

Using the Film “Good Will Hunting” to Teach American Values

Kelly QUINN

1. Introduction

In April 2001 Nagoya Women’s University reformed its Department of English Language and Literature into the Department of British and American Studies. Commensurate with this change was an increase in the number of classes dealing with culture and American studies. While putting courses together a number of basic questions arose. What constitutes cultural knowledge? Should courses focus on contemporary society? How much historical knowledge is necessary to understand current trends and events?

In the course of trying to answer these questions, I surveyed a number of text-books available on the market. The philosophy of the textbooks fell into basically two categories: “hard” and “soft”. The “hard” textbooks dealt with geography, demographics, population trends, history, current events and political institutions. In order to illustrate the difference in the contents of these two styles, I would like to give a couple of examples of textbooks that I consider representative of these different styles.

Two examples of “hard” textbooks are *The USA: Customs and Institutions* by Ethel and Martin Tiersky, published by Longman and *Spotlight on the USA* by Randee Falk, published by Oxford. A quick look at the contents of these two books shows their “hard” nature. Unit headings in *The USA Customs and Institutions* include: “The Salad Bowl: Cultural Diversity”, “Levels of Learning: American Education”, “Government and the American Citizen”. *Spotlight on the USA* is organized differently. Each unit is about a different geographical region in the US. Each unit deals with the demographics, history, economy, etc. of each region. The hard textbooks could be categorized as a corpus of concrete knowledge necessary for students, the names, dates, and places of American culture.

Two examples of “soft” textbooks are *The Culture Puzzle: Cross-Cultural Communication for English as a Second Language* by Deena R. Levine, Jim Baxter, and Piper McNulty and *American Ways: A Guide for Foreigners in the United States* by Gary Althen. The table of contents for *The Culture Puzzle* includes units titled, “Expressing Emotions”, “Exchanging Cultural Viewpoints”, “Understanding Cultural Differences”. Units in *American Ways* include “American Values and Assumptions”, “Ways of Reasoning” and “Coping with Cultural Differences.” “Soft” textbooks try to explain the thinking or behavior of groups of people.

One course that I teach is called Culture Seminar Number 2 (第二文化ゼミ). It is a class of about 15

fourth year students. I had already met and taught most of the students in previous classes and when asked what they most wanted to know about the United States, students almost always answered that they wanted to understand Americans way of thinking. For this reason, I decided to teach a “soft” cultural studies course and to try to explain the thinking and behavior of Americans. This paper will explain how I tackled this difficult topic and the reasons I chose film as a resource.

2. Background to the Project

I began the course with the warning that American culture is varied, fast changing and every description of a culture is incomplete and oversimplified. I cautioned students against overlooking individual and subgroup differences.

I chose Gary Althen’s *American Ways* as the text. The text is intended as a guide for foreigners in the United States and much of the material is aimed at international students living in the United States. Many of my students had studied abroad or were planning to, so the book seemed an appropriate choice.

A lot of time was spent on Part I of *American Ways*, “American Values and Assumptions”. Here Althen describes American orientations toward the following values: Individualism and Privacy; Equality; Informality; The Future; Change, and Progress; Work, and Materialism; Directness and Assertiveness. I believed that students would read the situations described in *American Ways* and be able to recognize and describe similar situations from their own culture and their own experiences overseas. This belief proved to be false.

The lively discussions that I anticipated based on Althen’s descriptions of American values failed to materialize for three reasons. First, the language required to discuss abstract topics was beyond my students. Most of my students were low-intermediate to intermediate language learners. Their TOEIC scores were in the 400–500 point range. They could read and understand what Althen had written, but when asked to give examples from their own experiences that proved or countered what he had written, they faltered. Even when given time to prepare answers, many of them were visibly frustrated. They had things they wanted to say, but were unable to articulate them.

Second, many of the activities in “soft” texts are intended for a multi-cultural classroom. *American Ways* describes mainstream American values and illuminates them by comparing them with viewpoints from around the world. Althen uses many examples of different cultures, including Iranian, Malaysian and Mexican. My students were unfamiliar with many of these countries and their cultures and the examples confused as much as they illuminated. Some students misunderstood what they read and believed that Althen’s examples of contrasting cultures were examples of the same cultural beliefs as the United States.

