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Teacher Films: Examining Hollywood Representations of our Practice

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Scott: Want to propose a class on film?
Amy: Yes!

When Scott presented me [Amy] with a course development opportunity that would merge my keen interest in critical media literacy and his work in democracy and citizenship education, I knew it was a chance to try something different; and, to offer students taking summer session courses (including in-service teachers working on their MAs) a way to engage in media re/presentations about the teaching practice and build our skills in film/media analysis *and* production. Though we were generally curious as to how students would respond to course content, both of us were more interested seeking answers to specific questions – Scott: How do films about teaching and schooling shape pre-service teachers' understanding of what it means to be a teacher? Amy: What do these films teach us about the social/political context in which they were made?

With a focus on this special issue of *The Councilor*, we reflect on this course and how we have used components of it as access-points into students' connections to social studies, films about education and schooling (including their experiences as students), and more specifically the impact social studies has had on their teacher-identity formation. This paper also highlights what we understood as issues students faced, including but not limited to the ways in which their thinking was challenged and/or reinforced through the films they watched and subsequent discussions with their peers. Finally, we reflect on what challenges we ourselves faced as co-developers and co-teachers as graduate students, and what we have learned about our own becoming as teacher educators.

Course Context

The original course, entitled "*Dangerous Minds, Dead Poets, and Democratic Education on the Silver Screen,*" was offered in 2011 as part of a special program for in-service teachers to work on their MA degree over a series of summers. We hoped to explore Dewey's (1916) conception

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of democracy as "a mode of associated living, a conjoint communicated experience" (p. 87) with pre-service and in-service teachers. Our goal was to create opportunities for students to examine the way filmmakers depicted (or ignored) the relationship between democracy and education, how education can further civic engagement, and the nature of democratic education in movies from 1940 through the present day. In nine class meetings over six weeks, students watched seven films (Appendix A) and read numerous articles, in a process of reflection about the films and their teacher selves.

In *Composing a Teaching Life*, Vinz (1996) calls upon preservice teachers to reflect and consider the mediation between their vision (of teaching, schooling, education) and something that is "more official" (p. 53). We conceptualize "vision" as the drive towards the practice of teaching. In other words, why do we teach, and what do we hope and/or envision our practice to look like? And, how do we negotiate that drive with what we experience daily in the classrooms, schools, and systems in which we work? With this in mind, we wanted our first session to lay reflective grounding for how students' visions of teaching and schooling align and conflict with the realities of teaching. Using an identity map activity on teacher roles and responsibilities, we prompted students to: "Create an identity map on the roles and responsibilities of a teacher." We began with the identity of "teacher" and then proceeded to add/expand identifiers as the students progressed.

Once the maps were created, we asked students to participate in a "gallery walk," where they were encouraged to add to their peers' maps using the provided post-it notes. As themes emerged from their maps, our discussion moved towards the role media, both popular and educational, has played in shaping negative perceptions and unrealistic expectations of a teacher's roles and responsibilities. As a way to historicize the practice of teaching somewhat, we viewed McGraw-Hill's 1947 film *Maintaining Classroom Discipline* (Old TV Time, 2012), and considered how such maps might look had they been created 50 years ago.

Seeking to understand how our students conceptualized "the teacher" was important as it gave us insight into where they saw themselves within the practice. For the preservice teachers who had not yet worked in schools, having them contemplate what in/formed their understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the teacher helped ground the conceptual framework for the course – that (1) media is powerful in constructing images for how we see, know, and understand the world (Kellner & Share, 2005); and (2) the necessity to "keep asking whose perspectives are portrayed and what purpose is served by repeatedly silencing or rendering invisible entire groups of people – even in films ostensibly telling their stories" (Yosso, 2020, p. 8).

