

**Pedagogy**

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**REPORTING THE RIGHT THING  
AN OUTLINE AND REFLECTION  
ON A DRAMA WORKSHOP EXPLORING  
MEDIA BIAS IN REPORTING THE NEWS***Robert Albrecht, Dina Bruno, and Carmine Tabone*

"Reporting the Right Thing" is a workshop designed for a college-level general studies class. The workshop uses a variety of drama techniques to guide the participants on an exploration of media bias in the reporting of a fictional incident involving the death of a young Black man while in police custody. The goal of the lesson plan is to engage students and guide them to a deeper understanding of media bias in the reporting of the news. Although the workshop employs drama, it is by no means intended as an acting lesson or an examination of theatrical technique. The strategy is a pedagogical one that builds on our natural attraction to storytelling and role-play as a platform for the development

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of academic skills and critical insights into the ways in which media influence our understanding of events.

An effective drama workshop within the context of media studies not only responds to the needs of the curriculum but, more importantly, to the cultural experience and needs of the participants. Taught at an urban university located in an ethnically diverse area, this workshop attempts to transform an issue of great relevance to many students into an opportunity for learning. In Jersey City, New Jersey, as in other urban areas throughout the United States, the issue of police-community relations is of grave concern. "Reporting the Right Thing" allows students who are not drama students to take on multiple roles within a fictional story as eyewitnesses to a murder, as police officers involved with the incident, and as newspaper reporters covering the event. This approach allows students to enter different roles and to speak out from multiple perspectives as they listen and respond to others who assume opposing positions. In the words of Stevenson and Deasy (2005), "drama, creates a safe space in which students are able to get inside the characters in a narrative and develop capacities for understanding their perspectives and motivations" (p. 59).

"Reporting the Right Thing" is an example of *process drama*, an approach to drama and education that de-emphasizes stage presentation and places the focus on in-depth drama experiences around social issues and educational goals. Its two key techniques are teacher-in-role (where the teacher takes on a pivotal role within the drama being developed by the class) and tableau (where students arrange themselves in a still pose that expresses a key image in the story). The goal of this approach is to get students to "live through" fictional situations in order to arrive at a deeper understanding. This tradition was developed by two British educators, Dorothy Heathcote (with Herbert, 1985) and Gavin Bolton (1984), during the second half of the 20th century. Although sometimes used in the United States, process drama has many more proponents and practitioners in the British Isles, Canada, and Australia (Booth, 1994; Morgan & Saxton, 1987; Neelands, 1984; O'Neill, 1995; Taylor, 2000; Wilhelm & Edmiston, 1998).

The workshop presented here incorporates such skills as formulating and asking questions, public speaking, working in pairs and in small groups, taking notes, and writing reports. The workshop concludes with the writing of a newspaper article from one of three perspectives: partisan press, commercial press, or a paper of record.

## THE WORKSHOP OUTLINE

### Introductory Discussion: The News Is Selective

The importance of the news media is that they not only report the news, they also frame it. News media are pivotal in deciding which stories are treated as important and which stories are not; which stories get constant repetition and which stories do not; which stories get front page attention and which stories get buried deep inside the paper; which photographs are included and which photographs are excluded; which voices and opinions get a full and complete hearing and which ones get excluded, taken out of context or simply underrepresented.

The workshop begins with the instructor explaining to the class the differences between three major types of newspapers: partisan newspapers, commercial newspapers, and newspapers of record:

1. The partisan press generally argues one political point of view or represents the interests of a particular political party or social movement. The partisan press was especially prominent during the period leading up to the War of Independence, in the early years of the Republic, and in the Abolitionist Movement prior to the Civil War.
2. The commercial press is primarily concerned with increasing circulation and making profits. This commercial motivation leads to a reporting style that sensationalizes stories of sex, violence, celebrity gossip, and so on: "If it bleeds, it leads."
3. Newspapers of record attempt to distinguish themselves by emphasizing higher standards of journalism that downplay sensationalism and that keep partisan points of view confined to the opinion page. These newspapers are taken more seriously by scholars as part of the historical record.