Finally, although many of the students in the class had at least traveled abroad and some of them had lived and studied abroad for up to a year, about half of them had never been outside of Japan. Students in this group lacked any personal context with which to interpret Althen’s opinions. Instead of critically evaluating his opinions, they took what he said at face value and swallowed it whole. I was deeply concerned about this and worried that even those students who had been abroad would be too influenced by over-generalized representations of American culture. I wanted the students to witness some spontaneous, authentic American behavior and see if the ideas they had read about held true. For this reason I decided to use film as a way of showing students examples of American behavior.

For the first film, I chose *Good Will Hunting*. This movie tells the story of a young man, Will Hunting, who is a genius, but because of the abuse he suffered as a child, he drifts from one dead-end job to another until he meets a psychiatrist who helps him realize his potential. The film is set in modern day Boston and because its themes of individuality, equality, and the potential for change mirrored ideas mentioned by Althen, I decided to show it to my students and see if they would find any examples in the film that demonstrated the ideas described by Althen.

3. Summary of the Methodology

At this point I would like to briefly explain how the class was organized. The class met once a week for ninety minutes. During the first month, we worked through Part I of *American Ways*. We discussed the different values as described by Althen. Much of the discussion focused on differences and similarities the students perceived between American culture as presented by Althen and Japanese culture from their daily lives.

After making sure that the students understood the values, we watched *Good Will Hunting* and students were told to look for examples of any of the values that Althen mentioned. We first watched the film as a class. I then selected one or two scenes that I thought contained behavior that showed American value orientation. I showed the selected scenes to the students and asked them if they thought the scene showed any of the values Althen mentioned in Part I of *American Ways*.

Afterward, I put the students in small groups of two or three students and asked them to come up with scenes from the film that they thought showed some aspect of American culture. The groups then presented these scenes to the class and we discussed them. In addition to discussion of the scenes, I sometimes had students do cloze activities using the scripts from the film or had the students rewrite a scene from another cultural perspective.

During winter vacation, students were asked to watch four films: *Bugs Life*, *Aladdin*, *Boys Don't Cry*, and *Working Girl*. Students had to go to their local video store and rent these films by themselves. None of the students complained about this. After vacation, the students were again divided into groups and each group selected one of the four films and lead a discussion about the values in the film.

4. Students' Observations on the “Culture” in the Film

At this point I think it would be useful to go through one group discussion of one film. One scene that elicited a lot of discussion came from *Good Will Hunting*. The group began their presentation by referring to a quote from Althen.

“...Americans have a deep faith that in some fundamental way all people (at least all American people) are of equal value, that no one is born superior to anyone else. ‘One man, one vote,’ they say, conveying the idea that any person’s opinion is as valid and worthy of attention as any other person’s opinion (Althen, 1988, p. 8).

In *Good Will Hunting*, the main character, Will, has been working as a janitor at M.I.T. Professor Lambeau,

a prestigious teacher, challenges his students to solve a difficult mathematics problem that he has written on a chalkboard in the hallway. None of the students can do it. Later Lambeau catches Will working on the problem. He tries to speak to him, but Will runs away. In this scene, Professor Lambeau has come to the maintenance office to try to find out who Will is. The students thought the following conversation between the head janitor and the prestigious professor was interesting and showed the American orientation towards equality:

LAMBEAU: Excuse me. Is this the buildings and grounds office?

TERRY: Yeah, can I help you?

LAMBEAU: I'm trying to find the name of a student who works here.

TERRY: No students work for me.

LAMBEAU: Could you just check, because the young man who works in my building—

TERRY: Which one's your building?

LAMBEAU: Building two.

Terry checks a list behind his [own] desk. Looks up.

TERRY: Well, if something was stolen, I should know about it.

LAMBEAU: No, no. Nothing like that. I just need his name.

TERRY: I can't give you his name unless you have a complaint.

ASSISTANT: This is Professor Lambeau.

TERRY: And this is Professor Hayes. (indicating another janitor.)

LAMBEAU: It is very important...Please.

TERRY: Well, he didn't show up for work today.

Terry takes a beat. Holding all the cards.

TERRY: (cont'd) Look, he got his job through his P.O. so you can call him.

Much of the behavior that students commented on was non-verbal.

