12-2003

Assessing a Media Discernment Course for Freshmen at Illiana Christian High School: A Case Study

William Boerman-Cornell

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Abstract

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Document Type

Thesis

Degree Name

Master of Education (MEd)

Department

Graduate Education

First Advisor

Sydney Hielema

Keywords

Master of Education, thesis, Christian education, secondary education, high school students, mass-media, discernment, Illiana Christian High School

Subject Categories

Curriculum and Instruction | Education | Mass Communication

Comments

Action Research Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Education

ASSESSING A MEDIA DISCERNMENT COURSE FOR FRESHMEN AT ILLIANA CHRISTIAN HIGH SCHOOL: A CASE STUDY

By

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Action Research Report
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of the Requirements for the
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December 2003

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Abstract

This case study examines the effectiveness of a team-taught mass-media freshman level course on discernment of media messages, and decision-making. By means of pre- and post- course surveys of students and faculty, this study examines students' decisions about consuming mass media and how after taking the course, their media selection process became more complex, deliberate, and organized. It also examines faculty response to the course in terms of how it appears to affect the students and how it affects faculty teaching and learning.

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Introduction

During an early phase of an outcomes-based accreditation cycle, the faculty and administration of Illiana Christian High School identified a critical area in which students needed instruction. The teachers and administrators felt that students needed instruction in discerning the bewildering array of messages that society (and particularly pop culture) broadcast to them. Although Illiana Christian High School addresses the theory and basis of biblical principles of discernment in Bible class as well as the other courses it offers, there was no vehicle to address what students should do when confronted with the internet, with fashion magazines, hip hop music, television and movies. We wanted the students to be able to discern the hidden and not-so-hidden messages of modern culture that reflect the "spirits of the age" like materialism, consumerism, postmodernism, existentialism, hedonism, and individualism from those elements of truth that proceed from God's general (and specific) revelation.

Illiana Christian High School sent two teachers to the BJ Haan Conference at Dordt College in January of 2000. Those two teachers came up with a plan (later developed more fully the following summer by a larger faculty committee) that would address the need for educating for discernment. At the same time, the course they developed would fight against the fragmentation of messages in the mass media (and in the curricula) by following a team-teaching model to develop unity across the curricular departments.

With the approval of the curriculum committee and the education committee of the board, and with the aid of a curriculum development grant, a group of eight teachers met two times a month through the entire summer to develop the course. During the second semester of the following school year, Reformed Perspectives on Culture (RPOC) replaced Bible I as a requirement for all freshmen.

In order help freshmen understand that our faculty brings a unified perspective to bear on cultural matters, RPOC rotates students through six different teachers, each one teaching a ten-day unit. Though units vary from year to year, a typical line up might include: an English teacher focusing on television shows, a history teacher looking at television news, an instrumental music teacher examining pop music, an art teacher looking at visual advertising in magazines, a physical education teacher discussing body image in the media and society in general, a Bible teacher focusing on societal attitudes toward sexuality, and a business teacher examining consumption, materialism, business and the environment. Illiana Christian High School implemented this new course for all new freshmen from the Spring of 2000 on. The course attempted to fight fragmentation of the curriculum and indeed in society as well, by having seven teachers work together under a curriculum development grant to come up with a common methodology in approaching widely different aspects of culture from the same consistent perspective. After much deliberation, they decided on a structure that would direct each of the seven two-week sections. This structure would also provide the basis for students to approach cultural decisions on their own. The structure, called the "Four Ds", consisted of encouraging students to follow the scheme of Discover (investigate the cultural artifact so you will be informed), Discern (separate out the messages that contain truth from the

ones which represent the "spirits of the age"), Decide (conclude what the best Christian response to the cultural artifact should be), and Do (work toward influencing others to make the right decision.)

As we prepared to teach the course, we worried whether it would make a difference in students' level of discernment. This was meant to be a cornerstone course, and the ideas introduced here would frame a context for further discussion of discernment in coming years. To be able to do that with confidence, we would need to know that the course was working.

