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C. Michael Elavsky

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# How You Gonna Save Y/our Soul? Tempering Corporate Identity in a Global Age

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**C. Michael Elavsky<sup>1</sup>**

## Abstract

This article considers how the intersection of cultural theory and pedagogy in the classroom might be utilized to foster greater global awareness and engagement. Specifically, it addresses how critical examinations of theories regarding the constitution of subjectivity relate to developing and advancing progressive conceptions of global corporate behavior and how liberatory pedagogies (i.e., addressing questions of culture, knowledge, power, representation, and agency) might intercede in the development of more ethically conscious conceptions of corporate professionalism. Such exercises force new considerations for imagining the world and one's role in it, potentially stimulating new forms of social engagement within and against the logics and reality of global capital; forms that promote progressive thinking and social justice while reinvigorating how we collectively conceptualize and engage the dynamics of the corporate sphere in our global age.

## Keywords

critical pedagogy, corporate identity, global citizenship

This article considers how the intersection of theory and critical pedagogy in the classroom might be utilized to foster greater global awareness and engagement. Specifically, it addresses how critical examinations of our subjectivity as a central component to educating ourselves for professional development in a post-9/11 world relates to advancing progressive conceptions of global corporate behavior. Deconstructing notions of education and identity more broadly allows fissures to emerge for rethinking who we are and how we approach living and working in the world as well as what is at stake in doing so. This is especially important for students of communication in light of their role and power in society as operatives in creating and disseminating symbolic culture and meanings. Reassessing the implications of their emergent professional identity, as it relates to (re)producing the dominant logics and dynamics driving the contemporary corporate culture industries, fosters a stronger appreciation not only for how power functions through concrete global communication practices but also of their personal responsibility with regard to cultivating humanitarian principles, values, and relationships more broadly through their work.

At its best, the exercise serves to develop strategies for imagining and enacting progressive forms of global engagement in relation to real life professional practices. At its worst, the students must at least confront their identity as it intersects the processes of globalization. In turn, examining how their subjectivity intersects systemic social forces contributes to opening new trajectories for thinking the world

and its global order, underscoring the essential role each of us plays as catalysts toward generating social change, and a more engaged citizenry. In the wake of 9/11, the Bush Administration's response to it, and the more recent global economic downturn, such examinations have never been more pressing or necessary.

## “What Do You Want From This Course?”

It is the first question raised, and one that never fails to flummox the 60-odd fidgeting or dozing students that sit on the first day of each semester in our International Communications course. Most often, in the pregnant pause that follows, I offer the obvious answer (a good grade), to which they all generally nod and snicker in universal agreement, none having had the nerve, however, to utter this aloud. “Why are you here”—the question that follows—only puzzles them further. Most are here because it is a required course. Some have an interest in “international things.” Some have studied or intend to study abroad. Some have never been out of the state. Most are communications majors, the majority of whom are destined for corporate media jobs in the realms of advertising, public

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<sup>1</sup>Pennsylvania State University, University Park

### Corresponding Author:

C. Michael Elavsky, PhD, The Pennsylvania State University, 310 Willard Building, University Park, PA 16802  
Email: cme16@psu.edu

relations, and journalism. All are here for a reason; most have never thought at length about it though. This, however, is understandable.

With its strong identity and job placement record in the corporate sector, the competitive communications program to which these students have come generally offers significant rewards to those who make it through. The 4-year plan, however, posits few options to deviate from curricular requirements, making the broader exploration of ideas and ways of thinking outside the parameters of their immediate field of study somewhat difficult. As such, their education requirements often become checklists rather than opportunities for wider intellectual engagement.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, with a large percentage of students interning by their 3rd year, it is not uncommon for them to graduate with significant work-related experience as well as a range of networking opportunities to exploit for employment. The university's strong identity in corporate circles, coupled with its extensive formal ties (itself, corporate in its proclivities), make it an appealing and effective gateway to a career in professional communications. The discursive spaces through and within which the students hone their professional identities largely reaffirm specific values, perspectives, and strategies for understanding and achieving their educational goals, suggesting why many subsequently approach their learning as a series of skill sets, accomplishments, and accolades to amass, rather than a process for philosophical reflection and spiritual growth. In turn, success often gets measured (and celebrated) in terms of how many and which corporate job offers are tendered and landed. From this context, most students arrive "here" in Communications 410 to learn more about "conquering their world."

For those individuals to whom such a description fits, this course functions as a speed bump in their educational development, specifically designed to be a potentially jarring alternative introduction to the rules governing their professional road ahead as well as a surprising and cautionary prompt for greater self-reflection and humility in their endeavors. To be clear, the goal is not to incapacitate their "vehicle" (i.e., their professional identity) per se, but rather to rattle it, encouraging deeper ruminations regarding its power, how they choose to maneuver it forward (in thought and action), and the implications of their "driving" decisions (as future professional elites).

With its broad range of themes and subject matter, international communications offers a particularly pivotal template for deconstructing "common sense" and one's cultural location, offering "the pedagogical conditions for students to critically engage knowledge as an ideology deeply implicated in issues and struggles concerning the production of identities, culture, power, and history" (Giroux, 2002b, p. 441). Personalizing the subject matter opens opportunities for reconsidering one's relationship to

one's education, culture, and practices of daily life, such that conceptual maps of the world and ideas of one's place in it can be redrawn (Heble, 2002). In attaining a deeper understanding of one's own cultural location, new definitions and meanings for "here" materialize, revealing how one's professional development intersects broader concerns in the world at large.