Students noticed that at the beginning of the scene when Professor Lambeau entered the buildings and grounds office, his attitude was very arrogant. He speaks loudly. He knocks once, loudly and walks in. His tone of voice is arrogant and he expects the maintenance man to deal with him immediately. Students were surprised that the maintenance man, Terry, does not stand up when Lambeau enters. He remains seated during the scene asserting his equality or superiority here in his own office. Terry interrupts Lambeau. He speaks to him casually or rudely. He does not show respect that the students felt a professor of Lambeau's stature expects. When Lambeau's assistant tries to assert authority over the janitor by pointing to Lambeau and saying, "This is Professor Lambeau." Terry mocks his high status by calling the other janitor "Professor Hayes". Students commented during the discussion that Lambeau's tone gradually becomes more polite. At the beginning of the scene, Lambeau addresses the Janitor from a distance. As the scene progresses, he moves closer and his tone becomes softer and finally Professor Lambeau addresses the janitor as an equal and asks politely for his help.

Another point that caused a lot of discussion was the distinction between the values, "individuality" and "individualism". In one scene, Lambeau and Sean, Will's therapist, are arguing about the best method of treatment. Lambeau feels that Will should take advantage of his immense talent and pursue a career as

soon as possible. Sean feels that Will is not ready. He thinks Will should not be pushed into pursuing a career until he chooses to do so himself. The argument turns personal. The men are old friends from university, but have followed different career paths.

LAMBEAU: Yes you do. You’re angry at me for doing what you could have done. Ask yourself if you want Will to feel that way for the rest of his life, to feel like a failure

SEAN: That’s it. That’s why I don’t come to the goddamn reunions! Because I can’t stand the look in your eye when you see me! You think I’m a failure! I know who I am. I’m proud of who I am. And all of you, you think I’m some kind of pity case! You with your sycophant students following you around. And your Goddamn Medal!

LAMBEAU: —Is that what this is about, Sean? The Field’s Medal? Do you want me to go home and get it for you? Then will you let the boy—

SEAN: —I don’t want your trophy and I don’t give a shit about it! ‘Cause I knew you when!! I knew you when you were homesick and pimply-faced and didn’t know what side of the bed to piss on!

LAMBEAU: That’s right! You were smarter than me then and you’re smarter than me now! So don’t blame me for how your life turned out. It’s not my fault.

SEAN: I don’t blame you! It’s not about you! It’s about the boy! ‘Cause he’s a good kid! And I won’t see this happen to him— I won’t see you make him feel like a failure too!

One student noticed that Lambeau has used his talents for success, but Sean, because his wife became ill, he cared for her and lost his career. He is not successful, but he has self-knowledge. However, Lambeau does not recognize his achievement. Lambeau thinks Sean is a failure. Similarly, Sean is not impressed by Lambeau’s success. He knows that Lambeau’s fundamental character, his most important attribute in Sean’s opinion, is unchanged from when he was a young student. One student wrote, “Because, in American society, even if the person is satisfied with his way of life, people won’t say that he is successful.” This is the distinction between “individualism” which is concerned with success and “individuality” which is concerned with one’s unique character.

While most of the behavior in the film supported Althen’s ideas of American behavior, one student noticed a scene where the characters acted in a way contrary to the mainstream values Althen describes. Althen describes the dominant value orientation of Americans as “individualism”. However, in one scene, Will and his friends display behavior that is more representative of the contrasting value, “interdependence”. At the start of the movie, Will and his friends are riding in a car. Will spots a bully from his elementary school. He demands that his friend Chuckie, the leader of their little gang, stop the car so that he can beat up this bully from his past. Chuckie stops the car, Will jumps out and begins to fight. Chuckie and Billy quickly move to join will, but Morgan, the last member of the group says that he is not going to go:

MORGAN: If he wanted to fight, why didn’t he fight him fifteen minutes ago at the park?

CHUCKIE: Shut up, Morgan. You’re going.

MORGAN: Not going.

CHUCKIE: Going.

MORGAN: I'm not going!

CHUCKIE: Fuckin' go Morgan. Will and Billy got out of a car.

CHUCKIE: If you are not out of this car in two seconds, when I finish with them, you are next!