Conceptual Underpinnings and Classroom Applications

Our course was framed around three central questions – What does it mean to teach and be taught? How have we come to know what schooling is? How/should we challenge pervasive, oftentimes troubling representations of students, schooling, and teaching? We situated our

inquiry using Share's (2011) critical media literacy framework, emphasizing that to engage in meaningful critical media literacy we must:

- *Recognize that texts are not neutral*
- *Explore languages, genres, and conventions for ALL texts (not just print based)*
- *Recognize the audience's role in negotiating meanings of texts*
- *Examine representations to uncover bias, point of view, omission, power, privilege, and marginalization.[1]*

Our course sought to use critical media literacy to question power and politics in/of representation, thus empowering students to "question media, challenge hegemony, and participate in society as justice-oriented global citizens" (Funk et al., 2016, p. 23). In addition, Yosso (2002), in drawing on Freire, reminds us that "critical media literacy uses media as a pedagogical tool to facilitate students' becoming critically conscious of themselves in relation to the structures of power and domination in their world" (p. 59).

Though students viewed nine films over the course of six weeks, three films – *Dangerous Minds (1995)*, *Dead Poets Society (1989)*, and *Lean on Me (1989)* – anchored the majority of our discussions and application of critical media literacy as defined by Kellner and Share (2005) and Yosso (2002). In the case of *Dangerous Minds* and *Lean on Me*, we discussed how the marker of being "based on a true story" influenced our criticality with text. We discussed that often we have let that designation speak for itself; in essence letting that designation do the inquiry work for us. We trust(ed) the story, and its representations of others, and we assume(d) that the filmmakers sorted through narratives to get to the "true" one. As we reflect upon this, we see how clearly this is rooted in whiteness, like media itself, and serves as a reminder that "we watch, read, and listen to the same media, but experience them uniquely, and often struggle to communicate these differences" (Hawkman & Shear, 2020, p. 2). For these films in particular, we were able to name the representation of racial divisions that were explicit, e.g. the opening sequence of *Dangerous Minds*, which is black and white until the "Palo Alto Schools" bus (arriving from an urban area) pulls up to the school, situated on a tree-lined street in a presumably suburban neighborhood. Only then is the viewer transitioned to color.

While viewing with a critical sensibility was important, we also had students critique the messages in both the official theatrical trailers and the film posters. Noriega (1992, as cited in

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[1] While we used this framework in 2011, it has since been updated to include environmental justice. The elements emphasized here are present in both versions, and were taken from
https://www.academia.edu/29786076/Critical_Media_Literacy_Framework_updated_Nov_5_2016_

Yosso, 2020) noted that "mainstream Hollywood films often portray whites as successful in school and life, whereas Chicanas/os and African Americans are more generally characterized as failures in education and society" (p. 52). While the films themselves are certainly evidence of this, as we noted in the example of the *Dangerous Minds* opening sequence, the theatrical trailers and movie posters also encapsulate this theme, and wanted the students to engage in this work.

In our course in 2011, and in my (Amy's) more recent offerings of the course, students were asked to identify similar themes in movie posters, such as power and control over People of Color found in the posters for *Dangerous Minds* and *Lean on Me; or* the themes of care and compassion found in the poster for *Dead Poets Society* (students are even holding up Mr. Keating, where Ms. Johnson stands at attention in front of her students, and Mr. Clarke points an accusatory finger at his).

We also discussed how in the *Dead Poets Society* poster, privilege and the erasure of People of Color stand out when analyzed through the following questions: (1) What does the poster/trailer show (tell) you about teachers, students, and schooling? (2) What does the poster/trailer not show? (3) Who benefits from the representation in the poster/trailer? Whom does it marginalize? Asking these questions not only created opportunities for our students to participate in critical analysis by gathering artifacts that include the film, trailer, movie poster, and associated film reviews and scholarship, it also underscored the importance of critical media literacy as a pedagogical tool of empowerment and participatory citizenship.

