

Walt Disney World as a Teaching Tool: Using Theme Parks to Explore Historical Themes

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At 10:45pm a group of undergraduate students gathered for class around a few small tables pushed together in a large cafeteria-style dining room. Despite the late hour, they chatted excitedly about the events of their day and their connections to the class. While some wore Mouse-ear headbands, the conversations were peppered with academic vocabulary, such as references to “colonialism,” “paternalism,” “globalization,” “multinational influence,” “economic hegemony,” “gross domestic product,” “gender ideals,” and “anthropomorphism,” all before the official class conversations had begun. The group had just returned from Walt Disney World’s Animal Kingdom and were excited to discuss their discoveries of how the rides, park décor, shows, and conversations with park employee and patrons revealed structured ideals of historical periods or issues. Rather than a typical classroom conversation in which the professor must work hard to get students to express their views, in this course the professor had the challenge of helping the students make order out of their comments. This course, HIS 330: Historical Field Trips: History and Culture through the Eyes of Disney (and other Popular Culture media), taps into the cultural pervasiveness of visual media giants, like the Walt Disney Company, to help students look more closely at the world they think they know. Through it, students build their critical thinking and analysis skill by reflecting on the ways that popular culture either reflects or shapes perceptions of history and culture.

Tapping into a student’s core interests through experiential learning and unconventional teaching tools can serve to motivate and invigorate students and can foster ongoing interests and passions for the subject matter—in this case history. Focusing on Walt Disney’s history, as well as the movies he, and later the company, created provide a basis for thematic cultural analysis of how Disney has retold stories of history, as well as literary stories borne of specific times and places, in compelling, but deeply problematic ways

(Stephens, 2014, Brode, 2011, Watts, 2013, Knight, 2014). For the first two weeks of this intensive four week course, students sample Disney's treatment of subjects such as race and gender and historical figures such as Pocahontas or Davy Crockett and compare those against the documents written by or about people in their own times. Students also read many thoughtful academic critiques that evaluate those themes in Disney's depictions and their impact on societal beliefs and actions (Gillam and Wooden, 2008, Cappiccie et al, 2012, Aronstein and Finke, 2013). In week three, the experience and the analysis is taken to the next level by immersing the students in a world built around these figures and the films from which they come – Walt Disney World near Orlando, Florida.

While this course focuses on history, its foundation is interdisciplinary. Through looking at Disney's depictions of history, students are able to engage with various global literatures, criminal justice themes (several of these students were criminal justice majors) of crime, punishment, and justice, as well as with critical race theory, concepts of gender, art and art history, sociological and anthropological perspectives on many subjects, intersections with issues of child psychology and education, and business ethics, among other topics. The topic itself has a broad appeal that can bring in students from many backgrounds and interests which then bring those differing perspectives to the classroom conversations deepening the conversations and the learning that results.

Once they arrive, the group is housed at the Pop Century Resort, a resort themed around popular culture icons and material culture from the second half of the twentieth century. As they wander the grounds, students are presented with Disney's ideas about what toys were most influential or memorable for each decade. From a Rubik's Cube the size of a small house to ten-foot tall Foosball figurines, the landscape of the resort is intended to inspire overwhelming nostalgia. In addition to the oversized toys, the resort features shadowboxes of actual artifacts, such as a Walkman, in-line rollerskates, and Rock-em Sock-em bots, from each decade displayed throughout the resort. Within the main lobby, students were able to view close-up examples of technology and toys that they had never seen before set in museum-like exhibits without extensive interpretation. Students eat, sleep, and breathe Disney for a week surrounded by a world created to invoke

and interpret history through the lens of “Disneyfication.” Cumberland University senior Mark Brown commented that the version of Pop Culture history delivered by the resort was “sanitized” focusing solely on those objects and events that were sure to bring out positive feelings of nostalgia without the realities of conflict, violence, or hardship. Students are encouraged to analyze the positive and negative consequences of these “sanitized” depictions of history as part of a retreat from the real world, and thereby the real history, that shapes society (Zipes, 1999).

The group then visits four parks in five days with one rest day built in during the middle of the week. They begin with the Magic Kingdom because it was the first of the Florida Disney parks built with input and inspiration from Walt Disney himself. Through a photo “Scavenger Hunt” assignment, students are encouraged to ride the rides, to explore the created environments of the line “cues,” to investigate the created landscape, and talk to individuals in the park. Each student has a particular focus chosen during week one of the course to use as the basis for their scavenger hunt, the research paper, and classroom presentation that result from the pictures taken as part of this assignment.

