

Book Reviews

Decoding Discrimination: A Student-based Approach by R. Simon, John Brown, Enid Lee and Jon Young, London, ON: Althouse Press, 1988.

Reviewed by Denis Hlynka

Decoding Discrimination is an important book for Canadian educators and for Canadian educational technologists. It consists of detailed study guides to four Canadian films. The intent is that a high school teacher will spend approximately five lessons on each film. The four films are *Ravinder*, dealing with a Canadian Sikh; *Reflections: People of Ontario*, dealing with immigrant experiences of four ethnic groups (Black, German, Greek and Korean); *Enemy Alien*, about the internment of the Japanese in Canada during World War II; and *Maria*, about an Italian immigrant. All four films are united by the common theme of discrimination,

The book is built on the simple but powerful concept that teachers need instructional support material if they are to use film materials effectively in classroom teaching. I think the authors are right, and I think the guides they have produced are excellent. While the focus is on four specific films, the authors have also produced a model which should guide teachers to using other films in a more effective and more efficient way. Indeed they “encourage you to adapt and apply the ideas in this unit to other films that may be more relevant and accessible to you in your particular situation” (p. 3).

The basic model of film analysis is not stated explicitly, but needs to be pulled out of the text by the reader. Nevertheless, this is probably the most significant contribution the text makes, more so even than the explicit content promised in the title “decoding discrimination.” Each of the four films is discussed under the following topics: description, general remarks, overview of lesson plans, detailed notes for each lesson, and assignments for each lesson. The authors suggest that each film needs several lessons, ranging from three sessions for *Ravinder*, to six lessons for *Reflections*. In all cases the first lesson introduces the film, then instructs the teacher to allow “an uninterrupted viewing” of the entire film. Later lessons show and discuss specific segments

of the film. The assignments are extensive, approximately six per film.

Given the above overview of the text, it is necessary to focus critically on three issues. First, living as we do in an information society, it is almost essential that teachers do what this book suggests, that is, teach with film. It needs to be noted, however, that the term "film" is a problematic one which ultimately needs to be phased out and replaced with film/video (much like the term he/she). Most teachers now use video, and one assumes that the films discussed in this text must also be available in video format. This not merely a technical point, however. One does use video differently. At the very least, the nature of video is much more amenable to the kinds of analysis the authors desire. Indeed, given a video format, even more in-depth analyses as to how the medium works become possible. Only video permits easy access to any scene almost instantly. In addition, instant replay of any scene or even frame is a significant attribute of the video format.

Secondly, a good teacher can do wonderful things with any stimulus material, films included. Unfortunately, a poor teacher will simply miss the point and end up abusing and/or misusing the system. Thus the most obvious problem with which users of this book will be confronted is that the authors ask questions but supply no answers. This is fine if the teacher knows the subject, and is sensitive to the particular methodology being proposed. But these days, budget-stretching solutions no longer guarantee that every teacher can be an expert in all areas. The teacher needs help, and this text may or may not give the requisite information needed.

For example, how long will a teacher expect students to work on the question which says, "Do your own research on the garment industry in Canada. . ." (p. 106). It is simple to say that the teacher will decide. But more likely the teacher will not decide anything, merely assign the question, and let the student figure out what the author (or the teacher) is after. And a simple innocuous question suddenly becomes a weekend nightmare of impossible homework!

Or take a question like "How do we come to accept that a woman's place is in the home?" (p. 106) and "What changes do men have to make in order to expand the possibilities of a woman's place. . . ?" Are these questions themselves inadvertently sexist? Is the first one asking that we do accept a woman's place? And why do men only have to make changes? Don't we all? Again, it is easy to say that we know what the authors have in mind. It is not so easy to communicate that clearly.

Thirdly, yet another set of activities proposed in this book is equally laudable in purpose but problematic in application. Throughout the units, students are expected to evaluate the cinematic techniques used in the films. On page two, students are told "When viewing films. . . you will see that through such techniques as the choice of narration, dialogue, casting of actors, editing of scenes, and camera angles used to photograph the story, each maker has created a particular version of the nature and origins of social inequality." The point is an important one. But later, when question 3.8 (page

SO) asks students to conduct a “film analysis,” no content information on cinematic technique is provided. It is a common error for textbook authors to treat certain topics as being intuitive. Very simple, one cannot intelligently react on an intuitive level alone to issues such as television intertextuality, gendered television, television modes of address or the semiotics of television. A content lesson on television/film literacy is clearly needed within this text, but is missing. It is not acceptable to shoulder the teacher with the task of becoming an expert in television analysis. It is not enough to request students to examine, as on page 81, the contributions of a film score. It is not that simple.

As a parallel example, I recall studying a complex philosophic technique called deconstruction, then some time later reading a junior high school English curriculum which stated naively, “students will deconstruct a text. . .” A second example and perhaps the most common such reductive statement is by those teachers and librarians who use the work “research” as something every Grade 2 student does. I also recall my ten year old son coming home to tell me about his “thesis” on the lemming! Such a use only tends to simplify and trivialize the process of “research.”

At this point let us return to the title of the book. The authors are trying to teach about discrimination. The subtitle suggests that the approach is “student based;” that this is “anti-racist education,” and that it is “using film.” Each of these terms seems problematic. “Student-based” can mean assigning homework for which the teacher must work out answers. “Anti-racist education” seems to be both a negative and narrow term. And “film,” as has already been noted, needs to be extended to include video.

The above comments notwithstanding, it needs to be re-iterated that “I like the book.” The model of using media to explore a significant issue within the classroom is laudable, perhaps even essential, as we enter the last decade of the twentieth century. Students need to know how to work with the simulacrum provided by media which goes under the name of “information.” The book, used with care, can be an important first step.

REVIEWER

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