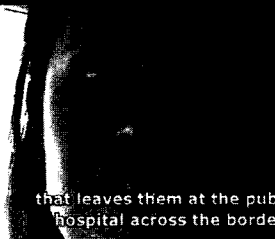


SECTION

3

ENGAGING  
SECONDARY  
STUDENTS



## The Apprentice: A Critical Approach to Media Portrayal of the Business World in the Classroom

Laura Pinto

This article analyses *The Apprentice* from the dual perspectives of media literacy and business teaching. The author recommends critical viewing strategies to examine representations of business in the media, and to think about business practice in new ways.

Without a doubt, *The Apprentice*, featuring millionaire developer Donald Trump, has made a huge impact since it first aired in January 2004. As the first purely business-focused reality TV program, it has garnered high ratings of approximately 20 million viewers each week (Cormier, 2004). Now in its second season, the program has generated a buzz among many business educators, even though many have misgivings about it. An entire class called "Management Lessons from *The Apprentice*" was offered at the University of Washington at Seattle in early 2004, numerous U.S. college business educators have used the program, and conversations with Ontario secondary school business teachers suggest that they, too, are incorporating *The Apprentice* into their courses, particularly Organizational Studies.

I argue, however, that a media literacy approach to studying this show allows business (and other) teachers to pose questions about strategies that the media use to represent business by addressing the following:

- In what ways does *The Apprentice* present power, using set design, stage direction, selective editing, and interaction?
- How does *The Apprentice* reflect and re-inscribe stereotypes?
- What sorts of strategies can teachers use to examine how popular television entertainment works to represent "the corporate world"?

### Portrayal of Power

At one level, the location of power in *The Apprentice* is completely obvious: Donald Trump and his two associates wield it and the participants are at their mercy. Moreover, this state of affairs

appears natural in "Trump's world." Media literacy is about developing critical skills to question this naturalness. To do so, students can examine set design, stage direction, and selective editing for how they communicate power.

On *The Apprentice* the "boardroom" is at the core of Trump's power. It is arranged so that all the contestants are required to sit together on one side, facing Trump in a large, stately chair, flanked by his associates. The boardroom set is dimly-lit, with dark wood paneling harkening to myths of old-time corporate glory, reinforcing the power and prestige that corporations are considered to hold. Careful stage direction contributes to the portrayal of power dynamics. When meetings between Trump and contestants are to begin, the contestants are called in and take their seats, along with the two assistants. Trump himself makes his dramatic entrance from a door behind his designated chair only when all others are seated. The camera work conveys that this is an important individual entering a room, worthy of an entire audience's attention.

Boardroom discussions, which reportedly last up to several hours, are edited to give only minutes of airtime (Gliatto, Lipton, & Stoyhoff, 2004). Contestants must remain ready to be called by Trump's administrative assistant to meet with him wherever and whenever he chooses, and while they (and the administrative assistant) call him "Mr. Trump," he refers to all others on the program by their first names. This establishes a clear distinction between those who wield power, and those who don't. Trump's power is further reinforced by his use of the word "girls" to refer to female contestants. Another example of the show's sexism occurred when a member of Trump's interviewing team suggested the only female candidate interviewed should be fired because she reminded him of a "Stepford Wife."

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# MEDIA LITERACY IN THE BUSINESS

Things to consider when talking about *The Apprentice* with students:

- How does the portrayal of the business world in *The Apprentice* construct reality? What spoken and unspoken rules exist for contestants? Were the rules the same for all contestants?
- Think about what might have been omitted in editing. What other scenarios or aspects of the competition would you like to see that were edited out?
- What does *The Apprentice* imply about characteristics, behaviours, or attitudes required for success in business? Are these characteristics the same for men and women? Are these characteristics the same for people from different cultural and racial groups?
- What implications do the issues raised in our discussion of *The Apprentice* have on your future once you leave school?
- What injustices did you perceive in *The Apprentice*? What could be done to change them?

A third example of the use of power is how contestants are silenced in the boardroom scenes; they are only permitted to speak to Trump when he calls upon or permits them to do so and the tone in the boardroom is hostile and dismissive.

