



Level: Grades 6-8

About the Author

Jane Tallim is MNet's education specialist

Lesson Plan

Images of Learning: Elementary

Overview

This lesson helps students become more aware of the stereotypes associated with portrayals of students and teachers on TV. (It is also a good follow-up to the elementary lesson *TV Stereotypes*.) *Images of Learning* begins with a class discussion about common television stereotypes that are found in the school-based television shows and films that students enjoy. Students respond to questions about television stereotypes and then write a short opinion piece about whether the teachers and students on TV influence their own attitudes about learning. In groups, students create a series outline for their own school-based television show and perform a scene from an episode.

Outcomes

Students will:

- recognize that the media construct reality
- examine how teachers and students are portrayed in school-based television shows
- understand the conventions and stereotypes that are commonly used in school-based television shows
- examine their own perceptions of various stereotypes

Preparation and Materials

- Check copyright laws in your area and, if possible, tape excerpts from two or three programs that feature students and teachers, such as "Malcolm in the Middle," "The Simpsons," "Clueless," "Student Bodies," "Breaker High," and "Degrassi – The Next Generation."
- If taping excerpts is not possible, assign your students home viewing of these programs during the week before this lesson.
- Photocopy the worksheet *Images of Learning* (educational handout)

Background Information for teachers

For background information on the portrayal of teachers and students on television, review:

- *Teacher/Student TV Stereotypes Chart* (educational handout)
- "Tinsel Town Teachers" (educational handout)
- For more information about the portrayal of children on television, read the Children Now Report: "The Reflection on the Screen: Television's Image of Children."

Activities

Activity One

In a short opinion piece, ask students to respond to the following question:

- Do the teachers and students on TV influence your own attitude about learning? In what ways?

Activity Two

In groups, have students create a series outline for their own school-based television program. This could be a realistic drama, or a humorous sitcom. Their outline would include:

- target audience
- a plot summary and overview
- a list of characters, including physical descriptions, personality traits and backgrounds
- episode guide of first five episodes
- Once the series outlines have been completed, have students create a script for a scene from one of their episodes, and present the scene to the class.

Evaluation

- Opinion piece
- Completed worksheets
- Group series outline and performance

Related Lessons on the MNet Web Site

- *TV Stereotypes*

Teacher and Student Stereotypes

Record the stereotypes that are associated with students and teachers on television in the chart below. Once this is completed, write a brief overview on how teachers and students are generally portrayed.

Male Teacher	Female Teacher	Male Student	Female Student
"Popular Teachers"	"Popular Teachers"	"In Crowd"	"In Crowd"
"Unpopular Teachers"	"Unpopular Teachers"	"Out Crowd"	"Out Crowd"

In your overview, also consider the following:

- Stereotypes associated with specific subject areas or positions such as Principal, Vice Principal, Guidance Counselor, Math teacher, Science teacher, English teacher, etc.
- Differences between genres, for example, are stereotypes more likely to appear in sitcoms than in dramas?

Tinsel Town Teachers

by Gavin Hainsworth



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Dear Gavin,

Thank you for the opportunity to review your screenplay "Secondary School Daze." Your effort, although obviously informed by your direct classroom background, does not meet our production needs. However, despite your lack of screen-writing experience, your turn of phrase shows some promise. I have decided to give you some of the benefits of my over 25 years in the business, and offer you the following tried-and-true themes and scenes from the teacher-film genre. Staying within this template will make your script more likely not only to be picked up, but also to gather both critical and financial success. I suggest you rent the following films, readily available at your local video store; you'll quickly see the patterns I will describe:

Good-bye, Mr. Chips (1939),
Blackboard Jungle (1955),
To Sir, with Love (1967),
The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (1969),
Teachers (1984),
The Breakfast Club (1985),
Ferris Bueller's Day Off (1986),
The Principal (1987),
Stand and Deliver (1988),
Lean on Me (1989),

Dead Poets Society (1989),
Kindergarten Cop (1990),
Dangerous Minds (1995),
Mr. Holland's Opus (1995),
The Substitute (1996),
In & Out (1997)
187 (1997).
Music of the Heart (2000)
Pay it Forward (2000)
Finding Forrester (2001)

Collectively, these 17 films have garnered over 22 Academy Award nominations (6 wins), 10 were among the top 20 money makers during their release year (with the 17 making collectively over \$800 million U.S. gross).

Here's some classic patterns:

Screen Teachers begin as youthful and idealistic

Most teacher films are variations on the same story—beginning teachers launched feet first into the harsh reality of the new school. They are naive, idealistic and completely unprepared for what faces them. As Rick Dadier (Glenn Ford, *Blackboard Jungle*) states: "I want to teach. Most of us want to do something creative—a painter, writer, or engineer. But I thought if I could help to shape young minds, sort of sculpt young lives, that would be something." After being hired on the spot to teach a class of academy kids that had already dispatched five substitutes, *Dangerous Minds'* Michelle Pfeiffer's character states, "I guess Ms. Shephard's lesson plans will be in her desk." Their dreams may even include innocent ambitions like Mr Chips'. "It means everything to be here, headmaster at Brookwood. That's something to work for." They believe that "students will raise to our expectations and desire," Jaime Escalante (Edward Olmos, *Stand and Deliver*).

