

Japanese animation as moral instruction: A Bourdieusian perspective of rural aspiring teachers' and urban anime fans' instrumentalist pedagogies

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ABSTRACT

Earlier research into Japanese animation and pedagogy encouraged the instrumental use of anime as a bridge to a traditional “real curriculum” of history, literature, language, and culture. Questions have been raised about the model’s efficacy, elitism, and neglect of anime as a dynamic and critical field of inquiry. These criticisms significantly overlap with the highly-cited French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu’s problematization of the education field as self-replicating its dominant ideologies.

Between 2013-2015, forty-four aspiring teachers and forty-six fans of Japanese animation responded to interviews on how they conceptualized the feasibility and process of incorporating anime in their hypothetical K-12 classrooms. A widespread idea they suggested was to use anime to instrumentally teach morality, but the kinds of anime suggested to teach specific types of morality varied and intersected with anime titles’ settings in rural or urban areas. Informed by Bourdieusian perspectives, implications of these answers for teacher education programs are discussed.

Keywords: Pedagogy, Japanese animation, Bourdieusian perspectives.

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The Primary and Secondary School Context

The No Child Left Behind Act and its successor the Every Student Succeeds Act in the United States effectively mobilized primary and secondary public schools to narrow most of their pedagogical objectives towards increasing students' pass rates on standardized tests (Tuttle, 2016; Vogt, 2016). This goal has diminished prospects for introducing courses in media education, and especially the study of global media. Studying Japanese animation, Korean dramas, Latin American telenovelas, or Bollywood film for gaining cultural awareness and perspective as one possible goal might be a distant possibility, if not anathema to schools as they're structured today. As an instructor of aspiring teachers, however, my research concerns what teaching might become in addition to what it currently is. In realizing a radical new possibility, aspiring teachers with little or no exposure to either teacher education or foreign media such as anime could more willing to incorporate it in a classroom as part of a new approach to media education.

Incorporating Japanese animation into classroom practice is also part of a larger project to have students consider routes toward what David Berliner and Bruce Biddle (1995) call "productive leisure" (p. 316), which includes forms of cultural exploration. It would also assist in realizing what media scholar Henry Jenkins (2006) call a paradigm shift in the substance and form of teaching skills via new forms of media education. While these media education skills are social and networked in nature, in Jenkins' (2006) words "these skills build on the foundation of traditional literacy and research, and critical-analysis skills learned in the classroom" (p. 4).

Anime can be thought of as not simply an artifact of Japanese popular culture, but as a practice that in Fiske's (1989) words is, "activated or made meaningful only in social relations and in inter-textual relations" (p. 3). Studying a popular culture practice from another country can highlight dynamics of ideology, justification, and interaction that are often hidden in the study of domestic popular culture.

However, this approach merits caution about ethnocentrism and viewing it as a disposition toward illiteracy. Educators should be careful about falling into a specific type that I call "pedagogical ethnocentrism" – strictly speaking, a predisposition to reading pedagogical intent in an assigned media piece from a different culture even where it does not exist. More broadly, pedagogical ethnocentrism may also be a predisposition to primarily valuing a media piece from a different culture as pedagogy for those in one's own culture. This differs somewhat from "ethnocentric pedagogy", a traditional classroom practice that reaffirms canonical lists of literature and historical figures. But "pedagogical ethnocentrism" is a perspective that assumes that some or all of a target culture's primary media artifacts serve to assist students in gaining a better understanding of that culture. It arises from an intersection of ethnocentric perspectives and assumptions about the intent of classroom pedagogy more broadly. As Beverly Cross (2005) writes, "For example, the teacher education program rhetoric about diversity and multiculturalism is often couched in how we are alike or how white teacher educators and students can explore others as cultural exotics, the racial other, or the object to study for their academic and professional benefit" (p. 265).

A real danger of pedagogical ethnocentrism is that it accentuates the idea that anime, or any kind of Japanese media is fully representative of Japanese culture. Experience with anime can elucidate patterns of Japanese popular culture, specifically fictional characterization, generic tropes, and the political economy of its cultural industry. However, introducing anime within the confines of a conventional classroom assignment

on “the art of other cultures” runs the risk of undermining teaching and learning about the transcultural flows anime is a product of. Moreover, like similar assignments that presuppose uniform national cultures with easily locatable historical antecedents, other ways that students can interpret culture will likely remain unaddressed. Recent anime-related scholarship (Annett, 2014; Condry, 2013; Shamooin & McMorran, 2016; Tsutsui, 2013) has rightfully critiqued what I call an instrumentally culturalist disposition towards anime. That is, anime mirrors an implicitly teleological progression of a coherent cultural history from which elements of a comparatively static “Japanese culture” provide immediately satisfactory conclusions to viewers’ curiosities and anxieties as well as guides for their expected behaviors.

