it that we feel drawn to recreate these tropes in video projects like this one (Hall, 2003; Share, 2009)? While these questions are common in the lecture space, in production labs they become practical concerns rather than conceptual considerations. As creators of their own content, students can use critical understanding and production tools like Adobe Premiere to challenge or negotiate standard representations through the creation of their own alternate texts (Kellner & Share, 2019; Morrell et al., 2013). So how do we use editing tools to not just produce forms we’ve already seen, but to create new works that represent our own voices and stories? Crucially, such critical questions aren’t purely theoretical. Issues of representation, narrative construction, and meaning making emerge organically from the grounded process of producing media.

Critical concepts in this space hold great consequence, in theory at least. It’s in practice where things get complicated. As in most production courses, our lab is on a time crunch. The prospect of taking additional time to discuss representation in film would shave valuable minutes off students’ editing process, and likely cause them to resent rather than engage with critical concerns (Boulton, 2016). Even given more class time, technical skills tend to take heavy precedence over theoretical discussions (Apple, 2003). Sitting in a space designed for doing—specifically in front of a giant computer
screen loaded with complicated editing software—it’s hard to make room for reflection. So for this lab class, I stick to my usual approach: checking in with individual students, addressing technical and critical skills where I can, and letting them do their thing.

Twenty minutes later, our lab time is up, and it’s on to the next video project.

From my own experience teaching labs like this one, I also know the very real challenges of trying to position video editing and other production activities as modes of critical thinking. There are few resources that articulate how a critical approach to media production teaching might work. Those that do usually lack the detail needed to explain how such an approach would realistically function in this sort of lab setting. The aim of this project is to sketch a more complete framework for what I call critical media production pedagogy. Such an approach as I imagine it offers the opportunity not just to inject theoretical concerns into production labs, but to ground concepts in practice through the sort of tactile interaction with media that discussions and reflection papers cannot offer.

I want to begin by defining the term critical media production pedagogy more thoroughly. First, what is media production? To produce media can encompass a huge array of different activities, from illustrating a story with markers and paper to coding a website on a state-of-the-art computer (CDM, 2020). My use of media production in this project focuses on its common academic and professional usage: as the process of creating video, audio, and visual texts via digital means. In keeping with this framing, my use of the term media text throughout this research will refer to video, visual and audio works created through these production processes. In keeping with this framing of media
production, my use of the term media text throughout this research will refer to video, visual and audio works created through these production processes.

Second, what do I mean by critical? As Ashton (2010) notes, the term critical has grown to take on a range of meanings, particularly in the university classrooms to which I am devoting my focus. The demand for college graduates to possess “critical thinking skills” operationalizes critical as a sort of flexible problem-solving ability: how to increase sales, handle difficult customers without incident, or effectively teach a maximum number of students (2010). By contrast, my use of “critical” throughout this project connects to its use in critical theory and, by extension, critical pedagogy. Within the critical paradigm, meaning is socially constructed, a belief that rejects positivist or empirical notions of meaning as fixed to a concrete truth or reality (Giroux, 2003; Tracy, 2013). A critical approach to media production acts not as a set of best practices to ensure efficiency or technical competence, but as a political process, one embedded with a set of socially constructed values, beliefs, and conventions. As Fassett and Warren (2006) elaborate, “Critical does not simply mean locating and naming the bad, the incomplete, or oppressive in a given instance, but also means considering the possibilities, hoping for and imagining something better” (p. 14). The project for a critical media production pedagogy must take both the negative and positive aspects of the critical approach, uncovering how oppressive or ideological forces impact our viewing and creation of media texts, as well as imagining new production practices that reject or negotiate these forces. Finally, the pedagogy I am most interested in implementing derives from critical pedagogy, in particular the framework outlined by Freire (1970). I’ll elaborate on some
of critical pedagogy’s core concepts and how I’ll plan to implement them later in the following chapter.

The scope of this project is limited to critical uses of media production within college-level Communication and Communications-adjacent departments such as Media Studies, Journalism, and Film Studies. For this reason, my use of the terms “educator” and “instructor” throughout this project will refer to individuals instructing university-level media production courses in Communication-related departments. I do not use the term professor, as many project participants are non-PhD or non-tenure track faculty (I’ll speak more to the dynamics between PhD credentials and professional experience in the following chapters). College-level media production classrooms, of course, are not the only spaces where educators are using media production critically or otherwise. Nor are these the only spaces in which I hope ideas about how to expand production activities might reach. However, narrowing my focus to just media production’s usage in Communication classrooms allows me to use my own experience teaching in these spaces, as well as to avoid issues of tech access and K-12 curricular concerns that are simply too complex to address in this limited study. Further, I believe there is a lack of recognition in the responsibility that Communication educators have in our role of producing producers. As future advertising, public relations, or communication professionals, the undergraduates taught in these spaces will create works with the capability of influencing culture at a mass level. Bridging critical ideas with production practice thus has the potential to affect not just students in the classroom, but the potentially huge audiences those students will reach with their work.
Finally, what is the role of critical pedagogy in this project? Though more specific than “critical,” critical pedagogy too has been deployed in a range of contexts, such that its meaning is often diluted (Ford, 2016). My use of critical pedagogy will draw on Paulo Freire’s educational theories, culled primarily from his 1968 book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (translated and published in English in 1970). Central to Freire’s thinking is imagining the classroom as a space in which students and teachers work co-intentionally to build understanding of the world and undertake actions meant to improve it. My use of Freire will focus on four concepts key to achieving this higher goal: challenging the transmission model of education, resolving the student-teacher contradiction, establishing authentic dialogue, and taking transformative action. The aim in melding critical production and media production in this project is to argue for the symbiotic quality of their blend. My argument is two-fold: 1) media production provides a means to actualize critical pedagogy ideals; 2) critical pedagogy offers a framework through which to open up technical production processes to critical concerns.

The idea of blending media production through critical pedagogy is by no means a new one. In the following literature review chapter, I’ll overview the many scholars and educational thinkers that have theorized this concept long before me. I’ll ground critical pedagogy, its roots in critical theory, and the key tenets that inform my research. I then draw from critical media literacy and software studies to bind these concepts with media theory and production. Finally, I point to the shortcomings of pre-existing scholarship on blending critical pedagogy and media production, which I argue lack experiential knowledge of the media production teaching process. This blindspot fails to account for the tactile challenges instructors face in incorporating critical pedagogy ideas into
practice. It also leads to a lack of theorizing on how media production as an educational practice—the act of learning production software, using audio and video equipment, producing media works for audiences—can better serve critical and critical pedagogy ideas.

Chapter 3 will describe my own approach to addressing these issues, which involved interviewing media production instructors teaching at the college level regarding the challenges they face and strategies they employ in blending critical concepts and technical production training in their classrooms. My aim is to provide pragmatic resources for instructors looking to implement critical media production pedagogy approaches in their own teaching. I also want to highlight the work being done by these instructors, much of it not recognized beyond their home institutions. In compiling the diffuse expertise of media educators implementing critical concepts in their approach to media production teaching, I hope to draw together a range of teaching approaches to better demonstrate the practice of a critical media production pedagogy. Chapters 4-7 offer findings from this research and follow a consistent structure: taking a Freirean concept, highlighting the difficulties in enacting the concept in the classroom, and providing strategies offered by instructors for overcoming the issue. I rely heavily on direct quotes as well as teaching artifacts such as syllabi, assignment descriptions, and grading rubrics provided by instructors to convey their approaches.

Chapter 4 is framed around Freire’s (1970) notion of the transmission model of education, wherein the teacher as holder of knowledge transmits knowledge to the student receiver. The transmission model remains the standard approach for most production courses, where the need to develop students’ technical proficiency with
production equipment and software overwhelms critical goals. Falling into the “technicist trap” as instructors note, is often the result of a myriad of pressures: from institutions focused on building job market ready skills, from students eager to pick up the camera and go, and from instructors themselves who feel their own worth as determined by their technical expertise (Masterman, 1997). I then highlight how instructors have worked to overcome the technicist trap in their own teaching, with strategies such as taking a process over product approach, lowering technical learning expectations, and questioning production tools and processes.

Chapter 5 examines the student/teacher contradiction, or the power dynamics between students and teachers inscribed through the transmission approach. I identify assessment practices as a key site of upholding the teacher/student contradiction in production classrooms. Despite efforts to bring critical concepts into production courses, the teaching goals, assignment parameters and grading rubrics used in these classes more often place outsized value on technical proficiency. These tendencies pull production pedagogy back into the technicist trap and exacerbate classroom power dynamics by privileging one form of knowledge over others. Instructors offer their own guidelines for addressing these power dynamics in their course materials, among them setting careful restrictions on assignment parameters, distributing equal point values to critical and technical elements, and including reflection or creator’s statements as a regular aspect of production projects.

Chapter 6 explores Freire’s concept of dialogue, the mechanism by which students and teachers, speaking as equals, share their knowledge and experiences as a means of building new understandings. Here I highlight the use of the feedback session, a
teaching strategy identified by instructors as an effective way to foster authentic dialogue in production courses. Sessions are not without their difficulties. Not all students may feel their perspectives to have value in these dialogues. Feedback—either overly negative or trivially positive—can also work against the goal of building new understandings. Drawing from their own experience running these sessions, instructors overview a number of methods for overcoming these issues, including using frequent check-in assignments built around feedback sessions, scaffolding sessions to determine when and to whom students give feedback, and adopting a facilitator role to navigate difficult topics without suppressing student voices.

Chapter 7 draws on the notion of transformation, a goal built on Freire's (1970) conception of the classroom as a space in which to both “name the world” as well as change it (p. 76). Naming and changing are achieved through praxis, a cyclical movement from reflection on a problem to an action meant to address it, cycling back to further reflection. I equate transformation/praxis as an outcome of critical pedagogy to the outcome of media production coursework: students’ creation of media texts. Setting expectations for students to create critical or transformative works is, as many instructors note, a lofty goal, one hampered by students’ desire to reproduce preexisting media standards and tropes as well as the need to balance critical and technical goals so that the texts students create can have transformative value. With these challenges in mind, instructors offer a number of teaching tactics, including modeling different modes of production to challenge hegemonic standards, creating assignment parameters that build critical ideas into the project, and emphasizing students’ responsibility as media producers in shaping culture.
I conclude by assessing what I hope are a set of easily applicable strategies that instructors can use to enact critical media production in their teaching practice. In the year or so I’ve spent interviewing instructors, analyzing their transcripts and artifacts, and compiling findings, I’ve already begun to employ many tactics relayed by these instructors to my own teaching. That I’ve been able to re-approach issues that have plagued me for a decade teaching production courses I think speaks to the value of compiling these previously isolated pockets of teaching knowledge together. My hope is that these strategies can prove valuable beyond my own experience, both to those teaching production who wish to take full advantage of the critical opportunities these courses hold, as well as those teaching media and Communication courses that don’t incorporate production. Both venues offer valuable sites in which to deploy these activities as a powerful means of binding critical concepts into practice.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This opening chapter sets the theoretical foundation for Critical Media Production Pedagogy (CMPP), rooting critical pedagogy, critical media literacy, and production/software studies concepts. Beyond providing an overview of the Freirean concepts that provide the structure of this research, I pay particular attention to the handful of works that have looked to apply critical pedagogy within production instruction. These works look to place CMPP in a long lineage of pedagogical research, and, by showing the limitations of this earlier work, justify the need for this project. First, I want to attend to some questions of relevance regarding the importance of media production instruction and what a re-theorization of its teaching practice might hope to accomplish.

Why does media production matter?

Writing some three decades ago, Sholle & Denski (1993) claimed that there is arguably no site that offers more pedagogical potential than the media production classroom. Having experienced all manner of Communication courses as both student and instructor, I could not agree more. For one, production activities offer a hands-on means of engaging with the media that simply isn’t available in a large lecture or seminar course. Many students, like myself, came to Communication and Media Studies out of an interest in multimedia texts. Engaging with shows, films, songs, or images only through classroom discussions and written papers runs counter to this interest. Production
activities, by contrast, allow one to understand media *through* media. For Morrell et al. (2013), placing students in the role of media producer provides a new perspective from which to understand their position as media consumer:

Students become critical consumers rather than passive ones when they go a step further and learn how to break down and analyze an image, video, or advertisement through words, colors, object positions, and settings in the classroom. When they next discuss the effects of media on their lives, their worldview changes and grows into new perspectives about popular culture and consumerism (p. 20).

Bringing media production into the classroom also connects school activity with the outside world (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000). Most students, particularly those at the college level, are producing multimedia content, be it through personal Instagram or Snapchat stories or through more ambitious YouTube, Vimeo or TikTok projects. A classroom focus on production allows students both to hone their production skills and, more critically, apply that understanding toward a more thoughtful participation in digital and media environments (Coiro, 2003).

Media production is also a socially engaged activity. Group work is not awkwardly mandated as with many presentations or written assignments; it is a necessity. A typical video project is by nature a collaborative (though often undemocratic) process, requiring a coordinated effort to script, shoot, and edit (Buckingham, Grahame & Sefton-Green, 1995; Sabal, 2009). The creative side of production projects requires similar collaboration, with group members pooling ideas regarding shot selection, dialogue, or story details in the moment to produce a final project. Production projects also focus attention outward to the spaces and communities outside the classroom or even campus. As Goodman (2003) notes:
Taking a video camera into the community as a regular method for teaching and learning gives kids a critical lens through which they can explore the world around them. It helps them to defamiliarize the familiar taken-for-granted conditions of life. This approach to critical literacy links media analysis to production; learning about the world is directly linked to the possibility of changing it (p. 3).

The direct engagement with community ideas and issues is a hard one to replicate in the confines of a classroom or through the mostly private process of writing a paper or taking a test. I should acknowledge some of my own biases regarding this last point. The multimedia projects I’ve undertaken as a student have been the ones that best pushed my comfort zone, challenging me to work in teams, to learn others’ perspectives through interviews and offscreen conversations, and to engage directly with spaces as I attempted to capture them. It’s no coincidence that these projects are among the ones I’m most proud of, and that the experience of making them has remained so fresh in my mind even in the decade or so since I was an undergraduate. I see a similar level of engagement when I send students out to create their own projects, a sense of being in the world that is hard to replicate with an essay. With all that said, I don’t mean to make a value judgment by claiming production assignments are ‘better’ than traditional written ones. When implemented thoughtfully, both forms offer great pedagogical benefits. The aim of this project is to call much needed attention to the largely overlooked benefits media production offers as a teaching tool. So why is it that production assignments are so rarely used in classes? Exploring that question requires that we take account of the historical context that has placed media production in such a limited role in most departments.
How is media production practiced at the moment?

How has media production traditionally been used in Communication courses? In large part, the answer is not at all. As part of a related quantitative methods project, I analyzed thousands of course descriptions obtained through communication department websites and course catalogs, documenting the number of media production courses—operationalized here as courses dealing with video, audio, or image editing or production—available in 53 communication departments in the U.S. These 53 were selected among the 58 departments that offer PhDs in Communication, meaning they were the most likely to be producing future communication professors (I was unable to locate course descriptions for the other five programs). Given this influence, I wanted to understand how these vanguard programs implemented media production within their own curricula.

Of the 2,308 classes I analyzed, production related courses comprised only 314, or 11%, of total courses. Where production classes are implemented, they are often treated as ‘professional’ or skill-building courses, a distinction marking them as discrete from ‘critically’ oriented classes. Further, only 4% of total classes qualified as implementing praxis, that is combining critical concepts and production skills. While it is perhaps difficult to judge the full context of a course by a one paragraph description, these findings do speak to a departmental imperative on splitting production from the rest of the curricula. Sholle and Denski (1993) trace this separation back to the beginnings of Communication departments in the mid-20th century. Curricular decisions to separate liberal arts focused critical thinking from professionally oriented skills like media production derived in large part from competing departmental missions: one to undertake
academic media effects research, the other to train students for jobs in professional media. Separating production and theory courses also splits instructors into “applied” and “academic” backgrounds, a professional/PhD tension that further erodes the possibility for overlap between the two (Sholle & Denski, 1993). Applied and academic are some of what Denski (1991) refers to as “distancing dichotomies,” the most significant of which is the split between theory and practice (pg. 8). As he explains, “The force with which this dichotomy has attached itself to media production curriculum in general has worked to silence critical academic inquiry into the greater social and political implications of media production practices” (Denski, 1991, p.10). This long-standing linking of media production with professionalism has created what Masterman (1997) calls the “technicist trap,” reducing classroom instruction to a set of purely technical operations that reproduce existing conventions (p. 46). Cameras, audio recorders, and other equipment are to be learned via step-by-step instruction, with the intent of preparing students for TV and film industry jobs. Equating technical skills as professionally relevant creates with it the opposing category of “non-technical” skills, set in contrast as non-pragmatic or purely academic (Sholle & Denski, 1993). Through this system, “students are generally led to perceive the critical and theoretical content of these courses as required for advancement to the ‘real’ meat of the major and treat them as a hurdle to be gotten over” (p. 73). In Communication departments, and in universities at large, pressure to produce job-ready skills for students continues to increase in tandem with tuition, student loan debt, and the profit-driven goals of most colleges (Giroux, 2011; Suoranta et al., 2004). In this context, the practical skills that production courses offer “may be popular with students and provide great vocationally-oriented optics for publicity and recruitment materials,” yet
they also risk “marginalizing the liberal arts tradition of ‘learning by thinking’—a critical and theoretical approach” (Boulton, 2016, p. 88).

Separating theory and practice along the lines of technical production and conceptual discussion courses may seem a necessary compromise for many departments. Few faculty are equipped to teach both media theory and production (Boulton, 2016; Sholle & Denski, 1993). Further, classroom spaces themselves are designed to cater to one or the other course, making it hard for instructors to imagine mounting a production assignment in a lecture hall or holding a critical discussion in a computer lab (Apple, 2003). Students as well seemed inclined to choose one or the other, especially as the pressure to accumulate job-ready skills continues to rise (Davies, 1997; Freire & Shor, 2003; Sholle & Denski, 1993). Put simply, splitting production and theory classes makes practical sense. It’s also created numerous pedagogical issues affecting not just production classes, but across the curriculum.

What is the problem with standard media production pedagogy?

Freire’s (1970) description of the banking model of education, in which teachers deposit knowledge into students’ (assumedly empty) minds, offers an apt depiction of ‘standard’ media production pedagogy. The emphasis on practical skills and technical proficiency establishes a “how-to” approach, where “only through emulating, and failing to achieve, professional practice can students fully understand the complexity of media production” (Grahame, 1991, p. 149). While the how-to approach frames itself as value-neutral, such instruction serves to reproduce existing representations baked into standard production practices, leaving unchallenged critical questions of meaning-making
(Buckingham, 2013). As Higgins (1991) notes, an uncritical or value-neutral approach is itself a kind of politics, one that “results in the promotion of the dominant mode” (p. 19).

A banking approach to media production based in ‘how-to’ logic also obscures valuable critical questions of ‘what’ or ‘why.’ The use of certain narrative tropes, stereotypical representations, or conventional production decisions are taught in the language of best practices, ensuring that students are never given the opportunity to critically reflect on these actions. Dewey (1938), writing well before the advent of the video production course, captures the consequence of this approach succinctly: “What is taught is thought of as essentially static. It is a finished product, taught with little regard either to the ways in which it was originally built up or to changes that will surely occur in the future” (p. 5). Learning, as Dewey observes, is an experiential process. Setting all critical reflection in one space and all practical action in the other never allows students to connect the two, to understand the value of theoretical concepts in everyday practice.

So while communication students may have lessons in photo ethics in a lecture class and learn how to use a DSLR camera in a lab course, the opportunity to experience the use-value of critical ideas in a meaningful context never occurs. How then do ethical issues of representation matter not just in principle, but in the moment when you hold a camera up to the world and capture your own representations?

The banking approach also hinders opportunities for valuable collaborative, team-based learning that activities like video projects might afford (Sabal, 2009). Instead, this top-down model silences students—in particular women and persons of color—who are often alienated in production courses by an emphasis on technical competency and a recycling of patriarchal representations and narrative tropes from the film and television
‘canon’ (Orwin & Carageorge, 2001). Separating discussions of representation from production courses, as Green (2013) notes, also serves to diminish their value. “Because they are taught as ‘theory,’ film students and professors alike often see the topics as unrelated to practice, not to mention dry and boring” (p. 31). For Apple (2003), technology is one of the key drivers in asserting ‘how to’ logic over the ‘why’ questions of critical inquiry. The new technology, in this way, “transforms the classroom in its own image, the more a technical logic will replace critical political and ethical understanding. The discourse of the classroom will center on technique, less on substance” (p. 454).

Despite its ‘top-down’ orientation, the transmission approach is so pervasive in many media production classes because it is enforced from all directions. The large production class I instructed for five semesters as a Master’s student was constructed as a crash course for students, whirling them through the basics of video, audio, and image production in order to advance them to upper-division classes. Instructors, given only a week to cover a topic as huge as photography, crammed in as much content as possible. My fellow T.A.s, many of whom had no background in media production, just tried to stay above water, relying on tutorials and rubrics to handle their teaching duties. And students—facing pressure from parents, instructors, peers, and loan collectors—were rightly worried about acquiring the kinds of hard skills they’d been told lead to high-paying jobs. At no point was the time or interest available to discuss why we were working on these particular types of projects, the parameters we set around good or bad work, or the value these production skills might hold outside of job skills. There was no space left for reflection, only action.
What alternatives are available?

Reimagining the role of media production must go beyond, as Boulton (2016) characterizes, “ginning up production courses with theory” or vice versa (p. 88). The depth of the dichotomy between production practice and critical theory requires a much more careful rethinking of the role both play in the classroom. To this end, critical pedagogy provides not just a useful critique of media production pedagogy with the banking approach, but a viable alternative. For Denski (1991):

A critical pedagogy of media production, in its meta-questioning of instructional practice, leads one to view the media classroom not only as an individual site of instruction, but as a cultural arena, i.e. as a site of cultural struggle in which various sociological and ideological struggles are continually being played out (p. 4).

Meta-questioning is perhaps the most crucial aspect of critical pedagogy, and it’s for this reason that I draw primarily from Freire’s (1970) work. Freire’s (1970) pedagogical lessons lack specificity, a point of frustration for many (Bragg, 2007; Ford, 2016). Yet the value of Freire’s (1970) ideas lies not in specific teaching strategies, but in rethinking what and for whom we are teaching. I want to walk through some of the key elements of Freire’s (1970) pedagogical concepts, in the process using them to recast possible approaches to media production.

For Freire (1970), a first step out of an oppressive, banking approach requires a resolution of the student-teacher contradiction, in “reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students” (p. 59). Teachers no longer impart facts to their students in a transmission-style model but engage with them in dialogue. Through dialogue, students and teachers bring their own cultural and experiential knowledge to bear in the classroom. As Fassett and Warren (2006) note,
“Dialogue is not a matter of negotiation and not a process of friendship building, though both may occur; it is a process of sensitive and thorough inquiry, inquiry we undertake together to (de)construct ideologies, identities, and cultures” (p. 54). So how might critical dialogue function in media production classes? The first step must be to address power hierarchies within the classroom, be that the instructor who knows the ‘correct’ way to use the software, the student who uses technical proficiency to assert a more powerful role, or the software itself that asserts its own educational agenda. Rather than centering class around how to accomplish a task (for instance, to edit a video), a dialogue-based approach should focus first on media production’s larger societal role in making meaning. As Buckingham (2013) outlines:

Students may be able to learn by doing; but if they are not enabled to reflect upon what they have done, it will be impossible for them to generalize from their experience to future situations. In this respect, then, learning has to involve a dialectical relationship between doing and analysing—or, to put it in media education terminology, between ‘practice’ and ‘theory’ (p. 133).

Having students reflect on their past experience with media might start with asking about former production projects they’ve worked on. Even if these projects are far from ‘professional’ level productions, students’ experiences making everything from photo albums to Instagram stories provides a helpful basis on which to reject the banking-style framing of teacher-as-expert versus student-as-blank receptacle (Buckingham, 2013). Dialogue must also address their experience as media consumers, acknowledging the complexity and diversity of our media viewing habits and recognizing the social basis of all judgements of taste and value, especially our own (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2005). These conversations, as Wink (2005) notes, should move both students and teachers to “often uncomfortable places of learning and unlearning” (p. 48), honing in on
the way issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality are represented and perpetuated through media texts. For hooks (1994), “Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow and are empowered by the process” (p. 21). Engaging in difficult issues of representation requires an openness regarding the experiences and values that comprise instructor’s relationships to the media. As Hall (1991) reminds, “You have to position yourself somewhere in order to say anything at all” (p. 18). Critical dialogue must push students and teachers to identify hegemonic values in the world around them, specifically by identifying the ways in which these values and beliefs affect their own lives.

The key for a critical media production pedagogy is to tie these conceptual discussions to the everyday practice of making media. For Fassett and Warren (2006), oppressions such as racism, sexism, and homophobia are not given to us fully formed, but are created and sustained through our own mundane acts of communication. Media producers have an outsized role in this perpetuation of representations and ideologies. Dialogue in the media labs should reflect on the privilege and responsibility creators have in everyday production decisions to either reproduce existing representations or work toward alternatives.

From this personal perspective, students use the classroom space to embark on their own process of inquiry. In opposition to the banking model, this problem-posing method of education “bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality, thereby responding to the vocation of men as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation” (Freire, 1970, p. 71). From posing
the problem, students then move to overcome it through praxis, or a movement between theory and practice. Wink (2005) describes praxis as a cycle, shifting from the naming of the problem to critical reflection on that problem, and on to actions to overcome the problem. Action may take many forms, including—most notably for the purposes of this study—the act of producing media texts. More important here is that action (or practice) isn’t seen as an end goal, but rather the completion of the cycle. Often students must return to the beginning of the cycle, reconsidering action through additional reflection on and revision of the problem and only then devising new modes of action. As Fassett and Warren (2006) outline, “Without action, what good is theory? Without theory, how might we take informed action? Both reflexivity and praxis connote process—an important reminder—and neither is a destination or end result” (p. 51). Through a process of action and reflection that utilizes both theory and practice, students—particularly those from culturally marginalized and economically disenfranchised backgrounds—can challenge dominant ideologies and transform the world via their own voice (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2003). For Sholle & Denski (1993), praxis is the key “transducing” element in closing the distance between theory and practice in media production coursework:

Through the displacement of a transmission model of media training (or the teaching of media reproduction), the teaching of media production is recast as an ongoing process involving the transformation of consciousness (and reformations of the self) that takes place in the interaction among three agencies: the teacher, the learner and the knowledge that they together produce (p. 143)
What Can Critical Media Literacy Offer?

Though Freire and other critical pedagogues like McLaren (2003), and Giroux (2003) don’t specify a subject area in their work, their ideas were largely conceived with literacy acquisition in mind. In particular, Freire’s early 1960s work in rural Brazil teaching reading and writing skills to indigenous students has entered the realm of lore, representing an idealized version of where, to whom, and to what end critical pedagogy should work. For instructors like myself working outside of traditional literacy education and with students that don’t fit such generalized conditions of ‘oppressed,’ this formulation of critical pedagogy can make its concepts seem incompatible. To this end, critical media literacy (CML) offers a useful interpolation of critical pedagogy approaches into media education. As Kellner & Share (2019) explain, “This critical pedagogical approach to literacy offers the dual possibility of building awareness of media domination through critical analysis and empowering individuals to create alternative media for counter-hegemonic expression (p. xiii). Critical analysis and alternative media production are cast here as two sides of the praxis process. Transformation thus comes from movement between the two: critically understanding media representations and producing works that challenge them.

CML also helps articulate some of the specific goals to which a critical media production pedagogy should strive. First, it expands the core literacy goals of reading and writing beyond rote skills and toward the more complex facilities of critical understanding and self-expression. Reading the media thus starts with an understanding of its powerful role in constructing the world and orienting us to the various social, economic, and political positions that we occupy within it (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000,
CML draws heavily from Frankfurt School concepts, specifically the role of mass broadcast technologies like television, film, and radio in producing false consciousness among viewers by reproducing dominant cultural values (Morrell, 2008). Gramsci’s (1971) concept of hegemony is useful in documenting how these reproductions are often received as ‘common-sense’ beliefs. Critical literacy should push students to denaturalize these beliefs, making present the normative values around class, race, gender, sexuality offered through media representations (Kellner & Share, 2019). Given the wide range of cultural perspectives, our reading must take into account not just the text, but the reader and the context in which it is read. ‘Writing’ in critical media literacy then acts as a means of speaking back to social forces, offering the opportunity for a democratic reconstruction of education and society (Kellner & Share, 2007). Morrell (2008) in particular highlights media production and other ‘writing’ techniques as central to CML’s ultimate goal of negotiating or challenging media representations through student-made counter/alternative texts: “Critical literacy, therefore, is necessary not only for the critical navigation of hegemonic discourses; it is also essential to the redefining of the self and the transformation of oppressive social structures and relations of production” (p. 5).

Second, CML highlights the need for multiliteracy skills, or the ability to create texts across a range of audio, visual, and multimodal forms. Writing with media should not be seen as a replacement for traditional text composition or as a gimmick to court students’ interest (Buckingham, 2013; Hobbs, 1998). These skills offer ways both for students to understand our increasingly media-dominated culture and to participate more fully in it:

When students learn to critically read and write with images, sounds, multimedia, and print, they deepen their critical thinking skills and develop their identities as
responsible and empowered global citizens. The challenge to critically understand media texts, as well as the power to create and disseminate alternative messages, is the essence of critical media literacy (Kellner & Share, 2019, p. 55).

The key for many CML scholars is to situate multiliteracy skills as means of understanding and challenging cultural norms. As Alvermann (2017) warns, “failure to reflect critically on the contexts in which a pedagogy of multiliteracies exists (or any pedagogy, for that matter) can lead to unquestioningly reproducing the cultural values of the most powerful, often at the expense of the students we teach” (p. 101). It’s an outcome that doesn’t seem far removed from many of the media production classes I’ve encountered, with skill production always outweighing critical discussion. The context of the digital spaces in which students acquire multiliteracy skills are highly different from traditional classrooms. A critical approach that works within these spaces should consider the issues that arise from these specific contexts in order to orient discussion and other critical reflection activity. A CML mode should enact a praxis-informed approach that moves organically through reading, writing, and understanding multimedia texts.

Finally, CML connects media education with community action. Students, especially at the college level, largely engage with the world through media (Coiro, Castek & Quinn, 2016; Morrell et al., 2013). A critical understanding of how messages are constructed and how their participation matters in these digitally and visually oriented contexts is a vital means of identifying how they locate themselves within these spaces. But, as Morrell (2008) notes, “Acquiring the critical language to deconstruct media narratives is important, but not enough. Students as agents of change must also develop the skills of digital filmmaking, web design, and musical production to name a few” (p. 158).
The role of change agent is a particularly powerful one, as students enter their own communities, bringing their own knowledge and experience of these spaces to bear on the work they create. Jenkins et al. (2009) and Ito et al. (2011), have spoken to the need for participatory action within media literacy, with students using multiliteracy skills to become active members within digital environments. Approaches such as youth participatory action research (YPAR) and critical participatory action research (CPAR) build further on students’ active role as change agents, imagining the classroom as a site through which to engage praxis-oriented and community-based work. Students, in dialogue with teachers, reflect on an issue affecting their community, collaborate on an action to address the problem, and work to implement it in the community. CPAR’s focus on teaching practices—the way classroom discussions are structured, the process by which each phase of the project is undertaken, the ways tools are used to achieve project goals—elaborate on the Freirean goal of shaping the classroom space into one in which participants/students can thrive and achieve transformative goals (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2013).

Morrell et al.’s (2013) work with students in Los Angeles’ Boyle Heights neighborhood in particular exemplifies this praxis-based, community-oriented approach. Students, largely from Black or Latinx and working-class backgrounds, began class sessions by discussing their own representations in the media, particularly how young, urban, persons of color like them are often assigned the stereotypical role of ‘gangbanger.’ Equipped with cameras and recorders, students then went out to capture a different set of representations drawn from their own experiences, documenting their neighborhood and the people that lived in it through visual montages, interviews, group
discussions, and personal reflections. Working back at school, they then edited together
the footage into short films shown at an event open to the entire neighborhood. Morrell et
al.’s (2013) project represents something like an ideal for what CML education could
look like. And, similar to Freire’s (1970) work in rural Brazil for critical pedagogy, it’s
also hard for me to imagine replicating anything like it with the often privileged, non-
local college students I typically encounter in my classes. Yet the framework of the
project I think outlines perfectly how critical consideration works with production
practice to create something greater than the sum of their parts. Critical discussion
emerges from the organic context of personal representation. What is a problem we
perceive in media representations and what can we do about it? The technical process of
learning and using production equipment is not just an act of skill-building, but a means
of directly addressing the problem. Questions of representation thus become grounded in
the real practice of framing a location, deciding how much of an interview to keep in, or
what narrative elements to focus on over others. This work further adds up to a tangible
product, something made with and for others.

