

Talking back to Nike: Culture jamming in the sociology classroom

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Introduction

'Artists are here to disturb the peace.'

-- James Baldwin

My goal in teaching sociology at community college is to encourage students to 'disturb the peace,' to think less passively and more critically about their world, and to understand themselves as social actors who can potentially transform society. James Baldwin identifies art as a powerful vehicle for this kind of agitation, and his words connect well to the concept of 'culture jamming,' a form of contemporary media activism that emphasizes active dialogue with the advertising that surrounds us. This article explores whether integrating culture jamming into a sociology course can help to transform students from culture *consumers* into critical culture *producers*.

Mark Dery defines culture jamming as 'media hacking, information warfare, terror-art, and guerrilla semiotics, all in one.' Culture jamming is a way of subverting mainstream cultural institutions, using corporate communication methods such as high budget advertising campaigns, against themselves. For example, Adbusters, one of the most-well known culture jamming entities, uses sophisticated Photoshop techniques to alter corporate advertisements. An Adbusters image based on the Calvin Klein perfume brand 'Obsession' shows a bulimic woman hunched over the toilet bowl, drawing attention to the fashion industry's promotion of excessive thinness. Another striking Adbusters image depicts a sleek black sneaker on which is scrawled 'NIKE \$250,' and 'SWEATSHOP 83 ¢' (Adbusters).

Adbusters' campaigns overlap strongly with sociological concepts, drawing attention to issues such as global income inequality, environmental destruction and over-consumption, provoking reflection on how global capitalism perpetuates environmentally unsustainable and inequitable outcomes. However, unlike sociology, culture jamming emphasizes visual and

creative communication of ideas, as well as a playful engagement with serious issues. In addition, it highlights brands and symbols that are immediately recognizable to many students, potentially lending concepts such as the exploitation of labor an immediate relevance and urgency.

While planning my classes last summer, I began to think seriously about whether a culture jamming project might help my students to grasp sociological concepts in a more active way, to become more interested in the values and ethical decisions underlying the products they consume, as well as feeling empowered to “talk back” to the advertising that surrounds them. Use of corporate communication tools is intrinsic to culture jamming, and I wondered whether – in the space of a semester -- students would be able to acquire enough graphic design expertise to be able to produce culture jammed images along the lines of those created by Adbusters. Drawing on student work created in the Fall I 2009 semester, this article describes how I integrated Photoshop training with sociology course content, and critically evaluates the work produced by the students, reflecting on the use of culture jamming as a pedagogical tool.

Integrating culture jamming into the sociology syllabus

My introductory sociology course (SSS100.2623) is part of a liberal arts cluster entitled “Sex Wars: Sexuality, Power, and Culture in a Global Context,” which is taught in conjunction with thematically linked classes in English and History. The course content of the cluster is loosely intertwined, with readings that reinforce issues across the three classes without losing sight of the separate conventions or conceptual frameworks of each discipline. For example, a student might be reading a historical journal article on female body size and sexuality for the history class, writing a narrative about burlesque for English and, in sociology, responding to de Beauvoir’s commentary on gender stereotyping.

My syllabus deals quite broadly with issues related to power and exploitation, with particular thematic emphases on sweatshop labor and female gender socialization. Sweatshop labor is explored as an example of global income inequality and environmental destruction. Female gender socialization is considered in the context of over-consumption and the media. In exploring these themes, the course incorporates a series of readings from classical and contemporary texts; recent newspaper articles; and several short films. The readings and films are held together by a conceptual framework provided by factsheets covering issues such as income polarization and gender, which are based on material from sociology textbooks.