Connections to Social Studies

When we first offered this course in 2011, all of our students were enrolled in courses to complete the requirements for a graduate degree in social studies education. Connection to the social studies as a subject area was evident, and many students are drawn to social studies teaching because of the possibilities inherent within to teach towards advocacy, social justice, and democratic citizenship. However, we thought that demonstrating these connections through a media exploration could provide for a more intimate connection with their teacher identities and the more philosophical and existential purposes of education and schooling. Inspired by Maxine Greene's (2007) work on imagination, we urged students to embrace this constant state of becoming. As she writes:

> *To learn, I believe, is to become, to become different. It is to continue making new connections in experience, new meanings, if you like. Meanings are funded, we are told, and offer continually expanding perspectives on experience. But that depends a good deal on a willingness to go beyond what is--to reach beyond mere facts to widening cognitive or intellectual possibilities. Surely, we know that is what inventive scientists and explorers do, what people who opened frontiers did in the past, those who kept searching for the territory ahead. (p. 1)*

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Working with a partner, students created short films that re/presented their understanding of social studies education. Students wrote a proposal that outlined their vision for the film and the message that they would be trying to convey. They then submitted storyboards with images, clips, and music selections. Included with everyone's film, was a typed transcript "Directors' Commentary" providing insights into the decision-making process to re/present their story in the way that they did. On the last day of class, we held a viewing for each group's film, followed by a Q&A with the directors.

While critical media literacy allows students a platform to question power structures, "alternative media production empowers students to create their own messages that can challenge media texts and narratives" (Kellner & Share, 2006, p. 60). Coupled with Greene's (2007) call to "go beyond what is" (p. 1), we asked students to think through not only what they see as social studies, but what they envision it *can be/come*. Through their various visions in their media projects, we created a space for our students to become more connected to social studies, particularly as they learned that challenging problematic and oftentimes racist re/presentations of schooling, teaching, and students, *was* social studies in and of itself.

Becoming (Social Studies) Teacher Educators

Both of us have used various components of this course since 2011. My (Amy) most recent institution of this course was for a three-week intensive at another university. The course, "*Education and Schooling in Hollywood Feature Film"* shared similar goals and course assignments as 2011. The primary difference, however, was that this new course would be offered to students from multiple disciplines. This course sought to provide students with critical media literacy skills and to be able to identify explicit and implicit messaging as re/presented in feature films.

Because students had varying disciplinary interests, it was important for me to focus on how schooling experiences shape identity more broadly, and our thinking about education. Wrestling with Scott's initial question on how teacher films shape pre-service teachers' understanding of what it means to be a teacher, I was curious to what extent negative experiences of schooling, or what Olsen (2009) might refer to as school wounds, pushed students away from the practice of teaching. Reflecting on this course a few years later, I liked how the course provided students a platform to think about identity formation *as students*. In addition, having become much more sharp in decentering whiteness, I felt that being able to enter into conversation about re/presentations of their experiences *as students*, allowed us to navigate those differences which we "often struggle to communicate" (Hawkman & Shear, 2020, p. 2). Even with the brevity of this course, there was a richness and robustness in their engagement with films, and in their final film productions depicting their understanding and vision of education and schooling.

Today's students are much more adept at navigating media-producing software than they were in 2011. In the 2011 course, we recall carving out dedicated time to train with iMovie, or using Flip Cameras. As we began using elements of the final project over the last several years, the need to locate platforms and subsequently learn how to use them has become less frequent. Now, I (Amy) simply ask if they need help and offer out of class time to explore options, and since 2017, I have not had a student ask for help.

The final media project continues to find its way into our social studies methods courses. Because there still remains such ambiguity behind the meaning of social studies, this assignment allows us to ask that question, and then give students a platform to respond through media production. For Scott, this occurred early on in a methods course as a way to gather prior knowledge about social studies content and pedagogy. In my course, it serves as the summative assessment where students create movie trailers about what social studies is and can be based on the work we have done throughout the semester. They are prompted to choose any genre to extend that meaning.

