

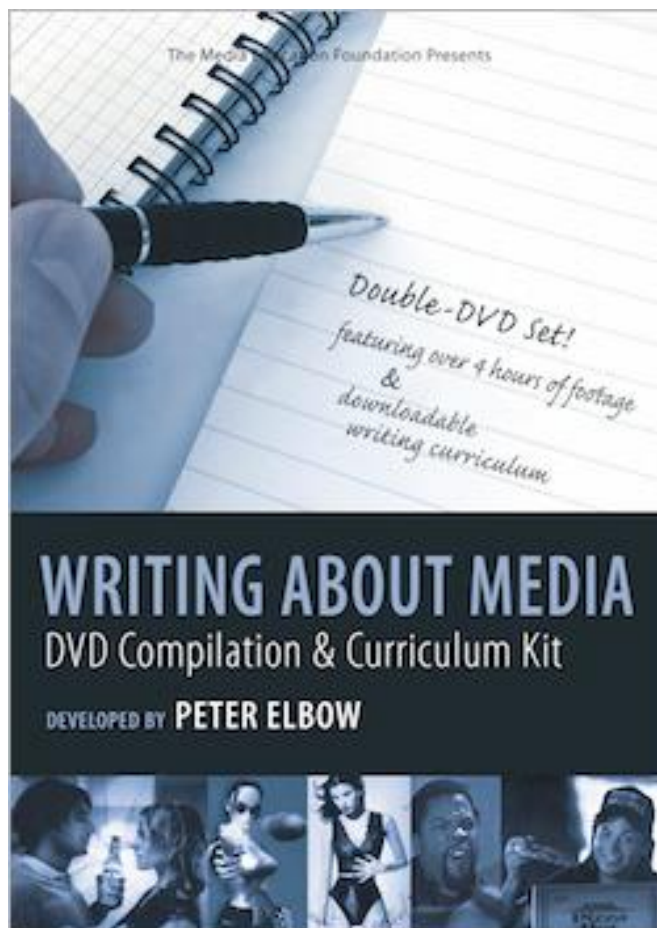
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Teaching with *Writing About Media*

(RADICAL TEACHER NO. 92, 2011)

by Michael Bennett



WRITING ABOUT MEDIA WITH PETER ELBOW (2007, 120 MIN, DVD)

A couple of years ago at the Left Forum, I picked up a copy of the DVD compilation *Writing About Media*, produced by the Media Education Foundation (MEF). In addition to clips from mainstream media grouped into four categories (Consumerism, Gender and Sexuality, Race and Class, and Media and Politics), the DVD also contains clips from MEF documentaries in each of these categories and a related writing curriculum developed by Peter Elbow. The curriculum materials are designed for various classes (Basic Writing, Composition, Media Studies); I have used them over the last two academic years for a second semester Basic Writing class I teach at Long Island University's Brooklyn campus.

In general, *Writing About Media* has been a useful and interesting teaching tool. However, as with most curricula, I have done some tweaking over time. I find Peter Elbow's suggested writing assignments to be a little too unfocused and process-oriented for my taste, so I have melded them with my own assignments that correspond to the categories into which the DVDs are grouped, and with each assignment emphasizing a certain form and skill:

Essay 1 (Autobiography):

Skill: Sentence

Subject: Consumerism

Essay 2 (Review):

Skill: Thesis

Subject: Gender & Sexuality

Essay 3 (Editorial):

Skill: Structure

Subject: Race & Class

Essay 4 (Research):

Skill: Style/Tone

Subject: Media & Politics

In addition to the formal writing assignments, informal writing assignment (journal entries) ask students to compare stories from a mainstream media source of their choice (they sign up during the first week) with an alternative media source (the first semester, we got a class subscription to *The Nation*, a process which proved to be rather cumbersome, so subsequent semesters I have asked students to use Portside.org).

My initial teaching experience also convinced me that the DVDs definitely need to be supplemented with a variety of written texts (though students are very savvy at consuming visual texts, they are often not as careful at

producing detailed writing based on what they have seen). So the first unit includes Michael Parenti's essay "Methods of Media Manipulation," Noam Chomsky's *Media Control*, and two webpages: Media Reform Information Center and "The National Entertainment State," originally published in *The Nation*. The second and third units are supplemented with Suzanne Pharr's essay "Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism"; various essays from the no-longer-in-print *American Culture and the Media*; and *The Communist Manifesto*. And my favorite unit, the last one, features Howard Zinn's autobiography. We also use *A Writer's Reference* as our grammar book.

The final assignment is the most difficult because it asks for a shorter version (4-5 pages) of the kind of research essays students will be expected to write in Freshman Composition and beyond. However, it has also produced some of their best writing. The assignment asks them to focus on a topic that is mentioned in Howard Zinn's autobiography and/ or in the film clips we viewed in class. Three topics are pre-approved: the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, and the Iraq War. Other topics can be negotiated. Once students have picked a topic, they are asked to narrow it down to something that happened on a particular date. I then schedule a library visit during which students learn to find primary sources (chiefly through Proquest Historical Newspapers). They are asked to compare and contrast mainstream media coverage of the event at that time with subsequent alternative media coverage (Zinn, film clips, etc.). Students have produced wonderful essays on the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, George Bush's "Mission Accomplished" speech, the March on Washington, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Stonewall Rebellion, the bombing of Hiroshima, and other topics.

Though some of the media clips in *Writing About Media* are growing a little dated, and I do not feel the curriculum would be successful without modifications similar to those I have described, the DVD has produced some interesting discussions, strong writing, and political awareness. What more could one ask as a radical teacher?

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