We can further explore the dimensionality of this disposition in terms of temporality. The setting of an anime title may amplify this disposition, particularly if it takes place in the Japanese countryside, in shrines or temples, or other surroundings sufficiently distanced (spatially or experientially) from urban metropolises or other sites representative of modernity. The location of the interpretation of anime may also affect instrumental culturalism’s utility as a framework for a viewer’s sense-making of the medium. It is here that I wish to briefly explore sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s theorization of social reproduction, especially its enactment in formal schooling. His conceptual framework illuminates what I refer to as formal schooling’s “bridge model” of pedagogy – the use of anime and other forms of global popular culture to accomplish specific behavioral objectives.

Bourdieu’s Gap

Much of Bourdieu’s project involved addressing not only how taken for granted assumptions about pedagogy reproduced themselves in subsequent generations of educators, but how these assumptions could be potentially overcome. Central to Bourdieu’s (1984, 1990, & Wacquant, 1992) answers to this question are three interacting heuristic elements – habitus, field, and cultural capital. Habitus (as applied to the subjectivities of individuals but potentially also to collectives) refers to an overlapping set of dispositions that are inherited through social experiences which in turn provide cognitive schemas for action constrained by what the actor(s) considers possible. A field is a relational matrix of social actors making decisions under a framework of institutional rules that they become explicitly or implicitly aware of through social experience. The field both shapes and is shaped by actions informed by habitus. While deployment of various forms of capital are key to the success of decisions by actors, cultural capital specifically refers to knowledges, analyses, judgments, tastes, and an overall sense of the field and the place (current and potential) of themselves and others within it. Generally the more one’s entrenched habitus resonates with one’s field, producing a frictionless epistemological relationship Bourdieu (1990) referred to as *doxa*, and the more the successful the use of capital has been for maintaining a realized positionality or acquiring a realizable one within one’s field, the less likely one’s habitus will change. In the case of formal schooling, the repeatedly successful deployment of economic, social, and cultural capital within this field allows dominant dispositions toward teaching and learning to legitimate specific curricular practices over time.

For habitus to change, Bourdieu (2000) argued that a social actor must experience a gap between their habitual expectations of the operations of a field and a new unexpected situation that challenges these understandings. In the case of experienced public school

educators, encountering the possibility of using domestic popular culture in a classroom normally elicits resistance. Despite earlier highly-cited education scholars' welcoming if not insistence of popular culture's inclusion in the formal curriculum (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Buckingham, 1998; Giroux, 1997) the field of education's rules continue to implicitly exclude it from serious pedagogical consideration. In the case of the inclusion of non-dominant cultural perspectives, however, this principle is enshrined in the Common Core State Standards as part of preparing students for "college and career readiness in a twenty-first-century, globally competitive society" (National Governors Association, 2010, p. 3).

In the case of Japanese popular culture artifacts such as anime, educators must confront a contradiction within the rules of the field of public school curriculum: Japanese culture is acceptable to include, but popular culture is not. Per Bourdieu, an educator's curricular habitus may change when confronted with this novel paradox and becoming more accepting of popular culture. This is more probable if that educator also inhabits separate fields (such as a community of popular culture fans or creators) or an education field outlier that call for a different habitus and types of capital amenable to popular culture's study. For educators who inhabit traditionalist education fields, their habitus may undergo a less comprehensive shift that conforms to that field's rules of practice. Resolving the conflict entails the promotion of the bridge model; that is, inclusion of popular culture as a bridge towards field-bound "legitimate" pedagogical goals that exclude the study of popular culture for its own sake. While more recent research (Shamoon & McMorran, 2016) seeks to directly address the bridge model through fostering critical appreciation of anime in higher education, much of the literature on its use in K-12 settings (Levi, 2008a, 2008b; Pham, 2009; Ruble, 2010) instrumentalizes anime as a motivator for students to accomplish other objectives. This approach towards resolving the international culture versus popular culture question calls for very little acquisition of additional cultural capital by educators, let alone rethinking the possibilities of what the curricular field could become.

