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Teaching English in the World

All I Need to Know about Teaching I Learned from TV and Movies

Particularly since the invention of television, popular culture has had a strong influence on the profession of teaching or, at least, public perceptions of the profession of teaching. As with lawyers, police detectives, and politicians, there seems to be no limit to the number of television and film characters who represent teaching and teachers. One way to explain this phenomenon is to believe that teachers have such influence on all people's lives that they never tire of thinking about what teachers' lives and work are really like. Too bad there has yet to be a show that does a good job of showing the profession of teaching in an accurate light; if there were, few would watch it. Probably only us—and only during the summers.

What we are left with are rather unrealistic representations of what teaching is like and what works for teachers and students in a classroom. Imagining that the only preparation one received for teaching came from television shows and movies, I have developed a list of principles of teaching.

Lessons Learned about Teachers and Teaching from Television and Film

1. Teachers have to teach only one class per day.

Have you ever noticed a teacher in a show who had more than one class to teach? Sure, the teachers on *Boston Public* may know other students in the hall, but they must be from the class they taught the year before because they spend all of their teaching time with one group of students. Imagine what great lessons we could prepare and what thoughtful, specific feedback we could provide for real students if we taught the number of classes they teach at TV High School.

2. Teachers never have to grade papers.

It is very rare to see any television or movie teachers grading papers. If we see this activity at all, it is generally for a very short time, and the teacher usually puts one grade

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and a very short comment on the paper. The grade is almost always either an A or an F, as they are the most dramatic. What we see more

often are papers being returned and teachers and students dealing with the aftermath. The best paper-returning scene ever is when Ralphie's fantasy teacher in *A Christmas Story* gives him an A++++ (the pluses are written around the walls of the classroom as they can't all fit on the paper); Ralphie's real teacher, of course, returns his paper with a C-. While witnessing the grading aftermath pays homage to an important part of a teacher's professional life, the majority of grading work goes on in private and after regular teaching hours. It seems Hollywood producers take a purely product approach to our responding to student papers. We know the real work is in the process of composing those responses. Of course, most of us understand that it is probably not the most exciting thing to watch.

3. Teachers do not have to read any books.

Professor Ross Gellar of *Friends* is a professor of paleontology at a school that looks suspiciously like New York University and yet, from what I have seen, he has never read a book, written an article, or graded a paper in his life. Viewers are allowed to see the other friends at work, but the only time I remember seeing Professor Gellar

working is the time he is dating one of his students. Most teachers at Television High School have remarkably little preparation work. Those of us who teach in the real world must be pretty dumb compared to them. We have to read and write all the time!

4. Problem students may be tamed by the application of poetry.

Though the power of poetry is never explained in movies and television shows, it is demonstrated repeatedly.

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The most hardened, disaffected, or self-loathing students are instantly and easily transformed with a few lines of well-chosen poetry read with feeling by a teacher who really, really means it. Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gently into That Good Night" seems to work especially well. Those of us who have had to resort to behavior-modification techniques, progressive-discipline programs, or other classroom-management techniques have really just never been let in on this secret weapon. A few lines of poetry can overcome years of parental neglect, poverty, underfunded education, and total distraction. Students snap immediately into model learners who just love their teacher.

5. For especially difficult problem students, you may need to physically threaten or publicly humiliate them before applying poetry.

OK, truth be told, not every single student at TV High is immediately persuaded by one or two

poems. For them, there is another effective technique that works just as quickly, but it requires that teachers use a different skill set: physical threats. Tom Berenger's teacher character in *The Substitute*, James Belushi's principal in *The Principal*, and even Michele Pfeiffer's teacher in *Simple Minds* all make very effective use of physical threats. From what I've been able to piece together, physical threats are most often needed at Inner City Television High School. At Suburban Television High School, public humiliation tends to work just as well. Leonardo DiCaprio's student character in *Catch Me If You Can* outfoxes his class's legitimate substitute by behaving more like a "real" teacher than she does: He has the biggest and most belligerent student in the class stand up and read in front of everyone. Humiliated in just a few seconds and with hardly any effort from the teacher, the student returns to his seat as docile as a puppy smacked on the nose with a rolled-up newspaper.

6. Good teachers are saints.

TV High is brimming with teachers who will surely soon be canonized. Many of the teachers on *Boston Public* obviously pursued teaching instead of following their initial desire to continue Mother Teresa's work in Calcutta. In a most selfless move, one teacher (who, until a few weeks before, had been a gifted and successful lawyer) took care of one student's learning problems by writing her a check to pay for her rent for the year. Other teachers at Television High School show up continuously at students' homes to tutor them, meet with their parents, help them get jobs, figure out ways for them to take care of their little brothers and sisters, and even spend

hours finding just the right poem to snap them into college-bound status. Even TV commercials have teachers who show up teachers in the real world. One office-supply store has become fond of running a commercial in which a teacher sacrifices her home budget to buy extra supplies for her students; her husband—originally annoyed that his and his wife's salaries are subsidizing the school's budget—comes around and buys even more supplies (and at 10 percent off!). These are the good teachers at Television High School. They will give up everything they have for their students—their time, their salary, their personal ambitions—for at least one hour a week (though they do take the summers off).

