

## WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM FILMS ABOUT TEACHERS IN THE CLASSROOM?

There have been many American films about teachers. We could begin with the most famous to come out of the 1950s, *The Blackboard Jungle* and end with a recent film, *Freedom Writers*. We might include other such films (in alphabetical order) as *Coach Carter*, *Conrack*, *The Corn is Green*, *Dangerous Minds*, *Dead Poets Society*, *The Emperor's Club*, *Finding Forrester*, *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, *Lean On Me*, *Mona Lisa Smile*, *Mr. Holland's Opus*, *Music of the Heart*, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *Renaissance Man*, *School of Rock*, *Stand and Deliver*, *Teachers*, *To Sir, With Love*, and *Up the Down Staircase*, to name just a few.

This is quite a list; some are exceptional films, others only mediocre. Can these films do more than just entertain us, however? Can we learn anything about what to do in the classroom in order to make us more effective teachers?

I believe that some of the films mentioned above, especially the film, *Freedom Writers*, possess a truth about the art of teaching that can serve as an example for high school teachers who struggle each day against overwhelming odds. I am speaking specifically about teachers in the *public* high schools where daily they battle against overcrowded classrooms, disruptive students, limited supplies, pressure to teach to the test, and the demands of being forced to teach to a cultural hegemony<sup>2</sup>. But there are techniques to be gained from some of these films for teachers in any environment.

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<sup>2</sup> Hegemony—Is defined as the ability of the dominant class to project its own way of seeing the world so that those who are subordinated accept it as *common sense* and *natural*.

In *Freedom Writers*, the scene where the new teacher, Erin Gruwall, meets her class for the first time indicated some of the challenges facing both teacher and students when they come from completely different worlds.

*As our new teacher calls roll, the camera cuts to a student yawning; close up of a student polishing her nails; cut to student sleeping; quick cut to a close up of a student doodling; the scene ends as one student walks out of the classroom without waiting for permission from the teacher. (00:10:00 Freedom Writers)*

The students' attitude in this scene indicated that they believed this was the beginning of another year of boredom in the public school system. At the same moment, Gruwall realized that her fantasy of how she imagined things would progress her first day as a teacher was way off the mark. Most teachers in the public schools have this same epiphany when facing students for the first time. But unlike other first year teachers, the teacher in this film took steps to try to do something about her students' attitude by trying something different. She was stubborn and persistent and we learn the first principle to be gained from this film:

*1. When one thing fails, try something different—again and again.*

The next scene showed the teacher's new approach as she attempted to introduce poetry by the rapper, Tupac Sukor to illustrate internal rhyme. How did she arrive at this idea? Was it a good idea? She was attempting to make some connection to what she *thought* was the schemata of her students, although I'm quite sure that she was not thinking so systematically or using such terminology. Notice that I emphasized the word, *thought*. She had not as yet attempted to learn analytically as much as she could about her students.

New teachers, as they gain experience with their students, through the trial and error approach, learn a great deal about their students. As the years pass, they come to have a fair understanding of the students' schemata and how to connect into it. She was simply doing what every good teacher does, trying something different and trying something that she thought they might find interesting. Give her an A for effort. Hopefully, she wouldn't have to wait twenty years to understand her students.

As she handed out the lyrics of one of Tupac's songs, the students began to recite from memory his poetry. One student said, *Think we don't know about Tupac?* And another one added, *white girl gonna teach us about rap?*

As the teacher protested and tried to explain what she was attempting to do, another of the students—Maria Reyes in real life (As a character, we learn a little about her situation from opening scenes of the film)—said:

*You have no idea what you're doing up there, do you? And then, she delivered the, coup de grace: You ever been a teacher before? She asked. (00:20:51 Freedom Writers)*

The teacher reacted angrily to the student's comment and began to rearrange everyone's seating, breaking up the different groups or cliques, a good idea that she arrived at out of her humiliation at the student's truthful questioning. Another student immediately reacted by saying, *well, there you are. I was wondering when you was gonna lose that damn smile.* What can we learn from this scene?