The workshop begins with a brief lecture outlining newspaper types so as to set the context for what is to follow. Moreover, as a lecture, it represents a format with which the students are familiar. The advantage of this approach is that it allows the teacher to gradually move the students in an unthreatening way from passive listening to the active involvement that the workshop requires.

### Tapping Into the Vernacular Culture: A Video Clip and Discussion

An effective drama workshop attempts to build on the everyday or vernacular knowledge and experience of the participants. In this instance, we are building on a popular movie (Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*) and an issue of great urgency to people of color (police brutality). We begin by explaining to the class that we are going to show a clip from a movie about a fictional event that would certainly make it into the local newspaper if it actually did happen. Most of us would learn about this event secondhand through newspaper and television coverage. Students are instructed to think how the reporting of this event might differ depending on the news source. How would a partisan newspaper cover the story? A commercial newspaper? A paper of record? This discussion can be carried out in pairs, small groups or with the entire class.

We show a clip from *Do the Right Thing*. Begin the clip with the scene late in the movie when Radio Raheem, Bugged Out, and Smiley enter Sal's Famous Pizzeria at closing time with the radio blasting. The young men have come to demand that Sal display images of famous African Americans on the wall alongside famous Italian Americans. Angry words and ethnic slurs are exchanged with the result that Sal destroys Raheem's radio. A brawl breaks out and spills into the street. End the clip as the police cars speed away, sirens screaming, with Radio Raheem dead in the back seat of a squad car.

Once again, we are using a format with which the students are very familiar—passively watching a scene from a movie. The powerful emotional content of the clip, however, transforms the experience into an effective way to motivate participation.

### **Putting on the Mantle of the Expert: Students in Role as Reporters**

Students are asked to imagine that they are reporters who have been assigned to cover this story by the editor-in-chief of a newspaper. Depending on the newspaper they work for, of course, they will be required to cover the story from that perspective. The students are then each given a number: 1, 2, or 3. Those designated "1" are reporters for a paper of record (*The New York Times*) and are expected to report the story thoroughly and with close attention to being accurate in what they write. Those designated "2" are reporters for commercial newspapers (either *The New York Daily News* or *The New York Post*) and are expected to report the story in a way that is flashy, sensationalistic, and yet still within the bounds of credibility. Those designated as "3" are reporters for partisan newspapers and are given the choice to work either for *The Blue Knight* (a newspaper that represents the interests of the New York City Police Department) or *The African-American Voice* (a newspaper that represents the interests of the African-American community in New York City).

By "putting on the mantle of the expert" and entering the role of reporter, the students raise their standards and expectations for their own personal behavior. Their questions are expressed with more poise and confidence, reflecting the voice of the mature professional they play.

### **Sparring With Power: The Mayor's News Conference**

The students are informed that the mayor has called a news conference to make a statement and answer questions about the incident in Brooklyn. What are some of the questions that could be addressed to the mayor? After the students make a couple of suggestions, they are asked to make a list of three or four questions in their notebooks.

The teacher plays the role of mayor. The teacher does not try to copy the mannerisms or imitate the voice of the mayor but does try to answer their questions as the mayor would.

The teacher leaves the room, returns and from the front of the room makes the following (or similar) statement:

Ladies and gentlemen of the press, last night at approximately 11 p.m. in the Bedford Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, there was an altercation between police and a troubled youth who had had many previous run-ins with local authorities and area residents. The young man in question is Raheem Johnson, 19 years old, of 4461 Atlantic Avenue. Mr. Johnson, who has a long history of violent outbursts and several prior arrests, was armed with brass knuckles and a knife at the time of his arrest. In



subduing the perpetrator, several officers were required to overpower Mr. Johnson. Mr. Johnson expired en route to the hospital in what appears to have been an asthma attack.... If you have any questions, I'd be happy to answer them at this time.

At this point, the reporters ask their questions and the mayor answers until such time as the mayor indicates that he or she has another engagement and must leave. The mayor exits briskly.

In their roles as reporters, students find a safe way to challenge an authority figure (the teacher in the role of the mayor) and are not afraid to follow up with additional probing questions necessary to the process of critical thinking. Students, for example, will frequently point out inconsistencies and contradictions in the mayor's responses and ask for clarification about the procedures and timetable for the investigation. When the mayor tries to discredit their questions or push them aside, the students in the role of reporter will commonly insist on a coherent response.

