Chapter 24
Anime Fans as Dramatists: Plotlines That Describe Japanese Animation’s Potential in Public Schools

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ABSTRACT

Though millions of school-aged children and youth are increasingly drawn to Japanese animation, or anime, schools in the United States have not capitalized on this potential conduit for cultural learning. This entails a significant loss in terms of the potential to reorient internationally-focused humanities and social science curricula towards culturally-relevant pedagogy. It would be helpful to explore how two populations that would likely be directly involved in anime curricula’s implementation make sense of anime’s pedagogical potential. This chapter explores the attitudes of Japanese animation fans towards the prospect of using anime in K-12 school curricula in contrast to the attitudes of aspiring public school teachers. Interview data from forty-four anime fans and forty-four aspiring teachers were analyzed to locate plotlines involving hypothetical teachers and students using anime in a classroom setting. Implications for teacher training programs and school curricula are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The incorporation and analysis of popular culture into public school curricula is not often at the top of the agenda for education reformers. Schools are positioned in the current cultural moment to concern themselves with preparing students to compete within capitalist relations of production and consumption (Saito, 2006). Trends since 1979 have indicated increased work hours for the professional-managerial class through at least 2017 (Pencavel, 2018). However, few schools are exploring the possibility that most of their students may be working less hours in the future (Kuper, 2018), particularly those who will not occupy the professional-managerial track. It can be reasonably assumed that shorter work hours will generally increase many people’s interaction with popular culture. Therefore, schools should consider a change in curricular focus towards more education for the purpose of mindful leisure; that is, a type

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of leisure that encourages the self-aware development of capacities for continuous growth in relevant skillsets through purposeful interaction with a tradition or community.

With the advent of digital media streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime offering transcultural media in addition to domestic titles, viewers have unprecedented opportunities to access entertainment from other societies. This expands the potential for meaningful intercultural appreciation for those excluded from credentialed and affluent groups that traditionally pursue it. Most U.S schools are accustomed to offering a simple “heroes and holidays” approach to encouraging the appreciation of different cultures. That is, individual exemplars (e.g. heroes) relevant to the history of a particular marginalized racial or ethnic group are explored in schools during a holiday commemorating the same group. In comparison to such a limited pedagogy, incorporating the media of outside societies in the curriculum provides a difficult but not insurmountable challenge. Happily, schools need not reinvent the wheel of transcultural understanding when a preexisting fan base for that media has forged gaps between the fans’ original culture and another culture’s media. This can inform schools’ approach to refining that wheel.

This study explores Japanese animation fandom in the United States as a possible resource for teachers to teach in K-12 settings. This opportunity prompts research questions that hinge on discrepancies between a fandom well-acquainted with the media in question and educators utilizing it for pedagogical purposes. Critical to the implementation of most new education reforms is the attitude of those charged with that task. If attitudes are generally less than accepting, then even the most well-formulated plans of policymakers will fail. With a focus on attitude, this study asks who are anime fans, and how might their history and contemporary situation affect their attitudes towards anime as a pedagogical medium? How might these attitudes differ from the way educators perceive of anime’s utility in classroom settings? By what social process are these attitudes formed, and what do these processes mean for teacher training so that transcultural media can be more effectively implemented in school curricula? Answers to these questions can lay the foundation for revising transcultural media-inclusive public school curricula so that it is more responsive to two important constituencies – those teachers implementing it with the assistance of informed community members as well as to students who are familiar with this media as entertainment but not necessarily with its pedagogical potential.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND OF ANIME FANS

Conventional fandom understandings posit that anime in Japanese refers to all forms of animation while North American English specifically references it to Japanese animation with an implied emphasis on perceived distinctiveness in terms of artistry, language, narrative, or industrial context, depending on usage. However, if one believes prominent artist and critic Takashi Murakami (as cited in Lamarre, 2002), there is a kind of anime aesthetic in Japan associated with the limited animation techniques first pioneered in the 1960s and given added prominence in mass market works of the 1970s such as Uchū Senkan Yamato (“Space Battleship Yamato”), translated as Star Blazers and Ginga Tetsudō 999 (“Galaxy Railway 999”), translated as Galaxy Express 999. This is not to say that anime equates limited animations of a few frames per second. The 1988 anime blockbuster Akira and most of the films of Studio Ghibli (despite director Hayao Miyazaki’s insistence that he creates “manga films” and not anime (Lamarre, 2009)) use 24 frames per second instead of twelve or less. However, just as the mass distribution of Disney and Warner Brothers productions in the 1940s conveyed the impression that junctures and overlaps between in-house animators collectively represented “American cartoons” (or