Such a pedagogical enterprise, however, is by no means easy or assured. Promoting the tenets of cosmopolitan thinking, critical citizenship and progressive global engagement often runs counter to the dominant ideologies and "neoliberal corporate ethic" that largely governs the dynamics and discourses of higher education institutions today (Giroux, 2002b, p. 434). In this realm, "[p]ublic needs are [implicitly] identified as market needs," individual aspirations often supersede the development of an intrinsic concern for the community at large, and "knowledge beyond its market value" struggles for nominal relevancy in the purview of preparing students for their role in corporate culture (Gould, 2003, pp. 8-25). According to Henry Giroux (2002b),

[w]ithin neoliberalism's market-driven discourse, corporate culture becomes both the model for the good life and the paradigmatic sphere for defining individual success and fulfillment . . . an all-encompassing horizon for producing markets, values, and practices . . . [which] lacks a vision beyond its own pragmatic interests and seldom provides a self-critical inventory about its own ideology and its effects on society" (pp. 429-440).

Consequently, students intrinsically learn "to define personal responsibility in pragmatic rather than moral terms" and are rewarded for their ability to "execute loyally, effectively, and efficiently procedures and operations that serve the achievement of institutional objectives," rather than for how they necessarily think outside the instrumentality of their cultural boxes (Jansen & Wildemeersch, 1998, p. 222).

Challenging the students to explore their own perspectives and biases, as well as those of the system that has nurtured their dreams for success, allows the ideology (and its global implications) within which they swim to be identified. It is, however, a complicated move in that it tears at the very fabric of their evolving identity, casting the corporate realm, the world at large, and, most important, their sense of professional agency in a different and more complex light. Such considerations, however, are essential for opening spaces to rethink how personal and professional choices connect to producing globalization's dynamics and emergent conceptions of global citizenship—in short, how personal actions have global consequences. Such pedagogical moves initiate candid and pragmatic discussions of the dynamics that await the students as media professionals in a corporatized society, providing food for thought to inform their

professional development. Challenging them to consider the larger geopolitical implications of their identity within a broader frame of reference than that traditionally provided in their training, we endeavor to foster a new awareness of—and engagements with—the world.

## Relocating Reality

When it happened, I was numb and didn't know what to think. It didn't make sense. I just remember watching the news for days, getting madder and thinking we need to bomb someone somewhere for this

James Boyd, 410 Class Angel Webboard,  
Spring, 2008

For many students, 9/11 is the day the world crashed into America. Deconstructing their perception, ideas, and awareness of this event clears the way for other revelations regarding their identity to emerge. Reexamining the dynamics surrounding that day is often a charged affair, but doing so can fundamentally reshape how the students' perceive the media dynamics in American life.<sup>2</sup> From this vantage point, the geopolitical power and ideological tendencies of the media industries—namely the very location where these students hope to land professionally—are viewed through a new lens.

At the outset of our course (following Nick Couldry, 2006) the events of 9/11 are explored as a

missed opportunity to explore/critique the dynamics of an undemocratic global media landscape which was both the background to these events and subsequently the frame for making sense of them henceforth . . . [looking at] the ways the media served to suture the myths of America, sustaining the narrative of “America’s horizon” in the world as good, just, moral, and ethically motivated. (pp. 89-93)

Rethinking it as media spectacle and deliberative “communicative act,” the attack gets repositioned as an ideological articulation of the “cultural consequences of those [global] inequalities,” whereby those marginalized in the global media landscape momentarily seized symbolic power to forcefully generate a monstrous spectacle of rupture against the hegemonic tenets of American empire, employing its very own codes (i.e., the Hollywood blockbuster) to deliver the message (Couldry, 2006, p. 93). Such a complex, distressing moment cried out for critical reflection. But in our mediated society where conceptions for news are nourished at the trough of sensationalism, it was not to be.

Instead, the incessant repetition in the media of the spectacle's images actually served to silence dialogue and critique, allowing only one frame for meaning—“one of shock, awe, and fear”—to emerge (Couldry, 2006, p. 99).

Any attempt to offer up a contextualized explanation to the U.S. populace was lost in the din of outrage and calls for vengeance elicited (and further stoked) by the media's replaying of the towers falling for weeks afterward. The fact that contemporary media significantly contribute to producing “the fabric of everyday life . . . shaping political views and social behavior, and providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities,” suggests an explanation as to why the U.S. population generally failed to consider these events in any different light: the logics of our contemporary media culture impel the reproduction of the spectacle that not only implicitly instructs us how to interpret news “events” but also obscures “the impact of spectacle culture and its underlying ideology on social relations” (Garoian & Gaudelius 2008, p. 24).

Interrogating the media's broader social function draws attention to the

spectacle pedagogy of visual culture . . . a ubiquitous form of representation which constitutes the pedagogical objectives of mass mediated culture and corporate capitalism to manufacture our desires and determine our choices . . . [as] an insidious, ever-present form of propaganda. (Garoian & Gaudelius 2008, p. 24)

It also serves to illuminate the students' own investments in “spectacle mimesis,” their education teaching them to “perpetuate rather than critique the spectacle of visual culture” (Garoian & Gaudelius 2008, p. 91). Ascertaining how media institutions are “deeply implicated in forms of inclusion and exclusion that produce particular moral truths and values . . . [and] legitimate cultural differences as part of their broader project of constructing particular knowledge/power relations,” the students are likewise introduced to how cultural power operates on and through them (Giroux, 1993, p. 373). Such insights provoke powerful—if also discomforting—revelations, for they reveal to the students not only how they are implicated in globalization's dynamics but also how the discourses of their upbringing have been complicit in naturalizing specific processes of knowledge production that reinforce normative conceptions of the world (Garoian & Gaudelius, p. 32).<sup>3</sup>

To the point, they begin to recognize the ideological implications behind their education and how it grooms them to sustain a system that also grants (them their) privilege in exchange for fealty. This new awareness also reveals how their “ideas associated with freedom and agency are defined through the prevailing ideology and principles of the market . . . [where] neoliberal ideology also wraps itself in what appears to be an unassailable appeal to conventional wisdom” (Giroux, 2004, p. 67).