One of the aims of this course was to avoid giving students open-and-shut pronouncements about cultural products (e.g. all teen magazines focus unreasonably on impossibly thin bodies). Instead, we developed three goals that aimed at teaching students to discern about cultural issues on their own. The aim of my study was to determine how effectively we achieved these goals.

Research Questions

First, we hoped to help students expand the number of factors they considered when making a decision (e.g. not basing their opinion solely on whether or not their friends liked it). The first research question, then, is, after taking the course, did students show an increase in the number of factors contributing to their decisions

The second goal was to give students a system with which to discern a variety of messages both those consistent with biblical truth, and those originating in the spirits of the age. Thus, the second research question is, after taking the course, did students use a system to discern those messages.

Finally, we were interested in helping students improve the quality and importance of the factors they were considering (e.g. considering the overall message of a movie rather than just the appearance of the aesthetically pleasing actors of the opposite gender who are appearing in the film). So the third research question is, did the quality and importance of the factors students consider in decision-making change after they took the course.

Definitions

I will use the term *media* to refer to the mass media – television, radio, print advertising, the internet, and similar ways that western culture tells its stories and presents its philosophies. *Media discernment*, then, is the process of looking at the products of that mass media (television shows or commercials, songs on the radio, advertising, websites, and so on), trying to unlock the messages, good and bad, contained within it, and making a determination about the relative value of that media product.

Review of Literature

While much has been written about media studies, media curriculum, and messages that media courses should convey, few studies have attempted to chart the effectiveness of a media studies program, almost none of those studies have focused on the high school level, and no study focuses on discernment from a Biblical perspective.

Singer et al. (1980) examined the effectiveness of a pioneering course for third, fourth, and fifth graders. This course taught students to discern the difference between actors and characters in a television show, but it didn't attempt to teach students to distinguish messages the show was carrying, nor did it give them any tools to decide

whether to watch or not. Singer et al. confirmed that children taking the course made measurable gains in learning the vocabulary of television and the techniques of television production. Neither the researchers nor the teachers, however, made any attempt to address discernment of the messages in the programming the children were watching.

Dorr, Graves and Phelps (1980) sought to test which of three media education programs was most effective in terms of reaching elementary children. Each education program they looked at had a different focus or aim. "The first aim was to decrease the degree to which children perceived the [television] programs they watch as real. The second was to increase children's tendencies and abilities to compare television content with information from other sources. The third goal was to diminish the credibility children ascribed to television through teaching about the industry's economic goals, about production, and about other legitimate sources of information" (p. 72). While this study seems to consider on some level a degree of discerning truth from lies, the study indicated that "...children learned the curricula and used them in discussing television's reality, but failed to use them in mediating attitudinal effects" (p. 75). In other words, there was a disconnect between what the children could discuss theoretically and their practical attitudes toward watching or not watching.

Chaffee and Singer, (1982) summarizing a National Institute of Mental Health study, concluded that although in the early eighties many new curricula were being developed to help children understand how television works and how to make distinctions between reality and fantasy on television, there were few corresponding evaluations of the effectiveness of such programs (p. 25). Furthermore, there seems to be a dearth of studies that examine any sort of discernment element in media studies. They

cited a Yale study of a lower elementary school curriculum, but argued that it was more anecdotal than statistical and suggested that there was a need to examine closely the effectiveness of such curricula.

Baron (1985) surveyed two groups of fifth graders before, immediately after, and several months after students took a ten-week media course. Students showed increased media literacy knowledge and increased understanding of media-related concepts. Baron argues that if the learner achieves, "a level of literacy," that will then, "allow him/her to effectively encode and decode the meaning of messages transmitted by various forms of representation" (p. 49). While this study attempts to teach the language of the media, there is no stated or implied evaluation of student's abilities to discern the value of watching (or not watching) a particular program or movie. Baron herself later argues that "...it is not the number of [media studies] projects but rather the rigorous evaluation of the majority of these studies that is sorely lacking" (p. 50).

