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POSITIONING, SPECTATORSHIP, AND TEEN FILMS: GIVING STUDENTS  
THE POWER FOR EFFECTIVE MEDIA EDUCATION

by

Bradley Moss

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Theatre and Media Arts

Brigham Young University

August 2009

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Bradley Moss

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Bradley Moss in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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## ABSTRACT

### POSITIONING, SPECTATORSHIP, AND TEEN FILMS: GIVING STUDENTS THE POWER FOR EFFECTIVE MEDIA EDUCATION

Bradley Moss

Department of Theatre and Media Arts

Master of Arts

What is the most effective curricular and pedagogical approach to use in increasing media literacy among students? This is the challenge that I and most media educators must address today. This thesis charts my exploration of that question and demonstrates the results of a unit of instruction created to enhance the critical media literacy of students by focusing on positioning theory, spectatorship, and considering teen representation in mass media films.

In creating curriculum, I needed to define the end goal of the instruction. My research led me to critical media literacy and its focus on moving beyond media textual analysis to exploring the power systems and meaning-making of media texts that could increase understanding of the world and oneself. In this research, the critical media literacy objectives were addressed through a focus on teen representations in film. Students viewed and responded to teen representations in a variety of films, and then were placed in the role of media creators to create teen films that showed the teen

experience from their own perspectives. This shift, from media consumer to creator, was designed to help students understand the role and power of media authorship, allowing them to consider how media messages could be constructed and transmitted.

Positioning theory suggests that individuals take certain roles and enact certain storylines in their social interactions with others. In order to achieve my critical media literacy goals, I needed to encourage the students to break from the positioning patterns of a traditional classroom, wherein the instructor holds the knowledge and is the arbiter of media values to the students. This shift was promoted in an effort for the students to gain more autonomy in media production and to develop media reading skills based on their own perspectives and not simply by looking at a text through the instructor's eyes.

The research presented here shows the success and limitations faced in a secondary film class with a shift in curriculum, based on critical media literacy, and pedagogy, based on positioning theory, and allows me as an educator to uncover new ideas that can help me and other media educators meet the changing needs of the subject and students today.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I acknowledge and give thanks for the work of Amy Jensen and Roni Jo Draper who helped me to focus my research and whose suggestions went a long way in creating a solid foundation for this work. The contribution of my students is immeasurable and has helped shape the educational experiences of those who come after them. I thank Jackie Eaton for her critical eye and close reading as copy editor. My deepest appreciation goes to my wife, Shawnda, for what she has taught me about being an educator, and for the love and support that she and my three children have given me throughout this process.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

I have been a film teacher at the secondary level for several years. The film studies program at the high school where I teach has grown remarkably since its introduction nine years ago. What started as a class taught in one section by one teacher has expanded to include three different teachers and hundreds of students a year. In 2009, nearly one-quarter of the graduating class of over 920 had taken a film studies class prior to graduation. The class can be classified as a success on many levels, but the drive that resulted in the class becoming part of the course offerings was one not shaped by the ever-increasing body of media literacy theories and research.

#### *Statement of the Problem*

As I met with parents in conferences regarding their children, I would always state that the film studies class is constructed much the same way that a literature class is structured. We examine texts, explore the creation process, and learn of different lenses that viewers can adopt while watching a film. I stressed that we were striving to find personal reactions to film, and that I hoped students would be able to better understand the filmmaking process and become more enlightened consumers of media. All of that talk seemed to please the parents. At least we are not just watching films in class. But the question I have pondered prior to launching this thesis is: should a media class be structured as a literature class? Is this the most effective approach? As I pondered these questions, I considered and researched the purpose and goals of media literacy education and tried to discern what I could do as a teacher to make this subject one of more lasting import for my students. What do they need and how can I help them attain it? The goals

of nine years ago may not suit the needs of the media-saturated students that walk into my classroom today.