As part of the sweatshop theme, students read an extract from chapter ten of *Capital* (Marx), which describes the deplorable working conditions and the prevalence of child labor in Victorian factories. After reading and analyzing the Marx, they watch a short documentary called *Behind the Swoosh* (Keady), which investigates the labor conditions in Nike's Indonesian factories, highlighting the company's illegal dumping practices (waste rubber and plastic are illegally dumped and burned near residential areas where children play), the low wages that require workers to put in huge amounts of overtime in order to subsist, and the sometimes brutal intimidation of workers who try to organize. In addition, students examine a series of newspaper articles about The Gap's continued use of child labor (McDougall "Child Sweatshop"; McDougall "Gap Plans"; Lawrence). This material illustrates concepts such as global income polarization and neo-colonialism highlighting how the profit incentive perpetuates exploitation. Students are often surprised to learn of the unsustainable environmental and labor practices behind prominent brands and this provokes discussion on how these "truths" have been hidden by advertising and branding campaigns.

The gender socialization theme operates in a similar way, juxtaposing sociological concepts and contemporary artefacts. Students read the introductory chapter of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (de Beauvoir), which highlights how qualities associated with femininity are socially constructed rather than innate to the female sex. They then watch an episode of *I Dream of Jeannie* (Nelson) that explores the relationship between feminine sexuality and power, showing in particular the centrality of magazine culture and shopping in prescribing female identity. This is followed up by a homework assignment and in-class discussion, where students locate a contemporary women's magazine and analyze it, considering questions such as "What, according to this magazine, is beauty?" As in the sweatshop theme, I encourage students to make a connection to the profit incentive as a driving force behind some of the pressures placed on women, driving over-consumption and creating unfulfilled needs.

My students generally execute some kind of class project, which is worth around 30% of the class grade. Approximately one hour out of the three hours of classroom time per week is usually devoted to the project. This pre-existing structure made it relatively easy to introduce culture jamming into the syllabus: for the duration of the semester, the project hour was devoted to learning about culture jamming, examining texts and images about this form of activism, acquiring the necessary graphic design skills, and executing individual projects in Photoshop.

The culture jamming project was aimed at helping students to make connections between sociological concepts, contemporary culture and personal experience, allowing each of them to select and focus on an issue that particularly intrigued them. I hoped that they would have fun creating an advertising-style image of their own, and might feel motivated by the opportunity to learn cutting-edge technical skills and show off this "product" to

classmates. In particular, I thought the project might open up the class to more diverse learning styles and talents, engaging students with a more visual approach to learning, or drawing in those with more advanced computer skills.

In order to introduce the concept of culture jamming in some theoretical depth, I added a journal article by Christine Harold to the reading list, which describes the practice and makes connections to the work of Deleuze and Foucault, emphasizing the shift from disciplinarity to control in post-Fordist society, where people are granted ever greater access to information and products but their experiences are ‘managed’ by an elaborate marketing apparatus. Harold argues that “the proliferation of the rhetoric of consumerism, in part, marks this shift from discipline to control” (194), underscoring the power of the advertising industry to mask exploitation and oppression.

As mentioned earlier, the appropriation of corporate communication tools is intrinsic to the power of culture jamming. I felt that the opportunity to wield a tool such as Photoshop would help students to gain a form of creative “capital” that might help them to see themselves as producers rather than consumers of culture. Although I was well equipped to teach the necessary technical skills (I previously worked as a web designer and have taught introductory courses in graphic design), acquiring an appropriate lab required a degree of luck. Photoshop is relatively ‘high-end’ software and is only available in a few specialized labs on campus that are generally used by photo and media students. However, with the assistance of LaGuardia’s IT staff, I was able to take advantage of a rare open slot and secure the use of one of these labs for one hour per week. Having received Photoshop instruction and chosen a theme¹, each student was required to produce a culture jammed 8.5”x11” poster

¹ I broke down the available time to allow approximately four hours for Photoshop instruction and seven hours for in-class project work. During the training sessions, students learned how to work with layers; use the

accompanied by a one-page brief, explaining their motivation and creative process, and making a connection to sociological concepts and course content. The images and briefs were presented to the class as part of a poster session on the final day of class.

What the students created

Student work created from the class varied greatly in quality, and some of the possible causes of incomplete or inadequate student work are detailed later in this paper. However, this section highlights some of the successful projects that came out of the experiment, illustrating the degree to which students were able, through their culture jamming efforts, to achieve some of the goals of the assignment.

