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# Using Wiseman Documentaries for Social Problems Courses

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# TEACHING NEWSLETTER

A Collection of Articles and Ideas About Teaching Sociology

Volume 9, Number 1

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### TEACHING SERVICES PROGRAM WORKSHOPS

Two teaching workshops are scheduled for the spring. Please make your plans to join other colleagues committed to effective teaching of sociology.

**TECHNIQUES AND RESOURCES FOR EVALUATING SOCIOLOGY PROGRAMS AND FACULTY EFFECTIVENESS** -- March 8-11, 1984 in Chicago, IL on the campus of the College of DuPage.

Participants will:

- compare the variety of instruments to evaluate faculty performance
- gain skill in peer evaluation techniques
- have access to norming information for departmental performance
- use videotaping to assess teaching skills
- review a variety of curricula for a sociology major

Staff members: Jeanne Ballantine, Wright State University; Charles S. Green, III, University of Wisconsin/Whitewater; Hans O. Mauksch, University of Wisconsin/Milwaukee; Theodore C. Wagenaar, Miami University; and Raymond Olson, College of DuPage.

Fee: \$225 for ASA members; \$325 for non-members. The deadline for applications is February 15, 1984

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**ISSUES OF SEXISM AND RACISM IN TEACHING SOCIOLOGY** -- March 30--April 1 in Washington, DC on the campus of American University.

Participants will:

- learn to recognize and address racism and sexism in our teaching
- gain skill in managing the classroom and incidents of racism and sexism in students
- explore curriculum materials to teach topics of sex/gender and race more effectively

Staff members: Rodolfo Alvarez, UCLA; Carla Howery, ASA; Barrie Thorne, Michigan State University and Charles Willie, Harvard University.

Fee: \$175 for ASA members and \$275 for non-members. The deadline for applications is February 15, 1984.

For more information and application forms, contact, Carla B. Howery, American Sociological Association, 1722 N Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20036. Enrollment is limited in each workshop to the first 25 applications received.

The ASA TEACHING NEWSLETTER is a bi-monthly publication of the American Sociological Association. Subscriptions are \$7.50/year for ASA members and \$10.00 for non-members. Send responses, articles, and announcements to the Editor: Carla B. Howery, 1722 N Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20036. Phone: (202) 833-3410. The Editorial Board of the TEACHING NEWSLETTER includes: Hubert Blalock (University of Washington), Thomas Faase (St. Norbert's College), Caryl Goodman (Simmons College), Donald Irish (Hamline University), Dennis McBride (Pacific Lutheran University), Robert McMinn (Delta State University), Joy Reeves (Stephen F. Austin State University), Eugene Rice (University of the Pacific), Norma Shelan (St. Martin's College), Norma Seerley (Gainesville Community College), Alvin Short (Southwest Texas State University), Ann Sundgren (Tacoma Community College), and Donald Wheeler (Kean College of NJ).

economy and to the expressive needs of his family? The notion that one can and should exhibit such simultaneous allegiance is a central value paradox of Western industrial culture. The film explicitly raises the issue through its portrayal of the Banks children as sweet, but lonely and unruly, due to lack of attention from their parents. Familial integration is threatened primarily because Mr. Banks regards his family as an extension of the bureaucracy in which he works; he feels that the family should run smoothly as a well-oiled machine. After explicitly introducing the paradox, however, the narrative veers away from the radical conclusion that a man whose first priority is his job cannot effectively contribute to familial integration. Instead, a rationalization is accomplished which suggests that both can be achieved if only one makes the effort to generate humor at work and love at home. It is the charge of the angelic magician, Mary Poppins, to instill this attitude in Mr. Banks, which she does, resulting in the integration of the family. Her mission fulfilled, she floats off into the clouds from whence she came.

In this fashion, the film suggests that inter-role conflict endemic to industrial society can be negated by the individual who repeats incantations like "supercalifragilisticexpialidocious." The sociological nature of the paradox is, of course, masked in the film. Nevertheless, we regard the resolution of the value inconsistency as an example of rationalization rather than glossing because the paradox is overtly expressed -- if only with reference to one individual and his family.