Morgan gets out of the car and joins the brawl. Surprisingly, he proves to be a capable fighter. The students pointed out that members of “interdependent” societies often draw their primary self-identification from the groups to which they belong. In this scene, Morgan does not want to fight and the fight is in reality none of his business. It is a personal matter between Will and the bully from his past. However, when faced with the challenge of resisting the peer pressure to fight and perhaps being expelled from the group, Morgan follows the group and fights.

Students, pointed out that this scene shows “interdependent” behavior rather than the “individualism” they expected. That is certainly true, however, the behavior in this scene appears early in the movie can be seen as foil for Will's behavior later when he acts independently and leaves his friends to pursue his individual destiny. In some ways the film is the story of how Will moves from “interdependence” (immaturity) to “individualism” (maturity).

The scene that all of the students commented on and in fact is the climax of the film occurs at a construction site. Will and Chuckie have finished work and are drinking a beer. Chuckie asks about Will's girlfriend. Will tells him that she has left to go to medical school in California. In fact, she had invited Will to join her, but he was not ready to break his interdependent relationship with his friends. Chuckie becomes angry and abuses Will for not taking advantage of his chances to develop his talent. Will tells Chuckie that he wants everything to stay as it is. He hopes that he and Chuckie will work together, raise kids, watch football and grow old together. Shockingly, Chuckie's reaction to Will's description of middle-class bliss is to say, “In twenty years if you are still coming over to watch the Patriots on Sunday, I am going to fucking kill you.”

A constant theme throughout the movie is the idea that Will must develop his talent. It is absolutely implicit that Will can never be truly happy unless his genius reaches its full potential. There are societies that place greater importance on family or interpersonal relationships individual success. In another culture Will could be encouraged to stay in his neighborhood and grow old with his friends, but this anathema to American values. Ironically, despite the strength of the idea that only through the greatest development of one's potential can one be happy, there is no logical or objective reason why this is must be true. Americans are just conditioned to believe it is true. The closest the film gets to explaining why Will should develop his talent is Chuckie's rant: at the construction site, “Fuck you. You owe it to me. Tomorrow I'm gonna wake up and I'll be fifty and I'll still be doin' this. And that's all right 'cause I'm gonna make a run at it. But you, you're sittin' on a winning lottery ticket and you're too much of a pussy to cash it in. And that's bullshit 'cause I'd do anything to have what you got! And so would any of these guys. It'd be a fuckin' insult to us if you're still here in twenty years.” This speech shows that cultural conditioned behavior is not logical and cannot be logically defended or explained. It can often only be observed.

Students noticed all of the points of behavior mentioned here. They were able to recognize examples of American value orientations that they had read about. Students quickly compared what they imagined would happen if the scene had taken place in Japan. I was surprised at what the students noticed, especially

non-verbal things. They often found examples of behavior that I had not noticed.

5. Final Thoughts

Students’ attitude toward using the films was good. At first they believed that films were only for entertainment, but later realized that there were many things they could learn. One reason for using video that students mentioned was that using films subtitled in Japanese removed the language barrier. Students could follow the story without effort and focus on the behavior. They understood the context of the actions and this helped them understand the behavior better.

Related to this is the fact that seeing behavior is better than reading about it. Students could read about American behavior, but could not visualize it. Using the films helped create concrete images in their mind that Althen’s descriptions did not. This is especially true for students who have not studied abroad. For students preparing to go abroad, studying film for values will help students understand the behavior of the people they meet abroad and will improve their readiness for overseas experience.

In conclusion, I would say that using film can be a valuable resource in helping students understand value orientations. Video, when used in conjunction with a text that describes behavior or thinking, can help students visualize the behavior described. Also, by studying the film for themselves, students learn to critically evaluate behavior and will learn to recognize culturally influenced behavior for themselves.

References

- Althen, Gary. 1988. *American Ways: A Guide for Foreigners in the United States*. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press.
- Bender, Lawrence (Producer), & Van Sant, Gus (Director). 1997. *Good Will Hunting* (Film). Hollywood: Miramax.
- Falk, Randee. 1993. *Spotlight on the USA*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Levine, Deena R. & Baxter, Jim & McNulty, Piper. 1987. *The Culture Puzzle: Cross-Cultural Communication for English as a Second Language*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Tiersky, Ethel & Tiersky, Martin. 2001. *The USA: Customs and Institutions*. White Plains, New York: Longman.