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Sport, Rhetoric, and Militarism: Democratic Citizenship in a Militarized Culture

Summary and Rationale for Assignment

In the face of US militarized culture it is imperative that we foster productive critical attitudes which recognize that “sport rhetoric is an especially persuasive vehicle for sustaining and extending the culture of militarism” (Butterworth & Moskal, 2009, p. 413). Towards this end, the following lesson takes a rhetorical approach to the examination of contemporary performances where collegiate sporting events are linked with narratives of militarism. By focusing on collegiate sporting events, I argue that students are encouraged to encounter militarized culture’s impact on their own lives. Rather than simply reveal the dangers of a militarized culture, this lesson attempts to orient students towards a critical democratic attitude; one that encourages action and fosters productive responses to militarization. This lesson envisions a class of 12-32 students and a time-period of roughly one hour.

There are several animating questions that drive the following lesson plan. They are as follows:

1. How is military culture normalized by collegiate sporting events?
2. How is militarism packaged and marketed to students through collegiate sporting events? How are students called to respond?
3. Who is postured as the ideal democratic citizen in militarized collegiate sporting events? What implications does this have for democratic citizenship in general?

Readings

Butterworth, Michael L. and Stormi D. Moskal. “American Football, Flags, and ‘Fun’: The Bell Helicopter Armed Forces Bowl and the Rhetorical Production of Militarism.” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2.4 (2009): 411-433.

Butterworth, Michael L. “Ritual in the ‘Church of Baseball’: Suppressing the Discourse of Democracy after 9/11.” *Communication and Cultural/Critical Studies* 2.2 (2005): 107-129.

Lesson Plan

- I. Pre-Class Assignments:
 - A. Assign Butterworth & Moskal “American Football, Flags, and ‘Fun’” and Butterworth “Rituals in the ‘Church of Baseball’” to read before class.
 - B. Divide the class evenly and assign each student one of four college sporting events to examine in terms of the articles they read.
 1. Carrier Classic < <http://carrierclassic.net/> >
 2. Battle on the Midway < <http://www.battleonthemidway.com/index.html> >

3. Sears Armed Forces Classic < <http://www.armedforcesclassic.com/> >
 4. Bell Helicopter Armed Forces Bowl <<http://www.armedforcesbowl.com/>>
- C. When examining the web pages for these sporting events, students will respond to five questions:
1. What sporting event did you have?
 2. Where was it played? When was it played?
 3. Who were the primary participants?
 - a) e.g. teams, branches of the military, audience, etc.
 4. How is the audience's attention drawn toward the military?
 - a) e.g. Location, event's audience, team uniforms, played on Veterans Day, etc.
 5. How is this sporting event presented as exceptional, or unlike other games?
- II. In-Class Group Presentation:
- A. Break class into four groups; each group consisting of the students who researched the same sporting event.
 - B. Have students share their findings regarding the assigned collegiate sporting event with their groups.
 - C. Have the groups prepare a short presentation on their findings.
 1. Provide each group with chart paper and markers to visually present their findings.
 2. Have each group present their observations to the class.
- III. Class Discussion/Debriefing
- A. After the group presentations, facilitate a class discussion.
 - B. In this discussion turn student's group observations back to the readings.
 - C. The following questions can be helpful towards that end.
 1. Who is respected/glorified by these sporting events?
 2. You have been asked how these sporting events posture themselves as unique or exceptional. How are these sporting events not exceptional? What characteristics are similar to "normal" sporting events?
 3. Is the military presented in terms of sports on these websites? If so, how?
 4. Who is presented as the model democratic citizen in these sporting events?
 5. Imagine yourself as an audience member for one of these sporting events. How are you asked to respond as a casual observer? As a fan? As a citizen?

Supplemental Readings

Butterworth, Michael L. "Militarism and Memorializing at the Pro Football Hall of Fame." *Communication and Cultural/Critical Studies* 9.3 (2012): 241-258.

Butterworth, Michael L. "Politics of the Pitch: Claiming and Contesting Democracy Through the Iraqi National Soccer Team." *Communication and Cultural/Critical Studies* 4.2 (2007): 184-203.

Butterworth, Michael L. “‘Take 'Em Out’ at the Ball Game (Or: ‘The Jersey Pop’).” *The Agon.*, 2 May 2011. Web 4 December 2012.

Ivie, Robert L. “Fighting Terror by Right of Redemption and Reconciliation.” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 10.2 (2007): 221-248.

Notes on Contributor

J. David Maxson is finishing his M.A. in Communication and Culture at Indiana University, Bloomington. He is currently teaching Introduction to Communication and Culture. He received the *First Year Teaching Award* from his department and will be presenting in the Great Ideas For Teaching division of Central States Communication Association in Kansas City this spring.