One nontraditional student described the Country Bear Jamboree as an artifact taken straight out of the 1970s, out of his own childhood, full of historical references and music from the time, as well as with jokes and imagery that seem out of place today. Several described the Carousel of Progress as a “cool” artifact of the 1964 World’s Fair that encapsulated Walt Disney’s version of American history focused on the technology of middle class households that depicts a “typical” household that is clearly white, Midwestern, and an idealization of what family life was like. The Enchanted Tiki Room and It’s a Small World are two more of those enduring artifacts that provide a snapshot of early 1970s ideals, particularly those regarding cultural stereotypes as well as hopes for multicultural unity.



Cumberland University undergraduate history major discussed the relevance of the Countrybear Jamboree and other Walt Disney World attractions as preserved historical artifacts from 1970 when the park opened.

Walt Disney wanted his parks to be idyllic representations of what the world could be, what it could become. His support of the creation of attractions like *It's A Small World* and the *Enchanted Tiki Room* and others, as well as the different “lands” in the Magic Kingdom Park, as well as in Disneyland, provide a form of “living artifacts” that have survived from his time to the present. His ideals of positive and enjoyable interactions extended to the crowds of visitors who come from all over the world. These ideals, however, were a product of Disney’s upbringing and experiences. While his vision has endured in the form of several of his original attractions, audiences view those attractions with different viewpoints than the visitors did in the 1940s or the 1970s (Clague, 2004). Likewise, his company has adapted to the cultures, views, and politics of the society within which it operates.

One of the most obvious examples of this was the film that Walt Disney worked on entitled “*Song of the South*,” released in 1946. Although Disney attempted to ensure he was sensitive to his audiences, the film met criticism from many for its portrayal of African American characters as submissive

and for placing the setting within the plantation world just following the Civil War. The company continued to rerelease the film at regular intervals, as it did with its other films. Despite the controversy over the film, the Splash Mountain attraction at Walt Disney World was themed after this film. This attraction was one of the required experiences for the class after students had read different perspectives of academic scholars regarding the film and its reception. In 1986 *Song of the South* was rereleased to theaters, ostensibly for the last time. As the perceptions of popular audience changed, the company decided not to rerelease the film in the 1990s and to stop selling home-video versions of the film (Sperb, 2013). The film is still available in several of Disney's other global markets and has been uploaded to YouTube and other online platforms. Nonetheless, Disney's treatment of this film, if not its partner attraction, is a clear example of the changes Walt Disney Company policy in order to respond to the changing views and needs of its audience. The Walt Disney company over the years has made pointed efforts to increase the diversity of their films and their parks, as well as to strategically target their marketing efforts toward more diverse audiences (Wentz, 2003, Stephens, 2014, Rukstad and Collis, 2009, Inge, 2012).

The group analyzed Disney's depictions of politics in the Hall of Presidents and in a stage featuring the Muppets telling the audience about "History, but just the American parts." Exhibits and landscape décor, such as the Liberty Bell replica cast in the same mold as the original, bring together replicas and original historical materials to create the sensation of "the happiest place on earth" while also invoking a sense of realism and nostalgia. Students find that Disney makes few, if any, critiques of America in the Magic Kingdom, but rather they see a reflection of the fondness for historical narratives of America's founding era and political heroes that Walt Disney himself admired, and that has been perpetuated by the company he founded. Such depictions provided excellent material for students who chose to write their research papers on depictions of "Heroes and Villains" and the impact of those figures on American history through popular culture.

Walt Disney's Animal Kingdom brought a different set of related experiences to the group. While they continued their scavenger hunts there, the subject matter shifted slightly. Others focused on the depictions

of African and Asian cultures and religions, even replicas of religious icons for sale. Here we investigated the blurred lines between history, culture, and religion. The landscapes in the different “lands” were thoughtfully constructed to honor and reflect the beauty of the architecture and cultures within the regions represented. One student was literally moved to tears by the beauty of the recreated African landscape of the Kilimanjaro Safari. Another was deeply concerned at the decorative rather than sacred use of prayer flags and the refashioning of the characters Dug and Russell from the Pixar movie *UP* to sit among the foliage just as recreations of temples and sacred statues were sprinkled along the paved thoroughfares. Students studied Disney’s portrayals of religions, religious themes, and culturally specific moral values in class prior to visiting the parks, and some did additional research for their research papers (Bowman, 1996).



Animal Kingdom statuary.