In response, a small percentage quit the class, distressed by the vision of the world outside the “matrix.” Others

protest, unequivocally defending the system by reiterating the neoliberal mantra that reaffirms the noble vision of the market and ignores its contradictions. Most, however, delicately begin to engage their “unlearning of privilege . . . sharpening and invigorating [their] understanding of the way in which [their] judgments and commitments are grounded in complex patterns of social and historical relevance” (Heble, 2002, pp. 147-151). Such moves open a space for a deeper examination of how their lives are systemically intertwined with the life prospects of others. As they begin to consider how macrostructural forces intersect micro-situational experience, how ideology shapes the operations of institutions, how symbolic discourses intersect the broader construction of societal norms, and most important, their role in these moments, the potentialities for their “critical and methodological self-consciousness” are nurtured (Heble, 2002, p. 149).

Stimulating thinking at this juncture, however, requires a subtle approach. For future media professionals initially realizing the processes of their own interpellation, hard Marxist critiques of capitalism and commercial media (practices) are simply inappropriate, as their emphasis on the politics of exploitation and the premise of “false consciousness” can be, as David Hesmondhalgh points out, particularly alienating for those expecting to work in the field (2006, p. 60). Moreover, such considerations can initially be perceived as a zero-sum game: namely, sell your soul to the (“evil”) system or fight the power. But neither option effectively frames what is really at stake: the fact that recognizing the system’s capability to delimit agency simultaneously provides openings to undermine these tendencies.

Providing spaces where future media professionals can critically reflect on the processes of cultural production and the ideological implications of their future employment, nurtures their critical capacity to contemplate alternative practices that both challenge the logics of spectacle culture and implicate/integrate their labor in the project of enacting a more equitable global order. Convincing the students that these are important endeavors isn’t terribly difficult, as everyone can agree that the world needs less conflict and exploitation. Making these goals personally meaningful, however, so the students identify with how the logics of spectacle pedagogy and visual culture exacerbate global insecurity is more challenging. Inspiring them to invest their own political agency into resolving global concerns through their work requires that they apprehend a sense of the power they possess.

Thinking about how one’s agency contributes to the symbolic organization of our social order can stimulate new conceptions of consciousness and empowerment, as well as “new understandings of [one’s] place as subjects in corporate dynamics, the contemporary world, and ultimately, history” (Jacobs, 2005, p. 21). As such, we ask the students to rethink who they are (and will be). Their success in doing

so can be greatly enhanced by how we likewise rethink the classroom and what we do there.

## Rethinking Practice, Purpose, and Potential

The readings and discussions are really freaking me out. I mean, it keeps me up at night and it all seems so overwhelming. What can I do about it all?

A. Mauceri (personal communication, March 14, 2008)

I really liked how we got to talk in this class. Although there was no attendance requirement, I found myself wanting to come simply to listen and share in discussions about the real world—something my other classes never seem to deal with. . . . Hearing your stories made it easier to share mine.

Anonymous, end of semester SRTE evaluation,  
Fall 2008

Nurturing the capacity to challenge the normative assumptions related to spectacle culture involves reconsidering the normative assumptions of the corporate educational model, the outcomes it produces, and why they are valorized in our society. By reorganizing the dynamics of the classroom, we unsettle that model, opening spaces where the limits of our knowledge can be “exposed, examined, and critiqued” (Garoian & Gaudelius, p. 3). In such spaces, the dynamics of spectacle culture can be explored in ways that link it to broader questions regarding democracy, social justice, and global citizenship, including how “the professional codes of media practice . . . fit within a wider ethical framework” (Couldry, 2006, p. 105). And by laying bare our own struggles in this realm, we illuminate more fully by example the complexity of what it means to become “educated” in our society.

Walter Jacobs (2005), in his book *Speaking the lower frequencies*, discusses the concept of the classroom as “pensieve,” where teachers and students alike “expose, explode and explicate” the narratives of lived experience and “the complexities of life in hyperdimensional societies,” by exploring in congress “who they were, are and could be” as “engaged citizens” of the world (p. 2). Such an approach diminishes the distance between instructor and student by employing life stories as a means to reflect more broadly on the forces shaping our “understandings, identities, and practices.” As Jacobs points out, the exposition of the instructor’s “own vulnerability and uncertainty regarding the ambiguity of modern life becomes a pedagogical tool” (what he refers to as “teacher as text”; pp. 3-7). In turn, the classroom becomes a forum for collectively “re-visiting, re-membering, re-conceptualizing, and re-presenting knowledge” in ways which “defamiliarize

the familiar, and reconfigure what we already know into something else" (Garoian & Gaudelius, pp. 114-115).