Conclusion

Morrell et al.’s (2013) approach, along with the many others offered in the critical
pedagogy and critical media literacy research reviewed here, offer an exciting alternative
view of how critical media production pedagogy might operate in the classroom. Rather
than a transmission approach of walking students step-by-step through the technical
aspects of media production, these approaches start by questioning dominant media texts.
Locating the common-sense values embedded in media helps build understanding of both
how sexist, racist, classist and other oppressive representations are reproduced in culture (Kellner & Share, 2019) and how our own consumption of these texts affects our understanding and position in the world (Buckingham, 2013). Students then use this critical understanding to produce ‘alternative’ texts, employing video, audio, or other multimedia means to challenge hegemonic representations (Kellner & Share, 2019). Together media analysis and production function as theory and practice: reflection on the problem and action to address it.

Yet for all the ways it seems like media theory and production practice should work symbiotically in the classroom, this “dialectic relationship between doing and analyzing” rarely emerges (Buckingham, 2013, p. 133). My own attempts to bridge this theory/practice gap have mostly amounted to shoehorning theory into media production, a tactic that is typically dismissed by students who often treat calls for critical reflection as interruptions from more pressing work. Reflecting on her own experience teaching media production students, Zanker (2007) experienced a similar pull back into the technicist trap: “How can I engage students in critical and political economic analysis without being viewed as a puritanical kill-joy when they just wanted to get back to their production tools” (p. 42).

So why do media theory and production practice so often seem so incompatible? The issue I believe is a lack of theorizing of media production practice itself. For all the methods critical pedagogy and CML provide to consider student voice, teacher authority, media content, and social forces, the process of teaching media production skills—the practice of using editing software, the technical details of operating recording equipment—is never given much thought. Making a video is simply offered as a finishing
activity, a way to inscribe critical lessons into a concrete object. This secondary role I believe has two consequences. First, it ignores the production process as a site of critical attention. As Grahame (1991) notes, the “process” assumed here “implies a single integrated procedure focusing on and resulting in a finished product” (p. 147). Yet the steps that lead to a finished product are rich sites of meaning-making, with each production decision laden by a set of often hidden value systems and logics that led it to be made in a particular way. Skipping over the process of how a piece of media came to look or sound the way it did misses the crucial connection between practice and meaning. Second, it assumes that alternate texts can mount a worthwhile challenge to dominant media. Such a challenge, however, can only be possible when accompanied alongside the skills needed to create a work that could reasonably hold up against a popular (and likely professionally produced) one. At the collegiate level where I am focused, this need to develop professional level skills is especially important. Production projects are not just one of many possible expressions of student voice, interchangeable with an essay or a presentation. The skills these students learn will carry into their professional lives, where the media they create has the potential to reach huge audiences. From positions within media institutions, the creation of alternative or counter hegemonic texts can have enormous cultural impact; however, it takes serious production skills to access these spaces and make content capable of having such an impact.

I believe both oversights here are partially to blame for the low status of media production among many educators. Without emphasizing production chops, activities are at best little more than opportunities to play around with cameras and computers (Buckingham, 2013). At worst, they are antagonistic to the critical mission of media
education by encouraging students to unproblematically reproduce what they’re used to seeing (Lewis & Jhally, 1998). Likewise, focusing too much on production skills results in the transmission approach to production training outlined earlier, leaving students with no room to understand how or why meaning is constructed through media production, or how they might use skills to create their own meanings. Such an approach places media production on the level of vocational training, a distinction many university educators dismiss as unfit for liberal arts curricula.

For educators to avoid critical questions while teaching media production practice does not constitute a neutral stance. As Freire (1970) emphasizes, all educational practice is political. Neutrality is in itself a political stance, a choice to ignore the ways in which standard production practices perpetuate hegemonic representations and beliefs. Sexist, racist, classist and other oppressive representations don’t simply appear in media or culture; they emerge from a set of practices set in a cultural context (Fassett & Warren, 2006). Understanding these practices both from a technical and critical level allows us to change them, providing true possibility for alternate texts to emerge and make an impact. Achieving this potential must first address how the transmission approach dominant in current media production instruction hampers critical thinking. This isn’t just a matter of balancing out time between lecture and lab segments of class, or any conception that makes media theory and media production discrete. To follow Grahame’s (1991) conception, a CMPP process must theorize the production process itself, articulating how the practice of picking up a camera, editing a scene, or re-coloring a photo may act as modes of critical engagement.
The resources cited in this chapter have been valuable to a degree in thinking through how to teach critical concepts with and through the production process; however, they lack the currency and specifics needed to formulate how a CMPP approach might operate in media labs today. The following chapter will outline my approach to fill this need.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS AND RESEARCH APPROACH

Introduction

Critical scholars from media industry, critical media literacy, and critical pedagogy backgrounds have provided considerable groundwork in articulating a critical media production pedagogy (CMPP). Synthesizing critical pedagogy reflection with media production action should serve to deepen analysis and understanding of media texts as well as provide a mode of transformation via the creation of new texts. Missing from this formulation, I argue, are clear means for enacting CMPP in classroom practice. There are relatively few resources detailing how to implement critical pedagogy aims through concrete materials such as syllabi, assessments, project parameters, and equipment training. Nor do available resources speak to the specific challenges production instructors face in implementing critical methods, be that the difficulty of avoiding the technicist trap or in facing student resistance to non-standard approaches. The aim of this project is to offer a pragmatic guide for actualizing CMPP, such that production instructors have clear strategies for using the approach. In service of that goal, I rely on interviews conducted with 22 media production instructors currently teaching at U.S. colleges or universities. Using a long interview methodology (McCracken, 1988), I document their collective experiences blending critical and technical concepts in their production courses, including the challenges they’ve faced and the strategies they’ve developed for overcoming these issues. As a supplement to interviews, I have also collected teaching artifacts including syllabi, assignments, and rubrics from study
participants in order to document how these educators translate critical goals into effective teaching practice.

The use of interviews and artifacts to examine these themes is an attempt to expand my understanding around critical approaches to media production pedagogy, a goal inspired by my own production teaching experience as well as the existing literature upon which the CMPP is built. Speaking directly with production educators, I believe, offers an untapped resource of knowledge on this subject. In the four institutions in which I’ve taught, I’ve encountered many instructors using creative and critically oriented ways of teaching both with and through media production. These weren’t self-identified critical pedagogues looking to challenge transmission-style approaches or bridge the theory practice gap; they were instructors with interests in media theory and production simply connecting dots in the moment. From the several years I’ve spent theorizing CMPP, I’ve come to believe that the most valuable knowledge lies with instructors like these. However, their critical approaches rarely go beyond their specific classrooms or institutions and are unlikely to be shared through the usual channels of journal articles or conference presentations. Instructor perspectives, of course, do not paint a complete picture of CMPP. Most notably, they overlook the experience of students. Yet in thinking through the questions that this research is interested in, I argue that they are a hugely valuable and underutilized resource.

The goal of this project will be to compile a portion of this wide swath of approaches and experiences, detailing the specific methods by which instructors use media production as a critical teaching tool, and organizing this collective knowledge into an actionable method for implementing CMPP. Another crucial goal in gathering
different educators’ classroom approaches is to openly credit their ideas in a more widely recognized manner. I also hope that codifying the collective ideas of these instructors can help to build a wider network of media educators looking to learn or share CMPP methods.

The following sections of this chapter will detail my use of Long Interview and Thematic Analysis to collect and analyze instructors’ experiences and teaching strategies. It will then provide in-depth background on the instructors interviewed for this project, including relevant information related to their academic, non-academic, and personal backgrounds. I offer these data as a means of exploring the “distancing dichotomies” Sholle & Denski (1993) describe as historically separating media practice and theory. Finally, it will explain my data analysis process and set up the organizational structure of the subsequent findings chapters.

**The Long Interview**

Interviews and site visits were structured using a Long Interview methodology. The Long Interview, as McCracken (1988) outlines, involves a four-part method of inquiry:

1. Review of analytic categories
2. Review of cultural categories and interview design
3. Discovery of cultural categories and interview
4. Discovery of analytic categories and analysis/write-up.

The review of analytic categories in stage one includes an “exhaustive” review of existing literature, one that “constructs an inventory of the categories and relationships”
that the interview will explore (McCracken, 1988, p. 32). The literature offered in the previous chapter serves as the basis for my inventory of topics, a list that, in addition to the Freirean concepts that form the theoretical core of this project, includes Sholle & Denski’s (1993) distancing dichotomies, Masterman’s (1985) technicist trap, Manovich’s (2013) software studies, and Kellner & Share’s (2019) alternative text production among others.

The second stage of long interview inquiry involves a review of cultural categories, wherein “the investigator begins the process of using the self as an object of inquiry” (McCracken, 1988, p. 32). Building off the exhaustive literature of stage one, the researcher applies the same scrutiny to themselves, providing a “more systematic and detailed” view of their relation to the topic (p. 33). From this familiarization of the self to the topic, the review then looks to defamiliarize oneself, building critical distance in order to better map pre-existing assumptions and understandings.

The third stage—discovery of cultural categories/interview— Involves formalizing the questionnaire and conducting interviews. The structure of questionnaires “provides a sense of direction” for the interview, ensuring that important categories are touched upon while giving respondents plenty of space “to tell their story on their own terms” (McCracken, 1988, p.34). Stage three also involves the selection of interview participants, a process governed not by quantitative sampling conventions, but predicated on finding individuals who possess a special knowledge of the subject.

In the final phase, data collected through interviews is analyzed and written up into findings. McCracken (1988) outlines an additional five sub-stages in this process, which include three distinct rounds of observing interview transcripts and field notes to
develop and test themes, followed by a formalization of key themes, and finally the transformation of these themes into final theses.

The remainder of this section will lay out my own application of McCracken’s (1988) four stages of inquiry, including a self-review of my positionality and paradigmatic alignment, an explanation of how material from the literature review will be used to produce cultural codes, the adaptation of these codes into structuring an interview questionnaire, my process for selecting interview participants, and the means by which I will analyze and interpret data.

**Positionality & Paradigm**

I position myself in this research as both an instructor and a scholar. Both of these roles have come with a number of privileges that are important to address with regards to my relationship to this project. As an instructor, I have been lucky to build up a great deal of teaching experience across a range of subjects and classroom spaces. The majority of this instruction, however, has come in auxiliary roles, specifically as a teaching assistant, adjunct, or practicum instructor. I have not had a great deal of experience designing my own courses or in contributing to curriculum planning efforts. As critical pedagogy and media literacy scholars note, the individual teacher only has so much influence in choosing course subject matter (Sholle & Denski, 1993; Kellner & Share, 2019). Critical media production, by nature of bringing together historically separated theory and practice-based courses, must operate at this higher curricular level. In conversations with interview participants working in administrative capacities, I often touched on curricular elements as a means to overcome this limitation in my own experience. Further, as a
white, able-bodied, cis-gender male, I have not experienced the issues of asserting classroom authority that have plagued many of my colleagues with more marginalized identities. My selection of interview participants deliberately sought to account for my personal blindspots, capturing the experiences of those who have faced these challenges and can speak to them more perceptibly.

Following my theoretical framework in critical pedagogy, I position my work as a scholar within the critical paradigm. Teaching media, as well as viewing or creating our own, are political acts set in socially constructed doctrines, myths, and beliefs, all of which can exert power over individuals, groups, and societies (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). This power is often hidden through hegemonic, or ‘commonsense’ beliefs that are perceived as natural, necessary, or inevitable (Kellner & Share, 2019; Tracy 2013). Pedagogy acts as the most powerful method for uncovering the workings of power and as providing a mode of liberation for speaking back to that power. As I have outlined earlier, critical pedagogy is not just the process of a teacher giving knowledge to a student. Whether through a Freirean process of mutual dialogue between student and teacher or the in-program tutorials that allow editing software to teach itself to students, pedagogy is an altogether more complex process. Locating power within this process, be that with software, student, or otherwise, will be crucial in critically theorizing a production pedagogy.

My research will also allude to poststructural questions, in particular the unstable and interactional nature of meaning (Tracy, 2013). This slippage provides opportunity for both educators and producers to locate practices for disrupting hegemonic meanings and asserting alternatives (Kellner & Share, 2019). In working to challenge hegemonic
representations in my research and teaching, I also must acknowledge my own privileged position outside many of the representations I aim to challenge. Many popular media texts are the product of individuals like myself: white, male, cis-gendered, heterosexual, and able-bodied. Given the limitations of my perspective, it is important in this research for me to be open to different understandings of what it means to perform this work critically, of what it means to challenge representations, the risks that come with making a challenge, and the means by which production can be transformative. None of these terms can adhere to static definitions. I have attempted to bring this reflexive understanding to my own interview practice and subsequent data analysis, addressing the ways in which my worldview might limit my understanding of or engagement with critical issues.

**Interview Recruitment**

The most substantial data collection aspect of the project consisted of collecting interviews from critically minded media production instructors. My criteria for defining what qualifies as a “critically-minded production scholar” comes from their relation to a number of key topics and terms previously referred to in the literature, including critical, media production, pedagogy, professionalism, hegemonic representation, and alternative texts. The scope of this project is further limited to instructors teaching within a Communication or Communication-adjacent departments such as Media Studies, Journalism, and Film Studies. A handful of participants fell outside of this scope as faculty members of English, Art, and Education departments. I justify their inclusion
through the alignment of their teaching methods with the “critically-minded production scholar” criteria established for this project.

Recruitment did not involve formal parameters with regards to diversity; however, I was deliberate in seeking out participants that could address my limited positionality through their background and experience. The majority of instructors interviewed qualify—within the context of the white, male, cis-gendered, heterosexual standard of most production instructors at least—as belonging to a marginalized identity. I found early in the recruitment process that I did not need to make a concerted effort to seek out instructors from these marginalized backgrounds, as these individuals have the most personal investment in challenging established modes of production instruction and media text creation.

As noted in the previous chapter, media production and studies courses—along with the instructors that teach them—have historically been separated. Instructors who do both, as Boulton (2016) notes, are considered “unicorns” by nature of their dual training in production and theory. My experience in finding participants did feel akin to trying to locate unicorns. This difficulty may be a symptom of the relatively small number of critically minded production instructors currently active in higher education. It may also be because these instructors have few means by which to be recognized for their pedagogy beyond their home campuses, a symptom of the invisibility of much CMPP work. My methods of recruiting participants involved five primary methods:

1. Personal relationships with or recommendations given to the author
2. Faculty bios or published course descriptions available on department websites that showcased a clear interest in CMPP approaches
3. Published works related to the subject of media production and critical pedagogy/critical media literacy

4. Presentations related to CMPP themes given at Communication or media production related conferences such as the National Communication Association, the International Communication Association, the Critical Media Literacy Conference of the Americas, and the University Film and Video Association

5. Affiliations with organizations such as EDIT Media that promote critical modes of production teaching

Over the course of the interview collection stage, I reached out to 55 instructors via their institutional emails inviting them to participate in the project. Of these requests, 22 instructors ultimately agreed to and went forward with the interview process. Full names, institutional affiliations, and instructional backgrounds and interests of all interview participants are listed below:

*Interview Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>AFFILIATION</th>
<th>INSTRUCTIONAL BACKGROUND</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chris Boulton</td>
<td>University of Tampa</td>
<td>A production instructor and, during his PhD years at UMass Amherst, a T.A. for the TV Process course in which I’m currently teaching. Comes from a professional background in television production/marketing and continues to work as a filmmaker. He is also one of the few scholars to have recently published work on the theory/practice tension in media production.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Blaine</td>
<td>University of Oregon</td>
<td>Former colleague at the SOJC whose reflective and reflexive approach to teaching production helped me formulate many of my early pedagogical ideas. Comes from a professional photojournalism background and continues to produce longform documentary and photo projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malia Bruker</td>
<td>Florida State University</td>
<td>UFVA Gender Caucus and EDIT Media member who integrates her documentary making practice toward her critical approach to production courses. One of a handful of participants without a PhD, a status that has greatly influenced academic standing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane Cubbage</td>
<td>Bowie State University</td>
<td>Video production instructor whose critical work on disability studies extends to her classroom practice and scholarship. The only participant currently working at an HBCU, a perspective that greatly informs her teaching of hegemonic standards in her production courses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth Goldman</td>
<td>Buffalo State College</td>
<td>EDIT Media member and community media maker/advocate. Not coming from a professional media background like most of the other participants along with her dual appointment in Women and Gender Studies makes her perspective particularly unique.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve Goodman</td>
<td>New York University/Educational Media Center</td>
<td>Founder of the Educational Media Center and author of <em>Teaching Youth Media</em>, an incredibly influential work on this research. Though the majority of his teaching focused on high school aged students, his writing on and experience in integrating critical pedagogy with video production instruction makes his perspective incredibly valuable for this project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Gracon</td>
<td>Gonzaga University</td>
<td>Educator and filmmaker whose presentation at the 2020 UFVA conference on critical uses of multicam media production put him on the radar of this project. Like Goldman, he comes from a more DIY/community media background and speaks candidly to the difficulties of integrating this “non-standard” approach in many university settings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oscar Guerra</td>
<td>University of Connecticut Stamford</td>
<td>Filmmaker, instructor, and scholar whose work looks to produce media that provides a way for underrepresented groups to share and disseminate counter stories. His professional production experience outside of the U.S. along with his work with majority-minority students at UC Stamford make his perspective of particular value.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie Laure</td>
<td>St. Vincent College</td>
<td>Visual designer and educator whose presentations in the Visual Communication division of NCA spoke closely to the synthesis of production and critical theory. Unlike the majority of participants, her teaching and professional work focus on design rather than video production.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam R. Levine</td>
<td>Amherst College</td>
<td>Film professor and visual artist who teaches Amherst’s introductory video production course aimed at blending technical and creative elements. His approach to video production instruction is more informed by an arts approach than any other participant in this project, a valuable outlook for reimagining standard practices in Communication-based teaching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa Heyamoto</td>
<td>University of Oregon SOJC (School of Journalism and Communication)</td>
<td>Former advisor and instructor who oversees (and typically teaches a section of) the SOJC’s massive Gateway to Media production course. Oregon’s department has a particularly strong professional orientation, which makes her own negotiation of critical and professional goals in coordinating the classes intriguing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth LeDoux</td>
<td>Bentley University</td>
<td>Educator whose critical pedagogy work presented at the University of Film and Video Association made her a strong candidate for this project. Her home campus of Bentley is a small, business-focused school, meaning few of her students are interested in pursuing media pipeline positions. Her teaching thus reimagines what production courses might offer students beyond specific job training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick Keating</td>
<td>Trinity University</td>
<td>Former cinematographer whose teaching and scholarship combines film production and theory. His approach is very humanities oriented, drawing heavily from video essay format to re-imagine technical production activities as a form of critical analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oscar Keyes</td>
<td>Virginia Commonwealth University</td>
<td>Educator recommended by study participant Jen Proctor. Member of UFVA and contributor to EDIT Media, who works closely with instructors at VCU to help develop critical production teaching methods. His work of instructing instructors on production instruction provided particular insight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Mulchay</td>
<td>University of Arizona</td>
<td>Educator whose critical pedagogy work presented at the University of Film and Video Association made him a strong candidate for this project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keith Oppenheim</td>
<td>Champlain College</td>
<td>Former CNN reporter and video production instructor with whom I co-directed a journalism summer camp for Russian exchange students the previous summer. Comes to the subject from a much more professional background, which greatly informed his views on critical subject matter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanju Özdemir</td>
<td>University of Connecticut</td>
<td>Filmmaker and video production instructor whose more contemplative work studies human relationships, dreams, memories and the contemporary experiences of life. His perspective as an active filmmaker with an international background made his viewpoints on teaching a unique asset.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Instructor Background

Writing some three decades ago, Sholle & Denski (1993) identified “distancing dichotomies” as driving the split between production practice and media theory. Some dichotomies including teacher/student and theory/practice are in keeping with the Freirean framing of Sholle & Denski’s research. Others, including professional/professor and applied/academic refer more specifically to media production pedagogy, where the split between production-oriented instructors with industry backgrounds and theory-based professors with PhDs has hindered critical approaches. My difficulty in recruiting critically minded production instructors speaks in some part to the continued existence of
these dichotomies. More instructive are the experiences instructors interviewed for this project shared regarding their own struggles in navigating dichotomies.

The majority of participants had received a PhD at the time of interview. All remaining instructors possessed a Master’s degree such as an MFA. A handful of participants came to production through theory, with one prevailing route being an exposure to production work through T.A. assignments as graduate students. The more common trajectory was for instructors to come to theory from production. The production backgrounds of these instructors proved more varied. Roughly half of participants held some professional industry experience in television, radio, graphic design, or film production. Similar to my own experience, many entered grad school due to dissatisfaction with industry work:

I was working in public television in Mexico. I didn't like it that much. I wanted to do something more stable. And with the teaching stuff, I saw that I could continue to do my own filmmaking. I was able to get a scholarship to get my PhD at UNC, and I got a chance to teach what I love, which is with cameras and media environments. It was not something I carefully planned to be honest (O. Guerra, Personal Interview, November 2, 2020).

A second category were instructors that self-identified as artists or filmmakers. For some in this group, graduate studies offered a way to bring more theoretical knowledge to their production work. Others viewed their academic training, and the teaching jobs it afforded more as a means of funding their art/filmmaking process. A final category of instructors pivoted to teaching by necessity, typically due to a lack of reliable industry career prospects or an inability to continue their professional practice:

Basically, I developed severe carpal tunnel in both wrists. I couldn't see my way to a PhD in graphic design; it was just too technically focused. What I loved about my time in school was the theory part, and that had mostly happened in my Communication classes. So I did an BA to PhD degree in Communication, and
then found this position where they were looking for someone in a comm
department who could also teach graphic design and visual communication. And
I'm like "oh hi, I'm the one of those that there is" (A.L. Nichols, Personal
Interview, September 4, 2020).

Nichols speaks here to the continued “unicorn” status of instructors with both theory and
production training. Instructors were by and large aware of this unique status within their
departments, with some expressing concern for their rarity:

I'm really the only faculty member in the Communication department that feels
comfortable in video production. And that's problematic. We had a job search
recently where I was on the committee. It was a film studies kind of seat that had
been vacated. And I was arguing that half of our major is authoring and
production, we've got a dozen faculty and I'm the only production person. We
need more production people if we're going to say we do both (C. Boulton,
Personal Interview, August 28, 2020).

Instructors described many institutional practices that worked to maintain distancing
dichotomies. One issue was a clear separation between media studies and production and
faculty:

Even those departments with production built in, production and studies have a
line drawn between them. That happens among the faculty, among the curriculum,
and among the students. Never the two shall meet. Even when production is a
consideration, it's often carved off (J. Proctor, Personal Interview, September 16,
2020).

This separation is often inscribed through graduate school training, where curricula focus
fully on developing one skill or the other. Bruker speaks to her experiences with
partitioning through her own MFA background:

I didn't interact with any PhDs. It was pretty siloed in that way. It was just film-
school brain. But there was a colloquium that was taught that walked us through
how to thrive in academia, how to publish, how to put together a CV. It wasn't
presented as a major track, but a few of us took note and started going to UFVA
conferences (M. Bruker, Personal Interview, October 23, 2020).
In contrast to film school training, graduate education in Communication and Media Studies-related fields—with rare exceptions—includes no required production-related coursework. For some instructors, this lack of inclusion reflects not just an oversight, but the diminished status of production work in these departments:

I literally had one of the production professors when I was a graduate student come into one of the graduate courses and said “you're gonna be treated as a second-class citizen.” We are second class citizens in the minds of academics (J. Proctor, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).

As Proctor elaborates, the siloing of production and studies reproduces a logic among faculty, administrators, and students that the two are naturally discrete:

Something I heard from students over and over again was that what they would learn in their production courses was not reinforced in their studies courses, and vice versa. It just felt like they were in two different programs. That's also because the faculty don't talk. They don't design the departmental curricula around the idea that these courses should be in conversation with each other (J. Proctor, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).

The institutionalization of this logic posed concrete challenges for instructors looking to bridge the production/studies divide.

It was really hard for me to get people to write letters for me. There aren't that many people who teach production who make it to professor. FSU wants you to have full professors write your letters, and there are just so few full professors teaching production (M. Bruker, Personal Interview, October 23, 2020).

As Nichols affirms through her own post-graduate school experience: “I had no idea there were any jobs like this. It's a very unusual space” (A.L. Nichols, Personal Interview, September 4, 2020).

Related to this institutionalized divide, it is worth noting that none of the instructors I interviewed serve as tenured faculty for any of the 58 U.S. institutions with Communication-related PhD programs. The majority work at smaller liberal arts
institutions, where their production and studies training is an asset in departments where limited faculty need to cover a wide range of topics. Holding dual departmental appointments was also common among instructors, which for many provided an institutional justification for their blending of critical approaches in production instruction.

The lack of tenured production faculty at R1 Communication institutions is particularly vital in maintaining distancing dichotomies. One outcome is that there is no pipeline available for blending applied media production and academic critical theory. Instructors personally related their own difficulty in trying to convince their graduate advisors and committee members of the academic value of their media production work. Knowing how to teach production, as several instructors affirmed, proved valuable once on the job market; however, it often worked against them in grad school coursework and dissertation project completion. A second outcome is the lack of incentive for teaching media production critically. Such work, as instructors note, rarely aids one’s tenure package, and can often prompt the ire of fellow faculty and department chairs who view production work as watered-down scholarship. As the following finding sections demonstrate, critical approaches to media production also require time and effort to implement. Some instructors acknowledge that such a time commitment is unsustainable, especially with publication pressures weighing so much more on their professional status.

Finally, I want to speak briefly to the demographic background of instructors. Considerations of race, gender, and sexuality did not play a significant part in the recruitment process; I experienced enough difficulty recruiting participants that satisfied the “critically-minded production instructor” criteria. I also did not explicitly ask for
demographic background from instructors at any point during the interview process. Such data is neither an aspect of Long Interview methodology nor relevant to primary goals of this project. All information related to gender identity, sexual orientation, or ethnic background was offered by instructors in the context of explaining their pedagogical approach or professional background and has been reproduced in the findings in this same spirit.

As noted in the previous chapter, media production at the professional and instructional level has been historically dominated by white, cis-gender men. Instructors largely affirmed this continued influence, either directly through their experiences working in various departments or indirectly through pressures to reify production standards that uphold this orientation. That the majority of study participants identified as outside the white, cis-gender male ‘norm’ also speaks to who is most engaged in this work of challenging established production pedagogy. As is illustrated throughout the findings, this ‘outsider’ perspective is often key to instructors’ ability to reimagine production instruction.

**Interview Structure**

Interviews were conducted over a roughly one-year time span between August 2020 and September 2021, with the majority held in Fall of 2020. The format of interviews follows a Long Interview structure, each formalized around a common questionnaire guide (McCracken, 1988). This interview format “provides the opportunity to step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do
themselves,” a necessary perspective for best understanding and articulating the perspective of these instructors (p. 7).

There are a couple of McCracken’s (1988) methods that were altered in this study. First, against his recommendation of devoting 2-3 hours per interview, my interviews with instructors ranged from 1-1.5 hours in length. This decision to shorten the format derived from a handful of practical and conceptual considerations. Regarding the latter, McCracken argues 2-3 hours are necessary to build rapport and create an atmosphere in which respondents are willing to offer “unconstrained testimony” on potentially sensitive topics (p. 42). Given the academic and professional nature of the research topic, I do not see a need to derive “unconstrained testimony” from instructors. As a condition of the transparent nature of this project, I instead communicated to instructors my intent to avoid the sort of “unconstrained” dialogue McCracken’s extended format aims to court. Through this pre-interview as well as the analysis and writing stages of this project, my goal has been to actively avoid publishing materials that might incriminate participants professionally or otherwise. Building rapport was necessary in speaking with instructors of marginalized identities, as the subject of these interviews on occasion touched on experiences of racism, sexism, and bigotry. Further, my own experience teaching production classes from a privileged position posed a further barrier to relating with their experiences. For these (majority) of cases, I did not alter the interview format or questions posed; however, I did communicate more with these participants in the interview stage to explain my intent in wanting to discuss these potentially sensitive topics and establish clear expectations for navigating topics before beginning the formal interview.
Second, I chose to go well beyond McCracken’s (1988) recommended 7-8 interviews per study by speaking with 22 instructors. This measure was meant as a counterbalance to shortening the length of individual interviews. Collecting a broader swath of experiences and backgrounds also better served the aims of this project. These multiple perspectives provided a wealth of teaching strategies that would not have been possible through a half dozen or so interviews. Further, the expanded field helped better illustrate overlaps in instructor approaches that proved essential in locating analytic themes within the findings.

Third, McCracken recommends face-to-face interviews in order to gain necessary spatial, embodied, and nonverbal information beyond verbal content. Interviews for this project were conducted during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, such that in-person interviews were not possible. All interviews were instead conducted and recorded via Zoom. Though the format was not ideal, it offered a number of unforeseen benefits. Most notably, I was able to expand the scope of interviews in order to speak with instructors from all over the U.S., which would not have been possible given the budgetary and time constraints of in-person travel. Zoom also allowed for easy recording of all interviews. I captured video and audio recordings for all 22 interviews, only deleting these recordings after transcribing each conversation. Finally, Zoom provided technical affordances such as screen sharing that allowed instructors to easily access, explain, and share teaching materials during our conversations. Many of these materials were later collected and analyzed as artifacts.

Rather than a set list of questions, I relied upon a questionnaire guide to ensure that each interview touched on the same general subjects and concerns. For McCracken
(1988), the goal of the guide is to allow the investigator to retain a low profile, directing the conversation in as subtle a manner as possible so as to produce the most possible freedom of expression from the participant. He recommends a number of question types designed for this purpose, including biographical (asking for background with the topic), grand tour (having participants provide their own map of the topic), and exceptional incidents (requesting specific examples that illustrate a facet of the topic). Questions on this guide derived from one of these basic formats, asking participants to provide a history of their teaching, give a tour of their teaching space, describe their motives and behaviors, expound on ideal pedagogical approaches, and offer issues they’ve encountered. The questionnaire was structured chronologically, starting with how instructors first became involved with teaching production, followed by how they developed their teaching style, and finally into how they imagine production into the future. The full questionnaire along with explanations of each question’s connection to CMPP literature, the framing format it follows, and its intended purpose in addressing this projects’ larger goals is available in Appendix A.

Artifact Collection

Following the initial interview process, I asked participants to share teaching artifacts such as syllabi, assignment descriptions, slideshows, and grading rubrics used in their production courses. 15 of the 22 participants provided artifacts ranging from 1-2 documents to dozens of texts. In total, 231 artifacts were collected. These materials act as a supplement to interview transcripts, offering a deeper look into how instructors infuse critical concepts into the course structure and various assignments. Thematic analysis
(Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017) offers a flexible tool for assessing educational artifacts such as syllabi, assignment details, and student projects. My application of the method is as a deductive analysis tool: do artifacts work with or against themes developed through interview transcript analysis?

My reading of all materials followed the interview transcription and analysis stage, such that themes were set prior to artifact analysis. This top-down approach aims to provide “a detailed analysis of some aspect of the data,” in particular the manner in which the strategies and beliefs instructors described through the interview stage manifested in teaching practice (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). With themes already set through the prior long interview analysis, my coding of artifacts deviated from Braun & Clarke’s (2006) six-step process, omitting the “generating initial codes” and “defining and naming themes” stages (p. 87). Analysis instead involved three distinct readings of all artifacts: a first round to familiarize myself with the data, a second to deductively connect established themes from long interview analysis with artifact data, and a third to generate a “thematic map” of the artifacts (p. 87). This final step was key in determining how artifacts would be interwoven with interview content throughout the findings.

This thematic analysis of artifacts will appear in the following chapters in one of two ways. Most visibly, excerpts from artifacts appear as figures in the findings chapters, including certain assignment descriptions, syllabus policy, or rubric structuring. Figures most often appear alongside quotes from the instructor that created the artifact, particularly in cases in which the instructor explicitly describes a specific artifact. Less conspicuously, I often rely on artifacts as means of tracking themes between interview participants. For example, when noting another instructor’s agreement with a particular
theme—for instance, using peer review activities—this agreement comes not from explicit mention of the approach in the interview transcripts, but their use of the approach in their own syllabi or assignment descriptions. In both cases, artifacts here act as a valuable source of supplemental rich data for illustrating more concretely the means by which instructors connected the concepts articulated in their interviews into actual teaching practice.

**IRB and Research Risks**

This research received IRB approval (#2144) on June 24, 2020 via an expedited process. The instructors interviewed for this project constitute a low-risk population, as the interview focus on their professional practice posed limited physical, psychological, or emotional risks to participants. I do acknowledge that the themes covered in this project can be viewed as provocative in certain contexts. In practice, however, the most personally difficult topics brought up by interviewees was the professional friction they faced in trying to implement critical production approaches at their instructions. More traumatic issues of discrimination or harassment did not arise in our conversations.

