

More than Clips

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Those of us who teach media frequently find ourselves on YouTube a few minutes before class, hunting for clips to illustrate MTM's televisual style, or fan vid practices, or that Miley Cyrus incident that simply must be subjected to critical analysis. YouTube has clearly revolutionized the way that we teach media: the site's users have put a massive amount of material at our fingertips on demand. What is more, our students increasingly turn to YouTube and other online sources to watch television. But perhaps we're not thinking critically enough about YouTube in the classroom. I want to make the case here that in addition to teaching YouTube clips in our classes, we should teach YouTube more explicitly. This might mean developing whole courses around the site, but it should also entail integrating discussion of YouTube into existing curricula. In this paper I'll suggest two potential approaches to teaching YouTube, one of which is critical-analytical and the other of which is more practical.

A first step in using YouTube more critically in the classroom is to recognize its limitations. We've probably all had the experience of looking for something on YouTube, say an episode from a long-canceled show, that we can't find. And more often than not, we'll choose to show something we *can* get on demand rather than looking for the episode at local libraries or video stores. This experience highlights a broader and more long-standing problem of availability that preexists YouTube but that persists in the digital age: not everything is available online on demand. This is especially true of YouTube following its acquisition by Google in 2006. As the site has increasingly emphasized monetization, it has also stepped up its efforts to identify and penalize copyright infringement, making it more difficult for users to post content that they didn't create themselves.

Most media scholars are aware of the intellectual property debates playing out on YouTube, but in my experience, fewer scholars have taken the time to really study the site and how it works. This is one of the main reasons we aren't talking critically enough about YouTube in the classroom. One approach to teaching ourselves and our students about YouTube is to engage with the growing literature about the site. Works like Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau's 2009 collection *The YouTube Reader* have opened a space for meaningful discussion of the site among scholars and in the classroom. Academic works provide a critical-analytical approach that encourage us to recognize the industrial imperatives of YouTube and identify the ways in which these imperatives shape the site's interface and content. In this way, they're extremely valuable. However, the site changes so quickly that it's difficult for published scholarship to keep up. What is more, students who are interested in using YouTube to jumpstart their media careers are likely to be wary of, if not hostile to, such scholarship.

This is where a second approach to teaching YouTube might be instructive. YouTube itself has identified a need to work with educators beyond providing clips, and the

company held its inaugural “educator labs” at several locations around the world last year. I participated in the Los Angeles lab, which involved a full day workshop at YouTube space LA (the company’s new production facility) and an online training course called YouTube Certification. YouTube’s approach to teaching the site is, as might be expected, much more practical. YouTube certification encourages educators to share YouTube’s “best practices” with students, who are presumed to be aspiring media producers. As I completed the training and took the certification exam, I found that I had mixed feelings about teaching students this material. Even as I correctly answered questions about YouTube-stipulated best practices for building, monetizing, and tracking analytics for my “channels,” as YouTube now calls them, I found myself wondering whether these practices, which are organized around attaining “partner” status on YouTube and sharing in the profits of the site, are truly the “best” practices for a site that was originally launched as a platform for sharing content casually among friends. YouTube’s current interface and infrastructure literally incorporate the user, directing user-producers away from producing material that challenges the site’s aesthetic, legal, and financial priorities.

The most fruitful approach to teaching YouTube may well be to incorporate aspects of both of these models. I acknowledge that the approaches I’ve outlined here will not necessarily work in every television class, but I do think that they can be adapted to augment a wide variety of curricula. As the boundaries between television and the Internet continue to erode, it’s increasingly important that we integrate explicit discussion of YouTube in our classes.