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As a citizen of the 21st century, we are constantly consuming visual media-on the television, on our phones, on social media, in grocery stores, etc. As a result, we are confronted with understanding and interpreting the images we see and decoding what each visual is representing. Professor Stuart Hall discusses the importance of representation and what representation of a visual can mean. Diving into first what representation is, is critical in understanding the crucial role that representation plays as an individual consumes and interprets visual media. Stuart argues that representation crosses a variety of important themes. Two of the most important themes being that meaning is constructed through “conceptual maps” and that representation is inherently affected by what is present or ‘absent’ in an image (Jhally).

Part 1

According to Professor Stuart Hall, “conceptual maps” are an important part in how an individual consumes and interprets visual representations. We can discover our own “conceptual maps” when asking ourselves the following question, “what are the ways in which we classify and organize the world?” (Jhally). Hall explains that these conceptual maps are not “printed in our genes” but instead is something that we have learned (Jhally). This notion heavily resembles the idea of socialization (Harro, 2010a). As a result, important topics like curriculum, education, and language need to be thought of with “conceptual maps” in mind.

It is significant to think about the ways that different languages are classified in relation to education. Willinsky discusses this idea that nonnative speakers in schools are facing a “human rights issue” (1999). As part of the “conceptual maps” that we as individuals have

constructed, we need to recall the historical events that played a role in the way that we are understanding our world. Willinsky (1999) explains this domination of the English language has historical ties to the expansion of the British Empire where language was used in the capacity to “police access and authority and knowledge among colonized people”. This historical knowledge vastly impacts the ways that our understanding of the world has been created.

These flaws in our own “conceptual maps” expands beyond just language. Leibowitz (2017) explains that learning and knowledge can both be affected by an individual, or collective, understanding. Leibowitz (2017) explains that “the assumption that one can design a curriculum around what knowledge is, and not around how people come to know, it is a problem”. Using Hall’s “conceptual maps” (Jhally) we can begin to analyze the process of representation regarding a prescribed curriculum.

Related, Gair and Mullins (2001) talk about an important related concept that they call “hidden curriculum” that is, “gendered, racialized, and class-based”. When imagining the image of what a college campus might look like it is important to recognize that we have been “socialized” (Harro, 2010a) and have “conceptual maps” embedded deeply to help shape this image. Does the image change when you zoom into what a college faculty looks like? An important conversation explored by Gair and Mullins (2001) is that “a duplicity of being” is often felt by those that are pressured to “modify behavior and appearance because of gender, race and ethnicity”.

It is critically important to consider the different “knowledge systems” (Leibowitz, 2017) to begin to uncover how our “conceptual maps” have affected the creation of a curriculum or language expectation. We must consider that the understanding of the representation could be flawed based on our “conceptual maps” (Jhally).

As an individual actively consumes visual media, it can be easy to see the image and try to understand what representation the visual is trying to convey. An approach to understanding a representation on a deeper level is to consider its “meaning and absence” (Jhally). Hall explains that “that absence means something and signifies as much as presence” (Jhally). This idea that the absence of something in an image is reflected in the work of Titchosky (2003). We often think about our world in relation to who we are, especially in regard to the “culturally defined maps of disability” (Titchosky, 2003). Titchosky (2003) explains the relationship between “being born into a culture that privileges aesthetic pleasures over and against the value of access”. Titchosky (2003) recalls an encounter where a faculty member of a university expresses frustration that “thousands of dollars of equipment” was put in for “just a few students”.

Another view of meaning in relation to what is absent is presented by Magdola (2014) who discusses the vision people have of campus custodians. Part of the construction of our “conceptual maps” includes who is educated and who is not. The role of a custodian is often considered an occupation held by uneducated people. Part of this meaning is constructed by the fact that custodians in an educational and scholarly setting is absent. Magdola (2014) explains that there is an absence of “cultural norms that make it difficult for custodians to share their wisdom with others, especially those with greater power”.

Part 2

Something I very consciously reflect on is the idea that I don't want to promote or only understand a “single story” (Adichie, 2009). This is a theme that this module helped me to understand on a deeper level. This idea is a significant shift from the middle class, Christian, mostly White community I grew up in. This sheltered environment contributed to my understanding that I was the majority and led me to believe that other people and communities

aspired to be like mine. These experiences were critical in shaping my “conceptual maps” of the world (Jhally).

One of the concepts that Stuart Hall brought up that stood out was the idea of “meaning and absence” (Jhally). Being privileged in many ways, I don’t often consider who is missing from an image or what voices are being left out. This is one of the ways that my higher education has challenged my thoughts- it is important to recognize the privileges I carry, think critically about how those privileges affect me and think about the narratives that aren’t being shared. Titchosky’s chapter (2003) about accessibility issues on campus has made me stop and consider how valued and supported able-bodied people truly are.

Another important point I connected with from the readings was the concept of “cognitive justice” presented by Leibowitz (2017), “the idea that knowledges and knowledge practices are intimately bound up with people’s cultures, practices and cosmologies”. Questions I consistently ask myself before teaching a lesson is that of what stories are missing? What truths are being withheld? Will my students see themselves within this lesson?

As an educator, I think that learning to challenge our own understandings, our “conceptual maps” (Jhally), is crucial. Constantly being surrounded by images it is imperative to question the representations that are present, and the ones that are not. Teaching our students, the skill of critically thinking and understanding to interpret representations should be a top priority.

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