My curriculum in the film class was based on an introductory film analysis course I took in college, and while the content of my class has continually changed (an increased focus on film theories, more project-based instead of written assessments), I have continued to feel that the class is trapped in curriculum and pedagogy that does not adequately prepare students to be the active media producers and consumers they need to be to navigate the new forms and constant stream of media teens are subject to today. Kellner and Share (2005) state, “If education is to be relevant to the problems and challenges of contemporary life, engaged teachers must expand the concept of literacy and develop new curricula and pedagogies” (p. 370). I believe that I am not using this venue, a media education classroom, to better equip students with skills that will aid them in the increasingly technologically based, global economy.

I discovered that I had been participating in what Buckingham (2003b) referred to as top down education, a “conservative” approach, wherein I received knowledge at the university level, which I then passed along to my students. In my classroom, I was the arbiter of knowledge, and possibly without being consciously aware of it, I may have been acting as the arbiter of values with regard to media. This approach could easily have slipped into the model of educator as protector that emerged from Postman (1985) that suggests that the purpose of media education is to protect students from media influence and instruct them in its negative influences. That has never been a component of my classroom, I believe, and I did not intend to make it one. I was careful to not directly state that my views and reactions to media were the benchmark that students would need to

attain, but this may have been covertly suggested, as that is the function of a top down classroom. I did not want to destroy the students' enjoyment of film, but in approaching it through an academic, literary-based eye, that may have been exactly what I was doing.

### *Statement of the Purpose*

One of the problems with the effectiveness of increasing students' media literacy in my film studies class may have been that my educational model, the literature classroom, is one that no longer meets the needs of students in a postmodern world. One of Lyotard's (1984) tenets of postmodernism is the disappearance of grand narratives. These narratives, which provided the structure for modernity and for the educational models that still exist in many classrooms, suggested that consensus could be achieved and that a teacher could provide the needed answers. Lyotard (1984) suggests a growing incredulity towards grand narratives that makes any degree of certainty in a classroom suspect. There is no one proper reading of texts in a postmodern view.

However, even in this postmodern world, education needs to be objectives-based and needs to provide mastery. Edwards (2006) claims that mastery, in suggesting a form of completion, also uncovers an incompleteness that brings incredulity to the idea of mastery. The more understanding is gained, the more students realize that there is more to learn. A one-semester secondary-level film class cannot provide an end point in media education for high school students. As much as I desired that my class would open eyes and create epiphanies, its present form, rooted in a modernist tradition would probably not allow it. Would the change require an adjustment to the curriculum or to the pedagogy?

According to Buckingham (2003b), the reaction to the “conservative” approach to media education, the top down model, was a “progressive” model that empowered students. Teachers should realize that the students may have a greater breadth of knowledge, but may be lacking a depth to that knowledge. Students today interact with media more often than I do as their instructor. In discussing film viewing habits with my class, I have learned that their repeated viewings of texts exceeds my own, and while I had hoped that repeated viewings may bring enlightenment about the text to my students, it has seemingly only allowed them memorization of it. Are they more knowledgeable about media because of their immersion than I am based on my formal education in media structure and analysis? Students may interact with media more, but that does not necessarily mean that they are equipped to guide a “progressive” classroom. Davies (1996) suggests that simply reading media does not require the acquisition of new skills. However, if students are not trained in decoding skills for media, the many and repeated viewings of media will place students in a position where media is constructing their reality. Kellner (1995) also supports the need for strong media education in the current environment stating, “We are immersed from cradle to grave in a media and consumer society and thus it is important to learn how to understand, interpret, and criticize its meanings and messages” (p. xii).

Consumerism was a component that I had not considered while building curriculum for my class. I had acknowledged that my students were voracious consumers of media, but I had not considered how that approach to media would influence them or affect how they heard and received media education in my classroom. Buckingham (2003a) states that media is marketed to youth and they have a consumerist relation to it.