In my own experience, such strategies serve to effectively generate more robust and honest engagements with the topics in class, in that the sharing of anecdotes and observations personalizes abstract ideas and concepts in important and more meaningful ways. Describing my own struggles in developing my professional identity and place in the world, stimulates broader reflection on how one's upbringing is suffused with cultural ideology. Recounting work and educational experiences—in my case, as a garbage man, temp worker, dishwasher, McDonald's employee (and failing out of college initially)—illuminates how we all grapple with determining social and cultural forces in (re)forming our own sense of agency and intellectual capacities, compelling broader reconsiderations of the dynamics of capitalism, the values and practices it promulgates/celebrates, and one's location within its hierarchy. Detailing life, work, and encounters overseas (i.e., revisiting my apprehension about moving to Europe and how this experience dramatically altered my understanding of myself, my country, the world, and how I would henceforth interpret world events [i.e., 9/11]) underscores the potential to deconstruct one's cultural "box" (as well as the challenges in doing so), stimulating further interrogations of cultural "common sense" and the media's role in shaping it, including how (and whether) we see the world. Each story underscores the ambivalence of my own entry into critical consciousness while building trust and rapport between us as a community of learners. In sharing their stories, the students contemplate "how power works on them, through them, and for them" and their "comfortable oblivion to the operation of power at the level of their everyday lives (Jacobs, 2005, pp. 75-76).

Such a critical pedagogy is political without politicizing, for it seeks to stimulate thinking about the consequences for power and agency and promote reflection on how the tenets of critical citizenship intersect corporate identity without imposing "answers." As Jacobs (2005) points out, the instructor's role is to

provide maps of political and /or politicized social terrain to help students negotiate various social worlds . . . pointing out what students may encounter on the personal and professional journeys without specifically dictating how they should respond to such stimuli and its possibilities (p. 33).

Likewise, the notion of a shared responsibility for culture—and by extension, our media culture—gets explored, as well as how we are each implicated "in the harms or benefits media create." (Couldry, 2006, p. 135) By foregrounding how "the ethics of media institutions are an extension of the ethics of its practitioners," we posit questions to the students that reach beyond the frame of "media ethics," to challenge their normative conceptions of

spectacle culture, corporations and corporate identity (Couldry, 2006, p. 135).

Inevitably, questions such as that which opened this section arise. Answers emerge by collectively considering—in a more sophisticated way—the relationships between cultural production and cultural politics and how media professionals actually impact outcomes, stimulating student thinking and processes by which alternative media practices—and media culture—might be imagined and enacted.

## A Space for Agency in the Cultural Industries

It seems that nothing can be changed. Yet things change. How do we explain that? People. Plain people (Rosa Parks, Gandhi, MLK) humbly find a way to change the world. It happened so I think it can happen again. Maybe that is just how it starts—by thinking it and then individually acting on those thoughts

Beau Berman, Post, 410 Class Angel Webboard,  
Spring, 2008

As David Hesmondhalgh (2006) reminds us, we need to be

wary of simple generalizations about media and power, on the part of either those who would say that the media are always mere servants of big business or the state, or of those who would say that producers operate independently of powerful interests. To take the first view would carry the disempowering implication that media reform was impossible and to take the second view would be naively complacent. (p. 87)

As he points out, defining "determination in its non-reductionist sense of setting limits and exerting pressures, rather than that of an external force or forces that leads inevitably to something happening," allows forms and degrees of agency to materialize within institutional spaces (Hesmondhalgh, 2006, p. 46). Stressing that "media producers need to be understood as active agents in forging a variety of possible relationships", he repositions autonomy within broader formations of social power and control by highlighting how the manifestation of internal tensions and contradictions rupture—and potentially reconfigure—corporate and cultural dynamics themselves (Hesmondhalgh 2006, p. 84).<sup>4</sup>

Wilfred Dolsma and Rudi Verburg (2005) provide an important framework for understanding practically such developments. Positioning institutional change as a negotiated relation between society's sociocultural values and particular institutional practices, they map out another theoretical trajectory for understanding how "structure and agency interact" (p. 6). Following Granovetter (1985, 1990), they

explore “institutions” in terms of “institutionalization” understood as both “a matter of social construction by individuals in face to face interactions as well as a process in which behavior increasingly becomes embedded and structured within larger networks to which actors belong” (Dolfsma & Verburg, 2005, p. 7). Institutions are thus conceptualized as patterns of behavior; delimiting, yet not completely determining in their function. Agency, and the power to constructively engage the specific logics of institutional settings, becomes directly proportional to the strength by which *conceptions* of structure and agency are themselves materially “linked in the process by which institutionalization takes place” (Dolfsma & Verburg, 2005, p. 9). “[I]nstitutionalization can [thus] be seen as the process of objectification of subjectively interpreted actions of actors into stable, more or less normative, patterns of behavior” (Dolfsma & Verburg, 2005, p. 10).

Stressing how “[i]nstitutions emerge or are set up with reference to socio-cultural values which give them their legitimacy and ensure that they are adhered to by individuals,” these authors employ a social value nexus to flesh out the interplay of standards, power, and interests that influence how the “institution” and the logics of the “institutional setting” get articulated in relation to the “nature and strength of underlying socio-cultural values” (Dolfsma & Verburg, 2005, p. 12-15). Tensions (or even implicit or explicit perceptions of them) between “an institutional setting and the socio-cultural values it refers to and builds on” can stimulate acts that reverberate to potentially set the processes for incidental or profound change in motion in either or both realms (Dolfsma & Verburg, 2005, p. 17-18).<sup>5</sup> Concluding that “individuals cannot escape institutions” and their influence, the authors nonetheless articulate a vision by which “people do have choices and can exert their agency even within any given institutional furniture” (Dolfsma & Verburg, 2005, p. 23).

Positioning the cultural industries and social change/stasis as more fluid sets of evolving interdependencies of institutional dynamics, sociocultural values, and meaningful symbolic articulations establishes an important framework for understanding one’s identity, agency, and power in constructive ways. Such moves allow the students to more effectively engage (and perhaps embrace) the meaning of this knowledge, as well as contemplate strategies for daily life practices as they consider the locations and activities they wish to pursue in the professional world.