Glossing may be illustrated through an analysis of the film classic Citizen Kane, which encourages a psychological reductionist explanation of human action by drawing the viewer into a search for the significance of Kane's dying word "Rosebud." This interpretation implies that Kane's quest for power, as expressed through his pursuits in business, politics, the arts and his private life of family and friends, can best be explained by reference to the childhood incident in which his mother sent him away under the care of Thatcher, the guardian of Kane's estate. According to popular reading, Kane's quest for power may be attributed to the childhood psychological scar which he carries. Kane hurts others because he has been hurt, he does to others what has been done to him; he turns them into objects to be manipulated at his will. However, this reading obscures the ineluctably social nature of life which neither the film nor the viewer can impertinently gloss, for Kane may also be defined by his relation to society, by reference to his social self. The psychological view of Kane offers only a partial explanation. Worse yet, it ignores the capacity of religion, politics, business, and other social arrangements to transform the psychological into a meaning entirely different. Marriage may transform a person's motives, helping to cure them of their self-love; a vocational commitment may provide a safe, limited outlet for hatred and aggression; politics can allow a socially controlled and beneficial quest for power; and patronage of the arts may refine the patron's sensibilities. Kane, of course, undergoes no such inner changes as a consequence of his social commitments. But it is precisely his social and ultimately his moral failures that become lost in the film's focus on the determinative power of childhood character. Citizen Kane fails to convey adequately the alternative possibility that Kane cannot escape from the prison of his self-love because he cannot change his basic self-interpretation, which is another way of denying the transformative power of communal commitments. Since this denial of the sociological is implicit rather than explicit, it is an example of what we have called glossing.

If film analysis is to become an effective teaching device, the teacher must encourage the student to resist the easy interpretation, the obvious reading. Only then may the student begin to see that films are equivocal and often contradictory in the variety of their voices. And once this lesson has begun to sink in, the student may also begin to recognize that the universe is not univocal and therefore accept the complexities of our relationships to society.



## USING WISEMAN DOCUMENTARIES IN SOCIAL PROBLEMS COURSES

*Patrick G. Donnelly, University of Dayton*

This report describes the use of seven films produced by Frederick Wiseman in a lower course in Modern Social Problems. The goals of the project were: to increase the students' awareness and understanding of the day-to-day operations of several basic institutions in American society; to offer a creative and interesting undergraduate course; and to enliven class discussion. Since this was a course in social problems, faculty and students focused on the problematic features of the institutions portrayed in the films and on the social problems these institutions are designed to handle.

Since Frederick Wiseman began producing films on major social organizations in the 1960s, his work has been widely acclaimed by journalists, broadcasters, academics and film critics. His ability to capture the routine, day-to-day activities of people in various institutions and his avoidance of the sensational, the extraordinary or the muckracking approach creates a credibility important to thoughtful, critical audiences. The people and the topics dealt with in the films and the manner of presentation make them valuable teaching aids for a variety of sociology courses.

Five sections of the course involving three different instructors used Wiseman's films in conjunction with a textbook and, in some cases, a number of other articles. The two hundred students, mostly freshman and sophomore non-sociology majors, saw one film each week during the middle part of the semester. Class periods during those weeks were devoted to lectures and discussions on the institutions and problems portrayed in the films. The seven films shown in the series and the related social problems topics were: "Welfare"--Poverty, "Hospital"--Poverty and Racism, "Basic Training"--Sex Role Socialization, "High School"--Education, "Law and Order" and "Juvenile Court"--Crime and Criminal Justice, and "Titicut Follies"--Mental Disorders.

Following each showing on a weekday evening, a discussion ranging from 30 to 90 minutes was held. The discussion was led by one of three instructors but also involved other members of the Sociology Anthropology Department and faculty from the Philosophy, Social Work, Education, Military Science, and Psychology departments. As such, the films provided an excellent opportunity for interdisciplinary cooperation. In addition, a number of persons from the community, with training and expertise in relevant areas acted as discussants. These included representatives of the mental health, juvenile justice and law enforcement agencies.

Each of the discussants made a five or ten minute presentation before the audience was invited to ask

questions and make comments. Based on the response of the students and other members of the audience (the films were advertised in campus publications), it was clear that the films and discussants raised many interesting and though provoking issues. Based on the brief student reports on the films, it is equally clear that the films challenged many of the students' long held beliefs concerning the operation of the social institutions that surround them and that may one day employ, serve, or otherwise involve them.

