

Effective Teaching: Why Teaching Something Fun Works

Introduction

Deciding what to teach, how to teach, and how to insure learning is a difficult task for any instructor. It is especially difficult, depending on the discipline, to actively engage students in the material. What follows is a set of principles behind and reasons why the use of “something fun”, like pop culture, as a teaching tool works.

This article is meant for use in any discipline. It is attempting to demonstrate the value and uses of pop culture in the classroom. Several of the examples provided throughout this handout are on the use of zombies and the metaphors they represent in movies, TV shows, and books. Inspiration for the use of zombies comes from Daniel Drezner’s book, *Theories of International Politics and Zombies* (9780691147833). However, pop culture in general can be utilized in any discipline. It doesn’t have to be zombies and international relations. It can be teaching physics through superhero movies or inequality through rap lyrics.

Why using “something fun” in the college classroom works

Principle 1: Most importantly, students (most people actually) are more interested when instructors talk about things they can relate to. We may want them to understand the writings of Plato and may even manage the task with typical teaching methods. However, demonstrating how the writings of Plato are still utilized today in varying ways and places will make a more lasting impression. Also, it shows students how to apply the information they learn in class. Students will be more likely to retain the information.

Example: *World War Z* was released in theaters in June 2013. It is a movie adaptation of Max Brooks book *World War Z*. Not only does the movie have the entertainment factor of action and high profile movie stars, it also has the potential as a teachable moment. *World War Z* is about zombies, but it could easily serve as a metaphor for pandemics, natural disasters, nuclear fallout, failed states, war, and emergency preparedness. All of which are topics that, in the event they happened, would have a high impact on students’ lives. A good article on this can be found at: <http://www.politico.com/story/2013/06/what-world-war-z-can-teach-us-about-pandemics-93497.html>

Principle 2: Teaching something fun like zombies and world politics or physics through film allows you to tap into a student’s current knowledge base. One of the best ways to get students to learn is to attach new knowledge to something they already know. Choosing pop culture to achieve this will not only gain student interest, but also provide meaningful learning opportunities.

Example: The majority of students know Facebook. Many of the social movements that occurred during the Arab Spring utilized social media to spread the word and organize. The discussion could begin with how and why students use Facebook, move toward how and why it was used in the Arab Spring, and end with the concept of social movements.

Principle 3: Pop culture provides an opportunity to teach critical thinking skills. Because students have a decent amount of knowledge and understanding of pop culture, it is easier to have them perfect critical thinking skills and strategies than it is with topics that are new.

Example: For the purpose of teaching and practicing critical thinking skills, any form of pop culture (movies, music, news, etc) will do. For example, *The Hunger Games* was a bestselling book in Young Adult literature before it became a blockbuster movie hit. In either medium, *The*

Hunger Games makes statements about society, humanity, government, relationships, poverty, and socioeconomic status. To practice critical thinking skills, for watching the film or reading the book students could establish criteria for analysis, identify the premise, identify the statements made on the real world through the alternative reality presented, question evidence presented to make those statements, and evaluate the effectiveness of the message. This type of activity would work just as well with current events coverage.

Principle 4: Tapping into the “unreality” of pop culture allows students to approach a topic through a lens with less bias and prejudice. They can free their minds of the way society is “supposed” to think about a subject allowing them to be more creative in their thinking and understanding. Once they’ve let go of the constraints of real-world situations and analyzed a topic thoroughly, they can then apply that analysis back to the world in which they live.

Example: Many of the problems the world faces today like population explosion, genocide, war, famine, economic downturn, and so on come with preconceived understandings, prejudices, and notions of what should be done. Beginning the conversation about any of these topics by talking about what society would look like and what would be required of the government after a zombie apocalypse allows students to talk about real world issues in a space of “unreality” before their emotions, culture, biases, and such become engaged. The TV series *The Walking Dead* would be useful because it shows students (allows them to visualize) societal problems and the issues that arise from trying to find solutions. This series can also be utilized to discuss ethical dilemmas because characters are placed in situations that require them to do things they may not like or want to do in order to survive.