Janelle focused on the issue of sweatshop labor, connecting some of the material from class to her mother's experience as a low-wage garment worker in New York City. In her project brief she reflects on her mother's working conditions, 'I don't think it's fair that she works 10 hours a day, 7 days a week and gets paid only \$200 weekly.' Janelle sees a continuum of exploitation between her mother's situation in the US and the labor conditions in India and Indonesia and is critical of The Gap and Nike: 'If they're so successful then why can't they pay their workers better? Why can't they give them better working conditions?' Her poster features clothing company logos and the slogan 'Made by Slaves for Free People,' set against an image of women working in sweatshop conditions in a developing country. Janelle's project validates her life experience of growing up in economically straitened circumstances in New York City, while also helping her to see her mother's struggle as part of a larger system of exploitation rather than as an individual shortcoming. By sharing this

airbrush, text, blur, and eyedropper tools; apply filters; and scale images to the required dimensions. Students scanned in images from magazines or used the Google search engine to locate images that they wished to 'jam,' and modified these images using Photoshop in a way that reflected one of the themes covered in class.

story with her classmates she became actively involved in the way these brands are perceived.

The project work allowed students to focus intellectually and creatively on specific issues that particularly concerned or intrigued them. *Zaynep*'s poster was inspired by concern about the pressure she feels from magazines to live up to unrealistic standards of thinness. In her project brief she writes, 'I am affected by these images of women ... if there were more ads where women were portrayed in larger clothing sizes, I don't think we would face as many problems as we do.' *Zaynep*, who was one of the most focused and capable students in the class, created a very professional-looking Photoshop image inspired by Victoria's Secret lingerie advertisements. She writes, 'My project is called Victoria's Reality, meaning that it's a reality to have meat on your body.' Her poster shows a 'plus size' woman in a bathing suit, adorned with white wings and set against an attractive starry background. The poster text reads, "Victoria's Reality, Not Secret," emphasizing *Zaynep*'s feeling that women of all sizes should be able to feel proud of their bodies. In her project brief, she made a connection to readings on burlesque from one of the other courses in the cluster, which had inspired her to think about alternative and positive visions for women whose bodies did not conform to stereotypical ideals of sexiness.

Another goal in integrating the culture jamming assignment into the class was to draw in students with visual learning styles or technical skills. *George*'s engagement in the class increased once the Photoshop training began, and gave him an opportunity to "shine" in front of his classmates. His project focuses on female body image, expressing his concern that the fashion industry tacitly promotes eating disorders. *George* went beyond the Photoshop training that was given in the class, using YouTube "how-to" videos to research Photoshop techniques for making a person look thinner. Starting out with a DKNY lingerie ad showing a

slender model, he used the ‘liquify’ filter to exaggerate her thinness, giving her an undernourished and elongated appearance. He also spent time during the training sessions demonstrating this technique to the class.

Students had fun working with images, and the sessions had a playful feel that energised the class. Also focusing on unrealistic standards of perfection, *Veronica* modified a magazine cover girl using Photoshop’s simple paint effects. Creating a cheeky and striking image in a style suggestive of guerrilla-style graffiti, Veronica adorned the model’s face with pink, black and yellow spots, and blacked out one of her teeth. In her write-up she reflects, ‘By making the image imperfect I am trying to convey the message that beauty is within. Just because you don’t have perfect skin or perfect teeth does not mean you’re not beautiful.’ Veronica, one of the most academically talented students in the class, used the project as an opportunity to expose her more light-hearted side, creating an image that was playful and relatively simple, yet spoke to a serious concern about female body image.

Another aim of the project was to help students synthesize sociological concepts and contemporary culture, identifying the everyday relevance of sociological scholarship. Using Photoshop’s filters and text tools, *Samantha* modified a Gap advert to highlight the hypocrisy of corporate philanthropy. Starting with a Gap T-shirt campaign that raised money for African AIDS prevention, Samantha modified the image to create a broken, burned-out effect. She then used curved text to inscribe the T-shirt model’s arms and torso with ‘subliminal’ messages revealing information from Marx’s *Capital* and news articles on the Gap’s use of child labor. Her project brief reflects on the clothing industry as a world where contradictions are made invisible by slick marketing. She also comments on the continuity between the working conditions described in Marx’s writings and contemporary sweatshops.

