

Change of plan

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Year 11

As a secondary school teacher of English, I am very conscious of syllabus requirements, including assessment guidelines, and theories influencing syllabus change. Within the Queensland system, the school program also guides my thinking, particularly as my school has a flexible program which caters for individual needs of students and teachers. I enjoy being able to change direction to suit needs and learning styles, without being constrained by a rigid testing procedure or mandatory texts. Flexibility, continuity and some sense of development in processes of thinking using language are critical to my teaching. There needs to be some connection between units of work so learning makes sense for students, also, and there is both an awareness of direction and a keenness to learn more through language. English cannot be about depositing units of content or individual theories in little boxes in the brain and slamming down the lids. For this vignette, for example, I think my objectives are supported by syllabus theories and program guidelines, but more than that, they are motivated by my wanting the kids to feel motivated to learn and to see some relevance in the subject English to what and how they think, to what sort of individuals they are.

My Year 11 English class was scheduled to start a short unit on film and narrative, to complete term 4 work. This was theoretically to be linked with two other ongoing activities:

- writing of a biography of a grandparent, a task covering well over a semester, but with drafting heavily in process at end of term 4 ; and
- juxtaposing visual and verbal text to deepen effective meaning for reader/viewer. (This involved analysis of media publications, choices of own texts, negotiation, writing of verbal text, as well as extension of biography task.)

Changing my plans

Originally I had intended to link the film/narrative study with these activities to maintain continuity of the semester's work, but my assessment of the student attitudes told me that they were dispirited, tired of the focus on biography and needed a change. I needed to create a situation which stimulated a desire to learn, based on fresh interest or curiosity in content. My objectives in studying film and narrative in film were able to be achieved by considering completely different content, so I opted to introduce planned Year 12 thematic focus on violence through the film study. I told the students of the change of plan and the reasons. The film genre was the Western and the films chosen 'High Noon' and 'The Unforgiven'.

We viewed the two films with a clear understanding that they were being considered as examples of the Western as a genre and as films which represented a considerable shift in the treatment of the genre. Also, the films serve as an introduction to the concept of violence in our society and to the ways literature and film portray violence. (This concept of violence as portrayed in text was to be considered in more detail in the second year of the course.) Much of our discussion focussed on the points made by Clark in his text, *Westerns. Making the Man in Fiction and Film*. Specifically, we planned to evaluate the films in terms of the following critical points:

- Portrayal of Western as escapist fantasy, a means of evading urbanised Eastern life
- Marginalised role of women in the films
- Masculinity of the Western and celebration of male body, male adolescence
- Role of violence in “growing up as a man”
- Necrology in the Western
- Behaviour as proof of gender
- Structure of plot in the films, linked with pattern of threat of ‘Other’/aliens/abnormal behaviour

The students’ task

I was also concerned with the development of a critical awareness of the ideologies espoused in the film. To that end I asked the students to focus on a feminist analysis of the film ‘The Unforgiven’, given that their viewing and discussion of ‘High Noon’ had given them a little perspective. Eastwood’s film uses females – whores – to support the plot development, to initiate it, and it seems as if he may be genuinely interested in exploring the female role in the society shown. At the same time, he initially appears to debunk the masculinity of Munny, the would-be hero. Other female and male roles could also be analysed. However, I wanted the students to answer the question: *Is the film soliciting a male or female reader, or perhaps both? Justify your response.* The audience for their response was to be teacher and peers. The response was to be completed in one class lesson and notes were allowed. The students were referred to the Descriptors of Standards for detailed criteria and the following for broad guidelines

- Understanding of task, purpose and audience
- Evidence of opinion supported by structured justification
- Degree of knowledge of appropriate elements of film
- Control of language

The challenge

Within the broad concept of considering the way texts portray violence and may be powerful in influencing social behaviour and embodying mores, I needed to present an opportunity for students to compare two films from two different contexts. This would naturally involve consideration of film technique. However, I did not want to kill interest by too much close analysis of film technique or contexts. I was also interested in making the students more critically aware of the way the film narrative positioned them as readers/viewers. I wanted to expand their interest in, and critical awareness of, types/genres of film. Finally, I needed to cater for a streamed class of 25 supposedly ‘average/sound’ students. This was characterised by distinct groups including:

- a dominant, rather ‘loud’ and egocentric group of males
- a group of about six students with considerable intelligence not shown in results
- a group of rather passive females not prepared to assert themselves
- a few rather sensitive, heckled males
- a couple of outspoken females lacking in knowledge of how to debate effectively.