## Reconciling Professional Identity

I don’t know how anyone can be the same after thinking about these ideas. Once you see the world in a different light, you can’t pretend you didn’t. You can’t go back. Although I wish I could do the last four years [of schooling] over.

Anonymous, end of semester SRTE evaluation,  
Fall 2008

Ascertaining a more complex vision of the world and its sociocultural dynamics is challenging on many levels for students. First, they must confront the idea that their education and professional development as media workers situates them—ideologically—as an elastic economic resource. Second, they must come to terms with how professional accolades are most often distributed in relation to one’s alignment and acquiescence to corporate logics and policies. Third, they must wrestle with how their pragmatic and (for the most part) nonreflexive approach to their education (i.e., compiling “work” experience, building their resume, developing the traits of good corporate citizenship) has been instrumental in these developments. Finally, they must reconcile how this new awareness might connect to reconfigured conceptions of “professionalism” that accounts for critical consciousness in the workplace. Extending the theoretical considerations raised by Hesmondhalgh, Dolfsma, and Verburg to corporate spaces and practices offers specific strategies to address these psychosocial conundrums related to corporate identity.

Strategies for negotiating and mediating power emerge from recognizing that it operates *through* participants in institutional settings rather than simply on them. Employing insights from symbolic interactionism, subjectivity can be understood as emerging through interpretive moves as they relate to multiple positionalities within a more fluid conception of cultural structures, the latter understood as “bare outlines of lived experience . . . [namely] forms of interaction whose contents must be filled in the interactions, intentions, and experiences of interacting individuals” (Denzin, 1992, p. 28). One’s “location in the world of experience” (agency) is then understood as the organization of “a body of localized, interactional practices which reify these relational-structural forms” and which are “always emergent” in relation to how such practices engage and affect (and are themselves tempered and positioned within) that social structure (Denzin, 1992, p. 28). Contemplating “how structures, ideology, and power interact in concrete institutional sites and locales to produce specific forms of subjectivity, emotionality, and lived experience” is the first step toward stimulating one’s own countervailing moves to constructively engage the determinations impeding thought and action (Denzin, 1992, p. 62). It also serves as an important step in reconceptualizing one’s relationship to one’s own labor.

Although fragile in constitution, such initial forays toward articulating critical consciousness and self-reflexivity represent radical potential for developing alternative praxes, in that “[b]y developing a self-reflexivity to consider how activity, structures, and history connect to power, discourse and ideology, one can begin to position and evaluate one’s practices or agency within larger contexts of macro-social structures and engagement (Denzin, 1992, p. 62).

Kathleen McCormick (1994) takes this idea one step further, suggesting that

conceiving of the self as an interdiscursive subject rather than a free individual can (paradoxically) enable students to develop greater agency than they might otherwise have had; such a radical reconception of the self may lead students not only to examine the various discursive practices which have helped to produce them, but to work more actively within and against them. . . . Agency follows only from a meta-awareness of why (to some extent) one has the beliefs, assumptions and habits one does. (pp. 146-148)

In this meta-awareness, possibilities for developing broader cultural and geopolitical transformations materialize.

## We Are the World

This class taught me how to listen to the world. Something I think our culture doesn't do very well. I think our media can be better and I will hold on to that idea as I work in the real world.

A. Altdoerffer (personal communication,  
December 4, 2008)

Today, the cultural industries connect people viscerally and personally to globalization as discourse, process, and experience in unprecedented ways. These industries themselves network global power. For those embarking on careers in these industries, examining questions of agency and determination serves to peel away the "naturalness" of corporate identity, exposing how it can be both structuring and prejudiced in the perspectives it breeds. It also reveals how one's life and future in the corporate realm is inextricably linked to larger concerns of ideology and power and that one's work as cultural practice has global implications. Such realizations often lead to broader reevaluations of one's nation and national identity as institutional and discursive constructs.<sup>6</sup> Grasping the ephemeral nature of these concepts as cultural representations in an evolving symbolic constellation actually allows "the complex contours of political and social agency" to emerge in the students' recognition that they themselves will play an important role (i.e., as media professionals) in creating, sustaining, or challenging such conceptions. In short, knowledge of the discursive nature of power and ideology itself becomes empowering; in grasping how power operates, a vision of one's own power (as well as limitations) to nurture particular perspectives and principles regarding professional creative labor becomes clear.

Moreover, the networks and forces of corporate life reveal themselves as dynamic—determining, yet not overdetermined. The governing principles in this realm are exposed for the powerful ideological constructs they are, (re)presenting the corporate sphere's potential as a site of contested values and logics. Broader modes of thinking and self-reflexivity

necessarily develop as the scope of one's vision of the world and society expand, as do the means to affect that world through personal choices (Noddings, 2007). Investing oneself in a "plurality of situated knowledges" and "pedagogy of self-reflection that insists on maintaining a permanent critique of oneself as a learner and worker," only strengthens this impulse (Tennant, 2003, p. 133). One's life becomes an exploration of the

important relations among language, texts, everyday life, and structures of power as part of a wider effort to understand the conditions, contexts, and strategies of struggle that will enable [them] to be more self-conscious about their role in the world, [and] how they affect other cultures and countries. (Giroux, 2002a, p. 156)

The premise is a basic one: individuals learn to identify with and internalize ethical responsibility for others across the spectrum of their daily life practices, fomenting a simple, yet "profoundly existential and practical philosophy" (Denzin, 1992, pp. 161-162):

First, before you act on behalf of another, you need to have shared in his or her experiences and taken his or her point of view in the situation. Even then, you cannot be sure that you've grasped the other person's perspective. Second, the ethical standards for acting are not given by some ultimate, final, external source (religion, politics, philosophy, or science). Individuals create their own values through action and by assuming full responsibility for the consequences of their conduct. . . . [In turn, the Self] is always preoccupied with human agency, the inability to understand the other fully, the constraints on freedom that structural conditions produce, and the inhumane acts that human beings direct to one another. (pp. 161-162)

Recognizing oneself as participant in process, historical agent, and an individual with empathetic capacities fosters different sensibilities with regard to understanding intercultural engagement and transnational corporate dynamics.