The role of youth as media consumer is an active one that is driven by an increasingly fragmented market and increased interactivity between producer and consumer. This is seen in internet movie message boards, DVD extras, and film parodies on YouTube among other sites. The current dominant education model, according to Buckingham (2003a) is one of passivity. Students do not see education as integral to their identities and concerns, especially in a consumerist society that has destabilized existing patterns of employment, settlement, and social life. Teachers do not have access to the media that are influencing students and do not interact with it in a similar manner. Since I had tried to ignore the current youth media culture, or more accurately had not understood it, my teaching model and classroom content were not impacting students. Buckingham (2003b) has suggested that this growing consumption means media is integral in the everyday lives of teens and is embedded in their social relationships, and as such there is a need for a greater emphasis on media education in schools. In such an environment, it is important for students to understand the construction and impact of media on their lives.

Media education in the United States is less developed than in other nations and there is little support for ideas of instruction in traditional professional development venues. Research exists regarding media literacy education; however, according to Sefton-Green (2006) the research is very focused and qualitative in nature. There are no big answers to the problems of creating and delivering strong media literacy instruction. Nor should there be, I believe. The discussion of postmodernism and the consumer culture suggest that teachers need to assess the temperament and situations of their own students and that media literacy education must be fluid in moving from “conservative” to “progressive” models and in making media education applicable to the lives of the

specific students of the individual classroom. There are plenty of ideas about adding dynamism and relevance to the media classroom, but many may not work with my student base or my current school environment. Additionally, the focus of the class should move beyond simple readings of the text to exploring messages communicated by media representations and the power structures behind media production and consumption. These additional tenets shift the foundation of instruction from media literacy to what has been termed critical media literacy.

### *Research Question*

As a film teacher in a secondary school, I have often considered if my curriculum and classroom approach are the most effective for students in an increasingly media-saturated, postmodern society.

This thesis will track my approach to curriculum development and pedagogical change in one of my media education classrooms in defining clearer critical media literacy goals, engaging students in discussions of reality and representation in media marketed to youth, and leading activities that require students to understand how they position themselves in relation to the media and to other youth as a result of media consumption.

The unit of instruction and delivery of the instruction will be centered on the ideas of critical media literacy, positioning theory, and spectatorship. Since Harré and van Langenhove (1999) suggest that positioning theory was partially influenced by marketing tactics, it could be argued that media can be a component in positioning tactics among aggressive media consumers. Students may gain clues on how to position themselves and the storylines that exist between them and their peers, their parents, and their teachers

from media. We are influenced not only by our previous encounters, but also by our observations of the encounters of others.

Buckingham and Sefton-Green (1994) stated that youth often include themselves and their peers in their stories as a way of defining identities and negotiating friendships. They do the same in media production projects. Teens watch media representations of themselves – produced by adults for economic purposes – participating in the creation of identity. Do these representations affect the process, and, if positioned as a media creator, would films made by students present a different view of their world than one promoted by mass media? Will the students produce media that replicates or rejects the conventions of teen depictions seen in popular media?

This study will examine the experiences of the students and teacher engaged in a unit constructed around the goals of increased critical media literacy by considering how students position themselves in relation to others and media representations of teens.



## Chapter 2

### Review of Literature

#### *Critical Media Literacy*

My first goal in improving the instruction and content in my secondary film classroom was to clarify the educational objectives. If I knew where I wanted to end up, I could better plan how to get there. When exploring media in the classroom, Hobbs (1994) reported that many teachers use media only to teach content or for entertainment purposes not tied to the classroom curriculum. Some teachers who include media in their instruction in a more rigorous, media literacy-based environment, like me, tend to focus on the modes of media production but do not venture much past textual analysis. Often, as mentioned earlier, media instruction stresses that media consumption has a negative influence on the development of student consumers of media (Buckingham, 2003b). All of these approaches made sense to me and I could see elements, no matter how small, of each in my teaching.