—2. *There are times when the right strategy will come from the wrong impulse.*

Following this rearrangement of the seats, the teacher had a lucky break. She stumbled upon a caricature that a Hispanic student had drawn to ridicule a specific black

student in the class. The teacher intercepted the cartoon just as the black student saw the drawing of himself with exaggerated, oversized lips.

In her chastisement of the class for passing this note around, she delivered a spur-of-the-moment lecture on the ramifications of the dehumanizing techniques used by the Nazis against Jews that was similar to what was being used to dehumanize blacks that day in her classroom. In the process of the lecture, she used the term, *Holocaust*, later discovering that the students had no idea what the term meant.

—3. *There will be teachable moments occurring every day. Be ready.*

It was Maria again that got to the essence of what the teacher must be able to do in the classroom to be successful. She blurted:

*You don't know nothing; you don't know the pain we feel, you don't know what we got to do. You got no respect for how we got to live. You got us in here teaching us this grammar shit...and then she asked the million dollar question for which every teacher must have an answer: What are we doing in here that makes a God damn difference in my life?*

The teacher did not answer this question at that moment, but a very lively scene ensued with the teacher and class debating the value of respect and out of this discussion the teacher began to learn some of the prejudices the students felt toward whites when another student blurted: *Stop acting like you trying to understand our situation!*

4. —You must be able to answer such essential questions that students think even if they never ask: *What are we doing in here that makes a difference in my life?* We must answer this by explaining how something (1) *makes sense—it “fits” into what students know about the world, and (2) it has meaning—it is relevant to students and explains why they should bother to remember it.*

As the teacher later learned, understanding also must be a two way street. The students need to know and understand the teacher as well: *How do we know you're not a liar standing up there? How do we know you're not a bad person...?* Asked another student.

5. —*Connecting to your students' schemata also means sharing yours. You must find common ground.*

It was at this moment that the teacher learned the extent of her challenge when one of her students raised his hand and asked, *what is the Holocaust?* The teacher asked everyone who knew the answer to raise his or her hand. Only one student in the class raised his. It was at that moment that the challenge Gruwall faced was driven forcefully home.

Unfortunately, it was a lesson many teachers never learn, even those who might spend thirty years in the classroom. The teacher in this film understood that she needed to know everything she could about her students: *Raise your hands if anyone in this classroom has been shot at*, she asked and most of the students raised their hands. She took her first step on the journey to connecting, involving and extending (CIE) her students into the language arts.

The information you might gain about your students will not necessarily be as dramatic as the information gained about the students in this film. But this is, after all, a drama and the outer edges of normalcy usually make for situations to write about that create the most conflict in the minds of filmmakers. For your students, the need to know why and what it will do for them will parallel the teacher in the film's need to know about her students. This will be true at whatever level you happen to be teaching.

All teachers can use the techniques of the CIE. Why then have I over emphasized its importance for the public school teacher? Even though we have a two-tier system of education, the public and the private, the major difference in the two is primarily that the private schools possess the right to screen their students; they are able to reject students who do not fall into a nice, comfortably normal (for their population) bell curve. By so doing, they eliminate many of the problems public school teachers face. There is uniformity in the student body of these schools since most students are being prepared for work and careers in the higher levels of the same social structure from whence they came. The students share many of the same schemata that the teachers possess. They are from the same world and understand each other quite well, which makes the teacher's job much easier. This is not true of the public schools, especially the urban public school.

There are two factors that reinforce the very effective homogeneous values that exist in the private schools. The first is the natural selection process forced upon parents by having to be at least in the upper middle class economically in order to afford most of them. This eliminates students from those families who can't break the economic barrier.

In a very underrated but outstanding series on HBO called *The Wire*, during the fourth year of the series, the story line focused on the influence of the schools on the drug trade and violence in the streets of Baltimore. Students were depicted very much like those in the film *Freedom Writers*: bored, disinterested and uninvolved; the public middle school was unable to make a difference, being barely able to maintain order. One ex-police major who was working in an experimental program came up with the idea of separating the "*stoops from the corners.*" When asked what he meant by these terms, he explained that the *stoops* represented those children who remained on the stoops of their

apartments like they were told and those who, as soon as they were let outside, went to hang around the *corner*, where the drug trade and trouble was prevalent, even though they were told to remain on the stoop. If we could separate the *stoops* from the *corners*, he emphasized, maybe some teaching could go on.