Nevertheless, fields rarely exist in isolation. Fields overlapping with other fields can produce otherwise alternative habitual outcomes (Atkinson, 2001). In the case of anime's inclusion in formal education, this overlap may occur between the field of anime worlds with the field of school worlds. By "anime worlds" and "school worlds" I refer to fields located in memory (re)called to become life-worlds through the researcher's prompting. The recall of these worlds brings forward not simply the anime world's characters and plots or the school world's classmates, teachers, and curriculum, but settings and places where these elements in each world came together. The overlapping of these fields can more likely result in habitual transformation for individuals who may still largely subscribe to the education field's rules, but who lack the necessary capital for attaining those rules' mastery.

Aspiring public school teachers who lack this capital are ideal participants in a study exploring perceptions of the utility of anime for pedagogy for those less likely to reject such a project outright. However, for the purposes of triangulation, low-capital Japanese animation fans who have also mostly inherited unquestioned traditionalist dispositions towards pedagogy may address this utility differently. While the aspiring teachers had inhabited, and expected to inhabit the educational field, the anime fans had inhabited but mostly did not expect to inhabit the educational field in the future. Whether one predicts to inhabit and master a field in the future can affect perceptions of the field's rules the present, including the rules of what counts as legitimate curriculum. Moreover,

fans' inhabiting a separate field of anime fandom with its own social and cultural capital may encourage them to answer the question, "What is and should be possible in schooling as it relates to anime?" differently.

Methodology

From 2013 to 2015, I had forty-four aspiring teachers taking one of my education program classes on a rural campus study both anime as a medium as well as forms of anime pedagogy that had been conducted by other scholars. Only four of them reported any previous experience with anime. In order to collect data, I first interviewed forty-six anime fans at three different anime conventions on the east and west coasts of the United States to first ask what they described as some of their favorite anime titles. From those titles, I asked those forty-four aspiring teachers to choose one of those titles to view before I conducted interviews with them to have smoother comparison of data generated by both populations. Three of the questions I asked in the interviews of both populations was, "Describe what you might have learned about Japanese culture from what you watched?" "How would you compare what you watched to media in your own country?" and "If you became a teacher, how might you use anime in your classroom?" The questions were open-ended as much as possible to reduce bias in answering.

Data was coded in terms of expressed emotions towards situations participants recalled in anime and how they would use anime in a classroom. Price (1987) recommends translating participants' responses into how a different set of listeners may receive them. I therefore responded to this recommendation by locating other potential themes where gaps existed between anime fans' perceptions and aspiring teachers' perceptions.

Findings

I divided the responses between "cultural practices different from the U.S." and "cultural practices similar to the U.S." However, some responses defied easy categorization into either of these themes, so I created a third theme, "cultural practices that may be similar or different from the U.S." In these descriptions, aspiring teachers were making judgments about the entirety of Japanese culture based on very limited exposure of what they watched for this exercise.

While more aspiring teachers noted aspects of daily mundane life that were different rather than similar, most of the noted similarities focused on school routines such as school schedules, curricula, and extracurricular activities. This limited exposure to anime may have reinforced common assumptions among these North Americans aspiring teachers that other cultures, even post-industrial ones like Japan, essentially lack dynamism or cultural change. Ironically, many of these impressions were gathered from aspiring teachers watching films directed by Hayao Miyazaki such as *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Ponyo*, and *Spirited Away*, a director who was making these movies as a response to what he considered tendencies of overconsumption and alienation that had developed in his own society (Reinders, 2016). Aspiring teachers on the other hand are led to believe that this is what Japan is really like. The cramped living spaces that students noted in these titles were not urban apartments, but rather small village huts and isolated rustic houses. Responses that indicated attitudes that Japan was less dynamic than their own society outnumbered those that considered Japan on par with or advanced from their own situation by over a factor of four.