As with other means of instruction, media education can become rote, with no real connection or exploration of media and the students. This can be a result of static curriculum and pedagogical methods. Media education cannot exist in its same form year after year. This repetition is too similar to the patterns of how students encounter media outside the classroom. Michaels and Sohmer (2000) suggest that students in current educational models, which could include my film classroom, have become acclimated in the process of accepting and replicating unanalyzed texts with no consideration of the students' experience in the educational environment. This research of Michaels and Sohmer (2000) refers to print as well as non-print texts, and instead of the focus on the

text, the researchers state that education should focus on the enculturation process that can occur in any encounter with a text, and how students accept or resist this process. In my classroom, the focus had been primarily on the text despite my attempts to push the students to understand and articulate their encounters with the film. These discussions and assignments have been safe with many prompts that do not allow the student to fully contemplate their own individual encounter with the text. To achieve this, I needed to create an environment where the students have a better understanding of the fact that media consumption is an active, not a passive process.

Students need to be aware that media encounters are conversations in which they are actively engaged, therefore media education should stress that audiences are participants in and constructors of the meanings of media texts. This meaning should not only focus on the effects of the media, but also in the empowerment that can be granted students through this process of engagement (Sefton-Green, 2006). Media literacy education can bring skills, but it is this idea of empowerment that intrigued me. What specifically is this empowerment and how can it be gained?

The answer is being able to use media as a means to explore society as a whole. While there are many definitions of media literacy, this study will focus on critical media literacy as defined by Kellner and Share (2005, 2007). Beyond the definition of media literacy proposed by Buckingham (2003b), which centers on gaining knowledge in the analysis and construction of media texts, critical media literacy acknowledges that media depictions influence our understanding of the world and themselves. While both media literacy and critical media literacy can promote higher order thinking that can address

several different learning styles, critical media literacy supports the development of skills and competencies for civic engagement, agency, and citizenry (Kellner & Share, 2007).

This curriculum change requires a change in the classroom environment. Before students can become active agents in meaning-making processes, the class must venture away from focusing on the analysis of a text following a traditional pedagogical model: there is one true critical reading of a text, and that reading is the one of the teacher (Buckingham, 2003b). This type of media education and analysis promotes the roles of student and teacher in familiar, accepted, and rigid confines. In this environment, students ignore phenomenal experiences and may position themselves as uninformed consumers and the teacher as the key to unlocking meaning. While students are exploring texts, they are viewing the text through the ideological eyes of the instructor. Analysis along this level can create higher order thinkers, but not individuals that are able to see beyond the texts to critique systems of power and injustice that will aid them in understanding the world around them and succeeding in the new, post-Fordist economies (Gee, 2000).

Leaving the teacher in the role of the arbiter of the quality and messages of the media is also problematic because so few educators have formal training in media education. It can also limit which media are incorporated into the curriculum. Hobbs and Frost (2003) studied a high school where the English department committed to focusing all eleventh grade English education on media literacy. None of the teachers had university training or disciplinary expertise in media arts. As a result, instruction did not focus on media modalities that were most central to the lives of the students: current films, video games, popular music, and the Internet, because teachers had less confidence in instruction in those areas. Teachers were conflicted between a desire to use

contemporary media and wanting to protect students from inappropriate messages. Also, the teachers were hesitant to include production elements since they did not know how to manage these types of projects for an entire class. As a result, the classes focused on reading texts through discussion and written response. While I have had more formal media training than the teachers of the study, I found that I face the same limitations in my classroom.

In the model of critical media literacy suggested by Kellner and Share (2007), teachers become cultural workers involved in citizen education working towards the ultimate goal of revealing the structural and ideological forces that influence everyday life. The idea of critical media literacy is that students use their knowledge of media analysis and construction to become instruments for social communication and change. According to Kellner and Share (2005):

Critical media literacy not only teaches students to learn from media, to resist manipulation, and use media materials in constructive ways, but is also concerned with developing skills that will help create good citizens. (p. 370)

It is a focus that extends beyond the media, and indeed uses the media not as the subject of instruction but as the means to a higher degree of enlightenment. At the heart of this goal is the ability to reveal the structural and ideological forces that influence everyday life and the capacity to act upon them (Giroux, 1983). Of course, while a teacher can function in a media education classroom as a co-learner, current institutional codes rightly require students to accept and acknowledge the teacher as the authority figure in the classroom. In order to frame the ideas of critical media literacy, the classroom can be explored as a microcosm of the structural and ideological rules of society as a whole.