## Reflection of Stereotypes

### MASCULINITY, AUTHORITY, AND THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN

Although they are presented as “reality” shows, producers of reality television only consider a small group of people as participants. They should have the following characteristics: physical attractiveness, spontaneity, and “clear cut identities” (Teurlings, 2001). The 16 men and women selected to compete on *The Apprentice* in the first season fit masculine and feminine versions of these features. Initially, when they were competing in two gender-segregated teams, women were winning. Once the genders were mixed in Week 5, however, things turned around. After the fact, Trump observed the following in an interview: “When they had their own team, they were dominant, but when they were interspersed with the men, the men started dominating for no reason” (cited in Kronke, 2004, p. 7).

While Trump did not step in to address male dominance and aggression, he was quick to call a meeting with the women during Week 4 to tell them that their use of sexuality to win competitions had to stop. Contestant Katrina Campins’ take on this practice is: “A woman that claims she doesn’t use her sex appeal to sell, simply

hasn’t learned how to use it to her advantage” (*The Apprentice* website, 2004). The resulting message according to Trump, is that male dominance is okay, while women need to be stopped when using their sexuality. Yet, viewers are also told by Campins that smart women do and should use their sexuality to get ahead in the corporate world.

### WHITENESS

The power of whiteness in the media works through its invisibility and naturalization. Whiteness refers to status, power, and opportunities that come along with participating in dominant and unquestioned norms and conventions. Race privilege is maintained when systemic hierarchies are attributed to “supposedly race-neutral factors such as individual merit or the operations of the free market” (Thompson, 2004, p. 32). Thompson reminds us that individuals of colour may participate in whiteness, but that their access to such status can be revoked at any time. How does “whiteness” operate on *The Apprentice*?

Of the 16 contestants on *The Apprentice*, in its first season, 13 were white (the exceptions were Kwami Jackson, Omarosa Manigault-Stallworth, and Tammy Lee). Contestants were required to follow wardrobe “rules” that fit conventional, white standards of dress. They were instructed to bring two business suits and “lots of business casual,” as well as to send photographs of clothing they planned to wear on the program in advance with two stipulations: no open-toed shoes in the Trump offices, and no jeans on the golf course (Gliatto, Lipton, & Stoyloff, 2004, p.102).

Without a doubt, whiteness plays a role in the potential for success in this portrayal of business reality. *The Apprentice* reinforces business practices that assume and naturalize “whiteness.” Participants have wardrobe restrictions, conform to certain ways of interaction, and expected knowledge of certain unspoken “rules” of business. Tucker (2004, p.31) suggests that in the case of Kwame Jackson (the African-American finalist), regardless of his Harvard education, “young black professionals are not bequeathed the ‘rule book’ that white businessmen operate by via generations of example and privilege.” Tucker attributes Jackson’s loss of the competition to this.



Howard Lam

“Using a media literacy framework in the business classroom opens doors to new ways of thinking about business practices.”

## Practical Strategies for the Business Classroom

By raising some of the issues discussed in this article with classes, and by using strategies and concepts from medial literacy, business teachers can critically engage students beyond the “content” focus of business strategy that would use *The Apprentice* to merely illustrate “real” business practices.

The Ontario Ministry of Education’s *Media Literacy Resource Guide, Intermediate and Senior Division* (1989), contains several useful points:

- Media are manufactured constructs, not reality. Participant selection, selective editing, and content strategies (e.g., rules of the game) in reality shows such as *The Apprentice* create a virtual environment that is sometimes mistaken for reality.
- Media can shape our values, perceptions, and beliefs. *The Apprentice* attempts to shape ideas about how the business world works.
- Individuals interact with the media in order to make meanings.
- Commercial factors impact content in the media.
- Media are not value-free, nor objective. A reality program such as *The Apprentice* contains numerous implicit and explicit values.

Using a media literacy framework in the business classroom opens doors to new ways of thinking about business practices. As illustrated by this brief examination of *The Apprentice*, such a framework allows us to uncover the “hidden curriculum” of business studies’ presentations of the workplace. Without a doubt, students and teachers will be able to identify more—and perhaps more significant—media literacy issues in *The Apprentice* and other reality programs.

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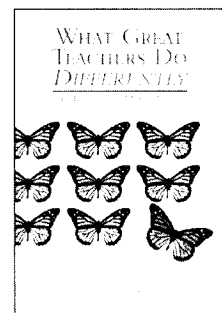
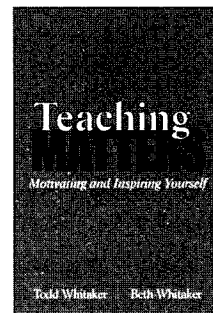


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