7. Many teachers are predators.

There are not many bad teachers at Television High School, but they are out there. And almost all of them mistake their school for a singles club. Since they never have to read a book, grade a paper, or write a report, teachers at Television High School have a lot of time on their hands. Some of them use it very, very badly. While the parents of Television High School students should expect their children's teachers to become very involved in their children's lives, they must always be wary of the predatory teacher.

8. Teachers don't require any professional training or professional development.

Teaching effectively is a natural gift. All it takes is desire, a caring attitude, and experience in another profession. Jeri Ryan's lawyer-turned-teacher on *Boston Public* is my favorite example. Disaffected by the crass life of the wealthy attorney,

she turns to the inherently noble profession of teaching. And after fifteen minutes with her first class, she is an absolutely brilliant teacher. At first the students won't listen to her and a few make some inappropriate

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remarks. She masterfully applies the public humiliation technique by using her cross-examination skills on a few students (and surely some of those students are intimidated by her amazing resemblance to a member of the Borg on *Star Trek*). Next, she applies deep concern for the students. Finally, she explains how her work as an attorney (out in the "real world") can help the students learn useful information from her. Natural teaching talent is completely realized between commercial breaks. The years I have wasted!

9. Teachers teach best by standing at the front of the class while students sit in rows and answer the teachers' questions.

It is truly amazing how well the old standbys work at Television High School. The truly gifted teachers there are so adept at their work that their students sit rapt by their lectures. The teachers who enjoy active classrooms sometimes even ask their students questions—to which the teachers already have the answers, of course. But a noisy classroom in which students are engaged in projects of their own design is seldom seen. Effective classes at TV High have students who sit in rows and speak when they are spoken to.

Representations of Knowledge

While the representations of teachers and teaching I describe above are

troubling, representations of what counts as knowledge on television and in movies are even more problematic. *Jeopardy* is probably the worst offender. Alex Trebek reminds us continuously that he is quizzing the contestants on trivia—that is, tiny bits of information that do not matter—but the assumption shared by the show's audience is that knowing these tiny bits of information is what makes the contestants brilliant and successful (as many of them certainly seem to be). In Kevin Kline's recent movie *The Emperor's Club*, the students compete viciously to be named "Mr. Julius Caesar," not by being able to solve ancient problems or discuss the complexities of ancient government or bring new knowledge to bear on issues of antiquity. No, they become "Mr. Julius Caesar" by knowing trivia about ancient Rome. News programs—which report on *real* teaching and learning—make this situation even worse by publicizing spelling bees as if they are contests about intelligence. In fact, ESPN—the most popular cable sports station—has begun airing the National Spelling Bee each year. One might speculate that these events garner interest because they are contests with one winner and many losers. But more difficult contests—Westinghouse science winners, for example, or creative-writing contest winners—don't get the kind of publicity memorizers of trivia get. The truly brilliant in TV and movie culture just know simple things. The rest of us would have to waste time looking them up.

Shows We May Soon See

Film and television studios will never tire of representing teachers as long as educators remain a substantial part of students' lives. Here

are a few reality shows I am afraid we will see in the not-distant-enough future:

Teachers (modeled on *Cops*). "Bad kids, bad kids, whatcha gonna do? Whatcha gonna do when they try to teach you?" In this new reality drama, a tough-as-nails principal narrates as teachers keep misbehaving students in line. In the first episode, a teacher from suburban Las Vegas uses a well-honed combination of public humiliation and physical threats to subdue a student with a learning disability. Next time you misbehave in her class, you will learn that the house always wins!

Fear Factor: Student Teaching. Another reality drama, this one follows student teachers from their day-one class assignments to their final day when they are given their teacher certification. Be sure to catch the scariest episode: parent-teacher conferences. These teachers would rather eat a bug!

Big Teacher. In this twist on *Big Brother*, one teacher from each subject area of one high school is forced to live together in a small house without killing each other. Just for fun, this time we've added two English teachers: one who supports phonics and one who supports whole language. Watch the sparks fly!

The Problems of Representation

All kidding aside, no one really believes the lessons about teaching and knowledge one learns from television and movies. Everyone is aware that what is shown is not intended to support effective pedagogy but simply to entertain an audience. However, that does not mean these representations do not have an impact on the larger culture's assumptions about teaching and knowledge. When beliefs about

teaching become commonplace assumptions, we teachers are actually held to them as tacit standards—in fact, we may even hold ourselves to

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them as standards without necessarily recognizing that we are doing so. Teachers may be held to the standards of the saintly representations: we are expected to do our work for love, not money; we should expect

to work in underfunded conditions; and we should be prepared to sacrifice our personal time for the community's children. And, teachers may be treated with suspicion generated by the negative representations rampant on television and film. Most damaging for education, we are held hostage to common-sense understandings of what counts as knowledge. Such impoverished notions of what counts as real knowledge fuel the current blaming of teachers for the woes of an underfunded education system and the uncritical belief in the value of standardized exams.

If, through representations of teaching and learning in popular

culture, ordinary people come to believe that teaching is a natural talent that does not require much professional development, they may be loath to pay for it. If they come to believe knowledge is simply knowing isolated facts, they may clamor for even greater amounts of testing. If they believe teachers should be treated as saints, in the profession only for the chance to do noble work, they may be less willing to understand the need for pay raises. I enjoy as much as anyone the shows and films that include teachers, but their impact gives me pause. We teachers know very well that entertainment is very instructive.

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