I understood how a shift in focus to critical media literacy can bring more educational heft to my film classroom and give a focus that can engage students on a more personal level, but I was uncomfortable with the idea of changing my role from educator as I have always defined myself to that of a cultural worker guiding students in social understanding. According to research, students can understand the power they can possess as media creators and consumers by embracing a more active role in the media classroom, but how much control can I or should I cede to the students? While I accept the idea of what critical media literacy can accomplish, I was a bit hesitant to wholly accept the changes that a curriculum focused on critical media literacy will require in how I define myself in the classroom. My resistance to this role may have hindered the goals I have in the classroom.

Textual analysis should not be overlooked or minimized in a critical media literacy classroom. The focus of textual analysis will create the foundation needed for production projects in the class. Media education centered on critical media literacy should stress that media texts are not static, but are dynamic in that the interaction with the media can be seen as an exchange. Media, specifically film, can be categorized as language and as such, theories that govern the use of language and its influence on individual and societal development can become the basis for media education. Language only gains meaning as a result of shared experiences and shared information. According to Gee (2000), “All language is ‘implicit’ until listeners and readers fill it out on the basis of the experiences they have had and the information they have gained in prior socioculturally significant interactions with others” (p. 63). Students create meaning in media by interacting with it, and the meaning they create is based on their previous life

experiences and media experiences. Therefore, reading media is an individual process and the teacher cannot have domain over it.

If students consider media viewing as a passive endeavor or rely solely on the teacher's response to the text, they will not progress. Media interactions must be jointly constructed by all participants in order to be meaningful (Barnes, 2004). All participants include the students and teacher. The voices of the class are just as significant in the meaning-making process. Students must comprehend and trust their own reactions to the film. They must also be able to articulate those reactions and consider reactions from others in the classroom. In doing this, I believe that there is a fine line between a teacher modeling personal responses from the film and dictating those responses.

### *Film Production*

Students can be trained in more fully understanding and expanding their individual reactions to a film text, but film production in a classroom environment is another way that media meanings can be jointly constructed. A class that incorporates production and analysis components encourages both critical understanding and active participation, the reading and writing components that lead to increased media literacy (Buckingham, 2003b). Students must be able to move back and forth between action and reflection in order to understand their interactions with the media.

Textual analysis and media production can be added to the curriculum to achieve critical media literacy, but existing social structures of the classroom should also be explored. Teachers may be unwilling to make curriculum changes because they do not have the knowledge they believe they will need to explore viewing and producing media. However, the fact that teachers are less comfortable in instructing students about new

media should be embraced and used as a means of changing pedagogic practices. Kellner and Share (2005) state,

Students and youth are often more media savvy, knowledgeable, and immersed in media culture than their teachers and can contribute to the educational process through sharing their ideas, perceptions, and insights. (p. 373)

Critical media literacy needs to exist in a democratic classroom where students and teachers share power to uncover truths of media representation (Kellner and Share, 2005). This sharing of power in a media classroom can create citizens who are able to question social structures and authority (Tyner, 1998), which is a key component of critical media literacy. Hart (1994) also suggests that serious and systematic exploration of media and media messages in the classroom promotes a spiritual and moral development that will help students examine any text they encounter. The same could be said for instructors, who can increase their abilities in examining and leading students to examine texts by participating in the same practice of skills as the students.