Later, Quin and McMahon (1993) conducted the first system-wide analysis of how well the curricular standards in a system-wide media course (in this case in the Western Australian School System) were meeting their goals. They determined that the media studies program was most effective in its stated goal of teaching fundamental skills of media analysis (identifying codes, symbols, and conventions used by the mass media). They also determined that female students are consistently more skilled at media analysis than boys. Students from a non-English speaking background and students who were the heaviest users of television seemed to have the most trouble using media analysis skills. Most interestingly, students in their sample group showed an inability to "...recognize the values and attitudes expressed in a media text and to recognize the operation of

sophisticated positioning devices employed by a text such as manipulation of the point of view" (p. 196).

A survey of the literature pertaining to this topic reveals a significant lack of studies examining the high school level and also examining programs that teach students discernment. For a Christian high school such as Illiana, it is important to know whether a media studies program can help students make clearer, more moral decisions.

Method

Participants

In order to determine the effectiveness of this course, I administered a survey (Appendix A) to all freshmen in December of 2000 (after they had had almost an entire semester to mature and get used to high school thinking – and before they had taken the Reformed Perspectives on Culture or RPOC course). In December of 2000, 145 students completed a survey. In June of 2001, after the freshmen had taken the course, they all took the same survey again. This time, 178 students completed the survey. The difference in numbers within a given year is due to field trips and absences. We informed parents about the surveys in an evening meeting which served as an introduction to RPOC in November of 2000.

In the second year of the course, students went through the same procedure. In December of 2001, 167 students were surveyed. In June of 2002, 178 students were surveyed. Again, the difference in numbers within a given year is due to field trips and absences.

To determine the effect of the course on faculty, and to examine their opinion about its effect on students, I distributed questionnaires (Appendix B) to the ten current and past teachers of the RPOC course who were employed at Illiana Christian High School in July of 2003. Five faculty members returned the survey (50% return rate).

Procedure

In developing a question for students to help us determine whether the course was reaching its goals, I sought to provide a complicated hypothetical situation with many possible factors to consider. Students responded to this same question before and after taking the RPOC course. The essay question they answered was based partly on the Robert Duval movie, "The Apostle." The focus of the question was on the decision-making process the students went through, and how that process was changed by taking the course.

Faculty were asked direct questions through a survey that was placed in their boxes. There were two follow up requests asking them to return the survey. After the surveys were returned and I had read the responses, I got permission from several faculty members to use excerpts of their responses and their names in this study.

Data Analysis

Once the essays were collected, I tabulated them in two different ways. First by counting the number of factors that figured into each student's explanation of their decision, both before and after they took the course. Second, I wrote down the different factors they listed and tabulated each time that a decision-making factor was mentioned. Thus, the list of factors, which appears in Table 2, Appendix D, is drawn from their comments, not a prearranged list that I imposed upon their answers. Then, since I was

surveying all the freshmen, rather than a sample, I simply converted the number of each response into a percentage of the total number of students taking the survey.

I analyzed the faculty surveys in a similar manner, coding the responses and grouping similar comments together. Once the various responses were coded and grouped, I tabulated them and then converted the totals to percentages.

Results

The first question I was investigating was whether the number of factors that students considered when making a decision increased. In December of 2000, before the students took the course, 44% of them listed only one factor that lead to their decision. 24% of the students listed two factors. 17% listed three factors. Only 5% of students made their decision about the hypothetical movie question based on more than three factors.

The same students, surveyed after the course, in June of 2001 exhibited far more factors in making their decisions. Only 16% listed only one factor. Though the number of students listing two factors remained close to the same at 25%, 16% listed three factors and 27% listed four. 4% listed five factors. So after the course, 58% of students based their decision on three or more factors. This represents a notable change.

Typical of a one-factor response on the pre-course survey was this student's complete response to the essay question: "I'd ask my friends if they were going and I'd think if there were better things to do. I would probably not ask my parents." A typical two-factor response sounds quite similar. "First, I would go ask my parents if they would even allow me to go. If they said yes, I would talk to my friends and see what they think."

