

## Please Criticize My Textbook

Jason Mittell

I never set out to write a textbook, as I have generally found the format to be less of a pedagogical aid than an impediment—textbooks typically aim to (over)simplify, focusing on consensus rather than debate, and stripping out the elements of academic inquiry that scholars find most exciting in the name of presenting information in an accessible and easy-to-digest form. That is not how I view teaching, a practice that I believe should strive to excite students through complexities and nuance, debate and dialogue, and working toward discoveries rather than repeating established knowledge. For my annual introductory course, *Television & American Culture*, I had given up on finding a textbook that would teach up to students rather than teach down to them, that would span across television's industrial, cultural, and social practices, and that would actually present ideas and arguments rather than just facts and definitions. It was only through a conversation with an editor that I realized that there was a niche to be filled and that other faculty might have use for a book that treats both the topic of television and the genre of textbook differently. I wrote the book with the goal of modeling my pedagogical style, both in approaching television as a multifaceted cultural form, and including academic argument and debate within the often sterile realm of the introductory textbook.

Now that *Television & American Culture* is written, published, and circulating in some classrooms, I want to reflect a bit on how I see such a book functioning within the television studies course. For me, a successful use of the book can inspire students to push back against its claims and examples, asking “why doesn't it discuss X?” or “how can Mittell claim Y?” Often, faculty will need to model such pushback, as students are conditioned to treat a textbook as a repository of knowledge to be mined rather than a set of claims to be debated, so I hope that faculty treat the book as a launching pad for conversation, critique, and inquiry, rather than something to be digested and absorbed—which is one reason I have resisted offering exam questions or lecture outlines as supplemental material. When I find syllabi teaching the book, I am gratified when I see the chapters reordered or recontextualized, or paired with another reading that I know will dispute claims I make in the book. One of my most gratifying pedagogical experiences came two years ago, when a student in my course approached me after reading the “Representing Identity” chapter, and asked why I didn't include a section discussing disability on television. After some initial hemming and hawing about the topic being underrepresented in television studies, and acknowledging that no book could do it all, I finally frankly said it was an issue that I just hadn't thought much about. I've now added it to my to-do list for a revision, and included a reading about *Glee's* representations of disability in my syllabus. My student demonstrated that she was getting the deeper lesson I hoped to teach about questioning representations and omissions in a television program by applying that level of inquiry to the textbook—and the textbook's author—itsself.

For those who do use my book, I hope you treat it as a resource to teach both *from* and *against*, rather than just something to teach *to*—by modeling the critical use of a textbook (even if you agree with it), we can help instill an attitude of critical engagement with all sorts of texts and practices as a core tenet of media studies. I hope such an attitude can extend to any assigned textbook, using an inquisitive pedagogical style to model critical engagement toward authoritative sources of knowledge. In the discussion at Flow, I hope we can discuss the various contexts and constraints that might facilitate or limit such critical pedagogy, such as differences in student bodies, teaching loads, departmental curricula, methodological adherences, or

pedagogical freedom—as well as modeling some criticism of teaching with textbooks.