

ROUND-UP 3: YOUTUBE IN WOMEN'S STUDIES

This is our third round-up of reports on using “e-tools” in the classroom. The first appeared in volume 27, numbers 2–3 (Winter–Spring 2006), and the second in volume 28, number 4 (Summer–Fall 2007). The round-ups are themselves follow-ups to “Blog This! an Introduction to Blogs, Blogging, and the Feminist Blogosphere,” by Vicki Tobias (*Feminist Collections* v.26, nos.2–3, Winter–Spring 2005), available at <http://minds.wisconsin.edu/handle/1793/22243>.

We will continue to publish reports from time to time about how instructors are using new information technologies and social networking in women's studies. If you have something to contribute, please contact us at wiswsl@library.wisc.edu.

YOUTUBE AND FEMINISM: A CLASS ACTION PROJECT

by Shereen Siddiqui

Background

YouTube, an online venue for sharing and reviewing video clips, is the fourth-most-visited website in the world (after Yahoo, MSN, and Google). Launched just two years ago, YouTube has quickly permeated the culture. YouTube videos are being used by instructors in college classrooms, can be viewed on Apple's new iPhone, and are often posted on the home pages of MySpace and Facebook subscribers.

When uploading videos to YouTube, users enter tags, or keywords, to describe the video, and also select a category (e.g. Comedy) from a list of twelve. The categories and keywords help other users find videos of interest.

Anyone may watch videos on YouTube without being a member. However, part of YouTube's popularity comes from the feature that allows viewers to post comments about videos viewed on the site. To post comments or to upload videos, one must become a member.

Feminism and YouTube

A recent YouTube search using the keyword “feminism” brought up 1340 videos. Many of the videos are clips from professional documentaries such as *I Was a Teenage Feminist* by Theresa Schechter and *Cultural Criticism and Transformation* by bell hooks. However, most clips fall into one of two categories: comedians talking about feminism, such as “Bill Maher on Feminism,” “Ali G—Feminism,” and “George Carlin—Feminist Blowjob,” or homemade videos, such as “Converting a porn hating feminist into a porn addict!” and “Feminist women hate MANLINESS, they hate MEN!” The latter category is dominated by young, white men. Regardless of the video's message about feminism, typically the comments about any videos with the keywords “feminist” or “feminism” are derogatory, such as “I 100% agree with you feminism is a ridiculous [sic] sexist movement promoting the hatred of men and it worries me too” and “Fuckin feminists. They spout about how men r stupid and evil and then call us sexist bcos we point that out! im not sexist and I dont agree wiv it, but the word ‘Feminist’ is just another word for ‘pissed off woman who has a bit of an issue with real life.’”

Logistics

Students enrolled in Feminist Perspectives on Gender, an introductory women's studies class that explores, among other topics, the meanings of feminism, were divided into four groups of five or six members. Each group was facilitated by a senior member of the class. After engaging in several small- and large-group community-building exercises, the small groups were asked to pick one of the many stereotypes of feminists generated by the class (e.g., lesbians, angry, man-hating, etc.) and create a video response to that stereotype. Through discussion and based on course readings, the group had to come to a consensus that the chosen stereotype is in fact a myth. Once the myth to address was determined, the next step was to decide how best to dispel the myth in a three- to five-minute video for YouTube. Each group member had to be involved in the process in some way, although not necessarily in front of the camera. Possibilities for involvement included writing the outline or script; securing the film location(s); coordinating with the camera crew; securing any necessary props and costumes; conducting background research; facilitating the involvement of individuals from outside class, such as experts, if necessary; and being filmed.

The student-run campus television station agreed to assist with filming and editing the videos, but in some cases, students opted to use their own equipment or convert a PowerPoint presentation into a video.

Obstacles

Many of the students were initially skeptical and somewhat apathetic when presented with the assignment. There were questions and concerns about the logistics and timeline. Many were unfamiliar with YouTube and needed a tutorial. Others questioned the potential efficacy of a video about feminism on YouTube. The consensus requirement slowed down the process, causing frustration in some groups.

Results

The requirement of consensus caused students to be extremely respectful of each other and to diplomatically deliberate each idea presented. Despite the initial apathy, once each group had its idea, the students grew more enthusiastic. When all of the videos were shown to the entire class, the energy and excitement in the classroom was palpable. In the reaction papers required after the project's completion, all of the students offered positive comments, most often about how much fun they had working with their groups. Many expressed pride at the final results.

Since being posted on YouTube in December 2007, the videos have been viewed hundreds of times, but only a handful of viewers have left comments. Of those, a few have been positive, but most have been typical of the anti-feminist rants found on YouTube.

The videos are posted on YouTube as a four-part series. To view them, visit www.YouTube.com/GenderEd. We welcome all comments.