I also communicated directly with all participants prior to the interview stage as to my intent to publish their names and institutional affiliations. Through this pre-interview correspondence, I also expressed my reasoning for publishing this information as part of a desire to provide full credit for their pedagogical ideas as well as a means of building a network of educators/scholars engaged in this work. I also emphasized that no other personal information such as contact or demographic data will be collected or used in this project. Any identifying information related to students shared in interview discussion or
through artifacts would not be published as part of this project. All interview participants signed study consent forms agreeing to have their names and institutional affiliations published as part of this study. A template of this form detailing this, and other parameters of the study is available in Appendix B.

Recorded data from the interview such as video or audio recordings, interview consent forms from all participants, transcripts produced from recordings, and subsequent coding data was kept on a secure hard drive accessible only to me and stored in my home office. These original audio and video materials have since been deleted following my transcription of each interview.

**Data Analysis & Project Themes**

After having conducted all interviews and stored recorded conversations on a secure external drive used specifically for research data, I produced transcripts of each conversion using the software ExpressScribe. These transcripts were saved alongside recorded conversations on a dedicated project external drive. The process of analyzing these data, marked as the fourth and final step in McCracken’s (1988) four-stage inquiry process, involves:

Determin(ing) the categories, relationships and assumptions that inform the respondent’s view of the world and the topic in general. The investigator comes to this undertaking with a sense of what the literature lays out to be there, a sense of how the topic at issue is constituted in his or her own experience, and a glazing sense of what took place in the interview itself (p. 42).

Built into this final stage are a set of five sub-stages. In the first, transcripts and field notes are read on their own terms, avoiding relationships to other aspects of the research. The goal here is to adopt a sort of “disingenuous wonder,” attempting to avoid
assumptions about meaning that might limit possible interpretations (McCracken, 1988, p. 44). For the second, the data is read again, this time with a mind toward how they might connect to literature, personal experience, or other factors. This reading pays mind to what the data “set off,” by nature of its connection to previous ideas (McCracken, 1988, p. 45). In the third, reading of the data is supplemented with a comparison with observations about the data collected in the first two stages. This final reading of the data is meant to confirm or develop additional possible themes in the data. The fourth substage moves beyond the data to focus on refining themes, a process that involves determining their interrelationship and organizing them in order of importance. Finally, these themes are transformed into final conclusions.

My analysis of transcripts and field notes followed these steps up through the final substage. In formulating conclusions, McCracken (1988) explains, “One is no longer talking about the world as the respondent sees it. One is now talking about the world as it appears to the analyst from the special analytic perspective of the social sciences” (p. 46). Such a goal, I argue, is deeply steeped in an objective, positivist view of social science research, one that I reject in favor of critical and poststructural frameworks. In presenting findings and conclusions for this project, it is crucial that the instructors interviewed are not “abstracted” or “generalized” but remain very much concrete through personalities, perspectives, and identities (McCracken, 1988, p. 46). To this end, my presentation of interview data aims to illustrate themes and make arguments by including as many attributed quotes as possible. Further, I draw from artifacts to offer ‘exemplar’ examples to better illustrate the specific means through which instructors enact various critical teaching strategies (Tracy, 2013).
Following the final analysis of all transcripts and artifacts, findings were organized around four primary themes. In keeping with the theoretical framing of this project, these themes correlate to around four Freirean concepts:

**Chapter 4: Transmission Model of Education**
How do instructors encounter the transmission model in production pedagogy, and how does their teaching seek to overcome it?

**Chapter 5: Student/Teacher Contradiction**
How do instructors contend with issues of power in the classroom, be that through a student/teacher contradiction or via other dynamics?

**Chapter 6: Dialogue**
How do instructors enable dialogue that recognizes student voices and their diverse knowledges?

**Chapter 7: Transformation**
How can instructors ensure students’ production projects can realize transformative goals, be that through the creation of alternative texts or otherwise?

Each findings chapters will begin by grounding its core Freirean concept by way of assessing the possibilities and problems of applying it to media production instruction. I will then detail 4-6 strategies offered by instructors for overcoming challenges and realizing these potentials. Strategies function here as sub-themes within the larger chapter orientation, emerging inductively through the interview analysis stage in the form of overlaps in instructor approaches. While I often speak generally to these thematic overlaps, findings will also home in on specific assignments or concrete examples drawn from specific instructors. Artifacts function similarly to further illustrate specific approaches. Findings also rely heavily on extended quotes from instructors, in line with
the goal of this project in providing a platform to document and share individual instructor’s perspectives, experiences, and ideas.
CHAPTER 4
OVERCOMING THE TRANSMISSION MODEL

Introduction

Paolo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) is equally known for the approach it originated—critical pedagogy—as it is for the one it critiqued. Drawing from Fanon’s (1961) colonial resistance work, Freire defined the dominant mode of education as following a transmission model. Teachers and students act in the roles of transmitter and receiver, the latter becoming a “receptacle” to be filled by the former: “The more completely he fills the receptacles, the better a teacher he is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are” (1970, p. 58).

Freire’s description conjures Greene’s (1965) description of 19th century American school houses, with teachers conducting memorization drills from raised platforms above hundreds of docile students. It draws as well from Dewey’s (1938) early 20th century analysis of “traditional” educational approaches, in which docility, receptivity, and obedience were the most highly desired outcomes for students.

While acknowledging the critical potential of media production coursework, scholars have noted a powerful tendency among production instructors to adopt the transmission model (Sholle & Denski, 1993; Grahame, 1991; Kellner & Share, 2019). Masterman’s (1985) concept of the “technicist trap” is helpful in contextualizing how the transmission approach operates within production pedagogy. Driven by the need to build job-ready skills, production instructors prioritize equipment and software training often at the expense of critical thinking in the aim of making students ‘industry-ready.’ Teaching thus amounts to step-by-step training, a process of memorizing the correct technical
practices and demonstrating the ability to reproduce established standards (Grahame, 1991; Masterman, 1985).

The difficulty of avoiding the technicist trap proved a common refrain among the instructors I interviewed. Sholle & Denski’s (1993) concept of distancing dichotomies still resonated with many instructors, in particular the split between industry-trained production and scholarly faculty:

There's definitely a divide academically, just this historical disciplinary divide with the PhDs, the true academics, there's some elitism there, compared to the MFAs that are teaching the practice, that the practice is academically inferior. Especially in some of the more professionalized film schools, so many of the practitioners come from industry rather than through the academic process. That creates a cleave between the PhDs that are teaching studies and the people that are teaching practice. They don't even have the language to talk to one another. Also those folks coming from industry don't have the training in the theoretical side to even approach those ideas in the classroom. So there are these sort of systemic ways in which production and studies become separated in a lot of institutions (J. Proctor, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).

Many instructors described themselves as among the few in their departments able to ‘speak the language’ of media theory and production, what Boulton (2016) refers to as having a “unicorn” status. As Sholle & Denski (1993) note, the split between academic and applied backgrounds is often a matter of training, more specifically the lack of production training present in the Communication and Media programs that produce future professors. Departments often reinforce the divide even further through curricular design and preference toward one type of course:

They don't design the departmental curricula around the idea that these courses should be in conversation with each other. It's that siloing that happens in academia, happens between production and studies (J. Proctor, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).
Another issue in upholding the transmission approach is the prioritization of technical skills in production courses, which sets a preconceived notion among students, institutions, and instructors as to what sort of work should be done in these classrooms:

I think when students go into what's counted as a production course, it sets up the expectation that this is going to be about how to make movies, it's not going to be about how to think about movies. Sometimes there's some resistance right off the bat to thinking critically about films if you haven't set that expectation up from the beginning. Which again feeds into this idea that students think production is something different, something separate than thinking about theory, representation, and meaning (J. Proctor, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).

The difficulty of making time to think about media rather than just making it often leads to the reproduction of existing tropes in the work students create:

It's much easier for me to say "I'm gonna teach you how to do multi-camera studio/TV production. You pick the topic of the show, you find the talent, whatever you're interested in." And that's very popular with students, and of course they do stupid shit like talk shows and exercise shows and cooking shows. In a way, it's what Paula Chakravartty told me was that student production projects imitate the hegemonic discourses already in circulation. They just aspire to make the next Marvel movie or imitate whatever reality TV they watch (C. Boulton, Personal Interview, August 28, 2020).

As Cubbage notes, the issue of reproducing existing standards is especially important for students who have not historically occupied places of privilege in media production industries:

Because production has been primarily influenced by white culture and production values, documentary, entertainment sports, hard news, all of that is the braintrust of white culture. Even at an HBCU, we're essentially reenacting Blackness in white face. We're teaching the values that have been heaped upon us, and we're doing our best to add our own cultural spin. But in reality, we're just slapping a basic layer of paint over what is really at the core that was created by people who don't look like us (J. Cubbage, Personal Interview, October 28, 2020).

For instructors, the need to train students to a certain level of technical proficiency—"teach them the rules before you break them" as Gracon describes—in turn pushes out
critical material. Several instructors spoke to pressure within their institutions to reach certain technical benchmarks, emphasizing the need to equip students with practical job skills that hands-on production training seemingly offered. Instructors also expressed a personal impetus to make sure students developed ‘baseline’ levels of production skill:

"In my head, if they leave this foundations course without knowing how to use the camera and other equipment, I've failed them. They're gonna do poorly in all their other production classes. So what doesn't get highlighted are the things around storytelling and representation. I don't prioritize it as the thing we must be discussing. Like I hope this sticks in your head, but it's not like every week we're going into critical topics (M. Bruker, Personal Interview, October 23, 2020)."

A third issue instructors grappled with is time. Despite the desire to integrate media theory and production, doing both can prove overwhelming for students:

"For the students, sometimes the technical challenges are as much as they can possibly absorb in a semester. For me to layer on a whole other level of complexity that I have to explain to them just seems too much to take on. I'd have to pare down the production exercises and technical side to make room for theory. (C. Boulton, Personal Interview, August 28, 2020)."

As my conversations made clear, production instructors did not actively choose the transmission model. They and many of their production colleagues adopted the approach by nature of circumstances: lacking the training needed to integrate theory and practice, the institutional support to pursue a blended approach, or the time necessary to effectively cover production and critical topics. Breaking out of the transmission approach, however, was not an impossibility. The following sections will detail strategies instructors used to work critical themes into their production coursework.
Strategy 1: Setting a new tone

Instructors emphasized the need to foreground critical aims as a means of countering students’ preconception of production classes as set apart from theoretical material. Failing to set this tone initially can make a pivot toward critical considerations difficult later in the semester. Tonal shifts focused on actively avoiding the technicist trap by giving value to elements beyond technical proficiency:

I think setting the tone of the course helps me to challenge everyone in their own beliefs and perspectives. That really helps me and helps everyone to have a positive outcome. I've been teaching for five years, and I haven't had any yet. And it's definitely up to having students that are open and willing to create challenging work; but it's also so important for the professor to set the tone and create a course structure that supports diversity and inclusion (T. Özdemir, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).

A tactic for several instructors was to ‘put skin in the game’ by screening and discussing the thought processes behind their own work:

That's always been important to me as a filmmaker, just to understand my own work. And as I became an instructor, I wanted to instill that into my students as well, so that when they are going out into the industry, they are thinking about those things as a way of pushing the industry into directions that are more conscious of the diverse audiences that are out there and how to make the industry itself for diverse and critical and thoughtful and less simplistic. Just doing the same thing over and over again (J. Proctor, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).

Proctor’s call for more diverse, critical, and thoughtful work looks to head off student resistance to theoretical concepts by positioning critical reflection as indistinguishable from production. To this end, using the standard transmission approach isn’t about shoehorning theory into production labs, but articulating to students the value that critical approach holds for them as producers. Instructors emphasized this tonal shift not just in
classroom rhetoric but in course documents including syllabi, assignment descriptions, and grading rubrics:

We’re not just reproducing a dominant paradigm. If that's what you want, I'm not interested. I'm done. I want something new, something different. My syllabus for my intro class, and all my students know this, it says no sex, death, or violence. None, of any kind. And we talk a lot about that (L. Vasquez, Personal Interview, October 28, 2020).

Often to the annoyance of students eager to start making media, many instructors held off on production assignments early in the semester to better establish critical aims. Screenings and discussions served as venues to consider issues of representation and positionality. While a common practice in film and media studies courses, discussions here are connected to the concrete context of student’s future projects. Özdemir’s screening of the 2016 James Baldwin documentary *I Am Not Your Negro*, for instance, looks to center diversity and inclusion as a precursor to narrative video production assignments:

We discuss the challenges of being a Black person in this country. This is not an experience that I've had. In Turkey, everyone is yellow or brown, but not Black. And even though I don't believe this race essentialism, you know, white is not white. But even though this is an experience I haven't had, these films give us the perspective to discuss the issue. And all of my white, Black, or other students of color, we have to all discuss it together. We are the creators, the filmmakers, the ones that challenge the borders in this world. We have different perspectives, ethnic and religious backgrounds, we will be the ones challenging (T. Özdemir, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).

In line with Özdemir’s call for students to acknowledge their power and responsibility as producers, Bruker regularly opens her documentary courses by screening the 2014 film *Oxyana* as a way to get students thinking about the power dynamics inherent in choosing who and where to point the camera:
It's such a great film for talking about ethics. The subjects are incredibly poor, they're doing drugs on camera, there are children who seem to be in a really bad situation. He's (the documentary director) from the outside, and he did really well with it. It's shot in this verité style. And many people have said that the people on camera said things that weren't true, like that 50% of my high school class died of Oxycontin, and that's just left in the film. So we watch that, then we read a scholarly article, a *Buzzfeed* article, an interview with the director, like a comment section that the film maker wrote on. And they really come up with very different interpretations. They figure out their ethical line. And I tell them, it's not like you cannot do this or that. Every filmmaker has to make that decision for themselves by thinking about it beforehand, by thinking about the position of power that you have and what it means to represent someone on screen (M. Bruker, Personal Interview, October 23, 2020).

To further connect ethical issues with students’ filmmaking practice, Bruker circles back to the topics raised in the *Oxyana* discussion during the planning stage of students’ final documentary projects. This written component of the final group documentary project prompts students to collaboratively justify their choice of subject matter, acknowledge their positionality as producers, and imagine their intended audience for the final piece. This use of written reflection essays as a form of critical and personal reflection on production practice will be further explored in Chapter 5.
**Final Project Framing Questions**

As a group, answer the following questions regarding your final project. Take time to consider these questions seriously and make sure your group is in agreement about the answers. Use 2-3 sentences per answer. Only one group member needs to submit.

**Topic, Story, Theme**

- Why have you chosen your subject matter?
- What is your story? (what happens in the film?)
- What are the underlying themes? How does your story link with larger social, historical or humanistic questions? How is your film relevant to now?

**World and Scope**

- What is the world of your film (a household, a neighborhood, a country, the confines of a computer)?
- What is the time span of the story?
- How big of a window into this topic do you plan on opening? Do you plan to profile a single perspective, compare multiple views, capture a cultural moment, tell an expansive history?

**Stance and Rhetoric**

- What are your own feelings, beliefs, and opinions about this issue or subject?
- What is the stance of the group you are working with?
- What position are you making a claim for in your documentary?
- What do you want audiences to come away thinking, feeling and doing?

*Figure 3.1:* Excerpt of Bruker’s Final Project Framing Questions used in her 400-level Documentary Production course.

EDIT Media’s student and teacher resources were also commonly cited by instructors as a valuable resource in tone setting. EDIT’s *Student 7*, for example, provides guidance for integrating critical themes across group work, screenings, project expectations, and critique sessions:

This is something we created, a few faculty members in conversation with students. And it's basically like a guide to being inclusive as a student, though we don't frame it that way. It sets the expectations for how the class is going to be inclusive, like watch movies outside your comfort zone, watch genres you
wouldn't watch, watch films in your non-native language. It's also about what it means to be a good collaborator in terms of respect and professionalism, but also about creating space for others to learn. I use that at the very beginning of the semester to be like "This is where I'm coming from, and this is why." I lay out the statistics about who is in front of the camera in the industry (J. Proctor, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).

![THE STUDENT 7](image)

**Figure 3.2:** Screenshot of EDIT Media’s Student 7: A Guide to Getting the Most Out of Your Media Production Education. Full descriptions of each practice available [here](#).

As all instructors who spoke on this topic stressed, resetting the tone required diligent attention. The transmission model functions as the default for most pedagogy, especially in production courses in which technicist pressures are so pronounced. Against this pressure, instructors made sure to establish a commitment to critical aims at the
beginning of the course, and to continually uphold that commitment through the tone of subsequent in class activities and project expectations.

**Strategy 2: Process over Product**

Once technical instruction does enter into consideration, instructors work to avoid the technicist trap through a process over product approach. Classroom goals here focus not on students reaching a certain standard in the work they make, but on thinking deeply on each step of the production process and its meaning-making value. Similar to the tone setting strategies mentioned above, many instructors look to disrupt the transmission/technicist approach by contextualizing the tools and skills students will encounter in class:

I talk a lot about how we're using Adobe Creative Suite not because they're the only or the best way to do things, but because most of the other ways to do things are in some way mimicking them. So knowing how to do them in this way can set you up with how to do things in other ways (A.L. Nichols, Personal Interview, September 4, 2020).

While Nichols exclusively teaches Adobe programs such as Photoshop, InDesign, and Illustrator in her graphic design courses, she often promotes alternatives to students who might not have the financial resources to afford Adobe’s monthly subscription rate:

I give them lists of open-source programs and what their equivalents are in terms of Adobe programs. But you need to know not that Adobe is the best, in fact I like GIMP better for a lot of things because I can automate scripts. But also because if you're hired by a company, they'll likely want you to be familiar with Adobe. They'll want you to step in and open the Creative Suite and be ready to go (A.L. Nichols, Personal Interview, September 4, 2020).

These meta conversations about production technology and software also help instructors to get out in front of the technicist trap by denaturalizing the ‘standard’ transmission
training model of most lab courses. For his reporting courses, Blaine introduces students to audio recording and camera equipment by avoiding a technical training approach, instead pointing to equipment as a vehicle for students’ storytelling ability:

I see all the tools not as end production tools but as notebook tools first. Like how does holding a camera in your hand teach you to observe better? How does being mic'd help you listen better? (M. Blaine, Personal Interview, August 20, 2020).

Instructors used the process over product approach as a means of addressing the technicist imperative to equip students with job skills:

I mean I teach skills. But I am a big proponent of throwing them on their feet first. They may not have gotten all the skills they need yet, but that's part of thinking on your feet. As you know, when you get hired for a job, you don't know what you're going to be asked to do. You have to be constantly thinking on your feet. You have to be ready to have things thrown at you. To me, media production is like a bunch of problem solving (R. Goldman, Personal Interview, January 12, 2021).

Another approach to stressing process over product was to justify the long-term benefits of learning production and design concepts over discrete technical skills:

Me teaching you the trick way and not the basic tool, you're just going to forget the trick later. If I teach you the five basic tools, you'll still have that no matter what. And those basic tools transfer from program to program. And I emphasize that. It's not about Adobe. It's about these skills (A.L. Nichols, Personal Interview, September 4, 2020).

Learning specific functions in a program like Photoshop, as Nichols elaborates, might only be useful until the next update of the software comes out. A process-oriented approach, by contrast, gives students the adaptability to create effectively no matter the platform or tools. Critically examining the production process also helps instructors avoid the eventual byproduct of the transmission production approach: student work that reproduces hegemonic representations. In line with media literacy approaches, instructors avoid scolding students for their enjoyment of popular texts. They instead deployed the
language of originality and creative storytelling to challenge students to tell new stories outside established forms:

I always start out the semester by telling them I don't want to see what I've already seen before. You know, I just watched Scream, do I need to watch it again? Because you're not doing it very well. They get it if you just say, not that aesthetic. I'm not going to limit your aesthetic, but I'm going to help you develop your own (L. Vasquez, Personal Interview, October 28, 2020).

Emphasizing originality, in particular pushing students to come up with an original process for creating media works, can also help to set more realistic expectations for what students can reasonably accomplish:

Like everyone wants to shoot a Marvel movie. I tell them very honestly, yeah, they're great movies. But you don't have the budget to do that, and it's gonna look like crap. But I can show you how to do something that's gonna look really good. And then if you wanna go that route, go for it. Because we've got so many channels like Netflix, Hulu, YouTube, even the pandemic, that's opened up a lot of opportunities for producers, especially documentaries. It's easier to have a one-person band. And I try to tell them, try to do something you can master instead of imitating something poorly. Try to create something that's yours (O. Guerra, Personal Interview, November 2, 2020).

Process over product here looks to move the goalposts around what counts as a ‘valuable’ job skill. As Boulton notes: “[It’s] not just training you for a non-existent industry job, but [getting] them started in establishing themselves, in their style from others.” A process-based approach also offers a way out from the transmission model of top-down instruction, as Goodman details through his praxis-based method for teaching students how to record an interview:

I will say, yes, kids are automatically drawn to the technology. They love the camera and learning to do the editing. And many have gone on to work in the industry in one form of the other. I don't want to minimize that. But because it's not our primary focus, it's almost on a need-to-know basis. We don't hand kids a manual that says this is how you do Premiere, read it and do it. Or here's this particular camera. They learn it when we do it. We'd model some basic things
with the camera, or how to hold the microphone like you're doing an interview. Practice it a few times, then we're going to go out and do it. And we're gonna make a whole lot of mistakes. And then we come back and watch it, and through the mistakes you learn. You try to break down that fear of making mistakes, that thing that's been hard wired into us in schools that you make a mistake, you get a bad grade. Here, no, that's how you learn. The mistakes are discussed, so now we need to learn about lighting. What happened there? Oh he's backlit. So what is backlighting? He's in a shadow, you can't see him. So what can you do to make it different? Or you did a great interview, but you can't hear it? Oh the mic was pointed toward the street. So how can you solve that problem for the next time? (S. Goodman, Personal Interview, October 29, 2020).

This trial-and-error method helps students learn production techniques through their own experience and connect how certain production choices affect meaning within the texts they create. Several instructors noted that transmission style instruction was often inevitable. The key comes in eventually clearing time to critically reflect on those technical concepts:

It may be that these hard skill building courses that incorporate how to use Premiere or the Adobe Suite, how to use this versus that piece of equipment, they may need to build that through multiple classes and contacts or by having the equipment themselves and by walking through the process. But my main goal is to turn that critical light switch on. To get them conscious of what they're consuming. Not pressuring them to perhaps not continue to consume something, but to at least see this content from a different viewpoint (J. Cubbage, Personal Interview, October 28, 2020).

The process over product approach described and deployed here by instructors acknowledges the professional pressures and need to develop technical skills that drive the standard transmission/technician model of production pedagogy. Yet it inverts the value system inherent in the technician logic, placing technical skill development not as the end, but the means to develop one’s own production voice and vision.
Strategy 3: Resetting the Bar for Technical Skills

A technicist approach is often the unfortunate result of time restrictions, with building equipment or software skills being all students could handle in a given semester. In line with the process over product approach, many instructors combatted this issue by setting lower technical expectations in their classes:

I actually have to hold back technical proficiency. That's the function of the parameters. Getting those ten 6-second clips, all you need is to make cuts. It puts everybody on a level playing field. Otherwise those who know how to edit will be putting on dissolves or wipes or slow-motion, then you have the student who just learned how to cut will be like "oh, mine wasn't very good, because I didn't have all that stuff" (P. Keating, Personal Interview, September 1, 2020).

As Keating notes, lowering the technical bar holds a number of additional benefits, among them limiting the knowledge gap among students with differing levels of production experience (this need to address classroom power dynamics among students will be more fully explored in Chapter 5). Assigning smaller projects with more limited technical aims also makes it easier to focus on discrete technical elements in order to understand their meaning-making potential:

It's not really (about working against conventions), it's really about working against themselves. They just think that they know how to make things. Like I don't allow them to use music, sometimes for the whole class, to cut to music. I'm really having them get to grips with film as a language. Like what are you saying? (A. Levine, Personal Interview, September 1, 2020).

Having smaller, less-technically ambitious projects also serves to make in-class feedback sessions more valuable, a theme that will be more closely examined in Chapter 6:

What I want to do is make it as obvious as possible so that later they can start looking at stuff around them all the time that they never even stopped to think about, and say "oh wait, there's camera angle again! Look how they're using lighting!" So when we push it to that extreme, we can recognize these commonplace things as decisions that were made, and that decision is more likely to make me feel a certain way (J. Share, Personal Interview, September 15, 2020).
Beyond setting smaller technical goals, Proctor notes the value of making projects iterative in order to demonstrate for students how individual skills and production steps work together in practice:

I typically have some smaller projects and then a larger final project. In the advanced class, they'll have more flexibility over that final. In the intro, I scaffold a series of assignments that get put together into a short film at the end of the semester (J. Proctor, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).

In line with his trial and error-based method, Goodman begins production training not by giving students equipment, but by modeling practices through storyboarding and doodling activities:

Very often, we think of doodles as singular activities, but I think you can doodle a collaborative film project, just by getting a rough sketch of what they're supposed to do. They can get a sense of "oh, we drew a close-up, but when we edited it together, it looks really bad there." They're getting a chance to see that before they jump into the larger project, but they're also seeing what they're supposed to do (O. Keyes, Personal Interview, January 8, 2021).

Avoiding the technicist approach of mastering discrete editing or framing techniques allows Goodman’s students to create an understanding of technical practices as modes of personal expression. To better illustrate the lower tech approach in practice, I want to spotlight a syllabus for Guerra’s 200-level Moving Image & Sequence course. At first glance, the language of the syllabus seems well in-line with a technicist approach to production, outlining a set of technically oriented goals including “gain(ing) technical expertise in configuring and operating video editing software, including importing various source files.” Further, the only book required for the course is Jago’s Adobe Premiere in a Classroom, an Adobe-produced text based around transmission style step-by-step tutorials. For Guerra, this initial emphasis on nailing down a basic level of technical proficiency is a matter of accountability to his students:
I want to make sure you know how to use the camera and a basic lighting triangle. Because there might be an opportunity to get a job in commercials or non-profit. So I try to teach classes that are going to give you enough flexibility for you to use the cameras in different ways (O. Guerra, Personal Interview, November 2, 2020).

Yet the small scale of the technical goals Guerra sets opens up the space necessary for critical work to occur. For the six video production assignments in the class, none is longer than one minute. The short duration of assignments also reflects their narrow scope. For example, one late semester assignment focuses just on mastering the continuity editing technique of match on action:

So for matching action, I don't care about the story. It's just about showing that you know the rule with your sequence. The more little assignments you have, the more engaged they are as opposed to one big final project where they've just been reading and taking quizzes (O. Guerra, Personal Interview, November 2, 2020).

While Guerra asks students to pay attention to a whole lot of technical concepts in the Matching Action assignment rubric—picture quality and focus, visual composition, pacing, continuity of action, avoidance of 180° rule and jump cut issues, shot variety—the assignment itself only comprises three shots. Maintaining these standards over the course of a short film might easily overwhelm a student; however, the task is a whole lot more manageable for a sequence less than 10 seconds in total length.
Further, the close focus on such a short sequence allows Guerra to contextualize concepts like continuity or 180° rule not in the technical language of right and wrong practices, but in more critical terms of meaning-making:

You learn the basics. Then if you're breaking the rule with a purpose, you're doing something really cool. You have to learn your basics, you have to learn how to frame a shot, and then you can do whatever you want with it (O. Guerra, Personal Interview, November 2, 2020).

Potentially the most interesting example of Guerra’s resetting of the technical bar is in the final assignment, a one-minute video tutorial on a subject of the student’s choosing. For many video production classes, this sort of tutorial assignment would likely serve as an early semester warm-up, a bit of camera practice on the way to a more ambitious narrative or documentary project. However, elevating this small-scale assignment to the final instead allows Guerra to direct closer attention to each component of the project.
In a clever bit of synthesis, the tutorial requires that students apply skills from all the previous assignments. They must reflect on how they used audio voiceover, match cuts, montage editing in previous projects, and think about how they will deploy them all together in the finished tutorial assignment. And while most early projects in Guerra’s class focus on developing individual technical skills, the final assignment Video Tutorial assignment aligns with the Freirean goal of letting students express personal expertise. Guerra’s students express their own expertise beyond technical production skills by showing off their ability to make cold brew coffee, design an original character in Illustrator, or install a fuel gauge in a Saab 9-5.

The restrictions open up space for reflection to happen. For Guerra and other instructors, it’s not about sacrificing technical or critical goals: it’s setting smaller, manageable ones, such that there’s time for reflection after the action of production.

**Strategy 4: Challenging Production Standards**

Disrupting the technicist/transmission approach also meant challenging standard production practices. For many instructors, this challenge began by rejecting the idea of learning to operate equipment or software in a ‘correct’ way:
My first step when I open Adobe, I tell them to watch me move this window. Then I say take thirty seconds and make this look as messy as you possibly can. Before they've even learned that it can edit videos, they've broken Adobe. Then I show them where the reset button is, which I didn't know about until my third year of film school. I think it's better to teach those technical skills knowing that mistakes are going to happen and giving them the skills they need to encounter it. Equipping them with troubleshooting and critical and information skills. How do you search for something? How do you learn to read software? Because if they can read one Adobe program, you can learn the others pretty easily as well. But if you teach it as "this is the specific way to do a specific thing" they'll never be able to open up Illustrator and fuck around (O. Keyes, Personal Interview, January 8, 2021).

Instructors deployed these critical approaches to production training in different formats, most commonly through a walkthrough lecture format. Working individually on lab computers, students guide students through a technical operation such as color balancing an image or trimming a video clip by modeling the task on a projected display. These walkthroughs are typical of a transmission/technicist model on pedagogy. Yet to break up the top-down orientation of this approach, instructors often build in opportunities to play and explore the tool. As Keyes articulates above, allowing students to “fuck around” prioritizes self-efficacy over proficiency. Inviting mistakes also works to prioritize students’ creative use of tools:

People understand that when they see a sequence of shots, that didn't happen magically; it was premeditated. So when the students hear about what the intentions of a project are supposed to be, the production things can be talked about in a way that's prescriptive or say that's really cool you did it that way. Or they can say "oh, you violated the 180-degree rule, but here's why it does or doesn't work here" (K. Oppenheim, Personal Interview, August 24, 2020).

Questioning production standards offered during technical training sessions serves to root critical discussions of power and representation at the site of production:

I try to imbue any technical conversations we have with elements of a critical example. Even with editing, we'll try to build in a conversation about how even
interfaces/technologies are not neutral. There's always some way the technology is nudging you in one direction or another. Even something like a transition, how does that become meaningful? What happens when you make a cut from one shot to the next. It helps to bring in Eisenstein and Kuleshov. It's not just a cut because it creates action, it's a cut because it creates a juxtaposition, and within that juxtaposition, there's a meaning. Even if you're doing continuity editing, you're creating some sort of juxtaposition (J. Proctor, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).

The technology “nudging” students toward certain production choices was a concern noted by several instructors. The Adobe production programs that most instructors used in their classes often include in-software tutorials allowing for self-directed learning.

While potentially helpful for instructors looking to offload production training and focus their own teaching on critical concepts, these tutorials are embedded within the technicist logic of reproducing “best practices,” and act as one of the most silent and powerful means by which the transmission model is reinforced through production pedagogy.

Instructors here emphasized the need not only to deliver these technical training sessions themselves, but to rework the process of teaching technical skills in order to open up space for critical consideration and new practices to emerge:

I'll take it back to a small technical thing then apply it to the large cultural thing. A thing I will do in my teaching around race--and I think it's really important to embed these lessons in the technical instruction as much as we do the conceptual--when I teach exposure, I will talk about Shirley cards. I'll talk about how you have to know how to light people with darker skin tones, otherwise it makes you a shitty cinematographer. I will embed it in their evaluation of their technical skills if they can't shoot different skin tones. And so it makes it where any time they hold a camera at somebody, they have to think about race in this critical way. And they're like "I'm not a good filmmaker if I can't light someone with darker skin tones," because the camera has a bias. And that's been incredible to watch especially my college students where they're becoming better in a technical skill set with this cultural understanding and becoming better filmmakers. This technical skill benefits from knowing how to light someone that's not white (O. Keyes, Personal Interview, January 8, 2021).
Keyes’ approach reinforces the strategy of resetting the tone by positioning cultural understanding as a part of the production process: necessary to students’ own success as filmmakers rather than a roadblock to their skill development. For Goldman, attending to the tone is a matter of establishing a new standard practice, one in which critical considerations inductively inform and guide production decisions:

I don't have one class where I'm like "now we're going to talk about diversity, equity, inclusion." It is integrated into my pedagogy and my curriculum. It comes up organically and I address it organically. I teach Women and Gender Studies and LGBTQ studies, and I think teaching those helps me bring those issues into my classes. As much as possible, I try to normalize all of these things. You can talk about it as queering, but I don't find that particularly useful. Just like racism and sexism and homophobia and classism and ableism, they underlie these structures. I guess it's my goal to push these very important issues of equity and inclusion into the very structures of the pedagogy of teaching media production (R. Goldman, Personal Interview, January 12, 2021).

