



LESSON PLAN

Level: Grades 2 to 6
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Once Upon a Time

Overview

In this lesson, students become aware of the idea of stereotyping and the role that stereotypes play in the stories and movies that they enjoy. Students are introduced to stereotypes by brainstorming the characteristics that are associated with stock characters from fairy tales and Disney films. For younger students, the book *The Paper Bag Princess* is used to illustrate non-stereotypical portrayals of princes and princesses. For older students, *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* provides an opportunity to discuss how different types of animals - and people - are routinely stereotyped in children's stories and films.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- understand that the representations made by the media are not always accurate
- understand the concept of stereotyping
- identify their own perceptions of various stereotypes
- recognize that the media construct reality

Preparation and Materials

Obtain a copy of *The Paperbag Princess* by Robert Munsch and/or *The True Story of The Three Little Pigs* by Jon Scieszka from your school or public library.

Background

Because most television programs are quite short, the identities of characters must be established as quickly as possible. To do this, television writers often use stereotypes. A stereotype is a fixed or conventional image of a person or group of people. Stereotypes generally conform to a pattern of dress and behavior that is easily recognized and understood. Often, a judgment is made about the person or group being stereotyped. That judgment may be positive or negative.



Generally, stereotypes are less real, more perfect, (or imperfect) and more predictable than their real-life counterparts. A typical male stereotype, for example, is of a "real man" who is adventurous, masterful, intelligent, and unshakable. Such sex-role stereotypes are intended to present viewers with a character they can easily recognize and relate to. Their danger, however, is that, if seen often, they can affect the way a viewer perceives men in general. Male stereotyping can narrow one's notion of what men can be and do; it can affect women's and children's expectations of men; it can even shape men's and boys' own views of themselves and of how they should behave.

While commercial television has improved in its portrayal of females, many of the women featured on TV continue to be depicted as someone's wife (apron-clad) or girlfriend (barely-clad). Television children are generally cast in gender-related roles - the girls playing with dolls while the boys play at sports - and all are "cutesy" and talk as though they were insightful adults. Similarly, the characterization of mothers-in-law, the elderly, gays, police officers, and truck drivers tends toward the stereotypical.

Culture and class stereotypes are also prevalent in television. Traditionally, blacks were portrayed as either happy-go-lucky servants or dangerous criminals, and while these stereotypes linger, we are now seeing what might be described as upright, intelligent, middle-class black characters. Similarly, North American native peoples are now being portrayed as something other than buckskin-wearing teepee dwellers. Too often, however, minorities are portrayed stereotypically and almost never as powerful or rich as the white majority.

Because stereotyping can lead children to form false impressions of various societal groups, it is important that students recognize stereotypes and understand the role they play in television's portrayal of life. To become television-wise, then, students must tune in to the ways television treats people, recognize how they themselves relate to TV characters, and understand how these characters can influence their ideas about the real people in their communities.

Source: Adapted, with permission, from *Let's Play TV: Teacher's Guide*, TVONTARIO

The Lesson

Guided Discussion

To introduce stereotyping, have students brainstorm words to describe a princess. She will undoubtedly be portrayed as young, pretty, beautifully dressed, and wealthy. Point out that they have created a stereotype princess. Together, define "stereotype."

Using Disney films such as *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*, *The Little Mermaid*, *The Lion King*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin* and *Pocahontas* as examples, ask students to brainstorm words to describe the following:

- The step-mother
- The handsome prince
- The villain (male/female)
- The hero
- The heroine
- Mothers
- Fathers



Once you have created words to describe these characters, ask your class if they can think of any characters from these movies that don't fit into a stereotypical role. (For example, the wicked step-mother in *Snow White* is very beautiful, even though she is evil; Belle is smart, as well as beautiful.)

Activity

Primary Grades

Read *The Paper Bag Princess* to your class.

Discuss

- How is Elizabeth different from the stereotype princesses that we talked about earlier?
- How is Prince Ronald different from the handsome princes in movies such as *Snow White* or *Cinderella*?
- Are *The Paper Bag* characters like anyone that you know? In what ways are they like real people?
- What do you think of these characters? Do you like them? Why?

Activity

Have your students draw or paint a picture of a stereotypical Prince, Princess or Villain standing beside a non-stereotypical version of the same character. Younger children may need some help in creating their non-stereotypical characters.

Junior Grades

Read *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* to your class.

Discuss

- How do the characters of the wolf and pigs differ from the usual version of this story?
- What are some other stories or movies that you can think of where the wolf "gets a bum rap."
- Even animals can be stereotyped. Can you name some other animals who have been labeled as evil in movies? In real life, do animals of the same type have different "personalities?"
- What animals are traditionally labeled as good?
- What qualities in animals determine how they may be stereotyped? (We tend to designate animals that we fear or animals that we find unattractive as being evil: wolves, lions, snakes, etc. The more domestic or attractive the animal, the more likely it is to be designated as good: dogs, cats, rabbits, horses, baby animals of almost any kind.)
- Do we do the same things with people? (Look at villains. When we are at war with a country, our villains tend to come from that culture - look at the proliferation of Arab villains since the Gulf War Crisis. In the 1960s, cartoon villains usually had Russian accents, which reflected Cold War tensions. Check out the accents of the "bad guys" in kid's cartoons.)



Activity

- Have your class brainstorm stories where there are traditional or stereotypical portrayals of characters. Fairy tales such as *Red Riding Hood*, *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Jack and the Beanstalk* are good examples.
- Divide class into groups
- Each group is to choose a story from those that the class has brainstormed. Stories that are chosen should be relatively straightforward, with clearly-defined characters.
- Each group is to act out the story that they have chosen without using stereotypes. For example, they could perform *Cinderella* with Cinderella as a well-meaning, but somewhat flawed character and the wicked step-mother and step-sisters as victims. They could portray the giant in *Jack and the Beanstalk* as a nice guy minding his own business who is robbed by Jack, the juvenile delinquent.

Extension Activities

- Have students research the actual habits of an animal that has been stereotyped and compare the screen image to the real animal in a presentation to the class.
- In addition to stereotypes, this lesson provides an opportunity to discuss perspective with older students. Have them think about how the story of the three little pigs changed when it was told from the perspective of the wolf. How might stories such as *Cinderella* or *The Little Mermaid* change if they were told from the perspective of a wicked step sister or Ursula? Students might like to create their own unique versions of popular stories from the perspective of a minor character, antagonist, or even an object.