Overall, the culture jamming projects created by the class had a strong emphasis on revealing that which is hidden by corporate advertising campaigns. Drawing on course readings and video resources, as well as their own experiences, students engaged critically with the images they encountered in the mass media and modified these images in order to express – often with a sense of humor -- contradictions, hypocrisy and negative social effects. In the sense highlighted here, students used the project to move toward a more active dialogue with the advertising images that surround them, experiencing a sense of authorship that imbued them with the role of producer rather than passive consumer of media culture.

Critical evaluation of this approach

From a pedagogical perspective, the culture jamming activity had a number of advantages in terms of engaging students' attention, helping them to understand body image as literally constructed (through use of Photoshop) by the media, and empowering them as critical actors in a slick digital medium. However, the experiment also raises some concerns and challenges with regard to the amount of class time taken up by the project, differential student access to the tools outside of the classroom, and the relatively superficial nature of the final product.

The hands-on Photoshop training and project work helped to address some attention issues that existed among the students. As part of a liberal arts cluster, this particular course has a high percentage of first year students, with 16 out of 28 in their first semester of college. In the cluster, the students spend over ten hours a week together and I have observed that, compared to students in my non-cluster classes, they often become emotionally involved with one another, and increasingly distracted, as the semester progresses. Engaging in a hands-on project with a tangible outcome refocused their attention and energy, while encouraging appropriate levels of peer support and mentoring activity. The visual rather than

text-based medium facilitated sharing and collaboration, and students became enthusiastic about working together to solve technical problems and share their newly acquired skills during the lab hour.

The acquisition of Photoshop skills that are used in the design industry also had a certain caché for students, both from the perspective of learning something professionally useful and obtaining ‘insider’ knowledge that let them into the secret of how magazine images are manipulated. Several students showed their interest in the assignment by contributing Photoshop-related news articles and, as noted earlier, online tutorials that they had discovered outside of class time. During the training sessions, students were impressed by the professional quality of the effects they were able to generate using ‘makeover’ techniques such as airbrushing and this sense of empowerment was in many cases carried over into their individual projects.

In a broad sense, the project also created a vehicle for transmitting the concepts of social construction and agency that are central to an introductory sociology class, and I found that the hands-on work provided rich examples with which to illustrate these abstract ideas during lectures and class discussions. Understanding the airbrushing and reshaping that is routinely applied to photos in magazines gave a literal meaning to the idea of media distortion and opened up the possibility that our culture, even our sense of beauty, is powerfully dictated by social forces. Being able to use these tools and techniques to enter a critical dialogue and take action, arguably helped students to see themselves as social actors, capable of shifting or influencing culture. Culture jamming, as a means of using corporate industry’s tactics against itself, brings forward reflection on what constitutes effective activism, and invites appreciation of the carnivalesque and of subversive humor as a weapon of the weak.

In spite of these advantages, the culture jamming project raised a number of technological challenges and pedagogical concerns. The first concern relates to Photoshop's status as a professional software tool that is not commonly installed in college labs and is differentially available to students outside of class time. LaGuardia students often face severe economic challenges and it is not uncommon for a student to lack access to a home computer. For those who do have a computer, the Photoshop software is expensive to buy, costing around \$200 for an educational user license. However, it is available as a free 30-day download, and students were advised of this as a way of working on their projects outside of class time. Unfortunately, requiring use of such software for a class project also may have created an incentive for students to seek illegal or unauthorised Photoshop downloads, potentially placing themselves at risk of legal repercussions from software vendors.

