

Book Reviews

Kenneth Nixon & Walter Werner.
THE MEDIA AND PUBLIC ISSUES:
A GUIDE FOR TEACHING CRITICAL MINDEDNESS.
London: The Althouse Press, 1990.
81 pp. \$12.95.

This book is about teaching students to be critical when relying on the media for information. The authors' intent is to provide a practical tool for teachers to use in bridging issues central to multicultural education. High school teachers are said to be the main audience for this book, and I agree. It is not theoretically complicated enough for university, but does require some sophistication.

Critical mindedness is never really defined, but there is the sense that it involves separating fact from value, establishing whether support is offered for arguments, and evaluating the strategies used by authors to advance their claims. As the authors say, it is important "to question the clarity and strength of reasoning, identify assumptions and values, recognize points of view and attitudes, and evaluate conclusions and actions" (p. 2).

The underlying premise of the book is not only general media literacy, but the specific training of skills useful for multicultural issues. The former tends to get more attention than the latter, however. The authors say that being critical is especially important in dealing with controversial social issues for the media can shape controversy in terms of who gets heard, and the rationalizations used to justify their interests. Students need to be trained to separate personal voices from those of groups, disciplines, regions, and nations. Given that the interests of minorities tend to be misrepresented or made invisible, being critical can enable seeing the agenda behind the news. Such an analysis can not guarantee open-mindedness, of course, but it is a prerequisite.

The bulk of the book is given to explaining the difference between value, empirical, and conceptual questions. Much attention is devoted to evaluating different types of claims, arguments, evidence, and discursive strategies. These sections are longer than necessary, more philosophical than interesting, and could be livened up with more media items. The authors use many examples taken from the newspapers, especially from the *Globe and Mail* which they say is less sensationalistic than most. One criticism I have, however, is that the analysis could be applied to the examples in more detail, allowing us to 'follow along' better.

The goal is one of preparing students for citizenship, to make them discerning and informed adults able to participate meaningfully in a modern democratic society. It is assumed that students are indoctrinated by the media, and that their opinions are often manipulated. We do tend to have a heavy reliance on the media for information in our society. And yet the knowledge we receive there is secondhand, produced for us by people we'll never meet, of places we'll in all likelihood never see, and of events we could never control. The media are powerful agents in society because of their use of information. The politics of information, however, is such that the news can not be assumed to always be objective.

There is the explicit idea, then, that there are good and bad media, and good and bad reporting. Bias can occur through omission and commission, and the result is that of informing the reader. People are not assumed to be dupes, but as the authors say, those in control of the media machine are experts of persuasion. There is furthermore the tendency of the media to sensationalize issues. In a large, competitive marketplace, sensationalism sells, without educating the public about wider social issues. There also tends to be a homogenization which occurs under corporate ownership where differences in reporting are discouraged, as we saw in the Persian Gulf war. The end result of these various biases is a cumulative diseducation of the public.

The version of bias used in the analysis is twofold: reporter's opinions can be prejudiced, and reporting occurs within a social context which favours certain perspectives on issues. There isn't a conspiracy, but rather "the media assumes (*sic*) many of the same current concerns, stereotypes, and values of the dominant society" (p. 48). Underlying this very important but tricky idea of bias is the notion that the media don't just reflect reality, but can create it. This mediated version of reality thus contains intratextual biases which reflect tacit social prejudices. This is readily apparent when reading news of crime, or news about minorities, as in the Oka crisis.

This said, one problem I have is that the authors could say more about the production of consensus in the news. Ideology is reduced to a concept that is apparent only when there are conflicting claims about events in the world.

Critical-mindedness is said to be important only when there are no ready made answers. But perhaps it is those times when we are most assured of the rightness of our actions and beliefs that introspection is required.

I believe that high school students should have better training in media literacy. As one who teaches media analysis in university, I have to spend a lot of time deconstructing the facticity of the news with students. Once shown, however, students are quick to take up the analysis and apply it to their everyday lives. Another important bias to be found in the media, in terms of teaching about ideology, is that of gender. Unfortunately the authors do not take up how the news is largely constructed by men, to reflect male issues, in a society dominated by male interests.

What the authors are advocating is a return to knowledge-ability, training students to evaluate claims to knowledge made in the media. They bow to reflexivity in saying that the teacher should not indoctrinate students, even in this form of analysis, but should respect a diversity of opinion. There is the intent then that the text should not become simply another item in the corpus to memorize. The authors are saying that in the world and in the classroom there can be a respect of differences that is not relativistic. Students can be trained to seek out the context and history of issues, and to examine how issues are formulated. The skill, of course, is rote, but the desire can not be trained, only inspired.

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Robert E. Brooke.

WRITING AND SENSE OF SELF:

IDENTITY NEGOTIATION IN WRITING WORKSHOPS.

Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1991.

166 pp. \$14.95; NCTE members \$10.95.

Writing and Sense of Self is a broad, bold title, and the implications of this book are also broad and bold. Robert Brooke, with the help of Joy Ritchie (who wrote one chapter and collaborated in the research) argues that understanding how students "negotiate" classroom roles is essential to the work of writing teachers. The concept of negotiating roles stems from social and political theory. The notions of "identity" come mainly from psychology and anthropology, with some intriguing input from imaginative literature. Together, these ideas coalesce into a theory with strong interdisciplinary roots which has rich potential. Almost anyone concerned with the ways human beings behave in groups will benefit from exploring these areas more deeply or from new viewpoints. This book shows how worthwhile the exploration can be.