## A Kinder, Gentler Capitalism?

I want a corporate job—does that make me part of the problem?

Ashley Stanko, 410 Class Angel Webboard, Fall, 2008

Framing and conceptualizing practices of "resistance" has been an important goal in cultural studies. But if we seek to confront power today that is largely "post-hegemonic," where culture is no longer a separate realm from which to launch

critiques of industry and the processes of commodification but rather implicated in overlapping industrial and cultural principles, new ways to configure challenges to power must be nurtured (Lash, 2007).

What this means in practice is that [we] must engage with the culture industries: with art, the media, architecture, design, information and communications technology, software and protocol design, and urbanism. . . . This is partly because these sectors are expanding and are increasingly destinations for our students. But also because of the critical interventions that need to be made there. (Lash, 2007, p. 74)

By exploring the complex ideological dimensions in the corporate realm, fostering notions of agency therein, and imprinting the imperatives of a moral consciousness into the development of our students' corporate identity and labor practices, instructors contribute to sculpting new articulations of resistance in the form of professional practices against, alongside, and especially *within* the cultural industries and their logics. In a sense, we seek to train the corporate programmers to rewrite their code. As powerful contributors and creators to the symbolic realm, these students embody a potential to advance progressive and liberatory considerations in the public realm through professional work that might stimulate further reflection and debate within and along the continuum of cultural production and consumption. Thus, in albeit small ways, they embody the potential to stimulate new thinking and acting beyond ideology through their work choices (Yankelovich, 2006).

And it is here that the power of a university's institutional success in placing the next wave of professional elites into the work force becomes an asset, for such institutions become powerful sites for stimulating new ways to envision and enact revolutionary mental frameworks that recognize the social contract between business and society, such that individuals—and by extension organizations—might begin to instinctively "look past their own economic well-being and . . . consider their role as broader agents of social change" (Svensson & Wood, 2008, p. 308). Fomenting these initiatives involves pushing the students past what Freestone & McGoldrick (2008) refer to as the "critical ethical point," that "tipping point where positive motivations outweigh negative motivations for an ethical course of action" such that the instrumental reasoning of corporate ideology can be surpassed (p. 461). Such developments challenge "the economic pretense that people can be treated as things, as commodities or machines, as lifeless property" to be "utilized" in corporate procedures (Greider, 2003, p. 60). It also instills the sensibility that struggles related to equitable distributions of power are worth taking up as an integral part of one's corporate identity; goals that can be good for humanity and the company. It also stimulates the recognition that one's work—and by extension,

one's fate—is inextricably tied to the welfare of others in the world. And finally, it underscores that "humanizing and spiritualizing the workplace" is a moral imperative if a sustainable capitalist model for the 21st century is to be achieved (Pandey & Gupta, 2008, p. 896).

In this moment, we are witnessing the development of such dynamics in the corporate realm, especially regarding environmental and humanitarian concerns (global warming, global poverty, etc.) and corporate initiatives related (sincerely and as marketing campaign) to social responsibility (i.e., the Product Red campaign), tactical philanthropy (mission-related investing), and political/ethical consumerism (moral purchasing practices). Such developments not only nurture economic practices and relationships that consider the greater good but also stimulate a heightened awareness and interest more broadly in the business community regarding ethical choices and social obligations, as they relate to profitability; processes that are "predicated on the interrelationship between business and society where each one is interdependent and responsible together for the outcomes" (Svensson & Wood 2008, p. 319).

Tangible benefits are being realized by incorporating such tendencies into corporate agendas. Hughes, Wrigley, & Buttle (2008) go so far as to suggest that [e]thical consumption and corporate responsibility are serving to rework the boundaries between functions of the market, state, and civil society . . . [with] significant implications for relationships between consumers, retailers, and producers" regarding shifts in the power and potential to advance profoundly radical conceptions regarding the business/society nexus (p. 347). Most important, in light of recent political and economic developments (i.e., an Obama presidency, the current global economic crisis), the imperatives to foment new potentialities regarding the intersection of ethics and economics have also never seemed more plausible.

Many scholars, of course, criticize such thinking and developments for what they perceive to be as their inherent contradictions (i.e., corporations operate without moral inclinations, as they are solely created to accumulate profits). Although their arguments certainly have merit and are worthy of further consideration, they neglect how scholars themselves are similarly implicated in capitalism's contradictions.<sup>7</sup> Chris Rojek (2007) addresses this in his critique of "neat capitalism," by pointing out how his publisher, Routledge, profits off of the scholarly critiques of capitalism and consumer logics it regularly publishes, while underscoring the academic dependencies (i.e., promotion and tenure) that are invested in reproducing this model:

By presenting positions . . . through publications, [scholars] engage with the marketing systems of publishing corporations that are designed not merely to provide outlets for important, worthwhile thought, but to maximize sales. Necessarily, this involves compliance with some of the devices and principles of

capitalist organization that . . . invite criticism. . . . cultural production and consumption, even in fields that are culturally critical and reflexive, assume an industrial model of exchange. . . . these processes are *most* effective when they are marshaled and consumed in the spirit of critical activity, because criticism assumes a type of knowledge that renders their effects transparent through the mere act of criticism. (Rojek, 2007, pp. 133-150)