Principle 5: Using pop culture to teach concepts demonstrates that pop culture knowledge has value. It teaches students how to read, understand, and interpret the limitless flows of information they are subjected to 24/7. It also helps them identify the implicit meanings in movies, images, news reports, TV shows, and any other medium they interact with on a daily basis. From this skill, rises the opportunity to develop the skills of argumentation not to mention the ability to develop opinions that are not based on what is seen in images, but also on underlying meanings and agendas.

Example: An effective way to bring value to pop cultural literacy is to have students view or read a variety of movie clips, images, articles, and literature. From there, ask students to identify all implicit and explicit messages, analyze the effectiveness of the messages, determine underlying assumptions or logical fallacies, identify their positions, biases, and prejudices, and develop arguments that support or refute the messages. A valuable skill that can be added to this exercise is to ask students to develop and defend arguments that they do not necessarily agree with or believe.

Principle 6: Learning difficult and controversial material can be hard for students. Using pop culture to teach these concepts can lessen student anxiety when it comes to learning them.

Example: There are many difficult and controversial topics that are addressed in pop culture. The “us vs. them” concept is often depicted in movies. *Warm Bodies*, a zombie movie with a storyline that indicates maybe the zombies can be saved, could be used to discuss how an us vs. them mentality can blind people (or a nation, a religion, etc.) to the prejudices and biases that feed hatred. The zombies in *Warm Bodies* could be used as a metaphor for terrorists, a religious group, or a nation like China. Another example is the movie *Zero Dark Thirty*. Although it has a very political message and obvious position, the movie depicts torture and according to some

indicates that torture results in reliable intelligence. Students could watch clips from the film and discuss torture, whether it is ever useful or just, and how the depiction of torture in the movie impacts views of the United States domestically and internationally.

Resources

The following resources are on the use of zombies to teach varying topics. Although they all relate to zombies, they are included to help spark ideas and follow links to other uses of pop culture for teaching purposes.

Berg, Mollie. *Walking Dead Serves as a Metaphor for Reality*, found at: <http://dailytrojan.com/2013/03/31/walking-dead-serves-as-metaphor-for-reality/>.

Center for Disease Control and Prevention, *Zombie Novella*, found at: http://www.cdc.gov/phpr/zombies_novella.htm.

Drezner, Daniel W. *Using Zombie Movies to Teach Politics*, found at: <http://garydavidstratton.com/2011/02/18/using-zombie-films-to-teach-politics-by-daniel-w-drezner/>.

Drezner presentation on TEDx. Video found at: <http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/Metaphor-of-the-Living-Dead-Dan>

Faircloth, Kelly. *Political Scientist Daniel Drezner Tells Us Why American Students Shouldn't Worry About a Zombie Outbreak*, found at: <http://io9.com/5787497/political-scientist-daniel-drezner-tells-us-why-america-shouldnt-worry-about-a-zombie-outbreak>.

Gordon, Samantha. *Zombies Invade College Classrooms, Inspire New Teaching Methods*, found at: http://www.usnewsuniversitydirectory.com/articles/zombies-invade-college-classrooms-inspire-new-teac_12999.aspx#.UecDC43VDh4.

Hendershot, Heather. *Lessons from the Undead: How Film and TV Zombies Teach Us about War*, found at: <http://flowtv.org/2006/01/lessons-from-the-undead-how-film-and-tv-zombies-teach-us-about-war/>.

Kreuter, Nick. *Professor vs. Zombies*, found at: <http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2012/01/25/essay-what-professor-can-learn-playing-all-campus-game>.

Shaw, Christopher. *What Zombie Films can Teach Us about Climate Change*, found at: http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/what_zombie_films_can_teach_us_about_climate_change.

Cool Teachers Guide to Pop Culture in the Classroom, found at: <http://www.onlineuniversities.com/blog/2013/03/cool-teachers-guide-pop-culture-classroom/>

USU Professor: Zombies are a Good Metaphor for Pandemics, found at: <http://usubluestreak.blogspot.com/2012/02/usu-professor-zombies-are-good-metaphor.html>

Society, Science, Survival: Lessons from the Walking Dead, MOOC offered through Canvas found at: <https://www.canvas.net/courses/the-walking-dead>