Forms of discipline was the largest category overall when aspiring teacher's responses to the question of what they learned about forms of Japanese culture from anime. I placed mentions of prosocial behavior, formality, and forms of self-discipline under this theme. In one case, I put a notable lack of discipline, the mention of a laid-back teacher in this category. Whether teachers are laid back or willing to use corporal punishment came from one student having viewed one episode of *Azumanga Diaoh*. Still, this was very much the exception. As this exercise primarily focused on anime's use in the classroom, aspiring teachers – most of whom planned to teach elementary grades – were keen to note most anything they saw in the anime they reviewed that they may use to reinforce what they considered prosocial or otherwise desirable classroom behavior. Even when noting one instance where discipline was perceived as similar to their own culture, this particular student framed it as a possible lesson about universal difficulties in meeting ideal behavioral expectations.

There were perceived differences between anime and American media that aspiring teachers thought might be more pedagogically useful. Closely related to the perception of rural Japanese culture as being a disciplined culture, a handful of aspiring teachers considered anime a useful medium for teaching morals. For aspiring teachers, Hayao Miyazaki's rural settings are ideal for inculcating moral pedagogy, as are other anime that take place in either school settings or in temples, shrines, and other locales that are seemingly divorced from urban modernity. If they conceptualize the “anime world” as a field with its own rules, then those worlds' rules are useful for teaching insofar as they are not overtly urban worlds. Though urban life, including that represented in anime has its own rules of morality, discipline, and widely expected behaviors, these aspiring teachers who largely hail from rural and suburban homes largely looked away from the city for lessons to teach. These students likely inherited overlapping conceptual schemas regarding location, population density, prosocial behavior, and moral instruction without much challenge or reflection. In other words, they could be said to have an urban-averse pedagogical habitus reinforced by their previous relationships to teachers in rural and suburban school fields, even if it may be otherwise inclined towards including anime in the classroom.

With a few exceptions of those who were involved with the animation industry or aspired to be, the anime fans I interviewed largely shared a fundamentally similar habitus towards anime in terms of its utility towards achieving traditional pedagogical objectives. In a broad sense, they shared the idea with aspiring teachers that anime could be instrumentalized to reinforce positive student behaviors. They had similar concerns of risqué humor reminiscent of U.S. animated series such as *Family Guy* or *South Park* that is present across several anime titles; a topic that frequently arises whenever the subject of anime in classroom instruction is raised.

In contrast for fans, there did not seem to be an urban or rural bias towards moral pedagogy. Several different titles such as *DragonBall Z*, *Haikyuu*, *Angel Beats*, *Assassination Classroom*, *Naruto*, *Bleach*, *Bakuman*, *Madoka Magica*, *Sword Art Online*, *FLCL*, *Gurren Lagan*, *Fairy Tail*, and *One Piece* were cited as potentially providing instruction in acceptable behaviors. These series take place in a multitude of “realistic” as well as “fantasy” worlds, but both types of worlds showcase different types of geographic positioning, habitable infrastructures, and population densities that resemble those found in the lived world. Moreover, the types of morals anime fans consider worthy of instruction are not necessarily those that dovetail with expected classroom behavior. They include how

to help and protect others, overcoming adversity, friendship, dealing with loss, finding one's identity during one's coming of age, and loyalty.

Several different factors may explain these differences in desired anime moral pedagogies besides the anime titles' urban vs. rural settings or aspiring teachers' desire to uphold the rules of the field of education. Out of the aspiring teachers, nine out of ten were female and eight out of ten were European American. In contrast, the anime fans I interviewed were at gender parity, a third were European American, a quarter were African American, a quarter were Asian American, and 15% were Latino. In both populations, nine out of ten were aged 29 and below. All the aspiring teachers were students, whereas eight out of ten of the anime fans were either students, employed as managed service workers, or unemployed. There exists no reliable analytical mechanism in the interpretivist tradition to establish a causal relationship between race, gender, social class, age, or geographic background and perceptions of global media's pedagogical utility. Bourdieu's epistemology, which takes its lineage from Husserl and Heidegger (Grierson, 2015) deemphasizes solidified identity categories determining perception. At issue is situational habitus responding to relationships between field participants in terms of perceived possibilities for shifts in that field's meaning. A gap exists between aspiring teachers' school discipline-attuned moral habitus informing their preferences for anime set in the countryside and an anime fandom field receptive to an urban moral pedagogy. Attempts to close this gap before aspiring teachers regularly acquire and deploy field-relevant cultural capital in their later careers potentially opens a robust moral vision when they encounter a morally-conscientious anime fandom field unbound by such geographic constraints.