Likewise the language of “Outposts” where visitors can meet Mickey and Minnie in the garb of early twentieth-century European “adventurers” further invokes the exoticization of the real locations and connects park visitors to a romanticized colonialist past. Recent acquisition of the rights to the movie “Avatar” has allowed Animal Kingdom to provide a counterpoint to one problematic idealization of the exploring adventurers by invoking another problematic idealization – that of the noble savage. Some students returned from their adventures with pictures from the line cue of the “Avatar:

Flight of Passage ride” with images that they compared to American Indian petroglyphs. The movie focused on decrying the brutal conquest of an alien planet in order to extract the resources for industrial use. Although the ride itself is a short simulation of flying on the back of an “avatar,” the cue invokes a transition from an exotic, dramatic, and beautiful “natural” setting into a sterile, industrialized environment that literally gives way to the efforts of the “land” to break through the metal walls to reclaim the building itself (Alessio and Meredith, 2012). Far from a new strategy, Disney has long sought to provoke through its built environments, music, and rides particular feelings in their audience members and visitors (Chytry, 2012, Carson, 2004)



Cumberland University student Chloe Randle takes in the symbolism of the Avatar cue.

Beyond the “landscape” itself, this attraction and the “land” in which it is set illustrates the careful construction of Disney’s attractions to manipulate the emotions of the visitors to provoke particular responses that can be tied back to historical events, figures, and peoples. Using theme parks as classrooms allows for students to study the ways history is not just retold but used, invoked, and manipulated to bring about particular reactions from audiences and visitors that reflect the social views of the parks’ creators. These students found colonialism a significant theme within the parks alongside the idealization of a particular idealization of multiculturalism.

Toward the end of his life, Walt Disney focused on his idea for the EPCOT theme park (Watts, 2013). EPCOT, an acronym for the Experimental Prototype Community Of Tomorrow, was envisioned as a showcase for the world's most promising technologies alongside microcosm depictions of the histories and cultures of several distinctly different cultures from different parts of the world (Miller, 1982). Here, as much or more than in any of the other parks, Walt Disney's vision of a harmonious global community takes center stage. Literally.



Students were encouraged to engage in critical analysis of the American Adventure attraction at Walt Disney World's EPCOT.

In the EPCOT world showcase, Disney chose particular countries he thought represented the most fascinating cultures of the world. These were to sit side by side in a circle so that, like King Arthur's famous round-table, all would be on equal footing. Disney's simultaneous interest in the King Arthur stories was spotlighted by the creation of the movie *The Sword in the Stone* released in 1964 during the heart of the planning stages for EPCOT and just a year before Walt Disney died.

Beyond the problems of representation is the issue of highlighting particular countries over others. Europe dominates the number of countries; of the eleven countries, five - Norway, Germany, Italy, France, United Kingdom - are European. All three of the North American countries of Mexico, Canada, and the United States were included. Asia, however, is entirely represented by Japan and by China. The African continent is entirely represented by the country of Morocco. A former colony of France and Spain, Morocco had only become independent of its colonizers in 1956, just one decade prior to Walt Disney's death, and its representation in Epcot strongly reflects the architectural and culinary remnants of that colonial legacy. In addition to the overwhelming prevalence of Eurocentric design choices, the United States presides over the circle as King Arthur over his council. Visitors entering the World Showcase enter a giant

circle of countries surrounding a man-made lake. Their first sight, before turning right or left is a large pavilion for the United States fashioned after the architecture of founding era Pennsylvania. This environment, paired with their previous explorations of the themes of cultures, race, and multiculturalism, allows students to see both Disney's vision for his future and the company's efforts to stay true to Disney's vision for EPCOT while remaining relevant to its audience as the decades pass.



Mark Brown, a student in Cumberland University's Historical Field Trips course, enjoys the culinary immersion experience at Chefs de France in Walt Disney World's EPCOT.

Students made efforts to talk with employees at the parks and found that Disney reinforced this multicultural ideal in EPCOT through hiring people from the regions being represented. The attractions alternated between representing the different cultures as unique and valuable in themselves and representing stereotypes that reduced a country or a continent down to those depictions that were most recognizable, sometimes in deeply problematic ways. The films in the Canada and China pavilions were both representations of history and historical artifacts in themselves. Students