Students who were able to work on the project in Photoshop outside of the classroom were unquestionably placed at an advantage. However, students were asked to report on how they had executed their project, and this factor was taken into account as part of the grading rubric I used to assess the work, where points for the quality and sophistication of the image were awarded more generously where it was evident that the student had not been able to work on it outside of class time.

Although students seemed to be generally comfortable with the Photoshop training, some of them became overwhelmed by the challenge of creating their own project and did not complete a poster in the time allocated. Given the number of students who appeared to be struggling to complete the work in Photoshop, I introduced the option of creating a traditional collage as a substitute for a Photoshop poster. This measure relieved anxiety among the students but may have produced an added incentive for inefficient use of lab time. Ultimately,

60% of the students managed to produce a Photoshop-based poster while the remainder opted for the collage.

This outcome may be related to the attention issues mentioned previously, which meant that some students remained distracted during the training sessions and also during the periods that were set aside for individual project work. There was also evidence that some students were doing most of their planning for the project during the lab hour rather than searching for images and thinking up ideas outside the classroom. However, the inability of some students to complete the project must also be attributed to the challenge of becoming comfortable using Photoshop within the space of a semester². One remedy, which would partly address time scarcity issues, would be to introduce some preliminary take-home assignments during the early part of the semester, requiring students to start collecting images and sketching out ideas so that they could use the lab time more efficiently.

Culture jamming, while open to many creative interpretations, is attached to specific practices such as the use of the ‘industry’s’ own tools against itself, and the subtle modification of corporate messages to radically alter and subvert their meaning. In some ways, culture jamming can be thought of as a sort of Tai Chi approach to activism, absorbing a powerful opponent’s energy and using it against these oppressive forces. While most students grasped this idea very well, others tended to retreat into simple negation (e.g., Don’t Buy Nike! or End Sweatshop Labor!), losing touch with the idea of addressing the audience with the smooth, persuasive rhetoric of the advertising industry itself. Clearer comprehension of culture jamming principles may have been better facilitated by use of different resources to

² Photoshop is such a sophisticated, full-featured tool that it is easy to take a wrong turn or become confused, and students often became temporarily confused or stuck. I was able to move around the lab resolving problems and, as mentioned earlier, technically proficient students provided guidance to slower ones, but this was not enough to bring everyone’s project to completion during the available lab hours.

articulate the concept. For example, the Harold article, which provides a thorough overview of Adbusters'-style culture jamming, also provides a sound and subtle critique of the practice, using theoretical language that was very unfamiliar and somewhat confusing to most students. Finer selection of resources, coupled with writing activities that help students to understand what culture jamming is, and how it emphasizes appropriation rather than simple opposition of advertising rhetoric, may have produced stronger work.

A final concern relates to the quality of the writing produced by the students in the project briefs that accompanied the culture jamming posters. They were asked to make connections to the sociological theory and concepts that we had covered in class, as well as relating their project to their personal experience. While the latter was accomplished very well, the links to course readings such as Marx or De Beauvoir tended to be somewhat underdeveloped and weakly articulated, and many students opted instead for vague allusions to video resources such as *Behind the Swoosh*. This could be addressed by making the project brief more integral to the poster presentations and designing staged activities that would help students to make scholarly and substantive connections between sociological theory and the visual images they had created.

While the project had shortcomings in terms of encouraging intellectual rigor, it succeeded in provoking reflection about the marketing of popular brands, and encouraged students to respond critically to advertising using powerful media tools. The work produced in the class exhibited a sharpened sensitivity to the unsustainable and inequitable reality behind contemporary consumer culture, which could potentially be more widely shared. Indeed, as I refine this approach in future semesters, I hope to offer students an opportunity to mimic more closely the advertising model, perhaps broadcasting their work to a broader audience through a college wall display or via the Internet. In spite of the concerns and

challenges it raised, the culture jamming project succeeded in engaging students and getting them excited about social issues. As such, culture jamming's emphasis on playful seriousness is an ideal medium for learning sociology and developing critical consciousness, helping students to develop into more critical and ethical consumers, 'disturbers of the peace,' who are able to actively contribute to building a sustainable society.

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