By acknowledging how we ourselves are implicated in the difficulties of developing a more holistic approach to what we do, one which admits the contradictions between our professional and personal identities, our ethical and economic impulses, and the policies and practices of the corporate (university) environment within which we work, we serve as examples for opening up the excitement, possibilities, potential and pitfalls in working to imagine and create a better world. If we truly seek to nurture a more complex vision of society and global engagement in our students, we must also remain mindful of our own biases and contradictions, as well as how we too, are directly implicated within the neoliberal logics and dynamics influencing social life today. Acknowledging that we too negotiate these forces in complex and contradictory ways serves to ground both ourselves as examples and our rhetoric beyond exhortations and platitudes.

This is not to suggest in any way that radical pedagogies and cultural critiques are unhelpful; rather, it is to put forward the idea that if we truly hope to turn the rudder on the current trajectory of global corporate capitalism as evolving system and ideology and curb its potential to foment division and intercultural dischord, perhaps it is time to reconsider a broader range of rhetoric and strategies with regard to how we conceptualize the dynamics of social change and the role of corporate identities within strategies related to it. Specifically, we need to consider the potential role the corporate citizen can play in promulgating alternative social realities. Within a more complex understanding of the processes of cultural production and how power operates within institutions lies the potential to perceive how professional work and symbolic creation might link up to larger political projects. Situated on the front line of cultural production within critical consciousness positions students to “question the basic assumptions that govern political life, and . . . participate in shaping the basic social, political, and economic orders that govern their lives” (Giroux, 2002a, p. 1151).

Engaging corporate identity as solution (rather than problem, which many theoretical analyses implicitly do by erasing corporate agency or dismissing its complexity) can serve to empower students to “[i]nvest in the notion of the public good as a political idea . . . [and] to believe they can be agents of change, and that political and ethical values matter” with regard to developing their professional identity (Giroux, 2002a, p. 1147). Heightened self-awareness and critical

reflexivity produces alternative visions of the world and one’s role in it, such that one’s sense of powerlessness (to alter imposing institutions seemingly beyond intervention) morphs into a perception of personal power to “to go against conventional wisdom and push the consciousness of others to consider new and challenging ideas,” potentially stimulating progressive streams of critical thought and action in the corporate sphere (Svensson & Wood, 2008, p. 310).

## Linking Coursework to Workworlds

As Freestone and McGoldrick (2008) point out, the motivational attitudes of students are a function of the stage of their ethical awareness, concern, and action (p. 445). International communications presents several opportunities to develop those attitudes toward progressive ends. But a university course is often just that—a stimulating semester that fades after finals. To offset such inclinations, I invite several former students to return and speak to the class every semester. These students—working in corporate and/or international settings—link the “real world” directly to our considerations of agency and determination in class by relating in unflinching terms how they’ve “moved on” from Comm 410, grappling with the further development of their critical consciousness and praxis since leaving the university.

They discuss principles and practices, grounded in their experiences and struggles as they continue to educate themselves and sustain their efforts to alter the world for the better in small but significant ways. Their stories are not always uplifting. However, the power of the premise resides in how their voices and narratives inspire the students in ways that no curriculum or isolated classroom in itself can deliver, providing real meaning to the issues and motivating all in the “pensieve” to embrace the idea that making a difference (while making a dollar) is our moral imperative. In these moments, we experience ourselves collectively “as critical social agents along multiple axes of identification, investment and struggle” (Giroux, 2003, p. 28). To be sure, everyone doesn’t get onboard. But in reaching those few who “enlarge their sense of the social and their possibilities as viable political agents,” notions of global citizenship are advanced. (Giroux, 2002a, p. 1155).

## Conclusion

I am really sorry to see this semester end. I do hope we will stay in touch—with the ideas and each other.

Shawn Biggs, post, 410 Class Angel Webboard,  
Spring, 2008

We teach the world because we believe in its possibilities. When we stimulate new ways to envision it, we open up new paths to perceive what’s at stake and how we all

might work to produce a more egalitarian and just global social order. Rethinking the world and our place in it involves rethinking how we educate ourselves. But it is not enough to teach against corporate educational practices. Rather we must consider how to remold it into new configurations. For those of us whose work contributes to shaping our media culture, it means forcing reconsiderations of determining forces in the workplace in relation to conceptions of moral agency therein. Stimulating critical consciousness in our students simultaneously requires us as educators to reimagine how we pedagogically address age-old concerns regarding corporate power and logics in the classroom. Encouraging a reconception of professional agency in ways that reflexively rethink power *within and through* the corporate machinery opens new potentials for realigning the visions of our world and how we all relate to it—and, by extension, each other. As Henry Giroux notes,

Such pedagogy bears witness to the ethical and political dilemmas that animate the broader social landscape and are important because they provide spaces that are both comforting and unsettling, spaces that both disturb and enlighten. Pedagogy in this instance not only works to shift how students think about the issues affecting their lives and the world at large but also potentially energizes them to seize such moments as possibilities for acting on and engaging in the world. (2002a, pp. 452-453)

As critical educators, we can specifically move this agenda forward by taking our position as teachers and public scholars very seriously. This means engaging our students respectfully in the classroom as both complex and caring individuals and as our colleagues in creating the better world in which we all want to live. It means designing our curriculum in ways that stimulate their thinking and compel reflection on culture and society from the perspectives they bring to the classroom. It means tying the subject matter to the real world, illuminating links between their university education and the ideologies and dynamics of society which lie beyond.<sup>8</sup> It also means mentoring the students beyond the classroom, guiding them toward further opportunities and initiatives that encourage them to explore the boundaries of their professional outlook and conception of public life (i.e., volunteer work, service learning, internships, study abroad programs, etc.). Finally, it means investing yourself in them long after they have left your class, acting as an existential lifeline in their trying moments and as an inspiration not only for their belief in what is possible but also in the value of developing their critical agency long after they have left the university.

