



LESSON PLAN

Level: Grades 9 to 12
About the Author: MediaSmarts

Images of Learning: Secondary

Overview

This lesson helps students become more aware of the stereotypes associated with portrayals of students and teachers on television and on film. On Day One, students discuss the reasons why television producers and writers use stereotypes to represent various groups of people - and the advantages and disadvantages of doing this. Using a worksheet, they compile a list of common television stereotypes from the school-based television shows they enjoy and create a list of humorous clichés about TV students and teachers. On Day Two, students look at representation of students and teachers in movies and compare their findings to the stereotypes found on television. On Day Three, students assume the role of television producers and create a series outline for a school-based television show and perform a scene from an episode.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- recognise that the media construct reality
- examine how teachers and students are portrayed in school-based television shows and explain the biases and beliefs revealed in the messages that are conveyed
- understand the conventions and stereotypes that are commonly used in school-based television shows
- analyse representations of social, political and cultural issues 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*, *Student Bodies*, *Clueless*, *Dawson Creek*, *Breaker High*, *Degrassi - The Next Generation*, *Boston Public*
- If taping excerpts is not possible, assign your students home viewing of these, or similar programs during the week before this lesson.

Photocopy the following student handouts:

- *Teacher/Student TV Stereotypes Chart*
- *TV Stereotypes Chart Answer Sheet*
- *Tinsel Town Teachers*



Procedure

Day One

Write the words stereotype and representation on the board. Ask students to define these terms.

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.*

- On television, what are the advantages of using stereotypical representations?

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.

- On television, what are the disadvantages of using stereotypical representations?

Television is both a mirror and a conduit. Its portrayals of groups of people reflect the values of mainstream society and at the same time, feed society's views about its members. For example, when successful television characters are continually represented as attractive, wealthy and thin, producers are not only tapping into North American attitudes about class and body image, they are also perpetuating the myth that all successful people must fit into this stereotype.

'Misrepresentation' occurs when the media perpetuates images and stereotypes that are not based on fact. Representations of youth often fall into this category.

- Ask students to brainstorm television shows that feature teachers and students. List the shows on the board.
- If you have been able to record segments from television programs depicting students and teachers, play them now.
- Distribute the Teacher/Student TV Stereotypes Chart and give students twenty minutes to complete the chart and write a brief overview. (*Tell them to use the programs listed on the blackboard as a reference point.*)
- Once students have completed their charts, take up their answers as a class.
- Ask students to brainstorm the issues that are encountered by characters in the school-based television programs they watch. Do these issues reflect their own lives?
- Of the programs that students have listed, which do they believe most accurately represent the lives of teachers and students, and which least accurately represents the lives of teachers and students? Why?



Homework Assignment:

In September 2000, *Rolling Stone* magazine jokingly summarized what teen shows tell us about today's teens:

- They all look sexy
- They are Caucasian
- They don't seem to have any parents
- They don't need an education
- They find high school boring and,
- They live in a world that does not resemble reality at all

Keeping this in mind, come up with your own list of ten humorous clichés about students and teachers, based on the television shows that you watch.

Day Two:

- Ask students to brainstorm movies that they have seen that feature students and teachers. (Record their selections on the board.)
- Distribute Tinsel Town Teachers and give students a few minutes to read it.
- Judging from this article, and the movies they've seen, are teachers and students portrayed differently in film than on television? How?
- Are films more or less likely to use stereotypes?
- Do students agree or disagree with the common themes that are outlined in the article? Can they think of any other themes that may be missing?
- Compare the themes from older films, like *Good-bye Mr. Chips*, *The Blackboard Jungle* and *To Sir With Love* to more recent films. Have the story lines changed very much over the past fifty years? (*If time permits, show students a classic film such as To Sir With Love, and have them compare it to a more recent film.*)
- In their journals or notebooks, have students respond to the question:
"Do the teachers and students on TV or in movies influence your own attitude about learning? In what ways?"

Day Three:

Activity

Divide your class into four groups.

In this activity, students will assume the role of television producers who are creating a new school-based television series. In order to sell their series to a network, they must create an outline of their series and offer network executives a "sneak peak" at a scene from an episode. Their program can be a drama or a comedy. It can play on stereotypes, or it can attempt to "break the mould" and offer a realistic portrayal of students and teachers.



The Series Outline will contain the following:

- An introductory page with the background to the plot, the desired target audience, the program format, tone, and setting.
- The goals and philosophy behind the series.
- An overview of the central characters (students & teachers), including name, age, photo, physical description, background, personality, and how his/her character fits into the overall plot. (*The goal is to create a believable character that audiences will relate to.*)
- An episode guide of the first five episodes.
- Remember that this Series Outline needs to get the attention of those network executives - show some creativity in putting it together!
- In addition, students will create a script for a scene from one of their episodes, (no more than five minutes in length) which will be presented to the class.
- Using the information in the Series Outline, have each group pitch its program to fellow classmates.
- When they have made their pitch, students will perform their scene.
- Once all groups have presented, let student's vote on the program they would most like to see on TV.