Students and other members of the audience were asked to fill out short evaluation forms following each film. Generally, the response was favorable. Table 1 reports the responses to three questions: Question 1--"Do you feel this film increased your knowledge concerning the institution that was portrayed?"; Question 2--"How interesting was the film?"; and, Question 3--"In general, how would you rate this film?"

TABLE 1  
AUDIENCE EVALUATIONS\*

	Q 1 <sup>1</sup>	Q 2 <sup>2</sup>	Q 3 <sup>2</sup>
"Hospital"	82%	3.4	3.8
"Basic Training"	77%	3.1	3.1
"High School"	54%	2.8	2.7
"Law and Order"	52%	2.8	2.8
"Juvenile Court"	72%	2.7	2.9
"Titicut Follies"	81%	3.2	3.5

\*Evaluation forms were not available for "Welfare."

<sup>1</sup>Percent responding yes to question.

<sup>2</sup>The scale used gave values of: 5 = Excellent;  
4 = Good; 3 = Average; 2 = Below Average; 1 = Poor.

These data show that most students felt that viewing the films increased their knowledge of the particular institutions. The three to four page papers that students submitted on each film and their exams clearly indicated that the students' understanding and awareness of the various institutions increased as a result of viewing the films and participating in the discussions afterwards. The questions on interest and overall rating also show an above rating for all of the films. "Hospital" and "Titicut Follies" received the highest ratings of all the films. This may indicate that students liked the more "actionpacked" films since these two tend, more so than the other five films, to portray scenes which are routine to those familiar with these institutions but which are shocking to others. Looking at the data on these questions more carefully, one problematic issue arises. There is a general downward trend, with the exception of "Titicut Follies," in the ratings given to the later films. When this issue was discussed in class, students responded that it was an "overdose effect." They reported that they were seeing too much of the same type of thing in too short a time. They recommended, and the instructors agree, that fewer

films or films spaced out over a longer part of the semester would be more widely accepted.

Another problem created by our use of the film series may be avoided by the same change. The films imposed a timetable on the coverage of various issues discussed in the course. Since the films were rented months in advance, instructors had to maintain a pace consistent with the film dates. (This, of course, may not be as serious a problem if universities leased the films for longer periods.)

The students also raised the issue that some of the films were old. Most of the films were made in the 1960s or early 1970s. The discussants pointed out that some of the same practices still occur in the institutions today and that in other cases, while the practices have changed, the processes remain the same. Examples of this were provided by the discussants who were most familiar with the institutions. This seemed to help the students and focused their attention, not simply on what was shown in the film, but also on the principles and philosophies underlying the practices. Where changes had occurred, discussants sought to analyze and explain the reasons for such changes occurring during the 1960s and 1970s affected specific institutions. Discussions also focused on the role of various political activist groups in bringing about the changes. Hence, an apparent disadvantage of using the films--their age--was used to introduce other important sociological concepts.

While the films were more expensive than the department could afford (\$150 for one film with discounts for multiple film rentals), the instructors sought and received an \$800 grant from the University of Dayton Educational Development Fund.

Generally, students and faculty found the series to be a rewarding experience, one which enriched and enlivened the traditional, textbook oriented social problems course. Students were given "a little taste of the real world" (as one student put it), exposed to the perspectives of other disciplines, and provided with an opportunity to view widely acclaimed films.

Study guides are provided for two of the films ("Law and Order" and "Juvenile Court") and reviews of the other films are sent with each order. Persons interested in renting or leasing the films can contact Zipporah Films in Boston and should feel free to contact the author regarding the use of the films in their courses.

Editor's Note: Consult instructors' manuals for introductory and social problems textbooks for other ideas about using films, as well as information about film distributors. The ASA Teaching Resources Center sells a publication entitled USING FILMS IN SOCIOLOGY COURSES: GUIDELINES AND REVIEWS (2nd edition). It is available for \$4 for ASA members (\$5 for nonmembers) from the Teaching Services Program, 1722 N Street NW, Washington, DC 20036.



SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION SYLLABI  
SET UNDER REVISION

The Section on Sociology of Education is revising the set of syllabi and instruction materials for those courses, and for courses that include a module on education.

Syllabi, class exercises, projects, test items, and classroom techniques are requested. In addition, colleagues who can write a short review of a textbook or a film or provide a sample lecture outline, should volunteer to do so.

Send your submissions to Jeanne Ballantine, Dept. of Sociology, Wright State University, Dayton, OH 45435, before March 1, 1984.