Other instructors opted to record their own training videos, allowing for self-directed learning while not losing critical concepts. Lab settings, by nature of limited computer stations, also offer opportunities for one-on-one engagement with students:

I do spend a lot of time in the editing room with my students. We are always thinking about and talking about what's the purpose of that cut. How does that cut frame, help, change, tell/not tell your story? What is the purpose of what you're doing? I do a lot of that (L. Vasquez, Personal Interview, October 28, 2020).

Key in all of these approaches is a hands-on approach to teaching technical skills in a manner that opens up the production process to deeper critical and creative considerations. How instructors work these considerations into their courses is a matter that will be given much deeper attention in the subsequent chapters; however, at this initial stage, challenging the established transmission/technicist mode of production education is necessary if CMPP approaches are to take root.
**Strategy 5: Negotiating with the Software**

Masterman’s (1985) notion of the technicist trap points to one of the specific issues that instructors face in blending critical pedagogy and media production. The onus to train students on complex production equipment and software pulls instructors into the trap, such that coursework is often reduced to vocational training. Since the time of Masterman’s writing, production software has assumed a central role in production classrooms. Many universities market their courses specifically around building aptitude with a certain program or make faculty hiring decisions based on candidates’ mastery of various software. Students enroll in production courses with the expectation that they will gain a working knowledge of software rather than the generalized skill. A graphic design course acts as a vessel for learning InDesign, or an animation class becomes a means to learn After Effects. The software and the skill become synonymous.

A further complication for instructors looking to avoid the technicist trap is that many programs—those in the Adobe Creative Suite used most heavily in higher education production courses in particular—now can teach themselves. The video editing program Adobe Premiere, for example, defaults to its ‘Learning’ module upon first opening. Built-in tutorials on importing media, using the timeline tool, and applying color effects walk users through basic operations of the program, in effect ensuring that the transmission/technicist approach is automatically inscribed into the production process (Swerzenski, 2021). The challenge of how to overcome the technicist trap when the tech itself is actively pulling them back into it is one that has been among the most difficult for me as a production instructor. Interviewees for this project also spoke at length to
their own struggles with classroom tech. Many have also formed canny tactics for
negotiating with/against production software to find space for critical considerations.

One common tactic was to encourage students to experiment within the software.
Against the default in-program tutorials which aim for mastery, the charge to experiment
aims to build different expectations for students’ use of the tool:

(I) have them look at editing as an experiment, as a language we take for granted
but that does come out of an experimentation with a kind of visual language...
Film is an experiment, montage is an experiment (A. Levine, Personal Interview,
September 1, 2020).

Like Levine, many instructors that championed this experimental approach to software
came from art school backgrounds. Having not been trained in production software
through the transmission/technicist approach standard in most Communication-adjacent
programs, they model for students a different relationship with software. Learning goals
center not on learning a program efficiently or developing best practices in it, but in
growing comfortable enough with its functions to express oneself clearly and creatively
through it. In line with tone-setting goals, these instructors advocate holding experimental
sessions with software frequently. Small, ungraded in-class projects also serve to reduce
the technicist pressure of doing something wrong:

Especially when you're working with young people, but even all students, we
want a sense of closure, of doing and feeling something and demonstrating
something. So we'll do a quick little podcast assignment. Take out your cell
phone, sit down with two other people, write a little script, and sell a product. Use
these techniques; you've got 15-minutes to do it… I try to (have them) create
some piece of media every class. Go online, create a meme. Create a poster (A.L.
Nichols, Personal Interview, September 4, 2020).

Instructors like Nichols showed a keen awareness of the technicist pull, particularly on
students. In situating critical discussions and reflection periods in her courses, she is
careful not to make these activities feel like an interruption from production work. For her Digital Design class, she instead negotiates with in-class software to find natural spaces for critical consideration:

It takes a while for us to get to InDesign. It takes like 7-minutes for it to open. They also made a change recently where every student has to logon with their own ID. So I use that loading time to my advantage. I talk to them for the first 7-10 minutes. The program can't be on yet because it's still loading. I lecture about theoretical content then (A.L. Nichols, Personal Interview, September 4, 2020).

The subsequent “lecture” Nichols describes is in fact a discussion session with her students meant to get them critically reflecting on questions of design in the moments before they start using the design tool. She grounds her lesson in accessibility in design by getting students to consider accessibility issues they encounter in everyday life:

I ask them questions and write their answers on the white board. So we'll start with a question like "what happens when I'm designing something like the cafeteria down the hall, and I'm pretty used to being able to use my arms and legs all the time.” So I figure I'll design this cafeteria so that you have to turn a doorknob, push open a door, go down four stairs, go around a corner, then pick up a tray, hold the tray with one hand while you put silverware on it with the other, and then walk over here and balance the plate. And by that time, they're laughing, because five of them might be on crutches from football injuries. So then I ask, do you think if I were a football player who was on crutches at some point during the year, I would design the cafeteria differently? (A.L. Nichols, Personal Interview, September 4, 2020).

Though cafeteria discussion here acts as an entry point to the main thesis of Nichols’ design lesson on the ethical imperative for designers to think beyond their own lived experiences when making production choices:

It's not that I hate football players when I design, it's that I didn't imagine football players. We as designers make those same mistakes. And then we start to think through, what about people who are red/green color blind? What about issues of contrast? Who are we designing this for? What if you associate these colors with this thing, but this other person associates them differently? How do you find these things out? So we have these types of conversations, and repeatedly in
different ways about different aspects of design as we're learning about them. We have them about color, we have them about typefaces and readability, we have them in the trifolds about audiences, we have them with the book covers about positionality, and we have them when we're making the posters about ideology and power (A.L. Nichols, Personal Interview, September 4, 2020).

Another tactic for challenging the technicist approach while teaching software was to challenge the perceived value neutrality of these programs. Denaturalizing ‘standard’ production conventions and the role software plays in reproducing these conventions can open up opportunities to create a different engagement with the tool than those inscribed in built-in tutorials and other technicist materials:

I approach it in a really queer way. Like Adobe is trying to sell you a product when it builds a tutorial. It's not going to tell you what's quirky about the software, it's not going to tell you that some parts of the interface don't really make sense, or that you can move things over in different ways. They're not going to tell you what happens when you do something wrong, because they're trying to tell you how not to do something wrong. You don't encounter mistakes in their instructional materials. And what I will do intentionally is practice my mistake making. I'll go into a lesson knowing I'm going to fumble this on purpose, just to see what happens. And sometimes it happens on a whim, like Adobe will update right before class. And I'll embrace that as part of the process, because they've seen this mistake making throughout the class. They're not frustrated when they encounter something going wrong; they meet that error (O. Keyes, Personal Interview, January 8, 2021).

Against the transmission/technicist style of building discrete skills through tutorials or step-by-step walkthrough, Keyes’ embrace of mistakes looks to build student confidence. Beyond the self-efficacy to overcome technical issues when they arise, this messier, experimental approach also induces students to use (and possibly abuse) the software on their own terms. For in-class editing sessions, remix projects act as a powerful vehicle for Keyes’ approach:

I introduce software through remix. That's where a lot of my practice as an artist comes from. So when I go through Adobe, one of the things I'll do with kids is
take the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* music, and we'll remix it with whatever fem-heroine movie just came out. They'll take the trailer, shorten it down to 60-sec., put it to music, and they're learning all the skills as an in-class, technical exercise that showing them where things can get kinda quirky, where their main key buttons are, and it's giving them in class time to explore that together (O. Keyes, Personal Interview, January 8, 2021).

For the remix and all other in-class editing activities, Keyes doesn’t shy away from providing technical instruction such as walkthroughs to ensure students are familiar with certain Premiere functions. In these cases, he emphasizes the need for an active instructor, one who doesn’t leave students to learn technical skills from outside materials or the tool itself:

> I see that so much in technical instruction, where it becomes the student responsibility to teach themselves. And that's great if all we want is more white boy editors. My goal is to get more diverse editors, to get more women into editing, to get more queer folks in editing. And so that means in-class technical instruction with a guided exercise is a thing to do, and that exercise should relate to your practice, because that's what you're going to teach the best (O. Keyes, Personal Interview, January 8, 2021).

In line with the earlier process over product strategy, Keyes’ advocacy of hands-on technical instruction looks to ensure software training doesn’t slide into the technicist trap: contextualizing technical instruction, reiterating critical themes throughout the process, and offering support for students with different capabilities and confidence levels. Though similar artists’ sensibility informs much of Keyes presentation of Premiere and other software to his students, he offers Queer and Glitch Studies as valuable frameworks for reimagining technical mishaps, experimentations, glitches as creative opportunities:

> Sometimes if I'm feeling particularly cheesy, I'll talk about your machine glitchy as it's trying to make art with you, it's trying to participate. It's what Bennett calls useful anthropomorphism. I do that with computers all the time. I have some witchy, magic-y students who might interpret glitch as a sign. Like they'll go in a
completely different direction because I encountered an error. And I'm like “dope.” As long as it happens, you're not like “everything is terrible, and life is ruined.” It's this other way of moving through it that's very queer and less perfectionist. That's how the Adobe industrial model has it: these are the standards of production. That's great in a certain context for certain people at a certain level. It's really inaccessible for other groups. I want people who aren't tech people making things with tech, because the way they're going to encounter it is going to be so different. That's where all the cool stuff comes from! (O. Keyes, Personal Interview, January 8, 2021).

Avoiding the technicist trap in software training, as Keyes and other instructors demonstrate, cannot avoid technical training. Yet in teaching editing and other skills, their approach rejects the technicist/transmission emphasis on perfectionism. In its place, they model for students a relationship with software built on experimentation and play, one that places personal expression over technical proficiency.

**Discussion**

Challenging the transmission approach must first acknowledge the pressures that have kept it in place. Production courses are popular among students and departments for the job-ready skills they provide. Ignoring these imperatives, as many instructors expressed, is to avoid accountability for students, who will need technical skills to compete in the professional world. Resistance to the transmission/technicist model as practiced by the instructors here takes an institutional rather than a radical approach: not dropping technical skill-building as a teaching goal but rearticulating the manner and context in which skills are taught. Instructors argue for a reframing of the tone around production instruction, one that takes the time to establish the value of critical concepts within rather than separate from the production process. They utilize lower technical goals, stopping the rush to have students master equipment in order to complete
ambitious final projects. Assigning smaller, iterative projects clears classroom time for critical reflection. Slowing down also helps to isolate specific aspects of the production process and understand how individual technical choices affect meaning. They approach technical skills and critical concepts as equally important aspects of students’ production toolkit, with skills such as lighting a scene requiring cultural sensitivity to skin-tone as well as the camera know-how needed to adjust for these differences. As McLaren (2003) notes, these activities move “beyond the technological correctness of what computers can and can’t do” and toward contextualizing production choices alongside considerations of class, gender, and race equality (p. 442). Cumulatively, these strategies challenge the logic at the core of the technicist/transmission approach that has kept production courses as a site of industry job training within universities.

This institutional approach also limits the degree to which these strategies uphold many critical pedagogy ideals. First, instructors here mostly maintained the top-down orientation central to the transmission model. Even if the tone they strike is more critical than in standard production courses, that tone is still set by the instructor. Further, strategies such as process over product aim primarily at getting students to think more critically about the technicist approach, rather than offering a distinct alternative to it. Resetting the bar through project parameters or challenging software are similar efforts to squeeze a bit more critical reflection and theoretical consideration within primarily tech and skill focused classes.

To view the institutional approach offered here as watered-down critical pedagogy is a fair critique. Yet given the deeply embedded technicist framing within most production instruction along with the myriad institutional pressures that uphold it,
these small moves to unsettle the status quo I believe have outsized value. To this end, challenging the transmission approach comes through the process of denaturalizing it: holding dialogue with students that contextualize the value of standard and non-standard production approaches, and creating classroom conditions in which students are empowered to play with standards to best benefit their own expression. These more adaptable production skills, based on conceptual understanding rather than technical mastery, can serve students in a variety of contexts, both in professional life and beyond.
CHAPTER 5

ADDRESSING THE STUDENT-TEACHER CONTRADICTION

Introduction

A crucial barrier to achieving critical pedagogy aims is what Friere (1970) calls the student-teacher contradiction, a power imbalance born out of the transmission model. Teachers wield power as transmitters of knowledge, rewarding and punishing its correct reception via grading. The contradiction also establishes the teacher’s knowledge as more valuable, leaving students in the role of passive receiver rather than co-contributor.

Critical educators, Freire notes, must “reconcil(e) the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students,” neutralizing power imbalances such that the knowledge, perspective, and interest of each participant in the class is given value (1970, p. 59). As hooks (1994) affirms “Education can only be liberatory when everyone claims knowledge is a field in which we all labor” (p. 14).

Making all voices equal by addressing the student-teacher contradiction has proven particularly difficult in practice. Ellsworth (1989) points to the failure among critical pedagogy theorists “to launch any meaningful analysis of or program for reformulating the institutionalized power imbalances between themselves and their students, or of the essentially paternalistic project of education itself” (p. 306). Addressing the contradiction by “supporting student voices,” she contends, is inherently problematic, as “pluralizing the concept as ‘voices’ implies correction through addition. This loses sight of the contradictory and partial nature of all voices” (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 310). Instructors are often unwilling to relinquish their authoritative position, becoming, as hooks (1994) observes, “enthralled by the exercise of power and authority within their
mini-kingdom” (p. 21). In his later writing, Freire notes this tendency among many critically minded instructors to instill correct theoretical concepts to the exclusion of student input:

You raise “correct” issues of racism or sexism or nuclear war or class inequality, and get no response from the students, who are hearing you speak in tongues. If you go beyond student desire or ability, or if you work outside their language or themes, you see the results: their resistance. Your approach was not systematically rooted in the real potentials for change (Freire & Shor, 2003, p. 483).

These institutionalized power imbalances, though present in education across all levels and subjects, pose particular challenges to media production instructors invested in critical pedagogy. As detailed in the previous chapter, the need to build foundational production skills centers transmission-oriented technical training as the primary learning goal. Power is then rooted not primarily with the instructor as in Freire’s original conception of the teacher-student contradiction, but with technical skills in general. As Bruker notes, “some of our students come in really tech-y already, fetishizing the tech” (Personal Interview, October 23, 2020). Instructors often reinforce this fetishization, creating a power hierarchy structured around one’s ability to work a camera or use Adobe Premiere. As many instructors noted, this hierarchy traditionally privileges certain groups:

We were seeing this pattern over and over again at institutions across the country, together with the anecdotal observation that our classes tended to be white/male dominated. Student work tended to rely on a lot of stereotypes. On top of that, the lack of diversity in mainstream media industries. So it was like, what are we preparing students for? (J. Proctor, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).

Challenging the hegemony of the white cis-male aesthetic in media industries, and by extension, media production classrooms, is a theme that I will explore more fully in
Chapter 7. In examining the teacher-student contradiction in media production pedagogy, I instead want to keep attention on the technicist logic as the prime agent in enforcing the student/teacher contradiction. This power, as instructors detail, is grounded in background elements of course structuring, including rubrics, assignment parameters, and learning goals. As noted in the previous chapter, time constraints pressure instructors to focus initial attention on technical skills: a need to establish the rules of production grammar before breaking them. From a grading standpoint, fixating on technical benchmarks like out-of-focus shots or sloppy editing is often easier than assessing less easily defined critical elements. The tech fetishization Bruker describes also means grappling with students’ impatience with critical topics. Failure to address the technicist power dynamic, as Sholle & Denski (1993) contend, is more than a matter of missing critical opportunities. There are real consequences in reproducing hegemonic skills and logics through production pedagogy:

As the dominant power relations of race, class, gender and sexual preference are reproduced, moment by moment, in popular film and television, university educators whose value neutral and atheoretical pedagogy has trained a generation of media (re)production students and (value) maintenance engineers must be asked to examine the wider and unavoidable political dimensions of their efforts (Sholle & Denski, 1993, p. 24)

Addressing the student-teacher contradiction in media production courses must attend to both the power imbalance between students and teachers as well as that between technical and critical knowledge at large. As demonstrated through the strategies detailed below, instructors worked to overcome both issues by challenging the technicist power hierarchy through their own teaching a course structuring in order to open space for diverse student voices and understandings.
**Strategy 1: Addressing Positionality**

A central conceit of Freire’s approach to critical pedagogy is the recognition of education as a political act. This recognition, he notes, is especially necessary in ‘value-neutral’ technical training classrooms:

One cannot say, “I am simply a technician, removed from the world, from history.” Not only must I give testimony of my desire for change, but beyond that, I must demonstrate that within me is more than a belief; it is a conviction (Freire, 2015, p. 22).

Instructors disputed the value neutral approach by sharing their own subjectivity and politics as media educators/producers. A common tactic in situating their positionality in the production field was in their sharing own background as a means of connecting with students:

In a place like Stamford, we have a lot of Latino students, and it's about representation not just in what you do, but with your presence. Like “hey, this guy has an accent. He's a professor with a PhD.” I think that's how you can really inspire some of the students. You have to respond to the reality of the classroom of the demographic we have there. It's not just what you do and what you teach them (O. Guerra, Personal Interview, November 2, 2020).

Highlighting one's background can not only challenge notions of what bodies are most privileged in production spaces, but model how one’s background informs their making. Guerra often screens his documentary work, in which he grounds his positionality as a Mexican national in telling stories about undocumented workers and asylum seekers:
I always tell them this is what I'm working on. Sometimes I ask for feedback on a trailer or something. So maybe the only difference between you and me is that I've been doing this for a couple more years (O. Guerra, Personal Interview, November 2, 2020).

Inviting student critique to one’s own work can put instructors in a vulnerable position. Yet these sorts of practices are key in diffusing student/teacher power dynamics toward, as hooks notes, a “holistic model of learning… where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process” (1994, p. 21). Using their positionality to disrupt the objective/technicist approach was, for some instructors, achieved through their self-presentation:

I do think having me standing in front of the class... I usually have short hair, and I often wear ties. I'm gender non-conforming, and I'll make jokes about stuff. So sometimes they'll very proudly come to me with a script and say, "we thought it was important to put a same sex couple in our script!" So I know for a fact that having me in front of the classroom makes a difference (R. Goldman, Personal Interview, January 12, 2020).

A majority of instructors interviewed for this project self-identified as female or non-white. Though there are no clear demographic figures for U.S. college-level production instructors, anecdotal evidence from interview participants along with surveys of National Association of Broadcasters and University Film and Video Association conference attendees speaks to a continued dominance of white-cis men in production teaching positions. Simply disrupting this ‘standard’ view of what a production instructor is supposed to look like, as Goldman details above, can serve as an opportunity to challenge the technicist approach from the moment students step in the classroom. The importance of diversifying production faculty was a commonly mentioned theme among instructors:
Don't talk to me about diversifying the academy, you diversity the pipeline. You diversify the teachers. And as they become diverse, and they attract diverse students, that's what makes for a diverse Hollywood vision (L. Vasquez, Personal Interview, October 28, 2020).

A handful of instructors spoke firsthand as to how efforts to diversify production faculty had actively altered student demographics:

The other thing that's great about our department is that we're not dominated by men. My major is probably 60/40 more women than men, and the rest of the school is predominantly women. I know at Temple when I would TA, it would be that bro-ey, boys club thing. But that's not the case in our major, partly because men aren't a majority (M. Bruker, Personal Interview, October 23, 2020).

For Vasquez, diversifying production faculty is an important step in addressing hegemonic production standards; however, it doesn’t address some of the deeper logics of the technicist approach. In addressing her positionality more deeply, she shares with students how her own film school and industry training shaped her perspective:

My aesthetic, whether you like it or not, is the white male aesthetic I inherited from Hollywood. So once I put that aesthetic on them, I'm just as bad as any other male teacher. So I always try to say I need to withhold my aesthetic. How would you tell this story? I know what I would do, but I don't think that's successful. For you as the teacher, that is the challenge. I don't think I can contribute to the discourse of entertainment if I recreate it (L. Vasquez, Personal Interview, October 28, 2020).

Vasquez provides an apt example of how to avoid the ‘sage on the stage’ tendency to challenge the value neutral approach through a top-down critique, instead addressing the problem in the sort of personal terms more likely to resonate with students. Breaking from hegemonic standards thus becomes not an edict set by a ‘critically enlightened’ teacher, but a co-intentional project shared by both instructor and students:

I just see myself as one of them, as a student trying to learn and expose myself to their work. I don't go into a class like I'm the big boss. Rather, I like to see that, in a class of 15 students with 7 assignments, I'll see over 100 examples from diverse
perspectives from students, and I will learn a lot from it. And I think this helps me a lot so that it breaks this hierarchy that you need to have control of the class (T. Özdemir, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).

A co-intentional approach also confronts the dominance of technical skills, opening space for a range of other knowledges to be used productively in the classroom:

You show them with your own persona and presence in the classroom. I think if you find your passion and they see that, it's not just you teaching them. It's not a transmission sort of thing. No, it's about sharing this knowledge. Let me tell you what I know, and you tell me what you want to do. It's a two-way street (O. Guerra, Personal Interview, November 2, 2020):

Demonstrating the desire to learn from students sends a clear signal to the value their work and perspective can hold in the classroom. Positionality here works to model the importance of non-technical knowledge in production, opposing the technicist/objective view of value-neutral skill building by making present the power imbalances that exist in production work and demonstrating for students what diverse bodies, backgrounds, and perspectives can bring.

**Strategy 2: The Importance of Restrictions**

Production classroom power imbalances are often most pronounced not along the teacher/student contradiction Freire describes, but on the student-to-student level. Technical knowledge of equipment operation or software proficiency can empower certain students in lab spaces while isolating others. In line with a process over product approach, the common method for addressing this dichotomy was to set heavy technical restrictions on assignments:

I love really restricting students. I think creativity comes out of constraints, that problem solving that comes from working with just this and this to make this. So
from a production standpoint, you don't just walk into a scene camera blazing (M. Blaine, Personal Interview, August 20, 2020).

Like Blaine, Levine rationalized restrictions to his students as a creative tool:

A lot of (my teaching) is actually about taking things away. For a while I don't let them use sound. The first two assignments, I have them use just one shot that has a certain structure. Then I give them three shots. Then I'll have them design sounds for something they've already shot (A. Levine, Personal Interview, September 1, 2020).

For the three-shot assignment Levine describes above, restrictions are a means of getting students to closely examine their production process. “It might seem like nothing to make three shots, but I'm going to ask you about each one: why it starts here, why it ends there, why is this or that in focus. In these small projects, every little decision counts” (A. Levine, Personal Interview, September 1, 2020). Restrictions work to put technical choices in context, what Nichols likens to the art school practice of limiting one’s palette in order to apply colors with more intention:

Otherwise they're not happy with something, but they don't know why they're not happy with it. It's because they've tried to use too many things at once. So I'm like look, here are the four major typeface families. You get to pick from one kind for titles and one of the other kinds for lyrics. Make sure we can read them. You'll get to use more in the future, but for now that's what you're getting. And we just move on in slow steps and build and build (A.L. Nichols, Personal Interview, September 4, 2020).

For Nichols’ 200-level Critical Design course, which focuses on developing InDesign and Photoshop editing skills, restrictions play a key role in balancing the right amount of technical and critical elements. An early assignment challenges students to design a book jacket in InDesign using only shape and line tools:

I have them pick a book that they've read and they're familiar with. I have them go through this exercise where they think through the themes, the setting, important ideas, symbols, characters, time period, and generate twenty possible symbols or graphic icons that could represent the book. We kind of treat it as a re-issue of the
book; they're not allowed to duplicate existing covers (A.L. Nichols, Personal Interview, September 4, 2020).

For teaching a complicated program like InDesign, restrictions serve an important goal of shrinking the software down to a handful of necessary functions. For students with little or no tech experience, designing assignments that require using only a specific tool (in Nichols’ case, Shape, Line, and Arrange) helps prevent them from feeling overwhelmed or inferior to their peers with more tech know-how. Restrictive assignments also head off the technicist rush to hit production benchmarks, allowing more time to discuss the meaning-making qualities of individual production tools. For her Book Jacket assignment, Nichols can key in on the design properties of distinct shapes or color options, and critically push students to consider non-standard uses of those tools through their designs:

How might they want to think about this book from a different point of view? They almost always pick the books they had to read in high school, because that's the last time they had to read a book: *The Great Gatsby* is always done. So for that, I'm like, "don't do a green light on a dock." If you were going to do this book from a different character's point of view, the point of view of somebody who usually isn't thought about in society, who would that be? Why aren't books marketed that way? So we have this moment where we're thinking about who the audience is, who is the protagonist, why do we make books be this way, what makes a book legible to an audience (A.L. Nichols, Personal Interview, September 4, 2020).

Like Proctor’s Action Sequence discussed in the previous chapter, Nichols’ Book Jacket project is a prime example of inductively critical assignment. Production choices must be informed through a critical understanding of the text’s characters, themes, and public perception. In reimagining a non-media text into a multimodal form, the assignment also acts as an effective bit of transmedia navigation, a tactic that will be further explored later in this chapter. Though students often resist restrictions as hampering their creativity,
instructors used a familiar tactic of countering this reaction by reframing restrictions as creative opportunities. Clearly defined constraints also work to counter student disappointment at failing to follow through on ambitious projects:

Recognize what you do well. And what you do well is tell intimate stories. You're in a close setting. You're a single camera, maybe two. A small crew of 3-4 people. You're in someone's private space. You aren't a gigantic production space. And because of that, people trust you. So in my work, I have found that if I limit them, if I give them that frame by saying "I want you to be whatever Hollywood is not. Don't take me down a dark hallway." That's such a cheap way to trigger adrenaline. You haven't shown me creativity or depth. So that's where I start with my lower-level classes (L. Vasquez, Personal Interview, October 28, 2020).

Setting more realistic expectations helps to de-escalate the technical skill power imbalance many instructors face. Beyond formal technical limitations, many instructors also set limitations on the content of media projects:

It's in the assignment design. So instead of saying go out and make whatever film you want, which I also don't think is a great learning experience. It's more about "I'm going to push you to be really creative by putting these constraints on you, and here's the research that shows this is good for learning. Now see what you can do" (J. Proctor, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).

Proctor’s Six Shot Story project offers an example of this restrictive approach in practice. Using Hemmingway’s famous six-word story as a template, the assignment places multiple parameters on students: only six shots to tell a three-act story using no dialogue or music.
Restrictive assignments like the Six Shot Story disrupt the technicist power dynamic by diverting student attention away from technical skill. Shooting and editing together six shots is a task students with even limited camera or software experience can accomplish. Other skills that do not depend on equipment proficiency such as creative shot framing, clever story development, or captivating background choices can then be given more emphasis and appreciation. Restrictions, as deployed in the assignments offered here, serve to slow down the production process, forcing students to pay attention to individual production choices rather than racing to create a slicker finished product.

**Strategy 3: Giving Critical Knowledge Value**

Related to the tone-setting goals described in the previous chapter, instructors made concerted efforts to establish the value of critical knowledge to their students. For action-oriented production courses with heavy technical demands, this tactic focused on normalizing critical reflection throughout the production process:

The theoretical tenets of media literacy would always contain that media production element, an action oriented thing like "how do you create a campaign
to engage media producers or how do you start your own venture? How do you act on the message?" And given the limitations of the semester and the student's own experience with production skills, you have to build up to those sorts of products. You've got to be very deliberate about your processes. If you go too fast, even with so-called digital natives, then you get a lot of people getting lost in the sauce (J. Cubbage, Personal Interview, October 28, 2020).

Being deliberate about the process for many instructors meant verbalizing their own pedagogy to students, particularly the importance of non-technical learning goals in their classes:

I tell them that at this point, I don't really care about the technical. That's what they're here to learn. I care more about their attitude, and that they're invested in the project. Maybe their project is horrible, but they've been trying. If they're asking questions, if every time I'm asking for feedback, they're participating, I see that. Everyone has different levels. I have some students that are very advanced, and others that have no clue what they're doing but are really passionate. I've had students that are good but didn't care. So what I tell them is what you give is what you get. Yeah, if you mess it up and it's a horrible project, I still know as a professor if they're trying (O. Guerra, Personal Interview, November 2, 2020).

Guerra’s course assignments typically focus on a single media mode such as sound, image, and video. These smaller projects are less about achieving mastery than about exploring each form as a possible mode of expression. In this way, the assignment design functions as part of a larger effort by instructors to move away from the deficiency model of the transmission/technicist approach, one focused on disciplining students’ lack of camera or software proficiency. Bruker shares with students her own film school experience and the unproductive tendency of production courses to devolve into a technical arms race. In place of that model, she pushes the value of self-efficacy and collaboration in learning production skills:

Production by nature is not something that you're just an expert at or that you stay an expert at. It's about being able to meet hurdles when they happen, because they always happen. Figuring out how to fight past the barrier and go from there. It's
setting a collaboration versus competition environment that acknowledges where everyone is starting based on their experience (M. Bruker, Personal Interview, October 23, 2020).

In practice, Bruker implements this collaboration versus competition approach by starting her documentary production courses with a pitch session:

   I said, "whoever wants to direct, pitch." And it was that four women and one guy did so. They self-selected who's gonna direct. Then the other students picked their first, second, and third choice, and here are the roles that I would want to do. And I took all of that and tried to give everyone their top choice (M. Bruker, Personal Interview, October 23, 2020).

Choosing directors based on pitch sessions also disrupts the common production lab tendency of director positions going to students with more comfort behind the camera (Citron & Seiter, 1981). Leaders are instead chosen based on the ideas they bring to these initial dialogues, a clear signaling of the value non-technical skills hold in Bruker’s classes. Pitch sessions also provide a useful venue for student voice, with project ideas and group assignments deriving from student interest. This self-selecting tactic, as Bruker has found, allows students to follow themes or interests she might not have expected:

   Last semester when I taught this Doc Production class, there was a student who ended up getting arrested for hazing. He self-selected to be in a documentary group by a Black female director about Black hair. So I think that they're doing a pretty good job of letting each other influence each other. It's a pretty good community (M. Bruker, Personal Interview, October 23, 2020).

Bruker’s pitch sessions speak in many ways to the value of avoiding the top-down approach that consolidates teacher authority. Facilitating these sessions instead provides a productive venue for student voice, allowing them to both contribute their background and pursue their interests. Critical skills can also be given value through class learning goals. Keating’s Video Essay course, for example, includes as one of its goals “develop(ing) a good command of Adobe Premiere.” Editing skills in Premiere, however,
are means by which to achieve the other five learning objectives listed on the course syllabus.

**Course objectives:**

- You should gain a rich understanding of the four films listed above.
- You should become familiar with the various forms that the scholarly video essay might take (argumentative, poetic, evaluative, etc.).
- You should understand the debates concerning the strengths and limitations of the video essay as a form of scholarly criticism.
- You should learn how to write and record a concise voice-over track, making your points clearly, efficiently, and elegantly.
- You should develop a good command of Adobe Premiere, the video editing program.
- You should learn about the tradition of close analysis in film scholarship and contribute to that tradition by producing your own works of close analysis.

*Figure 4.2:* Course objectives from Keating’s 300-level Video Essay course

In the context of his Video Essay course, editing is used not in its traditional role of assembling short films, but as a deconstruction tool for “scholarly criticism.” The mix of scholarly and production aims to make the course accessible and applicable to a range of students:

If you're more into film history, it gave you a little bit of production, but you were making things that were about films. But also if you were into film production, you could really feel like you were doing film scholarship, you could feel like your special set of skills in production were really helping. That course really struck the balance nicely (P. Keating, Personal Interview, September 1, 2020).

Parameters serve a number of key functions in the course, most notably through the content restriction of students choosing from one of four films to analyze throughout the semester. Though not allowing students to choose whatever film they like could be interpreted as an expression of teacher authority, Keating justifies the tactic as invaluable in helping students compare and contrast their peers’ approaches to analyzing the same
text. A clear example of editing as critical analysis skill comes through Keating’s Alternate Preview assignment, in which students must produce a trailer-length re-edit of their movie that alters the tone of the original:

People do really interesting things with that one. Like one student used *Vertigo*, and she told a sort of #MeToo story. Some told a story of the film's production, which is allowed. And the reason all of these are such great assignments is because they force you to watch the movie over and over again. You get to know the movie so well (P. Keating, Personal Interview, September 1, 2020).