Screen teachers get cynical advice instead of professional mentorship from their colleagues

This fact is revealed in the staff room or first staff meeting scene. Mr. Chips is told that “the boys are excited by fresh blood—mustn’t let them rag you—look out for drawing pins and tacks on your desk,” and he is asked if he is athletically inclined, “not that they ever become violent with weapons or anything.” A good model for the stateroom cynic is Jim Murdock (*Blackboard Jungle*). He is introduced working out on a punching bag, “getting into shape to defend myself for the fall term,” because his school is “the garbage can of the education system. You take the worst kids of most of the other schools, put them together here, and you get one big overflowing garbage can.” “You can’t teach logarithms to illiterates,” says one teacher in *Stand and Deliver*.

Screen teachers always get the worst class

This truism is timeless, from the balls of paper flying (*Good-bye, Mr. Chips*, 1939), through leather-jacket boppers (*Blackboard Jungle*, 1955), twisters and swingers (*To Sir, with Love*, 1967), to gangster rappers (*Dangerous Minds*, *Stand and Deliver*, *The Substitute*, *The Principal*)—all long after the bell has rung. The desks are broken and vandalized, and the students are completely out of control. They are going through the file cabinets and the teacher’s desk (*The Substitute*). There aren’t enough seats (*Stand and Deliver*), which only partially explains why couples are sharing desks (*Blackboard Jungle*, *Stand and Deliver*, *Dangerous Minds*, *Teachers*, *The Principal*). Any attempt to teach the first class is shouted down by the students who throw baseballs (*Blackboard Jungle*), beer cans (*The Substitute*), or books (*To Sir, with Love*, *Stand and Deliver*, 187). The bell to end classes always rings a few minutes after the one to begin, leaving classroom and lesson in tatters.

Screen teachers can count on little or no support from the principal

If anyone is of less help to the screen teacher than his/ her class or colleagues, it is the screen principal. Principals are insulated within their office from the reality of the classroom and are incompetent, indifferent, or intimidating. Principal Eugene Horne (*Teachers*) runs back into his office when he sees two teachers fighting over the mimeograph machine, and he knows neither who does the schools filing nor where the files are kept. Principal Warneke (*Blackboard Jungle*) is more concerned with the softness of teacher Dadier’s voice than with the false allegations of teacher racism in his class or the repeated weapons infractions or the attempted rape of a staff member. “There is no discipline problem here, Mr. Dadier, not as long as I am principal here,” he says. A death threat against a teacher is swept under the carpet by Principal Claude Rolle (*The Substitute*) because without proof of a direct threat, he’d “have a lawsuit on his hands.” Where screen principals use discipline, they go to sociopathic extremes. Principals Joe Clark (*Lean on Me*), and Rick Latimer (James Belushi, *The Principal*) patrol their hallways with baseball bats (that they are often called upon to use) as well as other management tools like verbal intimidation and threats used on students and staff alike. It is no accident that Rick Latimer is promoted to principal of his inner-city school after taking a baseball bat to his ex-wife’s sports car—he has what it takes to turn a school around

Screen teachers face an increasingly violent school environment in which they themselves must become violent to succeed

Mr. Dadier (*Blackboard Jungle*, 1955) fights attacks by his students in the alley and in his classroom, and he prevents a teacher rape in the library. Principal Rick Latimer (*The Principal*, 1987) not only has to fight an attack by five students in his library (whom he throws out the window), but breaks up a teacher rape by riding his Harley (labeled El Principal) to the rescue down the hallway. With bike and bat, he takes down the crack dealers around his school and engages in a battle to the death. *The Substitute* (1996) takes on KOD (The Kings of Destruction), Miami's top gang, to avenge the intimidation of his teacher girlfriend, but to do so requires all of his mercenary training and the members of his paramilitary squad. The KOD are led by the school's principal, Mr. Rolle, who is using the school for a drug transit point. Principal Rolle shoots down students and teachers alike, saying to one young teacher, "I'm just doing you a favour" as he shoots him in the back. A final showdown with automatic weapons, grenades and bazookas is needed at the school to clean it up. The two remaining mercenaries resolve never to work at a school again.

Realism in teacher movies can get in the way of a good story (and, more important, market success). *Why Shoot the Teacher* (1976) is all together too realistic (it has only one fist fight and an unconsummated love affair), and too Canadian. You might want to abandon the teacher films genre all together and observe your students' more interesting lives for the tried-and-true coming-of-age film (like *The Breakfast Club* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*) where teachers can be safely characterized as buffoons and the butt of teenage pranks and inside jokes. Remember that Robert Donat's "Mr. Chips" beat Clark Gable's "Rhett Butler" (*Gone with the Wind*) for the 1939 best actor Oscar. Regards, and good luck!

Stanley Motss (Producer), Wag-the-Dog Ltd., Hollywood, CA, USA

Gavin Hainsworth teaches at North Surrey Secondary School, Surrey