Implications

Still, a vision for a pedagogically instrumental use of anime to achieve behavioral ends, no matter how full-bodied or receptive to urban settings is a stunted one. Most any global media commodity can speak to classroom topics including political economy, cultural industries, foreign relations, gender and sexuality, digital and offline interactivity, linguistics, aesthetics and urbanization. Using the bridge model to study anime only to emphasize these academic categories in isolation from anime's history and lived reality across the world would be a mistake. Limiting anime to the role of a curricular adjunct to communicate expected behaviors and dispositions would be less desirable in comparison. Nevertheless, the prospect of aspiring teachers interacting with anime fandom as a field to expand the boundaries of their habitus to temporarily consider this limited objective is worthy of exploration.

As noted pedagogue Parker Palmer (1996) reminds us, "The viewpoint of the stranger not only affords a fuller look at the outer world; it also gives us a deeper look at ourselves. For the stranger represents possibilities in our own lives which we want to avoid facing...We avoid the stranger because he or she reminds us of our precarious place on earth, reminds us that we are strangers to others...And we are strangers to ourselves as well" (p. 66). Reducing anime characters to exotic but well-behaved people of the land that students can learn their manners from is not just avoiding the viewpoint of the stranger. It's instrumentalizing an entire medium and its alleged basis in "Japanese culture" in service to both a behavioral and ideological project of what John Whittier Treat calls the "stalled historicity" (as cited in Condry, 2013, p. 19) of Japan to better use it as a U.S. counterpart. I add that both projects are rooted in a craving for certainty that public education allegedly provides via an imagined traditional student-teacher relationship through which knowledge

of other cultures and mediums comes in consistent packages that are disassembled, demystified, digested, and ultimately discarded.

So how might aspiring teachers and even we as scholars and anime fans regain the viewpoint of the stranger, or more accurately *viewpoints of strangers* in the plural sense? Even though I had foregrounded my interviews beforehand through emphasizing to aspiring teachers that anime was *a* window into *forms* of culture, not *the* window into an entire culture, this message obviously did not resonate. If I said the answer was to directly re-teach this perspective, or spend more time on it hoping students would achieve my desired objectives, I would be just as guilty as my students who only wanted to use anime in their teaching to reinforce certain behaviors. Closing the Bourdieusian gap to consider the moral dimensions of urban anime (as an initial focus) can take on a variety of forms to better avoid this error. Aspiring teachers could attend anime conventions and clubs, start an anime club at their own school, interact with fans on social or other digital media, or even team-teach with skilled anime fans from the community or from urban locales via teleconferencing.

During these kinds of exercises, teachers could also enter into a dialogue with the literature on anime and higher education as an additional safeguard against instrumentality. One example is Ian Condry (2013), who studies how the emergence of anime is related to the *context of Japan* which relates to a finer level of detail than the overall “culture” of Japan. Likewise, Sandra Annett (2014) helps us think of anime as a practice, something that fans do through which connections are made across various cultural, national, ethnic, and gendered differences

Additionally, there are some exemplars of pedagogy who might provide some answers. Two educators, Julie Ruble and Kim Lysne (2010) gave a journal prompt to their students that was similar to my “What forms of Japanese culture did you notice from what you watched,” question, but in reverse. “Think of any American visual or performance artwork (books, movies, poems, TV shows, stories, music, etc.). In what way does that artwork serve as a window through which to view our culture? What do you think that art could tell other cultures about us?” (Ruble & Lysne, 2010, p. 39). This kind of reflexivity is critical to examining the intersection between anime and pedagogy without falling into the instrumentality trap.

William Tsutsui, a longtime professor of Japanese history examined his own tendencies to use Japanese pop culture to teach what he already thought about the material. He wrote, “What I still aspire to achieve (and hopefully am still working towards) is a full integration of popular culture into my approach to Japanese history, going beyond ‘adding in’ popular culture to my understanding of Japan and to my classes, but instead incorporating the insights gained from popular culture in reframing my historical perspectives and in refocusing my teaching of Japan’s past” (2013, para. 25).

These perspectives call on those of us who use anime in our teaching to embrace a pedagogy of uncertainty: uncertain contexts, uncertain connections, uncertain perspectives, and uncertain selves. I cannot say how such a project will end. But I can suggest thinking of anime less as an instrument and more as a process might be a place where aspiring teachers’ rethinking of global media and pedagogy can begin.

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