My strategy

The two films ‘High Noon’ and ‘The Unforgiven’ were to be compared, supported by references in the form of a solid text, articles and media reviews. These films suited my purpose in terms of contexts, the focus on violence and unfamiliar content which could catch the curiosity of the students. In response to my initial explanation of my choices to students, only two students indicated that they had seen ‘The Unforgiven’ and none had seen the older film.

Introduction focussed on brainstorming, specifically, an understanding the Western, aimed at identifying key elements of the genre, particularly plot patterns in narratives and the Americanism of films and novels. This eliminated some misconceptions and indicated general vagueness regarding the Western. However, the critical issue of violence and guns was recognised by all. Group discussion followed on guns, the gun debate in Australia, violence and its influence on viewers. This allowed the students to 'waffle' considerably about violence and films, which they love to do, but it also allowed them to take ownership of the activities to follow in a more definite fashion.

In an information-giving teacher talk, the general context of the '50s in America was discussed as an introduction to 'High Noon'. Links were made with *The Crucible*, Marilyn Monroe era, McCarthyism, etc. (issues/texts to be covered in Year 12) but these were not laboured as students had no background knowledge to draw on.

Students then viewed 'High Noon'. Ten minute commentaries were built in to each viewing session to enable the students to give personal evaluations/criticism and I also highlighted critical aspects of techniques of the film that were clearly worth noting, even given the lack of technology at that time. Emphasis was on the dominance of males, what made a man and violence as depicted in the '50s. My comments were not laboured, as students generally lack appreciation of classic films and find it very difficult to focus on anything that lacks the constant colour, noise, motion, special effects and graphic violence of their usual diet. The viewing and commentary were very much designed to set up an understanding of the patterns of the Western narrative, so transfer and comparison could be established when the second film was viewed. Students then engaged in writing responses to violence, guns and roles of men and women in narrative.

I then introduced students to some of the critical text regarding Westerns (film and novel form) which highlighted more curious aspects of developing genre, such as the number of times men are seen bathing, or being 'reborn' after fights proving masculinity. The students found the concept of necrology fascinating, which was to be expected given the fact that the dominant boys in the class lead the way in finding anything they considered at all 'kinky' fascinating. Key points brought up in the discussion of readings were summarised on the board and students were given time to note these. (This class talks happily all day, but rarely retains very much).

We then started viewing 'The Unforgiven', following initial revision of the Western, given that lessons had by now covered a few days. The tone of the group was quite positive and students were interested in the focus adopted, while apparently able to accept that there was now some relevance to them in the study of violence in Westerns. Importantly, all were recognising that I was pushing them to consider male and female roles, to be more aware of the way directors presented these roles in film. We could deal with the serious, focussed debates about ideology later.

As we viewed Eastwood's film, the students started to make comparative comments of their own accord, as in noting necrology in action when the apparently dead sheriff came to life to attempt to take out Eastwood, or Morgan Freeman (Ned in the film) appeared as a corpse in a coffin on the street as a warning to all comers. This time, I stopped more frequently during the film to consider the similarities and differences, particularly to question students about patterns of narrative: Eastwood parodies the horseman riding tall in the saddle, for example. This film viewing was essentially about allowing the students to make the connections through the juxtaposition of the films. All up, they probably saw both films within five to six days, given weekend and 'other' interruptions.

The students were then given extracts from Clark's text, *Westerns. Making the Man in Fiction and Film*, (mostly those relevant to film) as readings prior to discussion and construction of a

Retrieval Chart to compare the films. Brief reference was also made to the text, *Screen Violence*, to emphasise future directions and stimulate possible research (faint hope). Retrieval Chart construction focussed on key aspects, such as the pattern of violent events in the plot, things that make a man, the roles of women, gun usage, degree of realism of storytelling, position of readers/viewers.

The task given to the students at this stage concerned constructing a feminist analysis of 'The Unforgiven', given context of study. Their writing was preceded by a lengthy lesson in which I supervised a noisy but productive debate between those who saw themselves positioned as "male" readers of the film and those positioned as "female" readers. The final step prior to writing was the modelling in skeleton form of an appropriate structure for the task, formalising debate content and justifications and emphasising the need to *argue* a case appropriately.

Reflection

I was happy with the initiative to use the films to start students thinking and at the same time to make links with ongoing activities. Their work on gender roles in biographical writing and on juxtaposition was able to be consolidated. As well, the different groups in the class were less noticeable. The writing on the set task was the only tangible outcome in relation to the question regarding reader/viewer positioning. However as we continue next year there will be more long term benefits as our work in considering texts portraying/promoting violence continues.