The assignment showcases a number of the inherent advantages production skills offer as critical tools. For one, analyzing through editing software like Premiere provides a direct engagement with the text. As Keating notes, students have to scrub through footage and rewatch scenes to produce their essays, ensuring they interact with the content more than they might otherwise with a written assignment. In addition, students approach editing not from the technicist standpoint of assembly, but as a meaning-making process: in this case, a process of re-making meaning using the razor tool, multitracking, and audio remixing.
Make a video essay between 60 and 80 seconds long.

Your goal for this assignment is to make a trailer for the movie. However, you must make a crucial alteration to the film’s story—namely, you should design your trailer so that a secondary character appears to be the protagonist. Making this change may require you to change the film’s tone or even its genre. The challenge is to make a major change to the film while working with the film itself. An excellent “alternate preview” will propose a bold re-imagining of the movie.

Your trailer must contain titles. At least one title should be layered over black. At least one title should be layered over the image track from the film. Maximum: fifteen words over the course of the trailer.

Other than the titles, your entire image track should be drawn from the assigned film. You may use as many shots as you like. At least twice, you should employ a scene transition that is not a straight cut. The sound track should consist only of sounds drawn from the movie itself. Volume adjustments and cross-fades are allowed.

Start with one second of black. End with one second of black. In between, your movie should be 60-80 seconds long. When you are done, export your video as an MP4 file. Upload your MP4 file to the class TLEARN page. Do not upload the purple file. **Due: Monday, September 16 at 2:00.**

In addition, please submit one typed paragraph explaining one creative decision you made and how it helped you change the story. Maximum length: one page. Due: Monday, September 16 at 2:30. (Note that you have an extra half hour to submit this.) Upload your page to TLEARN.

----------

Work with the following films. I have listed each film’s primary character(s). Remember, your video should not be about these characters. They may appear, but only as supporting parts.

*All About Eve*: Jackson, Molly, Dominic  
- Primary characters: Margo, Eve

*Cinderella*: Jace, Grayson, Harrison  
- Primary character: Cinderella

*Sunset Blvd.:* Ben, Nathaniel, Fidelina  
- Primary characters: Joe, Norma

*The Third Man*: Sam, Jack, Christian  
- Primary character: Holly

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* The assignment is not to make a parody of a bad preview. Make a good preview for your hypothetical film. Imagine some alternate version of the film, and make us want to see that.

**Figure 4.3:** The Alternate Preview Assignment from Keating’s 300-level Video Essay course
Both Keating and Bruker’s approaches function in different but effective ways to disrupt the initial emphasis on technical knowledge in their production classrooms. The desire to establish skills upfront can inadvertently place the course on a technicist track with limited chance to veer back to critical issues. Instructors here modeled the value of other knowledges in undertaking production projects, be it innovative documentary ideas or re-imagining of existing texts.

**Strategy 4: Critical Assessment Practices**

Critical pedagogues have noted the difficulty in creating assessments that align with Freirean goals (Keesing-Styles, 2003; Serrano et al., 2018). Grading, as McLaren (2003) notes, is a key mechanism of the hidden curriculum, reasserting teacher power, and with it, the transmission logic of a correct knowledge. While scholars like Shor (2003) uphold assessment as an integral part of the learning environment, they espouse an authentic approach, one that validates the experiences and ideas students bring to the classroom (Serrano et al., 2018). Within the context of media production pedagogy, difficulties in reconciling grading standards with critical pedagogy goals often center around technical proficiency (Sholle & Denski, 1993; Boulton, 2016). Many instructors openly grappled with the difficulty in needing to establish ‘baseline’ standards through the grades they assigned, while recognizing how this emphasis often devalued the critical learning goals.

One tactic was to ensure that critical thinking and reflection efforts were given literal point value in assessments. This is not to say instructors didn’t emphasize technical
skills. Özdemir’s rubric for his video production course, for example, exhibits a clear focus on continuity, framing, and editing aptitude:

What I pay attention to with something like editing is first to make sure that they're getting the skills for each assignment. So editing and sound are what I really pay attention to. So for the continuity editing assignment, I share a short film with the same actors shot in the same place, but shot and cut in three different ways, one was happy, the other sad, one more anxious. And then they choose how to create a similar, continuous style in their assignment. So what I pay attention to is passage of time, if it is well shown, continuity holds throughout the film, pacing of dialogue is well timed, cuts are motivated, framing conventions are followed, edit creates atmosphere and space, audio in dialogue is smooth, these are the criteria I pay attention to with their projects (T. Özdemir, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).

Özdemir’s use of technical terms like continuity, pacing, and framing conventions set technical expectations for his student filmmakers. However, his use of language such as “well-timed”, “motivated”, “creating atmosphere”, and “space” frames production terminology in the language of creativity and storytelling. Rubrics for his Narrative Short Film Production courses further apply this reflexivity, such that ideas are not valued less than the technical skills needed to execute them. Vasquez makes this understanding explicit to her students: "What I tell them is, ‘I don't really care how you shoot this. What I care about is the story you're going to tell’” (L. Vasquez, Personal Interview, October 28, 2020). Challenging the technicist power imbalance for many instructors centered on reformulating their assessment practices, as rubrics and grading guides directly communicate to students the value of critical and technical elements in their work. There was no consensus among instructors as to a ‘correct’ balance between critical and technical skill assessment. Similar to Özdemir’s rubric approach noted above, instructors sought reflexivity in their grading to better address critical or technical elements on a case-by-case basis:
I have a rubric that has four categories. I try not to use overly negative or superficially affirming language. So I have exceptional, good, promising, and needs improvement. And I have technical, response to prompt, editing/sequencing, and concepts which are all weighted. And those technical categories are rated one star versus three stars for the concepts. And this is just my philosophy, but it's a problem if you have a brilliant idea and I can't see your image. But also, you can make this thing that's super slick, but I don't understand it or it's not responding to the prompt, or it has no structure (A. Levine, Personal Interview, September 1, 2020).

Instructors also design assessment categories to synthesize technical and critical goals:

I do insist on proper framing and editing practices. But at the very end of their critique on the documentaries, I want to know what the call to action is. What's your message, and did you get it across to the audience? Was it a text screen, was it implicit, was it a direct request for funds or assistance? How did you get across that you wanted me to do something? Did you just want me to cry? If that's all, then there's a little pornography in that. No, you want me to do something that is active, that could change the world (L. Vasquez, Personal Interview, October 28, 2020).

Nichols’ rubric for the Analysis Poster offers an example of this balance in practice.

Technical goals such as color balance, visual arrangement, and layout design operate within the larger categories of visual explanation and context, making sure aesthetic doesn’t supersede argument in the project assessment.
### Analysis Poster

This assignment introduces you to visual argument and analysis. For this project, you will choose an image to analyze visually, then prepare a poster highlighting key elements of your conclusions. You will be free to use grid and/or non-grid layouts, and must incorporate at least one photographic image modified in Photoshop.

Posted Tue Aug 18, 2020 at 11:23 am

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Grading Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Editing</strong></td>
<td><strong>12</strong> Exceptional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photos are skillfully edited in Photoshop to be color balanced and have hue, saturation, and/or background changes.</td>
<td><strong>11.4</strong> Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Visual Explanation</strong></td>
<td><strong>12</strong> Exceptional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Images are used to demonstrate points about the picture's composition, style, colors, and other choices. Images clearly demonstrate the point being made and significantly add to the analysis.</td>
<td><strong>11.4</strong> Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Analysis of Visual Elements</strong></td>
<td><strong>12</strong> Exceptional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant details of the image are commented on and elaborated to make an argument about the image. Elements may include color, line, eye movement, shape, composition, focus, perspective, etc.</td>
<td><strong>10.2</strong> Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Context</strong></td>
<td><strong>12</strong> Exceptional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural and/or historical context is given for the image. This context adds to analysis of the image.</td>
<td><strong>11.4</strong> Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clarity</strong></td>
<td><strong>7</strong> Exceptional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type, image, and text elements are arranged in such a way that the information is clear and easy to understand.</td>
<td><strong>6.65</strong> Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Balance</strong></td>
<td><strong>7</strong> Exceptional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The design is balanced, avoiding both crowding and large sections of blank space. Eye motion is fluid and comfortable.</td>
<td><strong>5.95</strong> Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Priority of Information</strong></td>
<td><strong>7</strong> Exceptional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The poster features clear priority of information: it is easy to tell what the headline is, which is the main image, and what the analyzed themes are.</td>
<td><strong>6.65</strong> Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Style</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong> Exceptional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The style of the design (color, typeface, layout, graphic elements, etc.) fits the image and analysis of the piece.</td>
<td><strong>5.7</strong> Excellent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4.4:** Rubric for Nichols’ Visual Analysis Poster final project for her Digital Design course
Another important aspect of critically minded assessment is knowing when not to grade. As noted earlier in this chapter, production work can be especially alienating for students who feel they don’t possess tech skills. Jumping right into graded assignments that require a show of technical proficiency is certain to make these students feel left behind and exacerbate existing power dynamics. Building on his remix-based approach detailed in the previous chapter, Keyes instead advocates building in low-stakes opportunities for play:

It really comes down to creating manageable chunks for the instructor, then showing the instructor the pedagogical moves: how to break up the activity, what to leave up to chance. Like you could give all these technical parameters, or you can have them make those mistakes and address them in the moment. And then I would encourage them to not evaluate that first assignment as a grade, but to make it participatory (O. Keyes, Personal Interview, January 8, 2020).

An additional approach is to use assessment as a means of drawing out critical concepts, a tactic Share employs for his photography courses:

A lot of the assessment that we can do with critical media literacy is more what we refer to as authentic assessment, where people have to actually create something and demonstrate the idea. So one assessment tool for, say, the good/bad photo: if you come back with two pictures that are exactly alike that used none of the techniques, that's telling me you didn't really get it. But if you come back and show me pictures that have black and white, all these different angles, for assessment that's proof that they really understood it, not only abstractly, but that they were able to put it into application. To me that's a more powerful form of assessment. You can also add a layer of analysis to that by asking them to write a little essay about your thoughts during the process. What did you think about when you created this? We don't want to focus so much on the product as the process (J. Share, Personal Interview, September 15, 2020).

Proctor outlines one of the more innovative and expansive approaches to assessment surveyed for this project. For the majority of her courses, she deploys a choose-your-own
adventure course design, allowing students to select which assignments they wish to complete:

I use sort of a gameful approach. The way the overall class is structured is you start at 0, and you earn points as you complete assignments. There are more assignments/points than you need to get a high grade. So you can pick and choose certain assignments to do in order to earn points, with the exception of a few foundational assignments that are required. If you just do those foundational assignments, the highest you can get is a C-. So even if those required projects are higher stakes, the course overall is lower stakes, which I hope gives them more freedom to experiment and take risks. That said, for any individual assignment, it is going to be a balance of have you achieved the technical goals, have you demonstrated proficiency in the camera, in export, and compression and have you demonstrated that you’re thinking thoughtfully about representation and narrative structure and composition. And they have to submit a reflection about their process (J. Proctor, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).

Proctor’s assessment approach, though time consuming, offers the potential to address a number of power dynamic issues for production educators. For instructors, grading harshly on either technical or critical matters doesn’t hold the threat of crippling a student for the rest of the semester, key in making sure non-technically inclined students don’t feel left behind. For students, the range of available point generation assignments reward both technical (practical exam, skills demo) and critical (helping classmates, reading responses) skills. The lack of specific deadlines for supplementary assignments also provides the space students may need to develop skills at their own pace.
**ASSIGNMENTS AND EVALUATION**

*Three audio projects are required:*

- Audio Documentary 150,000 points possible
- Soundscape 150,000 points possible
- Sound Design for a Film 200,000 points possible

*TOTAL: 500,000 points*

If all three of these projects are not completed, the highest possible grade you can earn in the course is a C-regardless of other points you accrue through other assignments.

Generally, though, you may earn points by completing other kinds of assignments—more than 1,000,000 points is possible. They are:

- Reading Responses 225,000 points possible (9 responses x 25,000 each)
- Listening Responses 225,000 points possible (9 responses x 25,000 each)
- Practical Exam 100,000 points possible
- Technical Quizzes 90,000 points possible (3 quizzes x 30,000 each)
- Help a classmate 30,000 points possible (3 assists x 10,000 each)
- Skills demos 45,000 points possible (3 demos x 15,000 each)
- Workshops 25,000 points possible (2 workshops x 12,500 each)
- Instructor conference 20,000 points possible (2 conferences x 10,000 each)
- Attendance 140,000 points possible (14 class meetings x 10,000)

*TOTAL: 900,000 ADDITIONAL POINTS POSSIBLE*

**BUT THAT’S NOT ALL!** You can also earn points by achieving **LEVEL UPS**. The following level ups are available:

- **TECHNICAL GURU:** Complete all three quizzes with a grade of B or higher: extra 20,000 points
- **NEXT LEVEL READER:** Complete all 9 reading responses with a grade of B or higher: extra 20,000 points
- **NEXT LEVEL LISTENER:** Complete all 9 listening responses with a grade of B or higher: extra 20,000 points

**THAT’S ANOTHER 60,000 POINTS!**

Note, however, that most of these assignments have specific deadlines, while only a few can be done any time during the semester. So, you’ll need to think ahead and map out a plan for how you wish to navigate the semester. And, some assignments have a minimum number of points you must earn to receive credit, so your serious attention and effort is important.

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**Figure 4.5:** Proctor’s gamified assignment structure from her 300-level Digital Film and Television course.

Assessments, as instructors demonstrate here, served the crucial purpose of inscribing instructors’ pedagogical approach in practice, with carefully designing assignments and project rubrics modeling the importance of technical and critical skills to students. These assessment methods likely do not qualify as authentic in the realm of critical pedagogy, with grading criteria still established by the instructor rather than co-
intentionally with students (though the following section will speak to opportunities in this vein) (Serrano et al., 2018). What grading strategies like Proctor’s do allow is a validation of students’ experiences and ideas in production assignments, personal abilities that have long been ignored in traditional transmission approaches to production pedagogy.

**Strategy 5: Using Written Reflections**

Against the top-down assessments employed in the transmission model, critical pedagogy scholars advocate for authentic assessment methods that are co-intentional with students (Serrano et al., 2018). Among the methods they advocate are student generated assessment and self-assessment practices that “allow students to reflect upon their personal development and skills acquisition” (2018, p. 18). To this end, I want to highlight a commonly used method of self-assessment implemented by instructors: the written reflection. Speaking to earlier strategies discussed in this chapter, these sorts of reflection essays and creative statements can provide a direct means of assigning point value to critical skills in multimedia work:

The creative assignments would often have a written component, like a short paper that illustrates how they're tying the concept with the project. I'd leave it open ended, so like sometimes I'd get an idea that I've never seen before. I want them to have that agency, but they also have to create a rationale for how the course concepts connect the creative text… the ability to articulate it in a short 3-5 page essay, like directly apply the concept to what you did creatively, they can show me they're connecting the dots (D. Gracon, Personal Interview, November 13, 2020).
Written components can offer a strategic check-in for instructors, ensuring that students are thinking intentionally about production decisions and reflecting on critical issues through those decisions:

I know a student is being rigorous when they've started shooting as soon as I've given the assignment. We can look at raw footage a week later, and they do three or four cuts before the final. And for the larger projects, they also write a self-reflection. So in addition to writing about a proposal, they then reflect back on the process. And thus they implicate the process. Things happen that they didn't expect; things change. And they get a chance to talk about how they were open to that. That to me is a kind of rigor (A. Levine, Personal Interview, September 1, 2020).

Given that production courses rarely include quizzes or written exams, reflection essays can also serve the more practical purpose of making students show their knowledge of class concepts. As a supplement to an original media work, however, these reflections let students demonstrate their use of the concept in achieving a distinct creative goal. As Vasquez points out, reflection essays also provide venues in which students can negotiate their own relationship to ‘standard’ production concepts:

I always teach them the rules. You must know the rules. And when you break it, you must justify it. You can break it. It's not a real rule. You're not going to go to jail for it. But you have to argue for why you're breaking it. So why do we use the rule of thirds? Because that's where your eye goes, etc. We can spend time on that. If you want to challenge that, and have the person falling off the bottom of the screen, is that attractive, is that appealing? What did you want me to look at, oh the blank wall over their head? So I do ask them to justify what they did. If they're going to shoot in their apartments, as they often do, why do you have the coat on the floor in the shot? If that's part of the story, great! But it's got to be conscious. Justify everything, and you can break any rule (L. Vasquez, Personal Interview, October 28, 2020).

Among instructors that supplemented production assignments with written components, Goodman particularly stressed the importance of written and oral reflections in his production pedagogy. As founder of the Educational Video Center (EVC) in New York
City and an instructor at NYU’s Steinhardt School of Education, Goodman has positioned his classroom use of video production as a critical thinking and community action tool. As an after-school program serving high-school aged students, the EVC is somewhat outside the collegiate classrooms that this research is most focused upon. Yet the format of the program reflects the typical semester-long shape of most university-level classes: students select a topic, shoot and edit together footage related to that topic, and feature their finished work (a 10-20 minute documentary at the EVC) at a screening-style event. That building up to one big project, as Goodman notes, is important in establishing for students “a real pride in creating.” Yet from a technicist perspective, emphasizing a single big project also works against a critically minded process over product approach. To reinstate the importance of critical thinking, Goodman requires both written and oral reflection on students’ production choices throughout the semester. Most notably, EVC sessions end not with the big screening but with a “portfolio roundtable”:

> At the end of the workshop, students show their work to educators in the staff. And we'll go over the outcomes for the course, and those can be technical like editing or camera work or critical in terms of engaging a concept. And at the end, we bring those back. So we'll have seen the 20-minute documentary, but what was your role in it? (S. Goodman, Personal Interview, October 29, 2020).

The portfolio presentation covers the entire semester of the students’ work, including “journal entries, completed handouts, logs, storyboards, interview questions, drafts of narration.” Reviewing both the micro and macro elements of their work over the months-long course of the program provides students a perspective from which to observe their growth and emerging identity as producers:

> And the portfolio will have their first interview, maybe where they're mumbling or not looking at the camera, then by the last one, look I interviewed the drug
counselor, and look how I really got it right. Or I chose these images to add, that really added this part to the final film. I could have picked this one. They're giving evidence in these different areas of their performance, but also their journey in learning the skills. We're interested in the process of learning and growth. You have to show the journals, the early footage, so we can see their change over time (S. Goodman, Personal Interview, October 29, 2020).

Beyond reflecting on their own production choices, the portfolio review session includes an intensive feedback roundtable. Participants in this 30-minute session “could include other teachers, staff or students at your school or after-school program, as well as parents, community members who are knowledgeable about the topic of the documentary and filmmakers.” For Goodman, the audiencing component helps actualize the impact-versus-intent aspect of media making. What ideas did you want to communicate with the project you made and how was it received?
Lesson:
1. Share Warm Up Thoughts (15 min)
Ask a few students to share their thoughts gathered from the warm up activity. Ask them these two follow-up questions:
What skills do you feel you’ve developed in that area?
What evidence (work samples) can you present to prove it?

List their suggestions on the board, adding others that they might not have mentioned, including samples from their journals, interview questions, research notes, drafts of narration, edit plans, footage of tapes, various versions of edits.

2. Gather Materials for Portfolio Presentations (40 min)
Distribute two copies of the Portfolio Presentation Planning Guide to each student. Ask students to review their own material quietly and fill out one handout for each skill area. Stress the importance of presenting video clips and other material that show changes and improvements over time in their performance as aligned with the rubrics. They will need to present two to three pieces of evidence for each skill area. Tell students to contact you if they need to screen any tapes. Circulate around the room giving individual coaching and assistance as needed.

Have students form pairs. First one student discusses and presents his/her samples and ideas for their portfolio presentations. Partner listens and gives warm and cool feedback. Then switch so that the other partner presents.

3. Prepare for Portfolio Presentations
Distribute copies of the handouts Creating an Outline for Portfolio Roundtable Presentation and Creating a Portfolio Roundtable Cover Letter. Tell them, as homework, to write an outline and cover letter for their presentation using the two handouts as guides.

Assign students the responsibility of making copies of tapes or other materials they’ll need. You may need to make facilities available during lunch period or after-school for them to do so. If necessary, also meet with students or groups of students to review cover letters and presentation outlines to help them prepare.

Figure 4.6: Goodman’s Portfolio Presentations used as the final assignment for Educational Video Center workshops

The comprehensive nature of the portfolio review, in particular its written component, asks students to contextualize technical and critical skills:

This all comes after the Premiere, they get warm and cool feedback from their portfolio presentation, they get a discussion of their work. It's another opportunity to focus on both the technology and critical analysis. And the analysis is usually the harder part of it (S. Goodman, Personal Interview, October 29, 2020).

The strength of Goodman’s praxis-based approach comes in making critical reflection more than an add-on or an interruption to production practice. Against the technicist “best
practices” language of right or wrong practices, his emphasis on having students verbalize their intent as producers is a means of making concrete the meaning-making aspects of the process. What were you trying to say with this work, and what were the tools you used to say it? Critical work becomes not an interruption from the technical, but a means of deploying technical skills in their own voice. Related to authentic assessment goals, Goodman’s use of student self-reflection assignments pushes students to define their own learning goals and assess themselves along those criteria.

**Strategy 6: Minding Group Dynamics**

The collaborative nature of media production work is one of its distinct pedagogical advantages, providing a viable alternative to the transmission model. Documentary or narrative film-based projects in particular are group-based by nature, requiring a crew to operate the camera, direct on-screen action, and capture sound (Sabal, 2009). Yet these group settings present a set of new, often thornier, power dynamics through which production instructors must navigate. Technical skill often becomes the de facto yardstick for determining who has authority within the group:

That's such a big issue. Who's got the camera? Who's doing the shooting? How are we balancing the power in the production group, and are we conscious of that balance? (L. Vasquez, Personal Interview, October 28, 2020).

It’s at the group level where instructors report imbalances between gender and to some degree race to be most pronounced. Keating advocates for an active approach to addressing the imbalance by assigning groups:

One issue that does come up when students go out to do these exercises you can be pretty confident that boys will direct. So I usually assign roles in order to ensure more diversity. I'll even plan it ahead of time, or I'll use a random number
generator to decide. And then if there are multiple assignments, I think about who directed earlier projects, to make sure everyone has a chance at each role (P. Keating, Personal Interview, September 1, 2020).

While Keating’s approach to group assignments looks to defuse power imbalances through an equal distribution of production roles, other instructors use assignments more deliberately to ensure individuals that have been historically marginalized in production classrooms are given positions of power within group work:

There's a crew, and it's always a white man, sometimes a Black man, directing. Or the DP (Director of Production) is always male, even now in student productions! I've really shaken that up in my classes. In one of my assignments, they make music videos with a professional musician, and with that, I'll make sure there are women directing and DP'ing, so that they get used to working like that. So that they get used to taking orders from a Black woman. They get used to the person who's most technical being a white woman (S. Goodman, Personal Interview, October 29, 2020).

Beyond group assignments, instructors also attended to small micro actions such as who carries equipment, disrupting these tacit practices around who performs technical/physical work:

I'll often tell my female-identifying students in the course "please be active. Do not leave the equipment to these guys, because you are just one of them. I want you to carry a sandbag, carry a C-stand, carry a light. Do not think this is work for men. This is your stage, and I will just ask you to be as brave, friendly, and open as possible. Never ever think this is a position for male students only." I'll assign a DP (Director of Photography) in every class, and I typically give women the priority, just to create a balance. And when it comes to guest speakers from the industry, most are women or women of color. And we then always talk of the challenges of being a woman in this patriarchal industry (T. Özdemir, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).

Beyond making students aware of power dynamic issues, many instructors address the issue by re-organizing groups and the work each member does:

Something that I notice and that I will say, for instance, if I need someone to carry the equipment, I'll ask the women to help. Or if we're doing positions or I need
someone to help with some technical thing, I will choose women, or physically put the camera in women's hands. I will tell students "I need you to notice who is in your group, who has their hands on the equipment. Are you the person that's dominating the camera?" If you've got 2 women and 2 men in your group, and the guys are rushing forward to do all the technical things, you need to check yourself. They actually have a little sheet when I'm teaching a piece of equipment, they have to certify that everyone has used the equipment. That's a tone thing that's really important, especially in my beginning classes. I show them statistics. I talk about who's doing what behind the scenes, how it's up to them to change that (R. Goldman, Personal Interview, January 12, 2020).

That attention extends to the editing stage, another site where students with limited production knowledge often feel insecure. When groups edit together, too often one technically savvy student will take on all editing tasks while the others passively watch the screen. When editing footage individually, students with less experience can feel isolated or overwhelmed by the software. Keyes provides a novel solution by splitting the difference between the two approaches:

If I'm working in a media lab, I'll still have them go around one computer, but I'll have them work in rotations. So every 10 minutes, the ringer goes, and they switch drivers like they would in a driver's ed class. That way they're still working on the same project, but they're also building on their group cohesion. I need them to like each other by the end of class; that's a goal for me. I'll also do it where we break out the editing, so like one person is in charge of titles, one in charge of sound, one assembly for that four-frame project. So you may have the most excited person put the images together, then the next person will put the audio in, and then the least confident student has the most stressful part of getting it all together. But what I usually end up seeing is those other two students helping them out… I think it's important to see that they can have conversation at a computer. There is this siloing that happens in a media lab where people are like "I'm at my own station, in my own zone." And I'm really big into embodied pedagogy, just remembering you have a body in a shared space with other people (O. Keyes, Personal Interview, January 8, 2020).

Keyes' group editing method leverages a number of the inherent advantages of production work as a vehicle for critical pedagogy. For one, it uses the imbalance of
technical knowledge within the classroom as an advantage, providing the collaborative venue for more technically savvy students to productively use that knowledge in helping their peers. As he elaborates:

Collaboration and peer-to-peer connection is such a big part of how I approach teaching, what I do is tell them "if you finish early, go help someone else in the class." Suddenly there's no time to dick around. They can either get weird with their edit, or they can sit with someone else to help them. I'll frame it for them like "you have this super rich body of knowledge. I want you to feel like you can share it." Then they'll learn the software better themselves. Teaching media stuff, there's a pretty open field for it. And it makes you less of a dick that I think can make your career prospects more open (O. Keyes, Personal Interview, January 8, 2020).

Keyes collaborative editing approach also foregrounds the importance of dialogue and interpersonal communication in production courses, demonstrating the value of collaborative openness over competitive divisiveness. Empowering students to teach each other also has secondhand benefits for the instructor:

I do it that way to save myself stress on the back end. If they trust each other, they'll become my tech support. Like when I taught media arts, I wanted them to know how to troubleshoot themselves, so I wouldn't get stressful emails at 3am. And I want them to be able to trust each other or share things voluntarily. Very often these programs are so competitive. Like if you know how to do something in After Effects that nobody else does, you don't share that information because that's your edge? (O. Keyes, Personal Interview, January 8, 2020).

Skill sharing and the other collaborative activities that Keyes implements tap into the pedagogical value of production activities beyond critical or technical skills:

In the class, I'm modeling what a sustainable work ethic looks like, what it means to have good communication skills, what it means to do that social and emotional work in a process together. Those are the skills whether they're teachers, or whether they're going to go into industry, whether they're going to have to navigate the art scene. We're using media tools that are all about communication, yet we don't talk about the most basic part which is "what does it mean for two humans to communicate with each other?" We get so wrapped up in the technical
part that we don't realize that we can use these technical exercises to access these social and emotional skills (O. Keyes, Personal Interview, January 8, 2020).

The communicative benefits of production work Keyes highlights here showcase yet more of the many untapped advantages production work holds when freed from a traditional technicist approach. The practice-based, group-oriented courses such as the one Keyes describes are natural laboratories in which students can build crucial collaboration skills and healthy work habits. CMPP approaches provide critical reflection time not just to examine production-related choices, but to consider the sorts of inter and intrapersonal skills that are transferable far beyond the context of media production.

**Discussion**

In addressing the student teacher-contradiction, this chapter focuses on the larger issue of power imbalance within production classrooms. These spaces warp the traditional Freirean dynamic between teachers and students into a technicist versus critical tension, which places teachers and students in equal competition over who possesses more technical skill. The strategies outlined here seek to resolve these dynamics in a few key ways.

First, instructors disrupt the objective, value-neutral approach by acknowledging their own positionality to students, making clear through personal reflection how critical questions inform their own making and teaching practice. Addressing their positionality opens space for students to reflect on their own background and knowledge, and how these skills can inform and drive their making practice. Second, instructors addressed how assessments reified the technicist approach by valuing technical proficiency over all other skills. Their use of restrictions in project parameters and balancing of
critical/creative skill categories with technical ones in assignment rubrics worked to even this balance. Assessments also worked to synthesize critical and technical skills through assignments and grading categories that used production as a means of analysis and vice versa. Finally, they oppose the competitive logic of the technicist drive for skill accumulation by emphasizing collaborative models of production. These were implemented in practice through pitch sessions for group project ideas, managing group dynamics, evenly distributing tasks among members, and empowering students to share skills, both production and otherwise, with each other.

These strategies—while innovative—cannot be said to resolve Freire’s student-teacher-contradiction. Restrictions on assignment parameters and restructuring of grading rubrics may help de-emphasize the authority of both the instructor and the technicist standard; however, parameters and learning goals are still dictated by these sources. Though the value of authentic assessment practices, wherein students and teachers co-create assignments or grading expectations, did come up on occasion in interviews, these practices were not used in any of grading rubrics, syllabi, or project descriptions instructors submitted as artifacts. Assessment strategies offered by instructors focused more on rewarding non-technical knowledge through rubric categories, providing students agency to choose assignments that most resonated with their interests, and allotting point values to written reflections so that students can evaluate and contextualize their work. Even here, a more critical approach to assessment largely amounts to a greater reflection on production choices: essentially thinking more intentionally about production rather than challenging or reimagining its core practices. Keating and Nichols’ use of video editing and layout design respectively as critical analysis tools moves closest to a
full re-working of production as a mode of building theoretical understanding. Moving even further in these directions might offer a path to more fully probe the issues of power, representation, and voice central to critical pedagogy and critical media literacy thinking.

If these strategies do not represent a resolution of the student-teacher-contradiction, they still provide a number of promising in-roads for addressing persistent power dynamics both in production classrooms and perhaps elsewhere in the curriculum. A central theme among these strategies was an ability to turn problematic power dynamics into critical opportunities. Instructors’ use of their positionality, for example, worked to repudiate the value-neutral technicist approach by reinforcing the embodiment of teacher and students. They made explicit the power asymmetries, especially those along gender lines, within their classrooms to illustrate how these dynamics are reproduced in media industry settings. Further, they saw group work power struggles as chances to build better interpersonal communication skills, and model collaborative production modes. This ability to make lemonade out of lemons is primarily a credit to instructors’ innovative pedagogy; however, I also believe it speaks to the power of doing-based work when approached critically. Production courses serve as learning labs in which issues of representation, power, and positionality are experienced first-hand. It requires a careful structuring of these courses through project design, rubrics, and group assignments to give students the space to reflect on how power operates in practice and develop strategies to enable more diverse and equitable production modes.
CHAPTER 6
DIALOGUE VIA FEEDBACK SESSIONS

Introduction

Dialogue holds a central position in Freire’s theorizing, acting as the mechanism through which to achieve many of critical pedagogy’s loftier goals. In avoiding a transmission approach, dialogue provides the pivot to reflection necessary in breaking up technical action. Dialogue in Freire’s conception must also address the student-teacher contradiction. Discussions provide the structure needed to make space for diverse student perspectives and knowledge, such that one voice in the room—most often that of the instructor—does not dominate. As Fassett & Warren (2006) highlight, dialogue must be “a process of sensitive and thorough inquiry, inquiry we undertake together to (de)construct ideologies, identities, and cultures” (p. 55).

In the context of media production pedagogy, dialogue should work for students such that “their commitments, styles of consumption and investments in the media be foregrounded, questioned, and understood” (Sholle & Denski, p. 161). Working within a praxis-based model of balancing theory and practice, dialogue as a teaching mechanism serves to critically consider aspects of the production practice and highlight the meaning-making value of technical decisions. The instructors interviewed for this project situated dialogue in their teaching in a number of venues, including discussions around film screenings and debriefs following technical training sessions. For this chapter, I want to focus on the most common method instructors implemented for establishing Freirean dialogue: the feedback session.
Almost every instructor I interviewed had students show work and give/receive critique to their peers. As a common film and art school practice, feedback sessions offer a number of obvious benefits for production educators looking to advance critical pedagogy goals. Against the top-down transmission model of instructors using class time primarily to instill technical skills, feedback opens space for students and their work to serve as the classroom focal point. Production assignments such as graphic design and video projects in particular lend themselves to public showcase:

There's a pride in what they've made. And for some, that's the first time they've done that. And I know that some kids are much more adept at media now, but to make a documentary is still quite an achievement in terms of complexity. So I think it's something where they show their principles to their teachers, their parents, their peers. Because it's a visual means, they can just show it in a way you can't show a homework assignment or test grade (S. Goodman, personal interview, October 29, 2020).