The second factor in reinforcing the homogeneous values is that the few students who are accepted from outside the social class represented by the private schools are selected based upon a process that is skewed to accept only those who appear to be willing to stay on the *stoops*, those willing to adhere to the values of the class represented by the school. Those *corner* kids who slip through the screening process and later become a problem are quickly expelled so as not to disturb the special equilibrium. *Corner* kids in private schools don't last long as rebels or students.

In the public schools there is little or no screening like that which occurs in the private schools. Even when it was attempted as an experimental program in *The Wire*, even though it was successful in connecting to students, it was eventually canceled so that teachers could get back to preparing for standardized tests.

There is a screening of a different kind occurring in the public schools—a sorting and selecting for the menial work in our society. In most of the films about teachers in the classroom, this sorting and selecting is going on, even though the teacher might not realize it; the teacher simply struggles against the establishment. They don't necessarily understand that the system is stacked for a reason and is highly successful at what its designed to do. As Colin Greet notes,

...American public schools in general, and urban public schools in particular, are a highly successful enterprise. Basic to that success is the high degree of academic failure among students. Attitudes and behavior patterns such as tolerance of boredom, learning as memorization,

competition, and hostility are learned and reinforced in the classroom. The schools do the job today that they have always done. They select out individuals for poor opportunities according to a hierarchical schema which runs closely parallel to existing social class patterns. (1972: 152)

In *Freedom Writers*, the established teachers thwart our new teacher at almost every turn. She doesn't understand why they are behaving this way because she believes that her role is to educate her students without regard to the demands of the system or any other consequences. The established teachers' teaching techniques have been incorporated in their minds as the only effective pedagogy for students unwilling to learn. They are just as much victims of hegemony as their students.

Attempting to take advantage of the opening her impromptu discussion of the Holocaust presented to her, Gruwall asked her chairperson for permission to use books about Ann Frank that were sitting on the library shelves collecting dust. The chairperson of her department denied her request because, she was told, her students don't respect books: *they should just be taught to obey.*

Later, when she sought support from the most senior teacher in the department, she was again rejected because the students couldn't understand something as complex as *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Said the teacher sarcastically: *Anne Frank—Rodney King. They're almost interchangeable*, and he demanded that the new teacher stop *...your cheerleading because you're ridiculous!* (00:39:56 *Freedom Writers*)

But Gruwall was stubborn, so she began to ask questions of her students in the guise of a "line game." She asked such things as "How many of you have the new Snoop Dog album? How many of you have seen *Boys in the Hood*? How many of you live in the projects? Know someone who is or has been in Juvenal hall or jail? How many of you have been in jail? How many of you know where to get drugs right now? How many of

you know someone in a gang? ...are gang members?" She realizes that this is not a question she should ask since it is against school policy for students to be in a gang so she apologizes by saying, "I apologize for asking, my badness," and gets a positive reaction from her students for her misuse of their language. She then asks how many have lost a friend to gang violence? As she learns more and more about her students, she began to purchase books and journals using her own money, working at a second, and then a third job, to pay for it.

It was after this first step toward learning about her students that she took another important leap forward. *"Everyone has their own story," she said, "and it's important that every one tell their story..."* She bought journals and required that every student write every day in the book, about their past, the present or the future, songs, poems or whatever. They could decide whether she was to read the journals or not; all she required was they write each day; about themselves, about the world they lived in. If they wished for her to read the journals, they were to place them in a cabinet which she would lock every night.

After a disappointing open house at her school (not one of her students' families visited), she decided to look in the cabinet, unlocked it and found that the entire cabinet was filled with journals. This was a well-designed obligatory scene staged effectively by the filmmakers, but it emphasized her success with her students. It was from these journals that the book and film got its title.