Scott has worked with elementary social studies for several years, and has used media production to expand on the possibilities of what social studies can be, and why it is so important in the elementary classroom. Like Scott, I leave it "genre open" and allow students to develop film trailers instead of longer films. This assignment provides an opportunity for students to narrate the story of social studies that is different from their experiences as students. In this way, their connection to social studies is one of their own making.

Conclusion

We learned a lot from developing this course and teaching it as a team. An unexpected outcome of this course, and our subsequent presentations about it since 2011, was how to navigate our teacher-selves as we worked alongside each other. Both of us have secondary social studies teaching experience, but we have completely different pedagogical styles and engagement practices with our students. Surprisingly, this provided an opportunity for students in our class to learn in real time how we negotiated those styles, and what it means to co-teach and navigate decision-making with a partner. Though we have become teacher educators at different institutions, we are still learning from each other by discussing the evolution assignment, as well as sharing student-produced films. We began this experiment as a way to meld our respective research interests, and to learn a little about what pre- and in-service teachers know about the media representations of our practice. Nearly 10 years later, we continue to learn from each other, and our students.

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Appendix A – Films included in courses

"*Dangerous Minds, Dead Poets, and Democratic Education on the Silver Screen," first offered in 2011 by Amy Mungur and Scott Wylie*

- Blackboard Jungle (1955)
- The Breakfast Club (1985)
- Dead Poets Society (1989)
- Dangerous Minds (1995)
- Lean on Me (1989)
- Not One Less (1998)
- Waiting for Superman (2010)

"*Education and schooling in feature film," first offered in 2018 by Amy Mungur*

- Blackboard Jungle (1955)
- Clueless (1995)
- Dead Poets Society (1989)
- Dangerous Minds (1995)
- Freedom Writers (2007)
- Fist Fight (2017)
- Lean on Me (1989)
- Mean Girls (2004)
- Sister Act II (1992)
- School of Rock (2003)
- Stand and Deliver (1988)
- Waiting for Superman (2010)

Appendix B – Digital Media Exploration assignment sheet

For this assignment, students will work with a partner to create a short presentation using digital media (iMovie, Windows Movie Maker, etc.) that depicts their understanding of social studies education. Included within this project will be a "directors' commentary" in which students discuss the choices made in their depictions. The project will consist of three parts: the proposal, the storyboard, and the presentation itself (with directors' commentary).

When planning your film, consider the following:

- What is the central theme you are exploring?
- What images will you include? Are they literal or metaphorical?
- What feelings do you want to invoke in the viewer?
- Why did you choose this topic / approach? How do you justify your decision? What alternative perspectives exist?

Remember the following important guidelines when making your film:

- Filming or using images of actual students and teachers requires release forms and IRB approval, which you **do not** have for this project. For this project you should use images and/or video readily available on the Internet. A Google search for "free stock photos" should provide plenty of results.
- Cite your sources. This is an academic project and should be treated no differently than an essay or research paper. If you are using images from a website, include the title of the image, the name of the website, URL in the credits of your video and in the bibliography of your directors' commentary.

Part 1:   Proposal (*10% of Project Grade*)

Students will schedule a meeting with the instructors to discuss the overall plan for their project. In this meeting, the students will describe their creative vision, the overall message they hope to convey, and the way in which they will go about this in their film.

Part 2:   Storyboard (*30% of Project Grade*)

Students will submit a storyboard that includes the images they will use in their film, along with any music or voiceover that will accompany the pictures. The storyboard is the grand plan or outline of your film. An example of the storyboard is included on the following page. Free templates can be found at http://www.printablepaper.net/category/storyboard

Part 3:   Film Presentation (*30% of Project Grade*) and Directors' Commentary (*30% of Project Grade*)

The presentation should be no longer than 6 minutes and will include a typed transcript of the director's commentary. The film will be shown to the class and will be followed by a Q&A with

the directors. MacBooks equipped with iMovie are available for use in the social studies office and the computer labs have iMacs with iMovie installed. Tutorials and support for iMovie can be found at http://www.apple.com/support/imovie