### **Digging Deeper: Interviewing Witnesses, Community Members, and Relevant Individuals**

The teacher returns to the classroom—no longer in the role of mayor but as teacher—and asks the students to relate some of the things that they heard the mayor say. The teacher then asks the reporters who else they would like to interview in order to get more information for their story. As the students make suggestions (the police chief, the officer involved in the killing, the owner of the pizzeria, the mother of the deceased man, eyewitnesses in the pizzeria, other police officers, the medical examiner, etc.), the teacher writes their responses on the board.

The teacher then breaks the students into pairs. They quickly decide who is "A" and who is "B." "A" is the reporter and tells "B" which one of the characters listed on the board he or she will pretend to be. The reporter should be taking notes based on what "B" is saying.

After a few minutes, the roles are reversed: "B" becomes the reporter and selects the character that "A" will play.

If there is time, new pairs are created and the same steps are followed with different witnesses.

By breaking into pairs, students who typically do not speak in class or with each other are forced to do so. The "reporter" is forced to formulate questions of a critical nature and the "witness" is forced to use his or her imagination to respond. The teacher can visit some of the dyads and help out those who seem to be having trouble getting started.

### **Creating The Photograph: One Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words**

The editor-in-chief needs a photograph to accompany the story. What kind of photograph should be included in the story? The teacher asks for a few

volunteers and poses them in a photograph representing the story (the argument in the pizzeria, the brawl on the street, the crowd in front of the pizzeria, the young man being arrested, the funeral of Radio Raheem, etc.).

Students are then assembled into groups based on the type of newspaper they are working for: partisan, commercial, or paper of record. The partisan group is further divided between *The African-American Voice* and *The Blue Knight*. If possible, each group should be comprised of four to six students. If the group is too large, it can be broken into smaller units.

Each group demonstrates its photograph to the class. The teacher asks the class if the photograph is appropriate for the type of newspaper in which it will appear. The teacher then asks the class to suggest a caption for the photograph. Is the caption suggested appropriate for the newspaper in question? The teacher and the class may then ask questions to individuals in the photograph, such as Who are you? Where do you come from? Why are you acting this way? What are you feeling?

In an image-based culture, an analytical reading of photographs is critical. News media editorialize through photos as much as they do through words and it is important to be aware of this. Captions, of course, frame the meaning of the photograph and guide the reader's reaction.

By asking and answering questions of the photograph, students have the opportunity to speak in role as other characters. Sensitive topics and attitudes related to ethnicity, oppression, and police misconduct can be dealt with more openly but from the safe distance of role play.

### The Writing Assignment

The students are then asked to write a news article, appropriate to the newspaper they work for, that tells the story of what happened. The article, of course, must also have a headline reflecting the type of newspaper they work for. The assignment can be done in class or for homework.

Writing without conviction or a point of view is generally dull both for the reader and the writer. The drama experience, because it involves the students emotionally, motivates them to find their own voice—or at least the voice of the reporter they represent—and the result is frequently enthusiastic and exhibits a technical quality (punctuation, spelling, structural organization, etc.) superior to their usual work.

### EXTENDING THE WORKSHOP

This workshop can be easily extended in several directions depending on the level of interest and the time available:

1. Additional opportunities for drama. The opportunities for drama are numerous. The teacher could ask the students to attend the wake of Radio Raheem either in role as reporters or as mourners. What kinds

of things do they see and hear at the wake? The teacher in role could play a family member or a pastor and elicit those gathered to express their feelings about the young man's death.

Another direction that could be explored is the creation of a meeting at the precinct house immediately following the incident. What is the best way to deal with this controversy? Should the officers stand together as brothers and support each other or should the truth be made clear? How do the Black officers feel about this situation? This meeting may be informal (officers on a coffee break, partners in a squad car, after work at a diner, etc.) or formal (the teacher in role as the captain who leads a discussion with his or her subordinates about the proper action to take).

