

Teaching Media Studies at a Liberal Arts College in China: A Pedagogical Reflection on Social Diversity, Difference and Critical Thinking

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Abstract

This article examines the pedagogical challenges and opportunities involved in teaching Media Studies in Chinese Mainland's private liberal arts colleges, where demographics indicate that students are predominantly Han Chinese from upper-middle-class backgrounds, with limited exposure to social diversity. Employing a mixed-methods approach—quantitative analysis on enrollment data analysis, qualitative classroom observations and case studies of pedagogical initiatives, this article investigates the structural homogeneity of the student body and its implications for critical thinking. Findings reveal that while students initially focused on specific diversity topics (e.g., gender), structured pedagogical interventions broadened their critical awareness to include disability, religion, migration and cross-cultural representations. By emphasizing social-inclusion pedagogies centered on “social difference” rather than static “diversity,” this research demonstrates how educators can counter neoliberal marketization in higher education and foster critical engagement with plural communities. The study contributes to global debates on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) by advocating for curricula that bridge privilege and social realities, thus preparing students to navigate and address inequality in a divided world.

Keywords: neoliberalism, higher education, social inclusion, media pedagogy, critical thinking

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As the researchers point out, income inequality and racial inequality go hand in hand, and affluent children are often educated without a great deal of interaction with members of other socioeconomic and racial groups. Private schools, even while they try to dispense financial aid to attract a more diverse student body, are still the domain of the wealthy – and the white.

–Blythe Grossberg, *I Left My Homework in the Hamptons: What I Learned Teaching the Children of the One Percent* (2021, p. 41)

The schooling process trains (Chinese) elite youth to compete for global status. During high school, elite adolescents must cultivate class-based cultural taste, develop the ability to skillfully utilize knowledge, exhibit a relaxed attitude when interacting with superiors and inferiors, and dissociate from markers of nonelite status. After entering college, these elite youth continue to refine the marks of elitism and form networks with similarly elite alumni.

– Y. L. Chiang, *Study Gods: How the new Chinese elite prepare for global competition* (2022, p. 7)

The above quotations challenge the pedagogical practices of instructors who teach in institutions that draw from a pool of students that is characterized by

demographic homogeneity in terms of socioeconomic class and race/ethnicity. Scholars have extensively critiqued the effects of neoliberalism in education, particularly its reinforcement of hierarchical structures (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2000; Davies and Bansel, 2007) and “pedagogy of the privileged” (Cresswell et al., 2013; Grossberg, 2021; Chiang, 2022) as well as the teaching approaches about “the other” that affect othering within and beyond the classroom (Gordon, 2010; Chakravarty, 2019). On the one hand, we can see the pervasiveness of the student-as-customer ethos in the educational environment, which mirrors a broader, global trend identified by Slaughter and Rhoades (2000) where neoliberalism has led to the centralization of market values in educational institutions. The colleges and universities may outwardly seem non-discriminatory; however, the affordability of higher education is homogenizing the student body on campus (Mintz, 2021). On the other hand, many educators are engaging critically with neoliberal social realities in ways that prepare privileged students for their roles as future citizens who understand and respond actively to social inequality. This article draws on the author’s experience of teaching Media Studies at one of the pioneering private international cooperative liberal