[Shereen Siddiqui is a Ph.D. candidate in comparative studies and an instructor of women's studies at Florida Atlantic University. She collaborated on the design of this project with four of her students: Jaimie Abbott, Christie Mayer, Samantha Montgomery, and April Weeks.]

WOMEN ON YOUTUBE: A FEMINIST ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

by Ann Andaloro

This is an outline for a group assignment that is a research study of the representations of women on YouTube.

The class is broken up into four groups: Literature Review, Textual Analysis, Audience Studies, and Conclusions. Each of the groups formulates a definition of its process and instructions for others in the class to help gather data for its section of the project. One of the graduate students is the director of the project. She monitors the progress of the groups and draws together the work of all four groups for a final presentation. In the end, the class has conducted a research study.

The literature review group gathers information about YouTube as well as feminism. Also in this section the students present the significance and timeliness of the study of images of women on YouTube and they relate that to the study of women's issues and experiences.

The textual analysis group focuses on examining selected YouTube videos from a feminist textual analysis approach. This section uses a worksheet to analyze the images and representations of women in the videos from a feminist critical perspective. The videos are then coded into positive or negative categories.

The audience studies group gathers responses to the selected videos by using a sense-making approach to identify the opinions and the likes and dislikes of the audience as they pertain to the selected videos. The sense-making formula also allows for audience members to share how their own experiences relate to the women in the videos. The students in the class use either individual or focus group interviews to gather audience responses. Most of the students also used FaceBook or MySpace to gather additional audience responses, by posting a link to the videos and an audience response sheet containing the interview questions.

The conclusion section ties all of the data together into a summary of the findings. Then recommendations are made for further study.

The students also create and upload to YouTube a video with tips for women who want to upload videos to YouTube. This is a "do and don't" list for female users of YouTube. When the uploading is completed, we consider our project a feminist action research project.

All or parts of this project can be useful in women's studies courses. This project worked well with students using BlackBoard and its collaboration tools. This project was also successful because we had some video production students to create and upload the video. The students learned about the feminist holistic action research process. They also enjoyed the process because most of them have a passion for viewing videos on YouTube and using MySpace and FaceBook. This group assignment works well in both face-to-face and online classes and in both graduate and undergraduate courses. All of the aspects of the research process provide the students with a unique and rich learning experience.

[Ann Andaloro is an assistant professor of communication and theatre at Morehead State University in Morehead, Kentucky. Her fields of specialization are electronic media and women's studies.]

READING YOUTUBE, CONTEXTUALIZING THEORY

by Ashley Falzetti

At Rutgers University, the introductory course in women's and gender studies, "Women, Culture, and Society," covers a wide range of social issues, the history of feminist activism, and foundational feminist theory. When I teach this course, I season the required texts with YouTube videos that provide context for the denser theoretical readings. As with all required texts, students are expected to watch the videos before class.

Anyone who teaches theory to freshman classes knows that the academic jargon and dense sentence structure can intimidate some of the most talkative students into silence. I find that the familiarity of the videos makes the theoretical points more palatable. One example that works incredibly well is the video of spoken-word artists Yellow Rage performing on Def Poetry Jam, paired with Uma Narayan's article titled "Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism," which responds to particular arguments at the intersection of post-colonial and feminist scholarship that the students are not likely familiar with.

Watching performance art like the poetry of Yellow Rage is both jarring and comforting to students in productive ways. This particular performance works against stereotypes of quiet Asian American women and calls the audience out on the limitations of their knowledge of Korean culture, the politics of bilingualism, and the history of U.S. military engagements in Eastern Asia. Seeing the anger and humor of the performers helps students understand how Narayan's critiques of cultural essentialism apply to real people. Without the video, students tend to read Narayan's article as being about just another conceptual issue rather than a real problem that affects their social world.

Opening the class discussion with this video leads the students to take on Narayan's rhetoric themselves, because they generally do not have another framework through which to talk about the message of Yellow Rage. This prevents me from having to take on the role of mediating the theoretical texts, and it continues to foster the sense that students are fully capable of accessing this sort of material with a concrete example and a little effort. For similar reasons, I do not provide direct links to videos. I require students to search for the videos and "go get them" on their own, because this process helps to instill the idea that students are active learners rather than passive receivers of knowledge.

Additionally, YouTube allows users to post comments about videos, and many students are already used to reading these responses. Once I mention some of the more provocative statements, students who are not normally inclined to speak up will often join the discussion, because they can point to someone else's thoughts without feeling vulnerable about disagreeing with either me or with other students in the class. Many students, especially the skeptics who signed up to meet some undesired requirement, make a point of letting me know that watching the YouTube videos leads them to finally "get it," and once they believe they can understand dense theoretical articles, their engagement in the class greatly improves.

[Ashley Falzetti is a doctoral candidate in women's and gender studies at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. Her teaching and scholarship emphasize the interrelatedness of theory, experience, and social action.]