As she read the journals, we saw the dramatizations of the scenes on the screen. From this baby first step with the journals, she took another part-time job to buy more books, deciding on a book that was not on the curriculum, *Durango Street* by Frank

Bonham. To use the book in the classroom and to take her students on a field trip on the weekend to the Holocaust Museum, she then begins another struggle with the establishment.

*There is a system in place based on years of running an educational system; you have to follow that system,”* said an administrator she approached. *“No, I won’t,”* she responded. A very brave response for a first year teacher who had not yet obtained tenure. *“I’m just trying to do my job here. Why would they waste their time showing up when they know we’re wasting our time teaching them? I can’t promise them anything I can’t deliver. It only confirms what they already believe.” (00:58:00 )*

There is a recent movement in the public schools to develop the *private* public school, called the *charter school*. The concept is based upon the private school and has some of the same advantages. They are able to screen public school students for admission, although not so rigidly as the private school. Some of these schools have been successful in raising the test scores of their students (If you wish to call that success), but their philosophy is not much different from the better of the public schools, except that they have smaller classes and non-labor affiliated teachers.

Whether or not you say these schools are still public schools, we should remember that public education began as a way of breaking up the patriarchal structure of the family and then evolved to become a way of preparing the worker for the assembly line. (Ewens, p. 154) We have outsourced much of the assembly lines, but the public schools still are sorting and selecting in order to maintain domination of the class that attends public schools by getting those at this lower end of the economic/social structure to willingly agree to this domination. Reinforcement comes through the consensual social

practices that are "...produced in specific sites such as the church, the stage, the school, the mass media, the political system, and the family" (McLaren, page 173)

When some of the teachers in these films realize this cultural hegemony (they don't see it in those terms; it is simply that the establishment blocks every move they make), they struggled mightily against it and in their own way, have some success in the end.

But, unfortunately, the impact these teachers have on changing the system is minor at best. When successful there comes pressure to move to the university or outside the classroom in other teaching or administrative positions. We are told that at the end of the film, *Freedom Writers*, Erin Gruwall moved to teaching in a university after her year at the public school in Long Beach. It may well be that the book and the film will make a lasting contribution to public education, but it is unfortunate that many teachers like Gruwall who should remain in the classroom are taken out to teach classes in the university system or to go on speaking tours or become administrators. The best way these successful teachers can serve the educational system is to remain in their classroom, touching the lives of students directly. In this way, they serve as a living workshop on successful techniques.

Films about teachers in the classroom:

**Conrack**, Twentieth Century Fox, 1974  
**Crisis at Central High**, HBO Studios, 1981  
**Dangerous Minds**, Hollywood Pictures, 1995  
**Dead Poets Society**, Touchstone Video, 1989  
**Finding Forrester**, Columbia Pictures, 2002  
**Goodbye Mr. Chips**, Warner Studios, 1939  
**Her Twelve Men**, MGM, 1954  
**Lean on Me**, Warner Studios, 1989  
**Mr. Holland's Opus**, Hollywood Pictures, 1996

**Music of the Heart**, Miramax/Walt Disney Home Video, 1999

**October Sky**, Universal Studios, 1999

**Radio**, Sony, 2003

**Small Wonders**, Miramax Home Entertainment, 1996

**Stand and Deliver**, Warner Studios, 1988

**Summer School**, Paramount Studios, 1987

**Teachers**, MGM/UA Studios, 1984

**The Blackboard Jungle**, Turner Home Video, 1955

**The Corn is Green**, Warner Studios, 1979

**The Marva Collins Story**, Made for TV movie, 1981

**The Miracle Worker**, MGM/UA Studios, 1962.

**The Paper Chase**, Twentieth Century Fox, 1973

**The Prime of Miss Jean Brody**, Twentieth Century Fox, 1969

**To Sir with Love**, Columbia/Tri-Star Studios, 1967

**Up the Down Staircase**, Warner Studios, 1967

William L. Ewens, *Becoming Free: The Struggle for Human Development.*”  
Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1984, Page 154

Peter McLaren, *Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of education.* New York: Longman, 1989, page 173