Typical of a post-course survey was this four factor response. "I would find out as much information about the movie as I could and uncover any bias I had on it. Then I would look to scripture to see if it was biblical. Next I would decide whether I agree or disagree with all the information lined up. Last, I would take action on my decision."

When we repeated the survey during the second year of the RPOC course, we also saw a change, though it was not as big a change as the first year. In December of 2001, 32% of the students taking the pre-course survey listed only one factor leading to their decision. In the post-course survey, in June of 2002, only 22% listed only one decision making factor. Similarly, the number of students listing two factors fell from 32% to 29%. Perhaps most remarkable was that the second time we offered the course, post-course surveys indicated that 36% of the students listed 4, 5, or 6 factors as contributing to their decision. (Appendix C, Table 1 shows the full results of this question)

Clearly, in this area of number of factors, we were gaining ground. Of course, the mere fact of increasing the number of factors going into a decision does not really indicate that the decision is being made any better (or any worse) than before. The second question that the study was investigating is whether the students were coming to that decision making with any kind of systematic process. The course emphasized following a "Discover, Discern, Decide, and Do" process (the "Four Ds"). We next look to see whether there was any evidence of this classroom structure carrying over (at least theoretically) into their real life decisions.

In December of 2000, before students had taken the course, it came as no surprise to us that not a single student structured their answer based on the "Four Ds". After the first year, 27% of students used that structure in organizing their answer. The following

year, when students were surveyed before the course, 1% of them organized their answer by the "Four Ds". The post-course survey in June of 2002 indicated 17% of students using the "Four Ds" to organize their answer. This was a smaller percentage than the previous year's post-course survey. Some teachers of the course attributed this to their tendency (due to their own familiarity) to be less explicit about the "Four Ds" in the second year of teaching it. (For additional details, see Appendix D, Table 2.)

The final question, whether there would be a trend toward students considering factors that indicated greater maturity, is certainly the hardest to draw any clear conclusions about. Some responses were encouraging. Some were not. Little was consistent. The results seem to be mixed.

For example, in the first year we offered the course, the pre-course survey indicated that 15% of students would consider the overall message when evaluating a movie. In the post-course survey, that number jumped to 24%. Unfortunately, in the following year, though the pre-course survey revealed an encouraging 20% would consider the overall message, the post-course survey only indicated 21% -- hardly an important change.

Likewise, for both academic years the survey was taken, the percentage of students who said they would check newspaper reviews before making their decision stayed roughly the same. Most other factors changed slightly, but it is hard to argue, based on this study, for a clear indication that students are approaching practical decisions with more maturity after the course than before it.

The surveys of teachers revealed an anecdotal belief that the course was introducing moral and spiritual content to both students and faculty. Deb Top, who

teaches an RPOC section on advertising reported that a student who had studied advertising said that she is, "learning that she needs to be more content with what she has and not give in to pressure to always have the next best things." Emily Bosscher, who taught an RPOC section on sexuality wrote that students, "...are becoming more aware of how their decisions affect those around them. For example, when we discuss dress codes and how dressing and chastity is a community thing, many students realize the connection for the first time"

A teacher also described how the course was helping her own professional development. Emily Bosscher reported, "I find myself doing a lot more reading and studying to make sure I know the facts and what the Bible says has caused me to spend a lot more time in Bible study and strengthening my own faith.... I have learned to revise my teaching much more often – to put the energy into making my classes better each time I teach it, and that has spread into my other classes as well."

Deb Top agreed, saying that preparing for the course had changed her behavior. "I thought I was pretty immune to the pressures and messages in advertising. When preparing to teach this class, I realized that I'm influenced a lot more than I think I am. I have changed some of my spending habits (as well as certain tv show watching habits) and I try to be more discerning in my tv watching habits."

Faculty members quoted above have given permission for me to use their real names. The questions they were responding to can be found in Appendix B.