Evaluation

- Stereotype Chart
- Clichés
- Journal Entry
- Series Outline and Group performance



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?



Answer Sheet: Teacher and Student Stereotypes

Male Teacher	Female Teacher	Male Student	Female Student
Overweight	Tough	"In" crowd	"In" crowd
Authority figure	Shrieky	Always dressed in the coolest fashions	Impossibly thin, always well-dressed in clothes that teachers certainly couldn't afford!
Not "with it"	Not "with it"	Athletic, attractive	Smarter than teachers
No life	No life	Smarter than teachers	"Hip" talkers
Not as smart as students	Portrayed as being smart, but is still constantly outwitted by students	"Hip" talkers	Use flirting methods rather than rudeness to outwit teachers
Likes wearing vests or sweaters	No fashion sense	Constantly talks back to teachers	Obsessed with the opposite sex, fashion and shopping
Bad tempered	Boring	Usually plotting to outwit teachers	School seems secondary to social life
Boring	Ignored by students: more of a nuisance	Obsessed with the opposite sex, cars, and rock music	"Out" Crowd
Ignored by students: more of a nuisance	Or	School seems secondary to social life	Nerdy, unattractive girls
Or	"Bombshell"	"Out" Crowd	Smart "teacher's pets"
there is always the opposite stereotype: Nice, but ineffectual	Subjected to sexual innuendo by male students	Big, tough, stupid bullies	Cruel, conniving In-crowd-wannabe's (usually attractive girls, but not as attractive as the show's main characters - much of the plot usually revolves around these girls trying to steal the cool girl's boyfriends)
Still not as smart as students	Or	Nerdy, "brains" who lack social skills and are the brunt of much of the "cool" crowd humour	
Doesn't notice when students are up to things	Nice, but ineffectual		
Lets students get away with things when they are caught	Talks in a childish or perky manner to cynical students (even in secondary grades!)		
Still ignored by students, despite being well-liked	Doesn't notice when students are up to things		
	Lets students get away with things when they are caught		
	Still ignored by students, despite being well-liked		



TV Teachers & Students: Overview of Portrayals

Teachers	Students
<p>Generally, TV sitcom teachers seem to be set up in adversarial roles. They are seen as obstacles who have to be outwitted, rather than as individuals who are on the side of their students.</p> <p>TV teachers in dramas, such as <i>Dangerous Minds</i> are depicted as individuals who care about their students, but they are still seen as "the enemy" by the kids and the plot is based on these teachers having to "earn" their students' trust.</p> <p>Specialised teachers also fall into identifiable stereotypes: the phys-ed teacher with the baseball cap, tacky sweat suit, ubiquitous whistle, loud voice and "rah rah" mentality; the spaced out, nerdy science teacher with the thick glasses, frazzled hair and oversized lab coat; the principal (still predominantly male) who is depicted as the ultimate authority figure, to both students and teachers.</p>	<p>Actual learning is the lowest priority of TV students. Ask your students to consider how much of their day is spent in the classroom, and compare this to how much time TV students spend in the classroom. The focus of these shows is on the social life of the kids; teachers and schoolwork are incidental.</p> <p>Grades are seen as conflicts. Very few "cool" students are seen trying to improve their marks for their own sakes (especially in sitcoms). Usually, attempting to get better grades is in response to parental pressure, to impress a member of the opposite sex, or a reaction to the threat of losing a position on an athletic team - seldom for the student's own sake.</p> <p>Relationships are everything. Much of the plot in school-based sitcoms revolves around "the dating game," with sexual innuendo rampant, even among junior high school students.</p>



Tinsel Town Teachers

by Gavin Hainsworth

This article originally appeared in the September 1998 issue of [Teacher](#), newsmagazine of the B.C. Teacher's Federation. *Reprinted with permission.*

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:

<i>Good-bye, Mr. Chips</i> (1939),	<i>Dead Poets Society</i> (1989),
<i>Blackboard Jungle</i> (1955),	<i>Kindergarten Cop</i> (1990),
<i>To Sir, with Love</i> (1967),	<i>Dangerous Minds</i> (1995),
<i>The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie</i> (1969),	<i>Mr. Holland's Opus</i> (1995),
<i>Teachers</i> (1984),	<i>The Substitute</i> (1996),
<i>The Breakfast Club</i> (1985),	<i>In & Out</i> (1997),
<i>Ferris Bueller's Day Off</i> (1986),	<i>187</i> (1997),
<i>The Principal</i> (1987),	<i>Music of the Heart</i> (2000),
<i>Stand and Deliver</i> (1988),	<i>Pay it Forward</i> (2000),
<i>Lean on Me</i> (1989),	<i>Finding Forrester</i> (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.