We could also create a meeting at the mayor's office with students suggesting who might be included in the meeting: council people, public relations advisors, police officials, members of the press, community representatives, and so on. The teacher in role as the mayor can set the tone for the meeting and guide the discussion. How should the city react to this situation? Should the mayor's office stonewall the investigation? If the accused police officer is prosecuted for misconduct will this action hurt police morale? Should the mayor visit the community and meet with community leaders? If so, under what conditions would he or she do that?

2. Letter writing. Students could be asked to write letters to the mayor's office or to the local newspaper articulating their perspective on the incident and what they believe should be done. This extension provides an opportunity for students to learn the appropriate format and language for a formal letter. This letter can address either a fictional incident (the one depicted in *Do the Right Thing*) or actual (relating to a similar incident that has actually occurred).
3. The art exhibit. Art, especially at the university level, is an underused medium of communication. Students could be asked to prepare a piece of art that reflects the incident in the film. For some students, the task of putting their ideas and feelings in a visual form will be a welcomed opportunity to express in images something that may be difficult for them to put into in words.

After the work is completed (either in class or as homework), some of the art could be exhibited in the classroom or in the corridors of the university. Students may then visit "the gallery" (either in pairs or as individuals). A group discussion can follow.

4. The oral history interview. Students can be assigned to conduct an oral history interview with a real police officer or someone who has actually witnessed or experienced an incident involving a confrontation between the police and the community. The interviews can be gathered either on video or audio, transcribed on paper, and discussed in class.
5. Archival research and critical analysis. Students select an actual published incident involving a police/community confrontation and then compare

how the story is reported in different newspapers (preferably a paper of record, a commercial paper, and a partisan paper).

## CONCLUSION

"Reporting the Right Thing" is a workshop that attempts to get college students "inside the characters in a narrative" and thinking about media bias in the reporting of the news. Built around Spike Lee's film *Do the Right Thing*, the workshop places students in the role of reporters, eyewitnesses, and pertinent members of the community as a pedagogical strategy that develops such skills as asking questions, taking accurate notes, speaking in public, working in groups, thinking critically, and writing.

This workshop has been held several times and has never failed to encourage the verbal participation of the students, many of whom are from inner-city neighborhoods. As one student put it, "I grew up in Bedford-Stuyvesant [the neighborhood in the movie where the action takes place] just a couple of blocks from the projects. We often heard stories about people being killed by the police and then finding that the story was covered up or ignored by the media." Another student commented that the "workshop really hit home. It's part of my history. It's things that we experience or hear about from friends, things that my parents told me about in the South. It gave us a chance to talk about something we're very angry about."

What has been perhaps most striking about this workshop is that it gives underachieving students, those who often bring a whole other set of unappreciated skills and experiences to the classroom, a chance to shine. It is common, for example, to find students who are familiar with similar confrontations between police and the community and, as a result, ask questions of the mayor that are more probing and with follow ups that are more critical. When the mayor asserts that Raheem has died of an asthma attack while in police custody, students not only demand evidence be produced to support this claim but want to know the source of the report as well. To demand evidence and inquire about the source of the information is, of course, a key feature of critical thinking. At the same time that the students are more engaged and critical, the quality of writing is also more focused, coherent and passionate. One student concluded that "words are powerful; writing is a form of empowerment. Words can make a difference when they are shared with the world."

"The media are our windows to the world" is an assertion frequently made by various news channels. "Give us 22 minutes and we'll give you the world" boasts New York's most popular radio news station; *The New York Times* proclaims it provides "all the news that's fit to print"; and Fox News declares itself to be "fair and balanced." Our sources of news, however, are not—and can never be—totally objective, fair or complete, but only representations of reality that are necessarily selective and framed in particular ways. Key pieces of information are always left out, distorted, and ignored. In this workshop, college students have the opportunity to explore media bias from inside the drama



experience while, at the same time, they are motivated to develop skills crucial to the learning process.

Finally, although this workshop was developed for a general studies class in media studies, it can be easily modified to explore philosophy (ethics and epistemology), psychology (perception, memory and experience), art (various ways of expressing the drama in visual media), and urban studies (race relations, police-community relations).

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