Following in this spirit, Blaine finds students are more open to receive and provide critique with multimedia assignments than for more traditional text-based ones:

Students who felt like they were good writers would push back against any critique. Like they may have been a good writer from an academic context, but from a storytelling/professional context, you gotta level up a lot to get there. What I found with doing visual media was that there was much less of a barrier. I don't think people had come up writing essays and being told they were good at it. You had more of a blank slate about people's own self-perception about whether they were a good storyteller or not (M. Blaine, Personal Interview, August 20, 2020).

Watching back and discussing student work offers necessary reflection time key in such action-oriented production courses. Inviting students to critique each other's work also helps to downplay instructors’ voices as the dominant authority. Further, those critiques offer a vehicle for students to apply their divergent experiences and knowledge within the classroom. Hearing feedback from their peers offers students valuable guidance toward improving technical or storytelling capabilities:
You can't account for other people's reading of your work. I speak to them from experience, like when I've been at a Q&A from my own work, and someone has taken offense. And I have to take that critique as legitimate. Once you make something, it's out in the world. You can't control it. People will read it in different ways and get frustrated (A. Levine, personal interview, September 1, 2020).

In practice, however, feedback sessions too often fail not just to achieve this promise, but to work against student empowerment goals. One issue comes in the assumption that students will automatically provide constructive feedback:

Like it's really hard to not just say "I really like that." Like I had a student that kept saying in every critique "you really hit the nail on the head." And I was like what does that even mean? (A. Levine, personal interview, September 1, 2020).

Several instructors noted the propensity for comments such as “it was great” and “I liked it”: hardly the kind of constructive assessment that builds future improvement. Bland complements, however, are often better than overly critical ones that may blunt student creativity and confidence:

You have to build community through critique rather than breaking down an individual. It's one of these ideas where the research shows when people receive negative feedback, they shut down parts of their auditory processing. They aren't able to hear you as well as they could prior; their body has had a physical response that's shut them down (O. Keyes, personal interview, January 8, 2021).

Giving students ‘voice’ in these sessions can often exacerbate power dynamics. Often the professor’s voice still acts as the ultimate authority, or certain student voices dominate the conversation, using their comfort in the space to alienate others:

I remember I once had a class where the most talented student was a man, and he was just all in it for himself. He made good movies, he thought he was better than everyone else, he thought he was better than me. He was probably right; he was really talented. But he just didn't have this giving personality. And that was not a good class. It just had a sour feeling about it (P. Keating, Personal Interview, September 1, 2020).
As noted in the previous chapter, student work often perpetuates negative stereotypes and
tropes. Screening this work can prove uncomfortable or even harmful. Attempts to
engage critical issues—particularly issues of representation often central to narrative or
documentary work—are often met with defensiveness or devolve into personal attacks on
character. Sharing sensitive work can also be triggering for students, an act of public
shaming that helps no one:

I get students who want to explore really personal topics and then end up
triggering themselves by doing that work. And I think sometimes professors that
are well-meaning encourage students to be like "yeah! put your whole heart in the
story! The story of a Black body traumatized is going to do so well in film
festivals!" (O. Keyes, personal interview, January 8, 2021).

Though sometimes unavoidable, these issues documented here are largely surmountable.
The following sections will detail five strategies offered by instructors for overcoming
these obstacles and maximizing the potential of feedback sessions as a vehicle for
Freirean dialogue.

**Strategy 1: Setting the Tone**

Though uncommon in theory-based media and communication courses,
showcasing and critiquing student work in class is a more normalized practice within
media production pedagogy (Wolf & Briley, 2007; Ito et al, 2009; Nixon, 2021). Yet as
detailed in the previous chapters, standard production practices often operate within a
technicist logic. With feedback, the draw to fixate on technical issues often dominates
discussions. With this potential issue in mind, instructors stressed the importance of
situating feedback within the larger critical aims of the course. A first step, as Özdemir
explains, is in explaining to students the aims of and expectations around feedback sessions:

My job for them is to be an intellectual storyteller, to keep telling them “You don't need to go to a school if you just want to be a technical person." We now have all these websites and online tutorials about how to learn Premiere Pro or a variety of cameras. You can learn everything from these resources; you don't need us. But if you want to intellectually be a good, creative storyteller, then you need school. You need the experience of your professors and your peers, their feedback, to become a better digital content creator (T. Özdemir, personal interview, September 16, 2020).

Setting a clear tone for these feedback sessions was a high priority for many instructors. Vasquez in particular stresses the importance of “tuning students” to examine work with a more critical eye. Her documentary production course opens with screenings of short documentaries, with subsequent discussions meant to draw the connection between technical filmmaking choices and ethical issues:

What are the ethical issues here? How is the filmmaker using fair use? How is fair use helpful to the filmmaker? That's a big issue for the documentarian, and they need to address it… We're really examining the social structure embedded within the image (L. Vasquez, personal interview, October 28, 2020).

Watching and discussing more experimental works can also help reorient the tone, offering instructors the chance to establish a different value system for work. Taking time to watch and critique other works, as several instructors noted, might frustrate students eager to pick up the camera and create. Yet these early class sessions offer the scaffolding needed to hold more critically oriented feedback sessions later in the semester. Instructors take this early class time to highlight the critical elements of the course. Goodman's use of feedback, for example, relies on the Freirean idea of transformation by attending to the ways in which their work can speak to local community needs and values. Others use feedback to model different ways of watching and evaluating, what Vasquez describes as
“tuning” students toward particular elements of the work. Levine also notes the importance of establishing the value of critique sessions as a necessary part of the creative process:

What I say to students is "the reason I want you to account for every decision you're making, is that as much as we can talk about your intention, you need to be aware that you can create unintended meanings or readings." And that's why critiques are so important, and that honesty in critiques are so important… (It’s about) being able to talk, and hopefully write, about your work, and being able to talk about someone else's work (A. Levine, personal interview, September 1, 2020).

Levine was one of many instructors that brought their own work into the classroom. The practice aimed to address the teacher/student contradiction by modeling the importance of feedback in their own work and connecting with students as fellow media producers. Directly explaining the importance of feedback here is crucial in achieving student endorsement for future sessions.

**Strategy 2: Developing Critical Language**

Instructors offered a range of strategies for getting students to give and receive more effective feedback. As Guerra notes, “I think that having critical feedback tends to be more important than what they actually learn. Learning to take feedback is something I really work on, which is really hard” (Personal Interview, November 2, 2020). The most commonly noted difficulty was getting students to offer their peers more than rote critique. One method of heading off the problem was to offer specific parameters around feedback language:

I have a list of banned words, like cool or weird or great that are just non-words. I pass along one of those hotel bells, so someone gets to be the monitor for each of those critiques. If they hear a banned word, they get to ring the bell… So we have
to monitor ourselves, my own transgressions included. It's teaching them how to use language about the work precisely (A. Levine, personal interview, September 1, 2020).

Other tactics spoke to the constructive value of critical comments as opposed to “it was great” platitudes. Many students' aversion to critical language, instructors noted, came from a fear of “being the bad guy.” Proctor addresses this issue by reframing bad or failed work as hugely valuable to producers:

> Failure should be something we embrace because that's a moment of learning. That's another way of lifting all the boats in a classroom, is that even if you feel like you've screwed something up, that's a success. That's what we're here to do (J. Proctor, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).

Vasquez communicates the reasoning behind her feedback approach directly to students, explaining her use of critical language as constructive consideration rather than cruelty:

> My intention is not to have you walk away and never pick up a camera again. I believe that if you're here, you want to be here. You like this art form, and you have stories to tell. My intention is to say, please, say something that's positive, that gives the person a direction to fix it, address it… We're really examining the social structure embedded within the image (L. Vasquez, personal interview, October 28, 2020).

Keyes echoes this idea by noting the importance of “build(ing) community through critique rather than breaking down an individual” (Personal Interview, January 8, 2021). That building process, however, does not come naturally, but through careful facilitation. Many instructors set clear expectations for how feedback should be structured, typically using a method that balances positive and negative critique. Specific strategies included a warm/hot and cool/cold share–offering one positive and negative critique of a piece–as well as the sandwich approach–placing all critical between positive comments:

> We use the sandwich technique, so I start with something I appreciate that you did, something I think you should do to make it better, then I end with something that I liked as well. It's not like I'm just gonna tell you "oh, that's crap." I'm always
going to start by saying "hey, I appreciate you're telling such a personal story. I think some of the assets you're working with are very shaky. I think you're going to have a problem because it's overexposed. When you're editing you should be thinking about this or this." Then I end with the positive, "you're on the right track, and I'm looking forward to the end" (O. Guerra, Personal Interview, November 2, 2020).

Critique formats were not presented as a suggested format students could use, but as a clear set of guidelines to follow when giving and receiving feedback:

You have to get one bit of warm feedback and one bit of cool feedback. And I usually want them in that order. Sometimes students will jump to the cool. And I find that when we start doing it, everyone in the class only wants to offer warm feedback. "Oh I really like this, and I really didn't have any cool feedback." And then I have to push them and say "nope, you gotta give cool feedback too." Even if it's just a tiny thing, like you didn't think this line-reading is right. And then usually after a couple of weeks, the reverse happens, where it's like "I like this one thing, but this was bad, and this was bad, and this..." and then I have to step in and say, whoa whoa, let's also talk about what else is working here (P. Keating, Personal Interview, September 1, 2020).

This emphasis on participation speaks to the importance of feedback sessions less for those receiving feedback, but for those giving it. These discussions are opportunities for students to develop critical viewing practices and articulate technical and critical details through the language of critique.

**Strategy 3: Feeding Back Frequently**

Key to establishing a familiarity with using and receiving feedback is providing students with ample opportunity to practice. Many instructors underlined the importance of holding frequent sessions, typically either weekly or bi-weekly:

What good is to wait until the essay or film is done and then critique it? They'll never read it. So I build it where I get a scene or a sequence or a rough cut, and
we'll all watch it, then another version of a rough cut, then a final. I built that into
the course (L. Vasquez, personal interview, October 28, 2020).

Equally important is making sure each student has the chance to showcase their work:

When I can, I make sure we show all of the work in front of the class. The
filmmaker is not allowed to speak at the beginning. And I really try to frame it as
a chance for people to share what they're feeling and noticing. So the people who
received it know how their intent sort of landed with the audience in addition to
providing constructive criticism (J. Proctor, Personal Interview, September 16,
2020).

The strategy of setting smaller technical goals and using assignment restrictions detailed
in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively are key here in providing the class time needed to hold
frequent feedback sessions that feature everyone’s work. The majority of Guerra’s video
production assignments, for example, are 30 seconds long, a parameter that keeps
feedback sessions short and prevents the students from feeling overwhelmed when
attempting to critique a given piece. These assignments are also iterative, such that
students are able to familiarize themselves with their classmates’ work. This incremental
approach, particularly in classes geared toward more ambitious narrative or documentary
projects, can be met with student resistance, many of whom don’t want to ‘spoil the
ending’ or screen only a completed work. Despite this possible pushback, making
feedback sessions a frequent part of in-class work serves two purposes for instructors,
both closely tied to Freirean goals. The first is to demonstrate their value in helping
students to improve their work by reflecting on each step of the production process:

They'll get a whole lot of feedback coming from me and from their peers, and
they'll get that after each script or video segment that they produce. The idea is to
always be getting a review and talking about what you're making so they're not
alone with it. So they don't just make something and say "ta-da!" And they're
getting pretty good now about talking about what they're making and trying to
bring it back to the big picture (K. Oppenheim, Personal Interview, August 24,
2020).
Carefully crafting these check-in points was a common theme among many instructors. Keyes for example prefers students screen a single scene from a longer work rather than show a rough-cut assemblage, as screening “the best students can do at the moment” provides better grounds for valuable feedback than a clearly unfinished work:

Smaller individual things we might watch in class, but anything large and narrative, I don't want to throw that to the wolves that don't know how to do it yet. A rough cut can be really vulnerable especially if it doesn't have that music or the cleanup. If it's just the stuff in sequence, it takes a lot of nuance to know how to give feedback for that (O. Keyes, personal interview, January 8, 2021).

The limitation of peer feedback is an essential part of structuring sessions. Instructors showed a careful consideration of where peer feedback could offer constructive value, and where the “nuance” of the instructors’ eye might be needed. Rather than expect students to provide deep critical reads, instructors instead used class sessions as a form of audiencing (Buckingham 2013). This audience perspective can open space to address questions of impact and intent so crucial for future media producers and communication professionals:

We still do warm and cool feedback, as well as another exercise where I'll say "Claire, show your film, and then everyone write down what you think the argument was." And then we go around and read out what they think the argument was. It's another one of these things where sometimes you make a video and you're like "oh yeah, it seems like everybody got it." But sometimes the opposite happens. Sometimes all 14 people in the class have a different argument written down (P. Keating, Personal Interview, September 1, 2020).

Second, sessions should also show the value of giving constructive feedback. As Oppenheim notes, frequent sessions should help students to build the language needed to “justify their own work and the decisions that go into them” (Personal Interview, August 24, 2020). Developing this critical language aligns with a process over product approach to production pedagogy:
I think that having critical feedback tends to be more important than what they actually learn. Learning to take feedback is something I really work on, which is really hard. So say the sequence isn't working, I'll ask them "do you see the issue? What are you trying to do?" (O. Guerra, Personal Interview, November 2, 2020).

Echoing Guerra’s views, Vasquez emphasizes the importance not in achieving a desired end, but in understanding what students can do to eventually reach that goal:

I think it's more valuable to have more critiques than a more polished video. I want that process. I think if anything sinks in, it's the process, not the final product. That's how I imprint as a teacher. In the end, they're not going to watch the movie again anyway (L. Vasquez, personal interview, October 28, 2020).

In keeping with the idea of sessions as a form of audiencing, instructors also encouraged students to rely on their own knowledge rather than feel as though they had to speak from an expert point of view. This perspective shift can help swap in the formalist language of critique with considerations that might be front of mind for a general audience: how would a regular person encounter this work? Would you still watch it if you didn’t have to for this class? Would you understand it if you didn’t have the creator here to explain it to you?

The course is going well when a lot of people are speaking, and a lot of people have good ideas. And then the person is still free to choose. They can pick and choose the ideas they like. That's when things are going well. It's not going well when you have people just reading their ideas, you have two or so talkative students who like to criticize (P. Keating, Personal Interview, September 1, 2020).

Setting clear expectations around feedback and holding sessions frequently are keys here in unlocking dialogic potential. As Keating notes, feedback also connects dialogue to Freirean goals by pertaining to students’ own work and in showing the value their knowledge and perspective holds in aiding their peers.
Strategy 4: Scaffolding Feedback Sessions

In no case did instructors take a freeform approach to feedback sessions. Each provided specific guidelines as to who speaks, at what times, and in what form. Rather than an exercise of power, these measures are meant to balance voices in the room and pre-empt power dynamics that might arise during discussions. This facilitation work, Goodman notes, should be deployed in the service of classroom equity. “I think a good teacher knows their students well. They're mindful of power and privilege in the classroom” (Personal Interview, October 29). Scaffolding strategies are often contingent on class size. For his typically 15-20 student production courses, Guerra “always (has) 2-3 people give feedback, then they'll hear my feedback. They have 5-minutes to present, then 5-minutes to hear feedback from other students” (Personal Interview, November 2, 2020). Assigning specific respondents to provide feedback was a common strategy for ensuring all students engage in critical discussions:

We'll take three questions, then it's on to the next person. It takes a while, but it builds community. It's something everyone has to do, both in giving the critique and responding to it. It doesn't become one person who has thoughts on everything and four people you don't hear from the whole class. It takes a lot of prep work, but what I find is once we do it the first time, the second time they have a model, and they kind of do that on their own. They'll fall into that format (O. Keyes, personal interview, January 8, 2021).

Many instructors also forbid the producer from speaking until the end of the critique, a tactic meant to model how a general audience would respond to the work:

We watch the work, and we take about two minutes taking notes. I don't let the maker speak. We talk about their work for ten minutes, and then they get a chance to respond at the end. That's another part that's more arts school, emphasizing that everyone is responsible for their own work (A. Levine, personal interview, September 1, 2020).
In implementing this same guideline, Keating speaks to the value of modeling reception inherent to the feedback session:

The philosophical reason is that the movie has to speak for itself. The more practical one is that everyone just comes in with excuses like "oh I couldn't do this." Or often they'll turn the movie into something it wasn't. Like for example, if everyone is telling you that a scene is funny. And then you jump in after the first person has said that, and you say "oh that wasn't intended to be funny." Then no one else will say they thought it was funny. But if suddenly three people all agree that scene was funny, then I know this is awkward, but you have to sit there and know that even though you didn't intend it to be funny, that's how it was received (P. Keating, Personal Interview, September 1, 2020).

Instructors carefully positioned their own feedback as a means of addressing the student/teacher power dynamic:

When we respond, we go in a circle. That includes me, so that we're all on an equal footing. Because I don't think I have any special insight into what the student's argument is. And it is true that frequently the film studies students will have a more intricate account of the film (P. Keating, Personal Interview, September 1, 2020).

These strategies do not fully defuse the student/teacher contradiction, as instructors ultimately hold grading power. Proctor’s strategy (discussed in the previous chapter) of giving extra credit value to peer critiques suggests one method of addressing this imbalance. Another strategy offered later in this chapter is student self-critique, which can serve to redirect the critical lens developed through feedback discussions toward their own work. Even with these caveats, carefully scaffolded and facilitated feedback sessions offer important vehicles for students to not only share their voice, but to apply their unique perspective and knowledge to the benefit of their peers.
Strategy 5: Navigating Critical Discussions

Even with careful scaffolding, feedback sessions can often prove tricky to navigate both for instructors and students. As Levine explains, “I just try to stress throughout that critiques are messy, but they should be places where people can speak their mind” (Personal Interview, September 1, 2020). That freedom of expression comes when instructors cede authority in the classroom by allowing discussion to move in unexpected directions. More often, messiness emerges from students presenting works in progress:

A lot of times what it's been for me has been someone using irony badly. Someone trying to satirize a behavior, and ending up seeming like they condone it. And they're issues of representation: who gets to speak for who about who. Especially now they're students half my age that are more sensitive than they might have been when I was their age, and rightly so. I've had students challenge me, and I just try to talk to people (A. Levine, personal interview, September 1, 2020).

Critical issues also can arise from the topics students pursue with their work. As Lewis and Jhally (1998) note, the issue with much production work is that students reproduce existing forms rather than challenging them in the works they produce. Citron & Seiter’s (1981) article “Woman with a Movie Camera” outlines a common example of this tendency, with typically male students producing class video projects steeped in misogyny. Many instructors indicated that this proclivity to reproduce harmful representations remains strong in their production courses. As Keating notes, the problem is often compounded by the technical skill of some of these works, such that feedback sessions often focus on the proficiency of form rather than issues in the content. A first strategy to address this issue was for instructors to pre-screen all student work before feedback sessions. This process helps to avoid, as Keyes terms, “throwing them to the
wolves” in a typical feedback session by screening potentially problematic work. Instructors instead can engage students outside of class via a one-on-one critique session, where they have more control in framing issues constructively:

    I have never gotten a student to change their idea by calling them sexist. If anything it might produce a double or even triple down… So I try to meet them where they are by saying "we actually see these tropes a lot." Sometimes calling it stereotypes won't work, but tropes, unoriginal, if I make it not about them being sexist, but that "oh the character's suddenly so much more interesting when it's a woman!" It's kind of an inception thing. I know what a solution will be in advance, but I'll guide them towards it (O. Keyes, personal interview, January 8, 2021).

Knowing when not to screen work in class is a crucial part of feedback facilitation. Many instructors tried emphasizing the message that “feedback is not personal;” however, they acknowledge that representational issues in a student’s work are commonly received among the class as evidence of the producer’s own sexism, racism, or bigotry. Reserving these conversations for a private context allows for more careful navigation around critical topics and to work out the issues of impact and intent that might lead to offensive content. A thornier issue arises when students either do not see or choose not to accept the presence of harmful representations in their work. Similar to Keyes’ stressing of originality in personal feedback, Vasquez formulates her critical critiques of student work in the language of creative expression:

    I trick them into making sure they challenge representation. So how will we challenge that, how will you make something different and push against a system that has always represented women as sexual objects? How will you redefine a woman on your screen? Or how would you redefine a person of color, or a person of different sexual orientation through your camera. Just having those discussions with students who are just dying to produce actually helps them think about it (L. Vasquez, personal interview, October 28, 2020).
Using conventions also emerged as a means of challenging students to think through critical issues. Keating recounts a conversation with a student pitching a slasher-style film that hit at critical issues from a story development perspective:

I just tried to push the idea that (the film) still has to be suspenseful. And if it's suspenseful, the protagonist has to be active. You can't have your main character, in this case a female, just be passive. It's politically bad and it's dramaturgically bad. So I was trying to avoid imposing my politics by making those views in line with storytelling (P. Keating, Personal Interview, September 1, 2020).

On the other side of the spectrum, student work often probes sensitive areas of their background that make them particularly vulnerable to critique:

Like I had a student last year whose father died homeless. She's incredibly passionate about (that topic). And I want to be sensitive to her passion, but from this journalist mercenary perspective I'm also like "you're not ready." So in conversations with her, it's like "hang on to that. You're not ready to do this story right now in the context of this class. Don't do that, because you're going to come up short, and you're going to feel really bad about it.

These tactics speak to a recognition of the harm feedback sessions can inflict on students. From this recognition, instructors placed careful limitations on the scope of feedback sessions and used their own expertise when necessary to navigate between students’ insensitivity to issues of representation and opening up vulnerability or even trauma in open discussions of their work.

Discussion

This chapter examines the feedback session within the specific context of a video production course. However, the strategies offered by instructors as how to enact feedback sessions to achieve authentic dialogue I believe are scalable far beyond this local context. In this concluding section, I want to generalize the findings to better
illustrate their importance for those instructing theory-based, writing-focused, or any other communication-related courses.

First, feedback sessions do not work in isolation, but in close consideration with course goals, assignment parameters, and due dates. The importance of iterative work was a key theme among instructors, with instructors, for example, having students build up from project pitch, script, completed scene, rough cut, to final. These frequent check-ins not only provided more opportunity for feedback sessions but made sure critiques could be immediately applied to the next version of the project. A similarly iterative process could be applied to research-based courses, with students building research papers up from abstract, literature review, and method. Feedback sessions here matter, with student work up until the final should not stand apart as one-off projects but have some connective thread that may be developed through regular feedback.

Second, feedback sessions require careful structuring. Setting clear guidelines around who gives feedback, what order they present it, and the expected tenor of that feedback all serves to formalize the process and build a more supportive classroom community. Working in the facilitator role, instructors should pre-screen all work. Should potentially offensive or controversial content emerge in this work, shifting from class critique to a one-on-one conversation with the student can be a key tactic in addressing difficult issues with the nuance required. Feedback sessions are more normalized in smaller, lab-based video production courses, where there is an expectation (and often hope) that students’ will have their work screened for their peers. Groups can offer this more intimate feedback even in larger classes. Instructors advocate for maintaining group
assignments throughout the semester so as to give students the chance to build better familiarity with the intentions and expectations of each other’s work.

Finally, giving feedback should be treated as a skill in itself. Related to the process over product approach espoused by many instructors, building critical language serves the practical purpose of helping student producers break open the production process into its individual components. In this way, feedback models how to enact praxis in students’ own production practice, providing the language to assess their own work, to identify areas of improvement, and to communicate what actions are needed to address those issues.

These strategies, while valuable especially within the technicist environment of most production courses, still offer a rather narrow application of authentic dialogue. For one, the feedback sessions offered here are far more hierarchical in structure than the open, equal discussions Freire envisions. The mode of feedback—in person discussion with set speaking order—also runs into many of the issues Ellsworth (1989) notes in mandating student voice. The format also might reproduce power inequities among those who are most comfortable speaking in the classroom space versus those who are not (Bali, 2014). The ‘critical’ character of the feedback sessions discussed here also lacks much grounding in critical theory concerns. Technical notes or narrative structuring comments seemed to dominate most sessions. More difficult conversations regarding the politics of representation were often (I believe wisely) moved offstage to one-on-one conversations between the student and the instructor. I don’t believe these limitations are a natural ceiling to the critical potential of feedback sessions. As many instructors noted, building a familiarity with the language of critique—even critique set in a technicist
discourse—takes time for students. Further integrating critical topics into feedback discussions will no doubt take even more, especially given the discomfort these topics often bring on. To that end, I see the strategies offered here—limited though they may be—as a significant step forward in re-imagining not only how students and teachers interact with each other in the classroom, but in how they serve to benefit both each other and them through those interactions.
CHAPTER 7

TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION THROUGH ALTERNATIVE MEDIA PRODUCTION

Introduction

Moving out of the transmission model of education by resolving the student-teacher contradiction and establishing co-intentional dialogue within the classroom produces what Freire (1970) calls critical consciousness. Education, as Shull notes in the forward of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, becomes a practice of freedom: “the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world” (1970, p. 15). Critical consciousness here leads to transformative action: “nam(ing) the world, to change it” (Freire, 1970, p. 76). Rather than set transformation as an end goal for critical pedagogy, Freire advocates for pedagogical praxis, or the cyclical movement between critical reflection and transformative action. Through this process of invention and reinvention, students and teachers use the classroom space to imagine transformative actions, then reflect back on those actions, and reformulate them toward greater transformation. “Because liberating action is dialogical in nature, dialogue cannot be a posteriori to that action, but must be concomitant with it” (Freire, 1970, p. 134)

For Sholle & Denski (1993), the great potential of media production is as a “transducing element,” a means of translating critical media concepts into transformative action and vice versa: “Through the displacement of a transmission model of media training (or the teaching of media reproduction), the teaching of media production is recast as an ongoing process involving the transformation of consciousness (and
reformations of the self)” (p. 143). Media literacy theorists further envision production activities as a form of transformative action. Students’ critical consciousness of hegemonic media forms can be put into practice as means of counter-knowledge creation. “A critical media perspective enlightens students to the potential that they have, as media producers, to shape the world they live in and to help turn it into the world they imagine” (Morrell et al., 2013, p. 3). Media production’s transformative power here is rooted in the creation of these alternate texts, “empowering individuals to create alternative media for counter-hegemonic expression” (Kellner & Share, 2019, p. xiii). This power holds the potential to affect change far outside the classroom. Situated at the start of the media professional pipeline, students engaged in media production courses produce works that have the potential to influence culture at a mass level. Alternative media production as a transformative action holds the possibility of creating real institutional change.

The remainder of this chapter will focus on critical media production pedagogy as a vehicle for praxis-based transformative education, specifically through the creation of alternative media texts. To begin, I want to inventory a few key issues that have hindered the transformative potential of production courses imagined above. First, many advocates of alternative media production approaches assume students are interested in creating alternative or counter-hegemonic texts. As many of the instructors interviewed for this project report, students are much more likely to enter production labs with the intent to recreate rather than challenge their favorite media:

As soon as students are in front of a tool, or a toy, that's where they focus it. And I think when students go into what's counted as a production course, it sets up the expectation that this is going to be about how to make movies, it's not going to be about how to think about movies. (It) feeds into this idea that students think production is something different, something separate than thinking about theory, representation, and meaning (J. Proctor, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).
This sort of “ginning up production courses with theory,” as Boulton describes, runs the risk of students not only ignoring critical considerations, but actively working against them out of frustration. Instructors’ efforts to instill critical concepts can also result in a transmission approach to teaching theory. Attempts to move students away from hegemonic forms can result in students viewing critical issues in the same manner as camera or software training: a need to avoid committing a “representational foul” rather than empowering personal expression (C. Boulton, Personal Interview, August 28, 2020).

A second issue comes in the inability of alternative media production to achieve praxis. The creation of these alternative works is often viewed as a finishing activity: a means of inscribing critical concepts into a concrete product. Such an approach ignores the production process as a site of critical attention, in particular how individual production choices affect meaning making. It also represents an inversion of the technicist approach to media production. Critical inquiry takes the primary pedagogical role over technical training, which merely produces a similarly unproductive result. As Sholle & Denski (1993) note, the transformative potential of alternative media production depends on its ability to mount a worthwhile challenge to dominant media. To this end, the value of learning standard production practices cannot be overlooked:

I could come up with some alternative perspectives. But then the system that the institution has put in place–Adobe Suite–I could say screw Adobe Suite. But then the department is like, no this is what we need them to learn. Adobe is obviously a major corporation, they've got near monopoly status across all platforms, so the process in and of itself is a colonized process. But we can while we're in that process use these same structures to create alternate voices. At the end of the day, people are still watching TV, on social platforms. So no matter what you do, even if you are using alternative voices and perspectives, the Internet is part of the structure, television is part of the structure, editing suites, the cameras, the people who produce the cameras, even education, all of that is so corporatized. There's no escape from this (J. Cubbage, Personal Interview, October 28, 2020).
Cubbage here speaks to an inherent flaw with the pipeline argument. If the transformative value of alternative production originates from the work students produce beyond the classroom, then instructors must provide both the skills to thrive in media professions as well as the critical lens through which to imagine and implement alternative practices once inside these institutions. The challenge for instructors comes in striking a Goldilocks balance between technical and critical skills. Too much of the former leads to the technicist approach detailed in Chapter 4, while the latter will result in these alternate works being ignored in favor of more slickly produced media texts. As Cubbage summarizes: “The shaky videos and muffled audio, it's gonna detract from your message” (Personal Interview, October 28, 2020).

Finally, transformative goals can often do more harm than good. The charge for students to engage in critical or social justice-oriented projects is often received by students as an imperative to probe sensitive aspects of their own lives. Too often they disclose vulnerable parts of themselves they may not be ready to share with others, or do not understand the impact of making public these parts of their lives through the creation of a media project. As Ellsworth (1989) notes, critical pedagogy’s call for students to bring issues from their own lives into the classroom and to create understanding between teachers and fellow students often places undue burden on marginalized students. Within the context of production courses, these students can feel pressure to perform and package their marginalized identities. Relating again to the pipeline argument for alternative media production, there are also ethical questions in challenging students to create transformative content as a means of training them for industries that may reject or co-opt these goals:
Something that does concern me (is) this notion that I was going to teach future educators to have a conscience, to change the industry from the inside… Freighting one aspiring creative industry professional to be conscious of an organization is naive. It doesn't reckon with this series of soft powers in place. These are compromises we make in our lives everyday (C. Boulton, Personal Interview, August 28, 2020).

Beyond the feasibility of the pipeline argument, Boulton also reckons with the dubious ethics of instructors charging student producers with transformational goals:

There's a risk to raise someone's conscience without any attention to how to manifest or actualize it in any kind of practical way. You're setting people up to feel like cowards and hypocrites. Like we've taught you what's right, now go out in the world and violate that every day. Good luck sleeping at night (C. Boulton, Personal Interview, August 28, 2020).

These issues represent perhaps the most challenging of those documented in this project so far, due in large part to the real-world consequences involved. Transformation through alternative media production must grapple with a past history of student expectations around production work, a present struggle to balance critical and technical skills, and an uncertain future over the value of the approach in real-world practice. The strategies outlined below do not offer a comprehensive guide for overcoming these issues; however, they do provide a number of innovative and nuanced ways for realizing media production pedagogy’s transformational promise.

**Strategy 1: Modeling different modes of production**

Opening space for alternative production practices that serve transformative goals must begin with challenging students’ expectations around media production and the desired output of those practices. For film instructors, screening work from a diverse range of makers was a commonly used strategy:
I show a lot of short films from all over the world. Students never really watch those on their own, so even showing them short films as its own form that tends to be more open-ended, more poetic, with a looser narrative structure kind of gets them out of their comfort zone already. I often focus on short films with minimal or no dialogue, so it's very much about visual storytelling. We're looking at a short film from a filmmaker with a disability or from another part of the world. A lot of it is about form, showing them new forms of storytelling and partly about representation. Showing them different points of view, how someone different from themselves can use this form for a powerful story and probably to tell a story they're not used to seeing (J. Proctor, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).

Showings and discussions, as many instructors emphasized, need to delve deeper than just on-screen representation. Keyes’ discussions of queer theory within production courses, for instance, look to make explicit how identity and experience directly inform making:

> One of the important things is in establishing the difference between queer theory and queer people making things. It's this idea that you see the world differently because of your experiences. The way that you're going to encounter a camera, and the way you're going to think about the things assembled in your timeline are going to be shaped by your experience of being queer (O. Keyes, Personal Interview, January 8, 2021).

