

The 21st Century Television Classroom: How, Why, & Why Not

Erin Copple Smith, Austin College

In teaching television, I begin with a crucial question: what is TV? The question “What is television?” was an easy one to answer for decades—television was both the box in your living room and the content that you watched on it. But pinning down exactly what “television” means in 2013 is getting increasingly more complex. Is the television the screen in our living rooms, or the one on our computers and phones? Is television something you watch on NBC or on DVD or Hulu or Netflix? Is television a set system of production, distribution, and exhibition, or something more than that? And most importantly: why should we care? Beginning with “What is TV?” invites students to become an active part of seeking and determining an answer.

I divide the course into four units, each approaching television from a different angle: TV and its relationship to society, TV as technology, the process of making/distributing/exhibiting TV, and TV as content. In each unit, we interrogate “television” from multiple angles, seeking an answer to the overarching question of the course and also working to understand why it’s worth studying television at all.

As TV moves beyond the box, it invites audiences—and, among those audiences, our students—to engage with it in ways that are both brand new and reinventions of “old” experiences. Over the course of the semester, I ask students to engage with television through various experiences that are emblematic of the current TV climate. In spring 2013, these included “binge viewing,” live-tweeting, cord-cutting, and/or engaging with enhanced viewing apps. Whichever experience students chose gave them a firsthand experience with what TV is today—how it has changed from previous eras, and how it might continue to evolve.

In reflecting on their experiences, students were asked to consider the following: How did undertaking this method of consumption alter the experience of watching TV? Did it enhance TV viewing, or take away from it? Why might audiences be interested in pursuing these methods of consumption? Are those involved in producing and distributing TV are likely to embrace or fear this approach to TV, and why? In considering these questions, they developed a complex and multifaceted view of contemporary television.

Like all new assignments, this one was not without its problems. Because each activity required sustained and active involvement, I allowed students to choose which experience they were interested in trying. Unsurprisingly, most of my Netflix-obsessed students were particularly keen to binge view TV, and so there was an extreme imbalance in participation and reporting. In future iterations, I

plan to ask students to rank their choices, and then assign each one an experience in order to maintain a better balance among the options.

The TV Experiences assignment worked because it required students to actively engage with what TV is today, to embody the position of a contemporary TV audience member while maintaining a critical focus on the experience and their subject position. It made concrete some of the more abstract concepts we discussed as part of the course: What is an audience member and how do audiences interact with TV? What are the goals and processes of the TV industry? How does TV function as a technology? How do these experiences impact TV content? These are precisely the questions I want students to be thinking critically about, and giving them an opportunity to put their newfound skills to work on a tangible activity allowed them to shine.