Discussion

In both years of the course, there is a noticeable trend for students to consider more factors in their decision making process after having taken the RPOC course. The

course was designed to point out one of the central tenets of reformed thought, that everything in the world is God's. Teachers also emphasized that this means we need to consider larger questions even when making smaller decisions. Most sections also explored the many factors that feed into the making of a cultural product. For example, the mini-course on television used a modified version of a questionnaire developed by Romanowski (2001) to help students consider factors like the financial backing of a show; the way the show presents women, parents, or children; what the audience is asked to laugh at; and a host of other issues. Another important teaching which may have contributed to this outcome is the notion that reformed Christians, operating out of a full Biblical understanding, need not fear culture and retreat from it. Nor should they blithely accept culture without discerning the truthful and untruthful messages it may hold, but should honestly consider what the cultural product has to say. As a result, students who were formerly making decisions based on a single factor (e.g. what friends thought, amount of nudity, amount of violence, ratings, and other factors – see Appendix D, Table 2) may now be taking a larger view.

One possible explanation for the differences from year to year might be that some sections of the course were taught by different teachers in 2000/1 than in 2001/2. Because of this some content may have changed, though the central ideas of the course tended to stay constant.

Overall, though the information in the first chart is perhaps more significant than the second, both sets of information seem to indicate a significant change in the way students approach decision making about mass media as a consequence of taking the freshman RPOC course.

As Wiggins and McTighe indicated in their book *Understanding by Design*, it can be extremely hard to measure whether students truly understand something. This study shows that students can at least remember an approach to decision-making and apply it to new situations (1998). Wiggins and McTighe, however, suggest that one only understands something if one can, "teach it, use it, prove it, explain it, defend it, or read between the lines....The students must perform using knowledge to convince us that they really understand material that quizzes and tests only suggest they understand." (p. 41). What we don't know, based on this study, is whether the description of their decision-making process that they list on an essay bears much resemblance to their actual response to a real event. It would be instructive to be able to know that.

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Appendix A

Survey Question

Essay. *Say a new movie has come out. It is rated PG13. One person you know has told you that it has some excessive violence and some adult situations. You have also heard that some Christians are protesting the movie because they say it makes fun of ministers. Someone else told you that they heard that the message of the movie has to do with the main character, who is a minister at a church, gets thrown out for cheating his congregation out of hundreds of thousands of dollars, then, by working as a car mechanic, finds out for the first time in his life what it really means to help someone. Three of your friends really want to go see it. Three of your friends don't. What steps do you follow (even if those steps take place inside your head) when you decide whether or not you are going to see this movie.*

Appendix B

Faculty Survey

Hello. Hope everyone is having a splendid summer. As I work on my Masters thesis for Dordt, I need to impose upon you once more. Please fill out the survey below and return it to my box. Thank you.

Name_____

RPOC Topic_____

How have you seen RPOC make a difference for your students? Specific examples would be helpful.

How has preparing and teaching RPOC made a difference in your thinking and teaching? (again, the more specific, the better.)

The attached lollypop is a token of my thanks for your input.

Appendix C

Table 1

Number of Decision-making Factors in Student Responses -- Pre and Post-course Surveys

Number of factors listed per answer	**December 2000 Pre-Course Survey**	**June 2001 Post-Course Survey**	**December 2001 Pre-Course Survey**	**June 2002 Post-Course Survey**
1	44%	16%	32%	22%
2	24%	25%	32%	22%
3	17%	26%	17%	15%
4	7%	27%	8%	24%
5	0%	4%	1%	6%
6	1%	1%	<1%	6%
7	0%	0%	0%	0%
8	0%	0%	<1%	0%
9	0%	0%	<1%	0%
nonresponses	7%	1%	8%	4%

