



Identifying Teacher Quality

REFLECTION TOOLS FOR TEACHER QUALITY

Title

REFLECTION BY USING MOVIES

Goal

The goal of this reflection tool is to stimulate reflection on the way that teacher quality is identified in teacher movies (or sitcoms). These reflections can be a starting point for teachers to identify teacher quality.

Targetgroup

Teachers, student teachers

Summary/description

With this reflection tool, a movie about schools, pupils and teachers is watched collectively. Teachers in movies (or sitcoms) often represent specific archetypes. After the movie, the participants discuss what (hidden) message about teacher quality could be derived from the movie.

The messages on teacher quality can be compared with the way in which the participants view teacher quality individually and as a group.

Materials

Movies and movieplayer (DVD, Videotape, internet, ...)

A good and inspiring selection of one or more teacher movies (or fragments) is needed. Suggestions can be found on

- http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin156.shtml
- Amazon.com has thematic lists on listmania, e.g.
 - Best teacher movies, http://www.amazon.com/Best-nbsp-Teacher-nbsp-Movies/lm/R36QLT2GOIBNCJ/ref=cm_srch_res_rpli_alt_1
 - The best movies about teaching, http://www.amazon.com/gp/richtpub/syltguides/fullview/R24CBPTK5TE6S/ref=cm_syt_dtpa_f_1_rdssss0?pf_rd_p=253463701&pf_rd_s=sylt-center&pf_rd_t=201&pf_rd_i=B000NOK1KM&pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKX0DER&pf_rd_r=1KNVB61V81T8PFDVBD6X
 - Movies about inspirational teachers, http://www.amazon.com/gp/richtpub/syltguides/fullview/2HAY51OFTLYEK/ref=cm_syt_fvsy_f_4_rysdsd0



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- Not too cool for school, http://www.amazon.com/Not-cool-school-movies-about-school/lm/R1CAJ06TOT3VFS/ref=cm_lmt_fvsy_f_5_rysdsd0

Other movies (not listed in the lists above) are Mathilda (Roald Dahl), Harry Potter, Kindergarten Cop (Arnold Schwarzenegger), Etre et avoir, History Boys, Entre les Murs, Les Choristes, ...

In many occasions, it is necessary to have selected suitable fragments, as a full movie can take too much time. The selection can be made at random or a thematic selection (e.g. teachers in classroom situations).

Youtube has a rich collection of movie fragments from famous movies (e.g. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wenGK_xzmSk&feature=related) or <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lz-gv6af-tw&feature=related>)

Methodology

Depending on the type of discussions you want to stimulate, the facilitator has to select a movie or sitcom (or movie fragment) (e.g. when he/she wants a specific teacher archetype to be used as a source of inspiration).

The meeting begins with watching the movie (with popcorn and soda!).

After the movie the group divides in subgroups (3-5 participants). Within each subgroup the participants discuss what kind of teacher archetype is presented and what (missing) qualities were emphasized in the movie.

From here the discussion can take a variety of directions:

- The discussion focuses on the way in which the school where the teachers work, represents the (ideal) picture that was presented in the movie. And if not, what needs to be done to move towards (or from) that (ideal) picture. Useful reflection questions are: 'Who do you want to be, who do you envy?'
- The discussion can focus on identifying other teacher archetypes (possibly illustrated by other movies). For each archetype, the qualities, strengths and weaknesses are identified. The comparison of the archetypes can be used to identify the qualities of a perfect teacher.

The identification of the qualities of the 'perfect' teacher/school can be used to reflect on the differences between the personal qualities of the participants and the perfect qualities and possible ways for increasing one's professional quality.

Another approach for using the comparison of teacher archetypes is to emphasize the fact that different archetypes can support the learning and development of pupils and that there is not one best type of teacher. Then the question is:

- for each participant: what archetypes fits to me, how could the strengths of the archetype/teacher be improved and how could weaknesses be compensated?
- for the team: do we have the right mixture of archetypes within our team?



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Variations

See above.

If the participants do not feel happy with the stereotypes of teachers that are represented in the movie or sitcom, the challenge might be to ask the participants to make the outline of a movie or sitcom that shows a more realistic representation of a teacher.

The method can also be used with headteachers exploring the way archetypes of headteachers are presented in movies.

Background/theory

In many movies teachers have a key role. Either they are the worst teacher you can imagine or the most inspiring one. In both cases the movies have implicit (or sometimes even explicit) ideas about teacher qualities. Most of these movies draw on classical stereotypes: the caring teacher, the believe-in-yourself-teacher, the dictatorial teacher, the abusive teacher, the wise-old-man, the mad scientist, etc.

***'Stereotype:** comes from the old-fashioned process of making metal plates of each letter in the alphabet for printing purposes. It means a "set" or "fixed" image. When applied to people, the word means an instant or fixed picture of a group of people. Stereotypes may be based on gender, race, class, age, disability, and occupation.*

***Representation:** is the way in which groups are presented in the media and popular culture, often through the use of stereotypes. The stereotypical images that are used to represent various groups can affect our attitudes towards them in real life.*

The average ½ hour television show has only twenty minutes to tell a story. Stereotypes offer writers and producers a 'short-hand' way of moving the story along. By using stock characters, such as the rebellious teen, the goofy sidekick, or the authoritarian father, producers can convey ideas and actions to a broad audience without having to use more complex representations.

Because many of us are familiar with these predictable stereotypes, television producers use them to reach the broadest possible audience.'

From: Jane Tallim (2002), Images of Learning: Secondary.
Media Awareness Network

The use of stereotypes is part of the way in which TV or movies work: within a limited timeframe the attention of the audience needs to be captured and the message/story told. Also, the main goal of a movie or sitcom is to entertain, therefore a movie needs action and not too much nuances. Quite some teacher movies with a limited number of



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classical patterns have been nominated for awards and are successful moneymakers (see Tinsel Town Teachers in the appendix).

Reflection on the stereotype that is presented and the (missing) qualities that are emphasized can be used as a stimulus to discuss what qualities are important for a teacher. Also the movie (or more movies) can be used to discuss teacher stereotypes, the strengths and weaknesses of each stereotype and the way in which a perfect teacher combines different stereotypes.

See e.g.:

- <http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/educational/lessons/secondary/stereotyping/upload/Images-of-Learning-Secondary-Lesson-Kit-2.pdf> (a lessonplan from the Media Awareness Network on the way in which teacher and student stereotypes are presented on TV and film)
- <http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/educational/lessons/elementary/stereotyping/upload/TV-Stereotypes-PDF.pdf> (a lessonplan from the Media Awareness Network on the role of stereotypes on TV).
- <http://www.teachwithmovies.org> (focussing on using movies with students in secondary education)

Strength and weaknesses

Strengths:

The method combines active reflection with a relaxing and social leisure activity: watching a good movie.

Weaknesses:

Watching a movie takes about two hours. The risk is that the participants (who often have a heavy workload) feel that this is a waste of productive time. If this is the case, the movie can be watched during the evening in a two day session. The reflection on the movie can start in the morning of the following day.

Another alternative is to have a selection of movie fragments.

The movies in themselves do not facilitate in-depth reflection. The depth of reflection and the consequences for professional development depend on the quality of discussion, the elaboration of reflection questions, etc.

The use of movies does not of itself stimulate a systematic analysis of teacher quality.



Appendix

Tinsel Town Teachers¹

by Gavin Hainsworth

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).

¹ This article originally appeared in the September 1998 issue of *Teacher*, newsmagazine of the B.C. Teacher's Federation and can be found at http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/educational/handouts/stereotyping/tinsel_town_teachers.cfm



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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



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(*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