KEYWORD: FEMINISM: EVALUATING REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMINISM IN YOUTUBE

by Betsy Eudey

To help students get a better handle on the meanings of feminism, I begin a lower-division undergraduate course on women's and feminist activism by having students read all of bell hooks' *Feminism is for Everybody*, as well as selected articles, book chapters, and websites offering perspectives on feminism's aims, achievements, and limitations. I close the introductory section by having students visit YouTube to raise awareness of the ways in which feminism is portrayed in popular culture. The students were asked to enter "feminism" or "feminist" as a search term and to view at least three of the videos displayed. They were to consider the ways in which feminism and/or feminists were being depicted; the impression viewers would have of feminism from the clips and viewer comments and responses; and how these portrayals compare to their understanding of feminism from the course readings, the websites they've viewed, their own experiences and perceptions, and any other resources at their disposal. Each student was to pick one video that they found especially interesting, and to post on the course discussion board the video title, the URL, and a brief description and analysis of the video and the viewer comments. Each student was also required to respond to the postings of at least two classmates, thus supporting a dialogue among students and expanding the number of videos each viewed.

As I had hoped, the students found videos addressing/representing a range of topics about which feminists were or are interested, as well as a range of feminist sentiments expressed through documentaries, music, poetry, interviews, speeches, art, humor, newscasts, and dance. They found videos in many languages, from many countries and regions, expressing the views of people from many ethnicities, nationalities, ages, sexes, and religions. They also were able to see cases in which the term "feminist" was added as a tag to intentionally draw viewers to videos with anti-feminist or misogynist content, and how often the pro-feminist sites they visited had comments posted that were aggressive, derogatory, and/or sexual in nature, or included misinformation intended to undermine feminism. For example, one video that several students recommended includes such viewer comments as "feminists should be burned alive and dumped in boiling water full of razors before they die" and "women make up the majority of university entries with millions [sic] of female only grants. male only grants are illegal. men are dropping out like flies because they are made to conform to feminized school systems that ignore their issues."¹

After this initial activity, we returned to YouTube periodically to watch videos that related to specific course topics, and as we did so many students felt more empowered to post their own viewer comments, especially when they could challenge misinformation with newly learned facts. Students indicated in course evaluations that they had benefited from the inclusion of the YouTube videos, although some pointed out the difficulties of loading videos via dial-up Internet access, and some noted that on public computers many of the videos were blocked for having mature content.

Note

1. These comments were posted by Aznflea and Subfloorjoist (respectively) in January 2008, in response to the video *Feminism*, posted to YouTube on May 6, 2006 (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRITuy0S0Ac>). The video is a 4:17 clip of Chelsea Steiner reading feminist poetry as part of the Stanford Spoken Word Collective.

YOUTUBE AS CASE STUDY: ANALYSIS OF GENDERED REPRESENTATIONS IN VIDEO

by Betsy Eudey

I have often required students to engage in critique of television shows, commercials, movies, and music videos as a means of developing their critical skills and demonstrating their understanding of the ways in which sex and gender are represented in popular culture. Such an assignment can lead to valuable consideration of the social construction of gender; the power of popular media in reinforcing, challenging, or creating notions of sex and gender; and the ways in which an audience can support or reject particular representations.

Although there have been many benefits to such assignments, there were several problems that limited successful completion. First, students who chose a lengthy program or movie often didn't have the ability to engage in detailed critique of the full range of issues present. Second, students often evaluated programs or ads viewed in real time, and found it challenging to accurately describe and critique a clip viewed only once. Third, many students found their program choices were limited because of their busy schedules. Finally, I was often unable to assess the quality of a student's critique if I wasn't familiar with the source material.

In my Fall 2007 section of a course entitled Society and Gender, I again had students engage in a critique of filmic media, but I limited their choice of artifacts to ones posted to YouTube. For the assignment, I asked students to select any YouTube video that they felt had something interesting to say/show regarding gender and/or sex. In the written report, they were to provide the URL link to the video, briefly describe the content of the video, and then engage in a gendered analysis, drawing upon media analysis tools and information about the social construction of gender they had learned in the course.

The switch to YouTube led to more concise descriptions and detailed critiques than students had provided in the past. Videos posted to YouTube are a relatively stable source that can be viewed multiple times by the student (and instructor), and all postings are accessible 24/7, thus allowing all students access to a wide range of videos. Videos can also be chosen that are of a length that is reasonable for the student to view and critique in great detail, and can be selected based on particular keywords, topics, or types (advertisements, television or movie clips, poetry, skits, etc) to best suit the student's interests.

I am convinced that using YouTube enhanced the students' learning and demonstration of learning, as well as my ability to assess and respond to their analyses. At the same time, there are a few limitations that deserve attention. First, most videos are not posted in a manner that makes all content accessible to those with visual or hearing limitations. Second, students with dial-up Internet connections may have more difficulty viewing videos online than via television, and should be encouraged to use a high-speed Internet connection or select shorter videos to limit download time.

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