Queer making, or any other ‘non-standard’ approach for that matter, here is framed not as being different for the sake of difference, but as opening up new modes of expression. In a similar vein, several instructors screened experimental works from filmmakers including Bill Viola, Victor Masayesva Jr., and Maya Darren. Beyond exposing students to works outside the Hollywood canon, the films point to how these director’s backgrounds affected their process of making. For example, a lesson on Masayesva Jr. might begin by showing how the director’s Hopi identity influences the subject matter for his films. It then speaks to production style, illustrating how identity shapes all aspects of his filmmaking process: using Indigenous storytelling devices instead of the Hollywood
three-act structure, employing a majority Indigenous crew, and premiering/screening films in Native communities instead of the mainstream festival circuit. Related to a process over product approach, screenings and discussions open up opportunities for students to reflect on the potential value of alternative media production practices in leading to transformative work.

Modeling alternative media production practices required students to integrate critical and ethical issues with their making. Similar to the *Oxyana* discussion detailed in Chapter 5, Pyles frames discussion around problematic documentary work that looks to move past critiques of the work onscreen, and asks students to consider the production choices that led to a particular outcome:

I think the features of documentary storytelling can afford you the ability to pull in lots of different identities and emotions. It can be factual in some ways, even though we know documentaries are not just facts. We're spinning the way images are being produced (D. Pyles, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).

Working with her Appalachian State students, Pyles often features work that represents Appalachian culture. A common example is the work of Shelby Lee, a photographer best known for his stark black and white portraits of Appalachian families:

We talk about what it means to represent oneself and one's culture. Lee for example claims to represent his own people, others saying he's perpetuating stereotypes. And some (students) in the class will say that is true. But others will reject them. And if we were to do a photography assignment, we would talk about what your own photography does for those representations? What does it mean to represent a particular identity? (D. Pyles, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).

Pyles’ use of Shelby Lee complicates the idea of being from a culture as automatically qualifying one to represent it properly. As many of her students are likely to identify as belonging to the Appalachian culture Lee claims to represent in his work, these
discussions around representation are grounded in students' own backgrounds. Similar to Morrell et al.’s (2013) project with Boyle Heights students detailed in Chapter 2, Pyles’ Freirean commitment to grounding classroom work in students’ lived experience presents alternate production modes as a concrete means of challenging hegemonic representations, in particular stereotypes that directly affect how students are treated in the world.

Another commonly used tactic in modeling alternative production modes is to bring in professional media makers as guest speakers. In addressing some of the critiques Boulton raises about not being able to actualize transformative production strategies in professional settings, guest speakers can help model for students what industry work looks like, understand how critical issues discussed in class translate to that professional context, and make clear the challenges and opportunities—particularly among marginalized students—that they may encounter:

I bring our graduates and people from the community in to speak in class. And I am very careful with who I bring in. Like I have this tiny woman who's second AC, and she goes over what she does and it's going over all their heads because it's so technical, and she's picking up these huge rigs (camera packs). And I bring in my African American students who are working in x, y, z in the industry. I believe very hard that it's difficult to be what you can't see... That behind-the-scenes work, just looking around to see who is doing what, that's so important (R. Goldman, Personal Interview, January 12, 2020).

Among instructors working as filmmakers and other producers, sharing their own background was also cited as an effective way to justify the value of alternative modes of production:

I explain at the beginning of the semester the lens through which I come to filmmaking, how important it is to be a critical filmmaker, and how that can make you a better filmmaker. You're going to come up with the original unique stories
that no one else has come up with before if you have this critical foundation in your work (J. Proctor, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).

Instructors with media industry background also tended to be upfront about their challenges in trying to reform practices from the inside. Teaching to her primarily Black students at the HBCU Bowie State University, Cubbage relates her experience as a Black woman working in a white male-dominated television news industry as a means of cautioning students looking to enter industry careers:

I'm acculturating them to what the process is if they want to work in the media. Like they say I want to be an entertainment reporter. You're already oppressed. You wanna be in front of the camera and tell stories and be entertaining instead of I want to go into my community and tell news that's not being told. To change that ideation, because they might have been dreaming about this since they were 13, who am I to crush that? No one said that to me. No one said "are you sure you wanna go in the news? News is kinda racist." I went into news and realized it's racist. Now I'm teaching (J. Cubbage, Personal Interview, October 28, 2020).

Similar to the tactic of challenging production standards detailed in Chapter 4, instructors largely took a negotiated approach when justifying the value of alternative production modes. Vasquez, for example, stresses the importance of “knowing the rules,” while speaking to the value of bending those standards to open up new forms of expression and unique ways of communicating messages:

I'm not sure I accomplish my job by putting out everybody who fits into the same box. You got that aesthetic! Go reproduce it. But can you interrogate that aesthetic? I think you can. The best way to do that is with your camera. And if you look at some of the feminist work that comes out of the '60s and '70s, that's what they did. Some of it was very experimental or challenging work, but they really used the camera to challenge the aesthetic of the feminine, of what it means to be a gendered being. Once we pull back the veneer, it's a brave new world out there (L. Vasquez, Personal Interview, October 28, 2020).

As a means of tone setting, the techniques offered above largely avoid the high-minded language of transformation in favor of a more tempered presentation of alternate
production strategies. Instructors grounded issues of representation in real world consequences, such as the cultural stereotyping that often results from media misrepresentation. In-class examples often related to students’ identities or lived-experience, with production assignments then positioned as direct means by which students might confront misrepresentation. Instructors did not sugarcoat the challenges of transformative action, offering clear-eyed looks at the challenges they may face in looking to transform industry practices from the inside. Finally, instructors also spoke personally to the value alternative production modes hold for them, leaving students to figure out for themselves how non-standard production approaches might work for them.

**Strategy 2: Assignments that build in critical engagement**

Making alternative production matter—that is production teaching practices that are capable of transformational influence—relies on a careful balance of technical and critical skills. Some instructors formalized this balance through theory and practice days set in lecture and lab spaces respectively. A more praxis-based tactic was to integrate critical reflection into technical production assignments, typically through the use of project parameters and assessment guidelines. Integrating critical ideas into assignments can often head off student resistance to critical discussions as interruptions from their production work (Zanker, 2007; Boulton, 2016). Integrating issues of representation and power into assignment parameters instead lets these critical considerations arise inductively through the production process. As media scholars have noted, production work possesses critical, praxis-based potential simply by nature of asking students to go out into the field (Sholle & Denski, 1993; Buckingham, 2013). The act of going into the
community to speak with people, pointing cameras at the world, and editing the results into whatever form they choose, as Oppenheim emphasizes to students, are all decisions that require critical consideration:

More than not, we're not saying "let's take a look at structural racism in news reporting." That's not to say that doesn't come up, we usually don't address it directly in the assignment… I let them go find their own stories, I don't choose for them. So in my approach, these societal questions and how we report on who we are come up accidently (K. Oppenheim, Personal Interview, August 24, 2020).

Against the educator-as-liberator tendency Freire warns of, taking time to reflect on production decisions isn’t about establishing correct ethical positions, but in letting students experience first-hand the complicated politics of representation inherent in creating media work:

The critical issues can emerge organically. I had one group that profiled a guy who gives backpacks full of food and supplies to homeless people. And a whole host of issues came around how to represent the homeless people receiving the packs. And that was a good space to talk about those representations. A lot of homeless people have mental issues or might be engaging in illegal behavior to where being on camera can expose them to arrest. Those issues of ethics come up. Like we're in solidarity with the poor in this university, so how do we not just reproduce that poverty through this project. How do you represent people with dignity? How do you deal with your own privilege? You go to this elite school, and you make this project that goes on your resume, and you go onto a career while these people largely stay in their class positions. We don't necessarily go into a bunch of readings on it, but we discuss the issues when they come up (D. Gracon, Personal Interview, November 13, 2020).

For instructors not teaching documentary or journalism-focused material, such inductive opportunities to engage with critical issues are less abundant. Narrative film or video courses present a particular challenge, with students often primed to recreate hegemonic narratives through their own video projects, such as the ‘slasher-bro’ tendency detailed in
the previous chapter. One countermeasure is to implement formal parameters around content, for example Vasquez’ “no sex, death, or violence” rule:

I had these guys filming, and they were out at the side of the road, and of course out comes the gun. And I said, you know what, you're going to reshoot that. And they said we can't reshoot the whole thing. And I said, well you gotta come up with something else. They went out instead and whipped a teddy bear out instead. It was sort of bizarre, but it was within the rules. But I had to challenge them. They knew the rules, they broke them, and they could either turn it in and get a 0, or change it (L. Vasquez, Personal Interview, October 28, 2020).

Though substituting a teddy bear for a gun might seem a more absurd than critically productive outcome, Vasquez’s hard line approach functions here to force students out of established media tropes, and challenges them to creatively find their way outside those conventions. Proctor uses a modified version of this tactic in her Action Sequence assignment. Working in groups, students are tasked with creating a 3-5 minute short film meant to demonstrate their proficiency with three-act narrative structure and rising tension through editing and shot choice. Within these technical goals, however, Proctor includes the parameter “No use of weapons in this sequence”:

Action sequences can so easily rely on violence for the excitement that this becomes something where they have to learn to create action without violence. Sometimes we'll have a prop, typically a goofy one that doesn't lend itself to violence. So how can they create tension or suspense visually without it being about violence? That I think helps them to grow when thinking about sequencing or narrative structure. Thinking more creatively about what the essence of action is. Because when we think about action, we think about fighting. But that's not necessarily what action is, so it gets them to think more foundationally about it (J. Proctor, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).

As an example of an assignment that builds in critical issues inductively, the Action Sequence is notable for its seemingly small scope. Proctor does not start students from a large structural issue like violence in the media and ask them to address the issue through
their work. Instead, the parameters denaturalize a hegemonic belief—that action equates to violence onscreen—and challenge students to imagine other ways in which action and tension can be rendered.

**Figure 6.1:** Parameters section of Proctor’s Action Sequence, assigned as part of her Media Production II course.

The Action Sequence replaces the negative framework of using parameters to ‘right the wrongs’ of film violence with the positive orientation of parameters as creative challenge. Proctor then uses student responses to this challenge in order to stage more critical conversations on onscreen violence. Crucially, responses and subsequent in-class discussions are rooted in students’ own attempts to work through issues. Though Proctor’s assignment is a particularly savvy illustration of this approach, many other instructors found opportunities for this sort of inductive engagement with critical issues along all steps of the production process, placing moments of critical reflection within the scriptwriting, filming, and editing tasks. These praxis-based techniques can build more
grounded, practice-based engagement with critical issues, and demonstrate for students the value of alternative production strategies as modes of personal expression not available through established forms.

**Strategy 3: Nudging toward critical work**

Among the toughest challenges instructors noted is student aversion to critical work. As media theorists have noted, students treat production courses as sites in which to recreate the media texts they love (Sholle & Denski, 1993; Morrell et al., 2013). Instructors here cannot adopt a high-minded critical approach by chastising students’ tastes as ‘harmful hegemonic representations.’ This “critical liberator” approach is sure to invoke resistance and stands against the co-intentional nature of Freirean education. Instructors largely refrained from a rigorous, sage-on-the-stage impulse to instill critical values or reprimand problematic work, instead using the unique context of production courses to develop deeper level understandings of critical issues in the media. Among the most common tactics was to diagnose problematic content by examining individual production choices. Share, for example, frames discussions of film stereotypes around the language of storytelling. Rather than brand a work as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ based on its use of stereotypes, his approach highlights the intentions of the film’s producers and why they might rely on stereotypes to convey a narrative:

How often and easy it is to do that in a way where you're reproducing stereotypes. Because the easiest way to communicate is the way we're used to. So in a movie, you want to make the audience understand that the woman is pregnant, then you go have her vomit. Like really? We're representing pregnancy as vomit? Just recognizing that the stereotypes are real, and that they're the easiest way to communicate. Most people in Hollywood, I don't think are racist. But a large majority of people making movies are using racial stereotypes because they're the
easiest way to communicate. So the more we can start to question, to really think critically about our choices is all the more important (J. Share, Personal Interview, September 15, 2020).

Share’s framing here avoids the totalizing language of much media critique, a rhetorical move that allows discussions around stereotypes to focus not on “what’s wrong” but on “what can we do better?” His framing also asks students to empathize with media producers, with the understanding that, as media makers themselves, these issues are ones that they will likely face when creating their own work. The ability to work through critical issues becomes part of students’ media making toolkit alongside camera or software skills:

I want to teach them how to think on their feet. As I said before, we have a very diverse group of students, so they’re more receptive to a lot of these ideas than students at other places that I’ve taught. That makes my job a little bit easier. But they aren't any less likely to fall back on stereotypes and those very typical tropes of student filmmaking. I’m always pushing them to be more creative (R. Goldman, Personal Interview, January 12, 2020).

The push Goldman and other instructors describe often works in the form of a strategic nudge toward critical work, avoiding the top-down approach of shooting students down for wanting to recreate hegemonic representations or demanding they take on certain critical issues in their work. This often becomes more difficult when students choose uncritical topics, which seem to be reproducing conventions:

My first instinct is to say yes. They want to do sports, football. So who's interested in that? Well potentially a large potential audience. But my objection might be, it's not enough. Can we get more context on it? What is it about the athletics program and the recruiting that make this more interesting? Can you make a story about football captivating to someone who doesn't give a shit about football? And if you can't do that, then what else you got? (K. Oppenheim, Personal Interview, August 24, 2020).
As Oppenheim’s example illustrates, a student’s choice of an uncritical topic seldom comes from a desire to reproduce media conventions; it’s often just the easiest choice. Instead of dismissing the student’s idea outright, his approach instead employs critical questioning to nudge the student to think through issues of audience, message, and originality until something less conventional emerges. Instructors of more narrative film-based courses too use this tactic of nudging students to expand their horizons and allowing them to engage with different ideas at their own speed:

I have a decent number of students who are at least entertaining the idea of film or documentary making or news production. And for that cluster, they're mostly interested already in some film history. So I just want to expand that a bit. Let me give an example. I have a terrific student that just graduated, one of my most talented. When he came in, he had the taste you'd probably expect an 18-year-old boy to have. He was into Tarantino and Nolan movies. And I like both of those directors. I didn't think it was my job to get him to rethink those. But just to expand a little bit. I want him to start watching Ozu films. So you know Kurosawa, have you heard of Mizoguchi? (P. Keating, Personal Interview, September 1, 2020).

In line with the navigating critical discussions strategy detailed in the previous chapter, instructors also use one-on-one meetings to push students toward further critical reflection. These private conversations are a necessary practice for when student work exhibits outwardly harmful content, cases in which a nudge might not be enough:

I will come right out and say something is sexist or homophobic or racist. I don't mince words at all. If someone submits a script like that, I'll sit down with them. I won't allow them to make it (R. Goldman, Personal Interview, January 12, 2020).

The one-on-one format can also allow for more nuanced discussion around critical issues than in-class critique or written feedback:

I think it's more valuable to hear it in person. Because when they read it, some of them just shut off. So I prefer to set aside the time to just talk with them. The text always lacks some emotion. So that's why I try to leave some of the more
important parts of the rules to the class. I open it so they can talk things over face-to-face (T. Özdemir, Personal Interview, September 16, 2020).

Frequent check-ins such as those Özdemir describes offer an effective means of guiding students toward deeper consideration without foisting theory onto them. Other instructors followed a similar mode of critical nudging in line with a praxis-based production approach, with the student taking initial action (choosing their project theme), reflecting back on that action (via instructor questioning and class screenings), and eventually reworking the initial action to arrive at a piece that skews expectations. Course structuring is essential here in enabling effective praxis, with iterative assignments, critical discussions, and feedback sessions all working to move between critical thinking and production practice. The nudge as a pedagogical strategy is aimed at giving students the time and feedback necessary to critically reflect on and reiterate production choices, components that are particularly essential for students working with sensitive subjects. Cubbage builds this praxis-based movement into the final PSA assignment for her 200-level video Video Production course, using check-in assignments to nudge students toward critical considerations of audience, social justice, and media format:

I had students bring in their own advertisement: who is this message created for, whose voice is evident in this and whose is left out? Then I had students make a presentation to unpack their ad. And then from that critical analysis, I had students make a public service announcement. They had to write a script and go out to talk about it. The issue could be no texting and driving, sexual health, environmental justice. They had to write the script, get a camera, edit it on Premiere and go through. So it was not directly teaching media literacy but injecting some of those themes in there. The students had the theory and the pedagogy. I had to approve the script, so I can tell them how to correctly structure a broadcast script. And they could choose to do audio or video PSA. We were scaffolding the critical skills and the technical skills (J. Cubbage, Personal Interview, October 28, 2020).
For her similar PSA assignment in her 300-level Intermediate Video Production course, Goldman breaks the group project into three parts spread over a month of class time: a reflective treatment of the PSA, a complete script, and finally the finished PSA. The treatment section front ends the written reflection strategy documented in Chapter 5 in order to get students to reflect on production decisions before picking up the camera:

Well I'll look at their script, which is a very easy way to get these things across to students. We'll talk over "who's their client, who's your audience." And I say, okay if that's your audience, do you think your script reflects that? And frankly, this generation is so much easier. They don't care about someone's sexuality. So I would just read their script and ask them "okay, what do these people look like? What race are they?" And I'd push them, say if they got only white actors, I would say "does this look like Buff State? (Goldman’s Home Campus)" And then they say "no." And then they'll ask some of their other classmates to be in it to correct that (R. Goldman, Personal Interview, January 12, 2020).

These reflective questions prompt students to make clear connections between technical and critical considerations, with features like casting, audience, mood, setting, and musical choices all needing to serve an intended defined message.
Goldman’s PSA project also avoids the issue of production action serving as a finishing activity. In-class screening and peer critiques of PSAs happen on the second-to-last week of class. Groups then use peer feedback to create another cut and screen this version for an outside faculty member in the final week of class. Only after these two rounds of feedback do students submit their final PSA video.

The critical nudge as practiced by Goldman and other instructors serves to head off student resistance through a careful implementation of praxis-based teaching. Their courses build in multiple opportunities to move between critical reflection and production
action. The critical nudge also works in a similar fashion to the technical restrictions discussed in Chapter 4: gradually introducing critical questions such that students don’t feel overwhelmed or repulsed but are able to bring critical ideas inductively into their making process.

**Strategy 4: Portraying the personal**

Several instructors did not experience the resistance to critical topics documented by many media theorists (Citron & Seiter, 1981; Zanker, 2007). Many instead pointed to a palpable enthusiasm among students to create works that engaged critical issues and social justice causes:

> I'm finding that students are far more interested in these subjects than I thought. So maybe we have to start asking them, what floats your boat? What story do you want to tell? So I think we have to turn it back and start interrogating what their stories are if we really want to see some changes (L. Vasquez, Personal Interview, October 28, 2020).

Instructors also found many students were eager to convey their own experiences and histories through class production projects. The personal nature of these works connects deeply with the transformative goals of alternative media production:

> I had one student who said to me "I want to tell the story of when I was shot." So I had to talk to her about whether that was an okay story for you to tell, because this is not about let's get PTSD again. So we talked about that, then did that. She interviewed friends, visited the hospital, and told that story. I had another project where a student talked about her biracial parents, and how nine grandchildren later now everything is okay. I had a colleague ask me "how the hell do you get those stories?" And I say, "tell them yours" (L. Vasquez, Personal Interview, October 28, 2020).

The student projects Vasquez describes outlines a deeply Freirean vision of media production pedagogy, with students reflecting their own experiences and issues, building
deeper understanding of the issues through interviews and other real-world engagement, and developing technical camera and editing skills as means by which to create works that challenge audiences’ understandings of the issue. Yet encouraging students to reflect on and share their experiences through media projects also comes with very real risks:

I think sometimes professors that are well-meaning encourage students to be like "yeah! put your whole heart in the story! The story of a Black body traumatized is going to do so well in film festivals!" So I try to be conscious of that in all directions. And I say that as a trans guy who was going through transition in the midst of doing my master's thesis. So I think I'm like "oh, no wonder I was unable to come to school for two weeks. I triggered myself writing a script" (O. Keyes, Personal Interview, January 8, 2021).

Keyes’ retelling of his own traumatic experience is one very direct tactic for modeling the potential harm inherent in probing sensitive parts of one’s identity through production work. He also speaks to the tendency among instructors to value deeply personal or triggering experiences as more critical or engaging, a value that is upheld through media fixation on these topics. Alternative production practice must acknowledge these tendencies, with instructors using their role as facilitators to navigate this tricky line between transformative work and trauma. Another aspect of this facilitation work is to be transparent with students as to the limits of what they can feasibly create with their media projects:

If you think you're going to get a sharp production out of 10-weeks, you're sadly mistaken. Those that do it come to us with a level of polish that we didn't give them. But I want to teach them to take that thing that's inspiring to them and start on a larger path. Like I had a student last year whose father died homeless. She's incredibly passionate about it. And I want to be sensitive to her passion, but from this journalist mercenary perspective I'm also like "you're not ready." So in conversations with her, it's like "hang on to that. You're not ready to do this story right now in the context of this class. Don't do that, because you're going to come up short, and you're going to feel really bad about it. What I want instead is for you to start a project that's going to help you get the access to do that project.
down the road. And check back in with me, enroll in a different class down the
go road where you can do it justice. That for me is what production can do (M.
Blaine, Personal Interview, August 20, 2020).

In line with the critical nudging strategy, Blaine’s approach avoids shooting down ideas,
yet doesn’t shy away from communicating the limitations of what can be accomplished in
a single class. Blaine and other instructors often advise students to continue larger, more
involved, or more emotionally resonant projects through senior thesis or capstone
projects. Beyond tempering expectations around personal projects, instructors must also
uphold technical standards. This need goes further than ensuring the work has the
transformative potential to challenge hegemonic work. Students also risk a feeling of
personal disappointment when the finished project fails to live up to their expectations:

That happened with the student who wanted to tell her story of getting shot. The
assignments were a car wreck, pretty unusable stuff. What I probably would have
done with her is to go through the footage with her image by image. What she
was doing was gathering bits and pieces together and trying to tell the story. So
what I do for critique is they sit down, they get an index card, and the index card
has the comments on it. Can you help this? Can you make this piece stronger? I
never say it isn't good. It's always, what can you do to make this stronger? Can we
make this a more compelling piece, and what do you think we can do? I always
turn it back so that they're the ones that are put in the place. Do you see anything
wrong with this shot? And do you think you could do a better job if you had more
time? (L. Vasquez, Personal Interview, October 28, 2020).

Vasquez’s use of check-in projects and one-on-one meetings serve to help bridge issues
of impact and intent. Her attention to tone here works to prevent technical issues like shot
framing or sequencing as personal attacks on a students’ character or the worth of their
story. By contrast, making the piece stronger by developing production skills becomes a
process of empowering students’ ability to best represent their personal narratives.
The transformative power of media projects such as video or film works also comes from their unique materiality. They hold the ability to directly reflect real life through images and audio elements as well as share these real-world experiences through the public format of screenings. Yet these inherent qualities also pose unique problems, particularly when works portray precarious elements:

Another time, students were working on a film about family relations. One girl started telling a story about physical abuse by her father. A pretty harrowing story. And the students asked if she would be willing to be the focus of the film, and she said, okay I think I will. And they went into her home, and there was her baby sister or niece in the room. And afterwards we talked it over and asked "wait, what is our responsibility?" This girl was not a minor, but now we've seen a minor in this environment where she's experienced abuse. And we had to talk to the student, to tell her we're mandatory reporters. The girl was not happy about it, but we had to report this case. They ended up taking out certain parts where the niece was, the underaged child. And they had to really weigh, to negotiate how you represent this student, and how she wants to be represented. It's this question of poverty porn, and exploitation. And on the other hand, you don't want to ignore these social problems and traumas that are real. How do you in these cases capture some of that but with dignity? That's a great way to teach some of the bigger ethical questions of filmmaking and journalism. But you need a very experienced teacher or professor to guide that (S. Goodman, Personal Interview, October 29, 2020).

Goodman and other instructors here speak to the high level of responsibility and consideration needed when inviting students to portray the personal. There is huge transformative value in having students use production courses to explore and relate personal experiences and perspectives on critical issues. Yet instructors must do their due diligence to set reasonable expectations around personal disclosure as well as communicate the potential risks inherent with showcasing parts of themselves through media formats.
Strategy 5: Connect with students’ power as producers

Media production courses hold outsized influence due to their role in producing future media producers. Following the pipeline argument, these students will graduate from video, audio, and image production classes to take positions in advertising, public relations, journalism, and the media industry. The work they produce in these professional roles thus has the potential to influence culture at a wide level. Students can use that potential to act as change agents, challenging hegemonic media forms through alternative production strategies. They can also avoid transformation altogether and reproduce existing conventions.

Instructors often explicitly expressed to students the power they wielded as media producers, in particular their ability to affect change through the work they create. Beyond in-class screenings, public presentations of students’ work—in particular films and documentaries—offered a way to demonstrate the impact these pieces could hold:

We always would have a public screening, and I'd try to get a venue like the HBO Theater or Lincoln Center and have a reception with their families where they can be celebrated. They would have Q&A, and with the critical thinking aspect, it's a great learning exercise to say why did you do this or that. Having a real audience is so important. It's a perspective about the value of student voice and the importance that you give to that work. That their work can actually be used. The idea that this film on toxic mold was used to organize for better public housing, or this was used by people organizing against police brutality. For many of them, the goal is for them to use the work for civic engagement and social justice (S. Goodman, Personal Interview, October 29, 2020).

Goodman’s access to venues in New York certainly adds another level of cachet to these screenings; however, any venue that allows for wider audiences to appreciate student work can serve the purpose of personal empowerment. A related tactic was to advise students with film festival submissions, connecting them with opportunities, helping to
prepare materials, and in general, offering venues for their production work outside of the classroom context.

Another aspect of transparently communicating students’ power as producers is to detail how to harness this power. Blaine emphasizes the value of baseline technical production skills:

That essentially gets down to the “killing your darlings” idea. And I think you just need to let it go. Do star wipes, unmotivated rack focusing, get it out of your system, then walk it back and "why'd you do that?" Then say, "you know what, industry convention is not that" (M. Blaine, Personal Interview, August 20, 2020).

Industry conventions in this context are not anathema to alternative production modes; a grip on conventions is necessary in order to critically negotiate them into alternative forms. Cubbage takes the impetus on technical skills even further, stressing to her students the need to develop tactile production skills in order to reach positions of power within the media professions:

There's what we call broadcast standard, in other words can I play this on a radio or TV station? It doesn't have to be perfect. No one's paying you thousands and thousands to do this, but I don't want to see jump cuts, you need to use a tripod. Students feel like they should be able to just do it. But there are standards. I mean, how many Youtube videos have you watched that are like "what is this?" People don't use a lavalier. People don't realize that if you're out and there's background noise, you have to channel the audio. So we cover that, what's good and bad, what are the dos and don'ts. We have to go there and walk through the process (J. Cubbage, Personal Interview, October 28, 2020).

Setting production standards here serves as a baseline for Cubbage to ensure student work can have value beyond the classroom. Instructors also presented students with tangible outlets for their production work outside of the traditional industry pipelines. For his multi-camera television production course, Gracon pushes his journalism students to
think beyond the traditional local news path by pointing to other venues for their reporting work:

How can we get into some deeper content in this space? Or how about working for public television, to think about something outside the news pipeline. I mean imagine being a music major and when you graduate you can only work for 3 record companies. But in the broadcast journalism field, that's kind of what it is. If you're going to work in that field, which few of them want to do anyways, you have ABC, NBC, CNN and Fox. And I'm like what about alternate journalism like Democracy Now? Or interactive documentaries. I want to open up the space to them, or else I feel like it's limiting and weird. You can start your own production company, or be a documentarian (D. Gracon, Personal Interview, November 13, 2020).

Another tactic was to highlight students’ transformative power at the community level. Many instructors employed service-learning based projects, with students interviewing and portraying stories of local non-profits, activists, and community opinion leaders.

While these projects have a tendency to be treated by students as trials for more professional work, Gracon and other instructors stressed the influence students wielded even these class projects through their ability to capture and retell community narratives:

I had an assignment called Teach the Community. And the task was to have them make a project that taught the community about media literacy. Some students made a zine, and they had to go out and distribute it to people on campus. And then they had to talk about how it was handing it out to people. Did people like it? Or other students would do a documentary screening and have a discussion. But it was this idea of how you actually do it in some capacity rather than just thinking about it. The idea of praxis is really important (D. Gracon, Personal Interview, November 13, 2020).

Service-learning projects like Teach the Community, as Gracon notes, are a powerful vessel for praxis-based learning: moving from reflection on community issues to production actions meant to document and address those issues. Instructors also had student producers recognize how they could be exploited for that power. Keyes in
particular warns his students not to adopt the grueling hours that typifies production practice:

You put students on a narrative film project, and trial by fire they're like "oh my God we bonded because we all stayed up until 8am for two nights in a row." But then they learned this unhealthy pattern of production that burns them out, that puts them up to have their labor exploited, that sets them up to drain themselves for an industry that already makes it really hard to access their labor rights (O. Keyes, Personal Interview, January 8, 2021).

Speaking to this similar sense of student agency, Vasquez looks to root students’ power as producers not as a matter of the skills they hold, but in their personal application of those skills:

I think it's because I pose it as your chance to tell your story. You get to put your input on it. So how will you imprint your story on your school friends who are attending the high school you're attending? Do you imprint that story? What I'm really trying to teach throughout is how to look. What do you see when you look at something? (L. Vasquez, Personal Interview, October 28, 2020).

Goldman leans even further into personal power, stressing for her students the need to build self-efficacy. Learning goals in her video production courses avoid earning specific camera or software skills in favor of less tangible, but more transferable skills:

I want them to feel confident, and to have a realistic idea of what the production world is like, including prejudice. And I want them to come out of my classes knowing how to tell stories, to have confidence in their voice and their ability to tell original stories. And I want them to come out of my class knowing how to think on their feet (R. Goldman, Personal Interview, January 12, 2020).

These tactics differ widely largely by nature of the different institutions from which instructors come, from Gracon and Cubbage’s industry pipeline focus to Goldman’s a broader use of production skills as a sort of critical problem-solving kit. Common to all these tactics is the need to name for students their power as producers and articulate as
specifically as possible the challenges and opportunities they have in employing this power.

Discussion

Transformation stands as arguably the most important as well as idealistic of Freire’s goals. Media production’s great promise to critical pedagogues, as Sholle & Denski articulate, is as a “transducing element”, capable of alchemizing idealistic classroom concepts into practice (1993, p. 9). Video, audio, and visual production assignments offer feasible mechanisms by which coursework can possess transformative action, with praxis-based courses funneling critical media ideas into practice through students’ media projects. Following the pipeline argument, the role of these courses in producing future media professionals also gives greater valence to these projects. And while the work students produce in class may not change the world, the approaches they develop in these courses may inform their creation of transformational texts in the future. The strategies offered by instructors here aim to actualize many of these high-minded goals in the practical context of production labs. Central to most of their tactics was a need to deflate often quixotic notions of transformation in order to set reasonable goals around how students might challenge hegemonic conventions through their work. In teaching practice, this means avoiding a top-down approach to preaching critical ideals by not foisting critical themes or chastising students’ tastes. They critically probe the production process itself to showcase the value of alternative approaches in real world context via screenings and personal accounts. They also use praxis-based approaches to cycle between action and reflection in order to develop a natural relationship to
alternative practices. Working in the role of facilitator and advisor, instructors nudged students toward critical ideas, a process bolstered by praxis-based assignments that allow students to reflect on the ethical/representational issues inherent in their production choices.

Instructors’ efforts to set more reasonable expectations as to what transformational work can just as easily be interpreted as falling short of critical pedagogy goals. Strategies such as nudging toward critical work—while aligned with the Freirean caution against forcing critical ideas upon students—rarely resulted in student projects that critiqued or challenged power in a true critical theory sense. No example offered by instructors neared something like Morrell et al.’s (2013) work with Boyle Heights students, in which transformative goals emerged from grounded discussions with students regarding their experiences and collective action was taken to achieve those goals. By contrast, transformative work as rendered here by instructors was largely individualistic. Reflection too most often came after action in the praxis cycle, rather than initially motivating that action. Bruker’s use of group pitches offers a possibility for bringing in a more collaborative and reflective approach to formulating and achieving transformative goals within production classes, though this could likely be pushed further.