Appendix D

Table 2

Specific Factors Listed by Students in Making Decision

Specific factors listed	December 2000 Pre-Course	June 2001 Post-Course	December 2001 Pre-Course	June 2002 Post-Course
Would consult parents	31%	17%	15%	16%
Would consult friends	22%	22%	26%	24%
Watch movie, then conclude about overall message	15%	24%	20%	21%
Would avoid movie that mocks God/ministers/ Christianity	12%	17%	13%	9%
Would consult others	12%	7%	4%	10%
Would rely on own opinion	12%	12%	8%	16%
Would check reviews	10%	12%	17%	16%
Movie sounds dumb/boring	8%	12%	29%	11%
Movie sounds fun/good	8%	1%	2%	<1%
Consider movie ratings	7%	9%	8%	5%
Would avoid excessive violence	5%	10%	7%	9%
Afraid that watching movie would negatively affect life	6%	0%	0%	0%
Would consider what the Bible says	5%	7%	0%	3%

Specific factors listed	December 2000 Pre-Course	June 2001 Post-Course	December 2001 Pre-Course	June 2002 Post-Course
Just a movie—can't hurt me	5%	4%	5%	0%
Would avoid movie featuring nudity or sex	5%	10%	8%	9%
Would consider what Jesus would do	5%	1%	2%	4%
Would rely on upbringing and taught values to decide	4%	0%	4%	<1%
Would avoid bad language	4%	0%	0%	9%
Depends upon actors/actresses	3%	0%	1%	1%
Depends on if I can afford it	2%	2%	4%	1%
Would question how movie will affect faith	1%	0%	0%	6%
Don't ever watch movies	1%	0%	2%	1%
Would consider protests against movie	0%	3%	0%	0%
Movies show the real world	0%	3%	1%	1%
Would follow Discover, Discern, Decide, Do approach	0%	27%	1%	17%
My church prohibits movies	0%	0%	1%	0%
Would watch previews	0%	0%	4%	3%
Would consider the plot	0%	0%	8%	4%
Does character learn good lesson?	0%	0%	1%	0%
If in doubt, say no	0%	0%	3%	1%

Specific factors listed	December 2000 Pre-Course	June 2001 Post-Course	December 2001 Pre-Course	June 2002 Post-Course
I don't support the movie industry	0%	0%	1%	0%
Would consider commercials for movie	0%	0%	1%	0%
Movie doesn't sound funny	0%	0%	1%	0%
If in doubt, say yes	0%	0%	2%	0%
Would rent it instead	0%	0%	1%	0%
Would get more information	0%	0%	1%	6%
Doesn't sound worth my time	0%	0%	1%	0%
Would ask self if it sounded interesting	0%	0%	1%	0%
Would go if there were girls/guys going	0%	0%	1%	0%
Would pray about it	0%	0%	0%	1%
Would seek out Christian reviews	0%	0%	0%	1%
Depends on film genre	0%	0%	0%	1%

Appendix E

Table 3

Effects on Students According to Faculty

Student learning	**Percentage of faculty response**
Students learn Biblical guidelines for living	100%
Students become more aware of community	80%
Students understand that advertising is designed to make them feel dissatisfied	60%
Students learn to question purchasing habits	40%
Students learn the "isms" (materialism, hedonism, individualism, existentialism, postmodernism, etc)	40%
Students learn about Christian responses to sexual issues	20%
Students learn how advertising targets them	20%
Students learn to understand the impact of visual imagery on their lives	20%

Appendix F

Table 4

Effects on Faculty

Faculty Change	**Percentage of faculty response**
Faculty valued chance to teach in team with different format	100%
Faculty valued chance to explore what scripture had to say about their particular topic	80%
Faculty valued chance to try project-based method of evaluation	40%
Faculty member realized how much he or she is influenced by advertising	40%
Faculty learned to be more discerning	40%
Faculty member changed spending habits	20%
Faculty member now tries harder to practice what he or she preaches	20%
Faculty member changed television and radio habits	20%

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Publications:

"Gabriel's Brother," short story, *Buffalo Spree*, Summer 1991

"Digging," short story, *Hairtrigger 15*, Spring 1993

"Bulldozer Sandcastle," short story, *Hairtrigger 16*, Spring 1994

"The Five Humors," *English Journal*, March 1999

"Toward a Definition of Christian Literature," *Christian Educators' Journal*. (with Jeff DeVries), October 2000