carefully looked for stereotypes, as well as for representations of history and culture. Rather than providing a simple counter-point to the histories they have been taught, the EPCOT theme park illustrates both the ways history is portrayed by Disney and the ways those portrayals become representations of history as they age. The films in EPCOT, like Disney's animated films and its original attractions, come from the era in which they were created and represent that moment in time becoming historical artifacts in themselves. The Spaceship Earth attraction has recently undergone substantial renovation to make its depiction of Earth's technological history more diverse and inclusive while maintaining the tone and look of its original animatronics. In EPCOT depictions of history and culture are constantly in a state of flux as the park's creative managers seek to balance the past with the present to keep the displays, the attractions, and the showcase pavilions relevant. EPCOT provided students with the opportunity to observe depictions of history, and of the future, in various states of transformation according to the prioritization of funding and the need to respond to a changing society. By seeing the differing presentations, students were immersed in a kind of historiographical world in which right before their eyes they could see Disney's multicultural ideals of the 1960s, attraction presentation formats from the 1980s, films recorded in the 1990s, and the merging of digital and animatronic formats in new attractions formed in the 2010s. These physical incarnations of historical change side by side serve as a powerful teaching tool for discussions of popular depictions of history and culture.

Keeping the students focused on history and culture at the Hollywood Studios theme park was a bit more of a challenge. Previous historical attractions have been upstaged by the recent additions of attractions and stage shows focused on the relatively new acquisitions of Star Wars and Pixar's Toy Story. The foundation of the park, made to represent the golden age of Hollywood in the 1940s, still exists. Upon entering the park, visitors immediately see a "set" built on representations of the iconic Hollywood and Sunset Boulevards. Obscured behind the Star Wars stage is the representation of Grauman's Chinese Theatre, which housed "The Great Movie Ride" attraction, closed in 2017, that spotlighted iconic movies and the history of Hollywood's productions. Tucked away at the end of "Sunset

Boulevard” is Disney’s own version of the handprints and signatures of famous actors and actresses pressed into the concrete outside of the Beauty and the Beast stage show.



Image from the walk of fame at Walt Disney World Hollywood Studios.

Rosie’s All American Café is a simple outdoor eatery, but the food is cooked and prepared by employees in Forties style clothing surrounded by replicas of the actual World War II propaganda that the Walt Disney Company was commissioned to create for the war effort. On the walls beyond the counter, visitors see images of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck outfitted as soldiers or civilians doing their duty for their country. Once again students had the opportunity to see the original park identity overlaid with newer influences that call attention to Disney’s acquisitions as much as to its own creations. The Indiana Jones series, Star Wars, and Pixar’s Toy Story films dominate the park and seem destined to overshadow the original theme, while the historical representations remain as the incongruous foundation upon which the newer attractions are overlaid. This park which was created to invoke history has become the least historical in tone and presentation as little more than the Tower of Terror attraction, the street names, and the building facades remain of the original theme. Even the film and museum exhibit “One Man’s Dream” is tucked away with limited, sometimes pre-empted, showings. In this park, the classroom scavenger hunt assignment is

crucial to keep students focused on finding the representations of history in the midst of the ambiguity of an ever-changing park modeled after an ever-changing industry.

Together these parks provide an experiential learning experience that, when paired with academic readings and intensive classroom discussions on historical themes, add substantially to a college learning experience on history's representations in popular culture and the impacts those representations have on shaping society. Rather than a simple cultural immersion experience or a student bonding vacation, the use of theme parks as experiential learning tools can augment other valuable experiential learning courses. Class visits to Walt Disney World or other theme parks do not serve the same function as visits to historical sites like Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico or Constitution Hall in Philadelphia, but rather provide students with a basis to understand the ways popular culture influences, and is influenced by, history. Students often come to this type of experiential learning with an extensive knowledge base derived from an entire childhood of experiences and associated values. These provide a foundation of students' passions, nostalgia, and sense of fun to fuel their learning about history, society, and the influences of popular culture on the world in which they live. Students walk into the class thinking they know what they are looking at in Disney movies and attractions. They leave seeing many more layers of meaning, subtext, social values and norms, and the ways changing views of society shape and change each of those layers.

The objective of courses like this one is for students to recognize the currents of popular culture so they can understand and respond to them, and even use them to their advantage. This method has applicability to many subjects. Other incarnations in which classroom instruction can be augmented by intensive on-site experiential learning might include courses on the music industry or sporting events and venues. Tapping into student experiences and passions could lead to courses that use music videos, sitcoms, or popular children's TV shows to guide their exploration of important sociological, historical, or anthropological themes. Popular culture is so pervasive that most people fail to notice how it shapes their everyday life. Like the sailors of old, we can learn the currents and rhythms of our culture, or else be swept along with their movements with little idea of how to direct

our paths or where we might end up. Through courses like this, students look more deeply into the world they think they know in order to be better informed and more aware for the future.



Cumberland University Historical Field Trips Course. From Right to Left: Sabrina Holt, Chloe Randle, Mark Brown, David Looper, Charles Ware, Natalie Inman, and Kaitlin Cashion.
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