Closer to home, it means linking our initiatives to like-minded individuals across our campus, curriculum, and community by tying our own “professional” development

to one another through guest lectures, cotaught classes, participation in seminars, and so on. It also means extending our perspectives into the realm of our scholarship, incorporating our beliefs and concerns into the research and publications we engage in, and disseminating our findings beyond the confines of our disciplines through public scholarship, outreach, and community engagement initiatives, among others. It is imperative that we invite the public more broadly into the conversation, including the corporate world as well. For through such initiatives, we foster and advance real possibilities to enact social change.

However, perhaps David Domke (2008) summarizes best how we (should) serve the public:

[Our work] is about more than imparting knowledge; it's also about providing hope, even inspiration. . . . When scholars highlight opportunities for social change, we offer hope. When scholars help people to negotiate systems in ways that more fully honor their humanity, we offer hope. When scholars provide tools that allow people to take greater control over personal and cultural choices, we offer hope. And when [we] drop our detachment and adopt an ethic of engagement, we offer hope. It is this emphasis—on the belief that together we can build a better world, a more perfect union of humanity—which should drive our endeavors]. (p. 393)

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### **Notes**

1. Allow me to insert a caveat here; this is in no way an indictment of my colleagues, administrators, nor the university at large within which we work, but rather an assessment of how our university is inescapably positioned within larger trends related to education under today's dominant neoliberal model. As I point out later in the text, there are distinct advantages to being successful within this realm, which are directly relevant to my arguments in the article.
2. Part of this process involves deconstructing dominant narratives related to American history and foreign policy, which, in many cases, challenges the very essence of the student's understanding of their identity and reality. Reactions range from affirmation to antipathy, and the fact that the class is structured to facilitate discussion is central in serving to diffuse tensions. Through robust and respectful exchanges, we seek—in the words of Henry Giroux—to “engage in a dialogue and critique around the meaning of democratic values,

the relationship between learning and civic engagement, and the connection between schooling, what it means to be a critical citizen, and the responsibilities one has to the larger world" so as to fulfill "the promise of a more fully developed democracy in a global landscape" (2002a, p. 1142). Integral to this process is the willingness to nurture dialogue that is both challenging and respectful, including tremendous candor and reflexivity regarding my own upbringing, institutional identity, and life experiences. Doing so allows for the subject matter to move from abstract consideration to concrete example, while confidently demonstrating that stumbling in earnest toward knowledge requires an ability to recognize, laugh at, and learn from one's own misconceptions and apprehensions about the world.

3. The fact that I regularly get in my class evaluations responses like what follows leads me to this conclusion:

This class really opened my eyes to the world and my place in it. However, this is my last semester here and I am dumbstruck that I am encountering this information for the first time after four years of school. How is that possible! Why haven't my other classes dealt with these ideas and questions? From them, I have skills for a job; this class gave me skills for living my life. I just wish I had taken this course four years ago. (anonymous, end of semester SRTE evaluation, Fall, 2008)

4. David Hesmondhalgh presents a valuable survey of theories addressing questions of autonomy in cultural production in his essay "Media organizations and media texts: production, autonomy, and power" in *Media Production* (2006).
5. In explaining how change occurs, the authors submit the following: "Our focus on the process of institutional change allows for a role for agency not just to exploit the "zone of tolerance" that existing institutions offer but also to seek for instance to alter existing institutions. Based on their set of values and norms, people have expectations about the performance of organizational structures or practices. Such performance is the material outcome of the ways values, power, and interests are translated into practices and present the extent to which these values and interests are served successfully, within a framework of interpretation rationalizing and legitimizing these outcomes. Individual valuations, however, may of course diverge from judgments following from this framework and depending on the constellation of values, power, and interest induce changes of behavior . . . Small, incremental changes in an institutional setting can, for instance, result in a tension in the relation between sociocultural values and institutions. Such a tension could [also] set in motion a process wherein a community's sociocultural values change. . . . Tensions occur when individuals decide to act contrary to routinized patterns of behavior because (the definition of) situations do not conform to aspirations and preferences, allowing valuations to diverge from expectations about the performance of an institutional setting and the way it has come to express socio-cultural values. These tensions trigger changes in individual

behavior and institutions. . . . Central to an understanding of processes of institutional change [therefore] is the idea that tensions between, or mismatches of sociocultural values on the one hand, and institutions on the other, is the motor of change. (pp. 17-18).

6. The work of Robert Jensen (2004) has been particularly helpful in parsing out the issues related to this exercise.
7. Laying this point bare is also an important pedagogical move, as it again serves to collapse either/or scenarios for action as well as promoting nuanced approaches to developing these impulses.
8. This historical moment in particular (the election of Obama, the current financial crisis, etc.) is particularly poignant for this purpose, as many of our students have been directly affected by it in profoundly personal ways.

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## Bio

**C. Michael Elavsky**, PhD, is an assistant professor of communications at Pennsylvania State University. His research interests are centered on developments in the global music industries, music as cultural and political communication, postcommunist cultural studies, and globalization.