Instructors also ran up against a larger struggle to equip students with critical framing while still providing the skills needed to enter the media industry pipeline. Balancing these two goals—so often at odds within production classrooms—means transformation is largely interpreted here as encouraging students to see the value in unsettling hegemonic approaches. Showing another path is not the same as laying out
means to achieve it, and as such, none of the approaches here can be said to achieve the full vision of Freire’s praxis-based approach of transforming the world. Yet what they may lack in transformative action I believe is equally made up in the significant contribution these strategies provide for reflecting on transformation: emphasizing the need to achieve change without sugarcoating the difficulties in enacting it. Instructors acknowledged the struggles students may face in trying to transform institutional spaces from within, relying on their own experiences as well as guests from the industry to temper expectations. They balanced critical and technical skill building, and related both aspects in context: the need for baseline production skills to secure work in industries, and the critical lens to do more than reproduce these conventions once on the inside. They also offered concrete venues for work outside the industry context, including public media outlets and personal projects. Key throughout these strategies is to recognize the unique power media production holds as a conduit for even critical pedagogy’s most utopian goals. Though they may not result in transformative work in themselves, what instructors offer here in their production courses offer venues to think deeply about how to realize transformation, offering actionable approaches to affecting change.
CHAPTER 8
CONCLUSION

To the frustration of some educators and theorists, Freire never offered specific guides as to how his pedagogical ideas should be implemented in classrooms (Keesing-Styles, 2003). Against this prescriptive approach, his philosophy offers what Sholle & Denski (1993) call a meta-questioning of pedagogical practice, a tool kit by which instructors and students can reorient the classroom to their own needs. I recognize that this project, with its emphasis on specifics and concrete action, might on its face seem to run counter to Freire’s pedagogical vision. Yet examining specifics, I argue, is an integral part of the meta-questioning process needed to formulate critical media production pedagogy, be that in understanding how transmission logic is reproduced through the technicism of standard production instruction, or in recognizing what aspects of the production process can translate into critical reflection and transformative action. The previous chapters have dealt mostly in the specifics, documenting through instructors’ words and teaching materials the issues and opportunities they encountered. In this conclusion, I want to move from specifics to a more generalizable—and I hope more widely applicable—reading of these findings. To begin, here are the five overarching strategies employed by instructors for enacting critical media production pedagogy:

**Set a critical tone:** The transmission model of education is deeply ingrained in standard approaches to media production via a technicist approach, wherein training on equipment, software, and other technical tools becomes the prime (and often only) educational focus. Disrupting the technicist model requires instructors to name it. Early class discussions that locate these logics in production processes
are crucial in denaturalizing technicism as the ‘standard’ convention. Through early tone setting activities, instructors offer critically oriented approaches to production meant to demonstrate their value over the technicist model. Screening works that challenge traditional production modes, reflecting on how critical approaches inform their own work, and assigning projects that allow students to inductively find their own value of ethics, representation, and social impact in their own making processes all aim to reinforce this critical tone. Production technology too must be deployed strategically, with the understanding that many forces—including production software itself—might reify the technicist approach.

**Do less:** A primary driver of the technicist/transmission approach to media production is a need—often reinforced by instructors, students, administrators, and industry figures—to hit certain technical benchmarks. This demand to develop job-market ready skills serves as the justification to focus fully on software and equipment training at the expense of any critical considerations. Instructors counter this technicist pressure by lowering technical learning goals. Against the transmission logic of needing to build maximum proficiency with production equipment or software, smaller assignments use a process over product approach to contextualize production practices. Focusing on specific editing techniques or software functions allows students to reflect on the meaning-making qualities of their choices. In place of time typically spent on training, instructors built specific venues for critical reflection time including class discussion, screenings, and reflective essays. Limiting technical goals also is
key in making students who might feel overwhelmed or intimidated by technical aspects of production courses feel included in these spaces. Finally, doing less does not amount to leaving students unprepared. It instead shifts the technicist goal of technical proficiency to one of technical self-efficacy, building in students a context of and comfort with production tools such that they can continue to develop these skills on their own.

**Value other knowledges:** The transmission/technicist logic is often enforced not openly by instructors, but less directly through assessments, assignment parameters, or in-class critique. Instructors actively worked against this tendency through discussions, screenings, and personal reflections on positionality that modeled the value of non-technical knowledge, in particular how concern for ethics, identity, and culture were embedded within the production process. They also featured student voice, most notably through feedback sessions that invited students to utilize their experiences and diverse expertise to the benefit of their peers. Assessments were designed to give point value to non-technical topics, with written reflections and self-evaluations going further to embrace authentic assessment modes. Instructors also showcased the usefulness of production in developing non-production skills, including as a critical analysis tool for deconstructing media texts and an interpersonal tool for building collaborative skills.
Facilitate and structure: A key difficulty in enacting CMPP is in how instructors integrate critical concepts into production courses. Too heavy-handed an approach often triggers student resistance either by castigating their tastes or thrusting critical topics upon them without their assent. Going too hands off leaves the standard transmission/technicist model to take hold. Instructors struck a balance by imagining their classroom role as facilitators, putting considerable attention into structuring feedback sessions, creating inductively critical assignments, and nudging students toward critical reflection via one-on-one meetings. This facilitation approach allowed critical topics to emerge organically from classroom production work, situating considerations of representation in the concrete context of students’ production practice. Avoiding a top-down mode to implement critical concepts, specifically through a lecture-based sage-on-the-stage mode, also has the practical benefit of freeing up instructors to devote time elsewhere. Devoting additional time to student feedback in particular helped instructors to build a closer understanding of students’ work, such that discussions around critical topics could be better tailored to their purposes.

Temper transformative goals: Though the media production process does offer a concrete means of transformative action not available in most classroom contexts, the potential impact of that transformation was something instructors were careful to temper. Though most students will not become Hollywood directors, many will enter media industries in which the work they produce can reach and influence wide audiences. Instructors spoke directly to that
responsibility, as well as students’ choices in upholding existing representations or challenging these representations through their work. Bringing in industry guests, creating connections with local and community media organizations, and speaking to their own industry backgrounds worked to help students think through their future trajectory. A tempered approach to transformative action is also based in praxis, moving between critical considerations of ethics, representation, and positionality and technical skills meant to communicate their intended message clearly and creatively. It also gives the time necessary for students to build both the technical and critical skills necessary for transformative works, particularly through the sorts of iterative projects and feedback sessions that move them frequently between action and reflection. Advising also helps students navigate difficult topics and points them to opportunities through which to develop and showcase their work. Related to a process over practice approach, transformation is treated in CMPP as a long-term project, with classroom work mostly serving as a space for students to encounter and experiment with concepts on the way to future works with potential transformative impact.

The strategies offered here aim to help instructors use media production in their classrooms in ways that support rather than drown out critical goals. In the year and a half since I began this project, I’ve personally adapted many of these strategies into my own production teaching. Relating back to the lab experience I shared in the introduction; they’ve been most valuable for me in helping re-imagine many aspects of the production instruction process that I had long taken as an inevitable. For example, I described my
students as “locking in” to their editing work in Premiere, such that trying to pull their attention away from the screen to discuss critical topics was bound to be treated as an interruption. This observation, however, was based too heavily on a binary view of media theory and practice as discrete activities. I’ve instead come to design production projects themselves to better incorporate critical elements, such that the in-lab work does not require a critical/theoretical interruption on my part: students work through critical ideas while staying locked into the task. I’ve also found more natural seams in the production process than I had previously imagined, places where critical issues no longer feel shoehorned in. I’ve also learned to find more natural pivots to critical reflection, in particular in class feedback sessions that position critical concepts not in the abstract, but within the context of students’ own work.

I’ve also learned to take a more reasoned, and hopefully long-term view as to the learning objectives for production courses. The process over product approach that instructors have advocated throughout this project has in particular has proved difficult for me in teaching practice. A great sense of the accomplishment I feel as an instructor is in seeing the work students produce, a drive that inevitably leads to over-emphasize technical skill development in the service of creating an impressive final product. Recognizing this impulse in myself has helped considerably in thinking more strategically about how I structure production coursework, such that my classes don’t eventually veer into a technicist mode.

Beyond the instructors interviewed for this project, I also want to point to several resources that have proved essential during its development. First is the University Film & Video Association (UFVA), which provided a platform through which to workshop
many of the nascent ideas for this project. Specific UFVA groups, most notably the
Gender and Diversity & Inclusion Caucuses, provided both valuable teaching resources
and a source of interview participants. Second is EDIT Media, the UFVA-connected
initiative founded by production faculty that aims to center issues of equity, diversity and
inclusion in teaching media. EDITs Student and Teacher guides were integral in
illustrating what a critically driven approach to media production might look like in
practice. Their teaching resources also serve as the model for what I see as a possible
next step of this project: translating these strategies into teaching activities and resources
available for production instructors and others integrated in integrating production into
their teaching (a prototype is available in Appendix C).

This project works within the narrow scope of college-level media production
courses. This focus I felt was necessary in articulating the overlooked value of these sites,
and in working through the complex dynamics in actualizing their critical potential.
While I see these findings as offering a great deal in terms of enacting critical pedagogy
aims through media production instruction, they cannot be said to be “an ideal venue” for
critical pedagogy as Denski describes. Instructors here largely implemented an
institutional approach to balancing theory and practice, in particular working in as much
critical material into the confines of a skills focused production course as possible. As a
consequence, instructors mostly maintained the power structures of the transmission
model, including a top-down orientation to their teaching as well as an elevated emphasis
on technical skills enforced through lab activities, project parameters, and assessments.
Critical material here is also limited by these technical confines, amounting often to a
‘process over product’ reflection on production choices rather than a deeper questioning
of power structures that have produced these choices. These reflections can lead to deeper critical considerations; however, they do not in themselves constitute critical work in the Freirean sense.

Rather than charging production instructors to find more inventive ways to squeeze theory into practice, a more significant means of addressing this issue would be to make this sort of praxis-based work the norm across the curriculum. Most obviously is to flip the focus and make a case for theory-based instructors to integrate more production. This project must stay in the CMPP spirit as outlined in this project: implementing production assignments not as add-ons but breaking open production itself. Keating’s Video Essay course provides one way forward, with video editing skills serving as more of a media analysis tool rather than the other way around. Production assignments also don’t need to be technically demanding, especially with smartphones and built-in webcams on laptops providing accessible and user-friendly means of production. Many of the assignments offered by instructors could be readily adapted to theory-based courses, providing a hands-on mode of engaging with theoretical concepts without putting too much classroom attention on the tech.

Another consequential shortcoming of these findings is their individualized focus. While thinking through group work dynamics, holding regular feedback sessions, and providing opportunities for students to teach each other all fit within the Freirean need to give student voice, experience, and knowledge value, this collaborative work is geared most toward solo or small group projects. The collective, community-based praxis of critical pedagogy and critical media literacy work is missing here. While some of the
instructors here have taken steps to have students produce work through class wide collaboration or for community partners, more could be done in this direction.

Speaking with community partners regarding how students’ production work could be of benefit outside the classroom offers one possible mode of expanding CMPP’s scope. As a method of transformative action, production is a natural vehicle for service learning. Many instructors interviewed for this project include collaborations with local nonprofits and social justice organizations in the structure of their courses, with students developing video, graphic design, or social media resources in class for these groups to use. Service-learning oriented projects also build students’ understanding of important social issues affecting their community and can demonstrate how their work can have value as a means of public good. However, much like the seemingly natural synthesis between critical pedagogy and media production, blending service learning with media production also brings with many complications that require closer scrutiny. Speaking with community leaders about how these projects could better serve them, as well as how students and instructors’ desire to do good through production work often does more harm than good, I believe can lead to more mutually beneficial service-learning oriented production courses. Documenting student perspectives would also be beneficial in formulating how this sort of collaborative and community-based production work can support their interests and learning objectives.

The institutional approach instructors articulated here—often lacking rigorous focus on critical issues of power and representation—may run up against the boundaries of what critical media production pedagogy is capable of at this moment. Boulton’s observation about production often being all students can handle in a single class
resonated for most of the instructors interviewed for this research. So while the strategies they provide offer a number of innovative ways to synthesize media theory and production practice, these instructors are still working within the confines of a single semester-long class, as well within the narrow standards of how production courses operate within Communication departments. Opening up the full praxis-based potential of CMPP will undoubtedly require broader institutional reform.

One venue for this work is graduate schools, in particular the Communication PhD programs that train future professors in the field. Making sure these programs integrate media production into their curricula could help reduce the dichotomy between media theory and practice that is later reproduced in the departments these PhD grads feed into. Programs such as the University of Colorado-Boulder’s Emergent Technologies and Media Art Practices program offer one way forward, building media study and creation into both coursework and dissertation requirements. Training more PhDs with production knowledge is important here not just to meet the continued demand for media-making oriented courses, but in ensuring scholar-makers have faculty status needed to affect departmental goals. Having the power to shape the curriculum is a direct means through which to reject a theory versus practice binary that reifies the distancing dichotomies between faculty, students, and subject matter in much Communication pedagogy. Normalizing CMPP-oriented courses throughout the curriculum also allows for the type of iterative work so many instructors here advocate for, providing students with the time to blend critical media and production skills over multiple classes. Empowering production instructors as full faculty also ensures they can work with students as advisors, such that intro, or intermediate level production classes can serve as
launching pads for deeper thesis or capstone projects. A second venue is in tenure requirements and other academic assessment measures, many of which do not value production-oriented projects. Acknowledging works beyond published articles as documentaries for tenure cases and elsewhere is a step in the right direction. However, the less quantifiable outcomes of CMPP work such as student showcases, community service work, and additional ways in which instructors connect departmental missions with the work students create also deserve recognition.

This project from its inception has been a product of the COVID-19 pandemic. That these findings make no explicit mention of the pandemic was—particularly at the time in which I conducted the majority of interviews in late 2020—a product of my belief that things would return to some degree of normal. Too much fixation on how the pandemic had shifted instructors' teaching seemed to me as doomed to date these findings. Writing now in early 2022, when (for the time being at least) teaching on campus has returned to something like normal, I feel this caution has largely proved out. Like most of the instructors interviewed for this project, I am back to pacing through production labs and sending groups out to film projects. Yet the pandemic has re-shaped my thinking on CMPP in several key ways.

First, these two years have seen many concepts previously limited to production courses become universal teaching concerns, including how to position a microphone, set good lighting, and use audiovisual content to communicate a message. Media literacy scholars have long called for schools to better reflect the media environments students inhabit outside the classroom. That shift ended up happening overnight, mostly to the detriment of critical goals. The technicist drive so present in production teaching became
a ubiquitous concern, with instructors putting their pedagogy in the hands of learning management systems and software that reinforce a transmission model of education (Swerzenski, 2020). To this end, I see CMPP concepts as more valuable than ever in helping instructors across subject matter integrate production technology with intention: denaturalizing technicist logic and deploying it to the benefit of critical goals.

Connected to this point, the pandemic has also highlighted for me the crucial interpersonal and collaborative element of production classes in ways I did not initially consider. Having been one of the few instructors teaching both online and in person throughout the pandemic, I was able to see firsthand the importance not just of the in-person format, but of a format that gave students the chance to share ideas, create together, and see the products of their collective work. Emphasizing the social aspect of learning is a key benefit of a CMPP approach, one which offers a way out of transmission approaches not just to production teaching, but lecture-based coursework as well. To this end, I hope the ideas articulated throughout this project can prove adaptable for media instructors of all sorts, serving dialogical goals of supporting student voice, creativity, and empowerment across Communication curricula.
APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE GUIDE

1. How did you first come to teaching media production?

Aside from acting as a warm-up, this question looks to establish educators’ pasts and get a sense of the range of experiences from which educators came to media production teaching. Sholle and Denski (1993) speak to the distancing dichotomies between theory and practice in communication departments, dichotomies that often manifest through academically versus professionally focused faculty. My goal was to get a sense of where these critical media production educators come from—the professional field, academia, or some unique mix of both—in order to see how or if these distancing dichotomies still exert influence. Boulton (2016) further addresses how the scholar-practitioner, while often highly desirable on the job market, often finds the dual role to be like holding two jobs at once. In learning of subjects’ backgrounds, my intent was to learn whether this experience is common among other instructors.

2. How has your approach changed since your first started? And what part of that change has most surprised you?

Continuing with the past-focused inquiry of the beginning of the interview, my aim with this question was to get a sense of how production pedagogy has evolved. My heavy use of late 1980s and early 1990s literature (Masterman, 1985; Denski, 1991; Grahame, 1991) leaves a huge gap with regards to the issues relevant then to where things are now. Having participants offer their first-hand accounts of how the practice evolved during that time sought to bridge this time gap. The follow-up to this question used an expectation versus reality prompt to look at a specific element from the past. To model the prompt, I frequently shared my own difficulty connecting my production teaching to the critical lessons I was acquiring through my graduate studies to interviewees.

3. How do you bring critical approaches into your teaching of production, and do these approaches speak to your own scholarship/activism?

This question bridges past into the present of educators’ teaching approaches. In line with Boulton’s observation that the learning by doing media production should be driven by “a significant amount of critical and theoretical thinking” (2015, p. 90), I sought to better understand how critical concepts drive educators’ teaching of media production. Follow-
ups to this question aimed at specifics of their approach: what are the critical issues fueling their work, and how do they translate their interest/passion into the content and manner in which they teaching? In using these sorts of concrete examples, I wanted to connect the often nebulous idea of ‘critical’ media production pedagogy with the grounded activism of feminist, postcolonial, antiracist, and LGBT+ rights work.

4. Where did you learn these approaches? And do they differ from how colleagues have taught this subject?

I’ve documented the degree to which critical approaches to media production are not readily available in literature or instructor training materials, and how even available materials come up short in critically engaging the production process itself. With this question, I wanted to know how each educator came up with their teaching approach despite not having a template to work from, and to explore if other sources such as a colleague or mentor helped in this development. When time allowed, I followed-up this question by asking whether they received any resistance to their use of critical content in production classes. As Shor and Freire (2003) observe, the anxiety for students to “gain skills and credentials for a tough job market” justifiably makes them resist experimental classrooms such as those outlined in critical pedagogy (p. 480). These pressures are deeply felt in production classes, which have long been influenced by the professionalization discourse (Boulton, 2016; Sholle & Denski, 1993). I devote time to questions to discuss student resistance; however, my interest here was in difficulties they might have met at the departmental or other administrative levels.

5. Can you walk me through an assignment or exercise in your class that illustrates your approach?

My goal here is to move from theory (how they aim to teach) to practice (how that concept is applied through an assignment). Hopefully the assignment educators discuss will connect with their responses to the previous question, illustrating how they translate critical concepts for students both through how they teach, and more importantly, how they encourage students to engage in critical work of their own through the work they create. This question will also open an opportunity for me to ask educators to send any artifacts (syllabi, assignment descriptions, anonymous student work) that can supplement the descriptions given here.
6. *How do you make the production process itself critical, in particular when teaching technical skills like editing techniques or equipment operation?*

Keeping with the example-based thread of the previous question, I wanted to dig deeper into how educators move through the production stage of these assignments. As I’ve argued earlier, many critical approaches to media production often stop being critical once the technical portion of the process begins. I sought to understand how or if educators have built critical approaches into these processes such as video editing, as well as what challenges and opportunities they’ve found in implementing these practices.

7. *How do you illustrate alternative production approaches or question standard/Hollywood practice?*

My aim here is to deepen the thread of the previous question by asking how educators navigate the pressure to teach ‘standard’ production approaches such as the Hollywood standard in their own classes. How do they teach with or against the software, or trouble ‘established practices’ in ways that open up opportunities for critical engagement? I also wanted to get a better idea of how they define ‘established’ practices. I’ve published my own ideas related to these common production conventions elsewhere (Swerzenski, 2021); however, each educator might be critical of different practices or concepts. I use this question as another chance to ask educators for artifacts from their teaching, such as lesson plans, exercise instructions, or even lecture notes. In collecting these materials, I wanted to build a cache of critically oriented approaches to the standard technically and professionally focused production practices, the likes of which can offer a functional alternative for future production educators.

8. *What examples of alternate productions/producers do you use in your teaching?*

Critical media production pedagogy cannot just be different from standard instructional approaches; it has to offer something to students. In her review of alternative media production, Jeppesen (2016) explores how DIY, community-based, critical, and radical strategies can create new subjectivities, serve communities, and create space for new modes of aesthetic expression. With her approach in mind, I wanted to understand how educators illustrate the value of alternative approaches to students, such as by sharing examples of unconventional media texts (i.e. non-Hollywood films). Where do educators locate these examples? How do they use them in their classes? And how do students react to them?
9. **What is the biggest challenge for students with critical production assignments?**

As I outlined in Chapter 2, the ‘theory’ of deconstructing media and ‘practice’ of producing it happen in separate contexts: different spaces (lab versus lecture hall), different instructors (academics versus media industry professionals), and different workloads (essays versus multimedia projects). As a result, bringing theory and practice together through critical media production assignments is a challenge not only for the educators who come up with them, but the students tasked with completing the work. To this end, I wanted to dive into the difficulty of bridging theory and practice from the student perspective. How do educators critique standard production practices and promote alternative practices in ways that resonate with students? In asking educators to map these difficulties onto the assignment they described in the earlier question, I aimed to ground these issues in concrete examples rather than drift into a vaguer review of ‘challenges.’

10. **Do students ever push back against your emphasis on critical ideas?**

   Alternatively, how do you sell students on this process?

My goal here was to take the prompt from the earlier question and further explore the idea of student resistance. Sholle & Denski (1993), Apple (2003), Zanker (2007), and Boulton (2016) all speak to the tendency for students to resist critical themes in production classes, seeing it as a distraction from skill-building. I was interested to hear about the degree to which educators see this sort of resistance in their own students, be it because of the aforementioned reason or others. As a follow-up, I also sought to understand how educators navigate this tension. How do they position critical work as not in opposition to skill-building, but as beneficial to personal or professional goals?

11. **Do you choose the software/equipment that you teach? How do you negotiate its role?**

In exploring the influence of the professionalization discourse in media production courses, I argue that editing software now acts as the primary influence in enforcing and reproducing that discourse. Though often perceived as value neutral, these tools now actively shape how we author media texts (Manovich, 2013). In the classroom, this influence is often felt through the ‘best practices,’ disseminated through the tool itself, be it through the functions it does or doesn’t make available or the tutorials and other instructional tools built into its interface that point toward correct forms of usage. My
goal in posing this question to educators was to expand on (or possibly test) my argument by understanding their own relationship to media production tools in the classroom, and the degree to which they take agency in this technological relationship by determining what parts of what tools are used. Does technology, as Apple (2003) argues, assert the language of efficiency, job skills, production standards over critical considerations? Or do they find in these tools (and their own negotiation over which ones they do and don’t use) new ways in which to approach critical questions? My goal was to better understand educators’ relationship with production software, be it adversarial, symbiotic, or perhaps both.

12. **How do you uphold student voice through your assignments?**

Traditional approaches to media production instruction have largely followed the transmission model, with instructors teaching students the ‘correct’ means of producing a media text via tutorials or other step-by-step processes (Freire, 1970; Buckingham, 2013). By contrast, a critical approach to media production should support Freirean concepts of dialogue, student voice, and transformation, one that “enlightens students to the potential that they have, as media producers, to shape the world they live in and to help turn it into the world they imagine” (Morrell et al., 2013, p. 3). For educators looking to instill critical concepts into their production courses, I wanted to understand the ways in which these principles can get complicated when put into practice. How do they teach core production skills without silencing student expression, especially through assessments of their work? And what if students do not wish to engage with critical topics, or, more troublingly, wish to perpetuate racist, sexist, or bigoted messages through the work they produce? To avoid purely theoretical discussion, I asked participants for specific examples of assignments that have or haven’t upheld these goals.

13. **How do you assess student work, especially in attributing technical and critical value to student work?**

Coming after the previous questions on student voice and transformative action, I want to see how educators balance these loftier pedagogical goals with the necessary work of grading students. Do they focus on the technical aptitude students show with multimedia assignments (form) or the ideas they express through these media texts (content)? I’m hoping to get into the details here and go through rubrics or other metrics educators use to evaluate assignments.
14. What is the value of production both in classes like yours going forward, and can that value be extended further across the curriculum? What other uses as a critical tool do you believe media production has?

I wanted to discuss whether educators perceive media production as having an expanded role in future college coursework. Production courses still comprise a relatively small portion of the Communication curricula in the majority of programs (Buckingham, 2013). They are also typically separated from more academically-oriented courses that do teach or utilize multimedia assignments (Denski, 1991). Do educators see these trends as changing in the future, or will this dichotomy remain intact? Finally, do they see opportunities for media production activities outside their current position? One such site has been around the issue of fake news, where production skills may play a role in helping students detect digitally manipulated media texts. I was curious to see whether educators have imagined or perhaps already created new contexts for critical media production pedagogy to be implemented.
APPENDIX B

STUDY CONSENT FORM

Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Primary Researcher: J.D. Swerzenski, jswerzenski@umass.edu
Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Leda Cooks, lcooks@umass.edu

Study Title: Locating a Critical Media Production Pedagogy

1. WHAT IS THIS FORM?
This form is called a Consent Form. It will give you information about the study so you can make an informed decision about participation in this research. We encourage you to take some time to think this over and ask questions now and at any other time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and you will be given a copy for your records.

2. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF THIS RESEARCH STUDY THAT I SHOULD BE AWARE OF?

This form is called a Consent Form. It will give you information about the study so you can make an informed decision regarding your participation. Your participation is fully voluntary. Further, it will not require you to divulge any personal information beyond your name and institutional affiliation. The data you provide through participation in these interviews will be used for the researcher’s dissertation project “Locating a Critical Media Production Pedagogy.”

3. WHY AM I DOING THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

The purpose of this research study is to better understand critical approaches to teaching media production, specifically courses taught in communication and media-related departments. Media production coursework such as video editing and image design is often approached as a technical process, more in line with professional skill building than critical goals. My intent is to speak with educators who practice a different approach to teaching production, one that looks to understand and challenge media norms rather than just reproduce them. Given the limited resources published available on this topic, this study works to collect the experiential knowledge of media production educators. Through interviews with educators as well as site visits to classes, the study hopes to establish a grounding for critical media production approaches, one that can serve future educators looking to bring media production practice and critical theories together.
4. WHO CAN PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

Participants in this study are instructors of media production, all of whom teach at the college level and who apply critical concepts in their teaching. No other demographic criteria were used to determine participants.

5. WHERE WILL THIS RESEARCH STUDY TAKE PLACE AND HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL PARTICIPATE?

Interviews for this study will be held remotely via video or audio call and will involve 25-30 total participants.

6. WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO AND HOW MUCH TIME WILL IT TAKE?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to set up a time to speak with the researcher via video or audio call (Zoom, Skype, or Facetime). The interview is structured to last for 30-45 minutes, though it is requested that you set aside a full hour for your participation. The subject of the interview will focus on your experience as a production educator, including challenges you’ve faced in bringing critical concepts into technically oriented coursework, institutional or professional pressures you’ve faced, and classroom experiences that have been formative in your growth/perspective as an educator. If you feel uncomfortable with any topic, please feel free to express these concerns before the interview.

In using materials from these interviews in my research, I plan to use your name and institutional affiliations in order to give full credit to your ideas and experiences. No other personal information will be collected or published for this research.

7. WILL BEING IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY HELP ME IN ANY WAY?

You may not directly benefit from this research; however, I hope that your participation in this study can help provide a valuable (and at present, largely unavailable) resource for bringing critical concepts into media production pedagogy. The cumulative experiences offered by other study participants may also provide valuable in your own teaching.

8. WHAT ARE MY RISKS OF BEING IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

There are minimal risks associated with this research study; however, a risk of breach of confidentiality always exists and we have taken the steps to minimize this risk as outlined in section 9 below.
9. HOW WILL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION BE PROTECTED?

Your privacy and confidentiality are important to me. The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of your study records.

As noted earlier, it is my intention to provide your name and institutional affiliation in the finished study. This measure I believe is important in assigning full credit to the ideas and experiences expressed in the completed research, and to make visible a broader network of media production educators who are engaging with critical ideas in this practice. I will collect no other personal information from you as part of this study.

The recordings from our interviews will be saved on a secure hard drive accessible only to me. Transcripts of these conversations and any subsequent coding data will also be saved on this drive. Recordings will be deleted after the completion of this study.

10. WILL I BE GIVEN ANY MONEY OR OTHER COMPENSATION FOR BEING IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

Payment or other compensation will not be given for your participation in this study.

11. WHO CAN I TALK TO IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

Take as long as you like before you make a decision. We will be happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the researcher by email at jswerzenski@umass.edu or Faculty Sponsor Dr. Leda Cooks at lcooks@umass.edu.

Additionally, if you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of Massachusetts Amherst Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) at (413) 545-3428 or humansubjects@ora.umass.edu.”

12. WHAT HAPPENS IF I SAY YES, BUT I CHANGE MY MIND LATER?

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate.

13. SUBJECT STATEMENT OF VOLUNTARY CONSENT

When signing this form I am agreeing to voluntarily enter this study. I have had a chance to read this consent form, and it was explained to me in a language which I use. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers. I have been informed that I can withdraw at any time. A copy of this signed Informed Consent Form has been given to me.
By signing below I indicate that the participant has read and, to the best of my knowledge, understands the details contained in this document and has been given a copy.

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent
Print Name: Date:
APPENDIX C

CMPP TEACHING ACTIVITY

This attached piece is a prototype of a much larger translation of this dissertation project that I hope to undertake in the next year. As present, the guide only exists in a written form. While a necessity given dissertation guidelines, I see a multimodal presentation of these findings as better serving the larger spirit of the project. The prototype I’ve included here stresses the importance of process over product when teaching production skills, an approach gleaned from my interviews with Profs. Jen Proctor and Oscar Guerra. This lesson focuses on audio mixing and includes a video tutorial overviewing the lesson as well as a lesson plan with links to raw clips for use in classroom exercises. The goal in both pieces is to critique the notion of a correct or natural audio mix, an approach that limits the role of sound to a mirror of the visual action on screen. Using a short single shot clip, I first present what sounds to be a correct or natural sound mix. I then break down the component parts of the audio mix, showing how this naturalness is entirely constructed. I then retool those components to demonstrate how sound mixing—rather than mimicking the visuals—can be used to redirect the feel or focus of what we see onscreen. Taking this time to play with the mixing process opens new meaning-making modes often missed when the emphasis falls only upon producing a ‘correct’ sounding product. Along with this critical aim, the aim of the lesson is to place production concepts such as close miking, synchronous sound, and sound perspective not as terms to be mastered, but as valuable instruments of creative expression.

In presenting this project at the pre-conference, I’m hoping to garner feedback from other makers as to how to best proceed with the project, particularly the ‘conversion’ of research materials from written to multimodal forms. For example, I’ve presented fairly straightforward video works here, but there may be more effective modes of communicating these findings. This lesson also focuses more on adding critical content to production-focused instruction; future materials will work to integrate production-based exercises into more studies-oriented courses. I hope to develop more of the findings from my research into these sorts of multimedia resources, organizing these pieces into a publicly accessible guide for media educators.
Producing Past a Correct Sound Mix

J.D. Swerzenski/University of Massachusetts-Amherst

Link to full video lesson: https://vimeo.com/657476380

Link to exercise materials: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1XW5uHXjc18JI5y_CMNi-dwl7VrloIP?usp=sharing

This hands-on production lesson is meant to be held in a lab setting in which students have access to computers with video production software and instructors can use a projector to screen clips. I have used Adobe Premiere in the materials here; however, other software can work as well. Students do not need video production experience to complete these exercises. Ideally, all aspects of the lesson can be completed in a single 1-1.5 hour session, though technical issues might necessitate more time. This lesson looks to emphasize process over product, and as such, I do not recommend assessing the mixes students create in the exercise beyond a participation or completion grade.

Learning Goals

a. Challenge the concept of a natural or correct sound mix by illustrating the meaning-making potential of creative sound mixing
b. Familiarize students with technical concepts of synchronous sound, close miking, sound perspective, and asynchronous sound.

c. Build audio editing and multitracking skills in Adobe Premiere or other editing software

Class Instructions

1. *Opening Discussion (5min)*: What is ‘correct’ sound?

2. *Lecture (5min)*: Introduce concept of synchronous sound: the idea of audio mirroring the action seen on screen. Show Clip 1 to illustrate.

3. *Technical Lesson (10min)*: Open the session in Adobe Premiere or other video production software. Break down the sound mix heard in clip one, introducing concepts of room tone and close miking when demonstrating the different clips used to create the Clip 1 mix. Play Clip 2 to illustrate the necessity of sound mixing to achieve ‘natural’ or synchronous audio.

4. *Disrupting the Correct Mix (10min)*: Using Clips 3 and 4 in concert with the Premiere project file, highlight how close miking and audio multitracking can be used to alter visual meaning. Include concepts of sound perspective (Clip 3) and asynchronous sound (Clip 4) if time permits.

5. *Mixing Exercise (30-40min)*: Working individually or in pairs, students first download all clips from the assignment file and import them into a new project in Premiere. After adding the video clip to their sequence, they will then create three different sound mixes using the other audio clips provided in the assignment file that illustrate the three mixing concepts discussed earlier (synchronous sound, sound perspective, asynchronous sound). Depending on time, students should be encouraged to record new audio, import sound effects, and experiment with sound filters and effects to produce an even greater range of meanings in their mixes.

6. *Clip Screening (Remaining Time)*: After students complete their mixes, have them export their finished files to the Drive on which they originally downloaded the clips. Play through their work on the projector, making sure to emphasize the value of different mixes in creating new meanings rather than a correct product.
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