In changing my curriculum, the focus needed to be not only on the ability of students to read and write media texts. To this point in my career, I have defined reading a film text as exploring a personal response to viewing a film based on understanding how individual components (script, camera, design, etc.) and theoretical lenses influence that reaction. Writing media texts is demonstrating an understanding of film elements by using them to create new media texts. But beyond reading and writing, the focus must also be on increasing the students' understanding of the world around them, media representations of it, and their role in influencing those representations through media consumption and production. Kellner and Share (2007) suggest that while a critical media

literacy classroom needs a textual examination base, the goals of understanding and engaging in social engagement and agency must be built around media production.

Production is a difficult component that I have only used to a limited degree in my classroom. There are two main reasons for this: first, it is not possible for me to provide the required equipment for media production to all of the students in my large classroom, and second, the production work that I have given the students has resulted in work that predominantly parodies or copies existing films, so I have considered it unsuccessful in achieving the goals of creation that I had set. Buckingham (2003a) stresses that production can be a concrete way of using media to explore media issues such as representation, but he also cautions that tightly structured projects will not allow this success. Students must be in control, and as such, the teacher should have little control on the form and content of the final product. This student control seems to be crucial in achieving goals of citizenry espoused by critical media literacy, but are they learning anything if the final product is of a poor or derivative quality?

Giroux (1996) suggests that student imitations in the media display student learning as much as creative and individualized work. In a postmodern context, the ability of a student to understand and replicate popular forms can be considered as much a synthesis as using those forms to create original work. Still, I worried that mimicking existing forms and conventions, while safe for the student, will be a hindrance to achieving the lofty goals of critical media literacy.

But should an educator anticipate or worry about the final shape of a production assignment? In a critical media literacy classroom, students must share the responsibility in what is learned and how it will impact them. I feel like I needed to have clear



objectives in assigning a production project so the students knew what was expected and I would have criteria for assessing the work, but student expectations may be different, and the form, content, and quality of a production assignment may not fit my expectations. Grahame (1991) suggests that production work needs input and reaction from students to verify the importance of the work even if the product is not what the educator anticipated:

However open-ended the project, we seem to need strategies which bring academic knowledge back to us in a safe and acceptable form. But by insisting that students must locate their individual accounts within a pre-determined 'objective' framework, we may be putting several important learning outcomes at risk. It may be that only by allowing students to write freely and objectively about their own personal perceptions of the production process can we begin to reconcile our notions of appropriate learning with what they perceive as important to them. (p.121)

I made self-reflection and peer critiques a component of the process in order to achieve my critical media literacy goals. Buckingham (2003b) confirms that reflection and self-assessment are crucial components in the media classroom.

Additionally, Sefton-Green (2006) states that with technological advances, media production, which used to be a community endeavor in the media classroom, has increasingly become individualized. Students can have more success in an individualized process in representing themselves using accepted forms and conventions, but the lack of community cohesiveness may limit a student's understanding of his or her position and relationship to others in the classroom and how media can capture or filter the way we

represent ourselves and others. By requiring students to provide the means for production on their own (using their own cameras and computers for editing) I wanted to avoid the pitfall of not being able to supply production equipment for the entire class, but I would also lose the benefit that can arise from having students work as a small group on production projects in the classroom environment. Group work outside of the classroom may become individualized and lose the benefit of multiple perspectives. Buckingham and Sefton-Green (1994) stress that media are image-makers among youth today and that youth often include themselves and their peers in their stories as a way of defining friendships and negotiating friendships. They also do this in production projects. The idea of image and representation is key to my instruction and to what I hope students respond to. Can it happen with individual work or with parody? Students helped in answering this question.

### *Popular Texts and Teen Films*

Critical media literacy strives for a democratization of the classroom environment and places a significant weight on textual analysis. The selection of media texts to study and analyze is important in building a democratic classroom. When deciding which texts to view in the class, several things must be taken into account. First, what should be the purpose of media education in a secondary classroom? Buckingham (2003b) recounts the historic uses of media in schools. It has predominantly been used as an educational aid, supporting instruction, but not viewed on its own merits. The use of media in many classes is mostly based in high art, literary adaptations, and films depicting historical events. This creates a dichotomy in students that should not exist: students see films outside of the classroom as entertainment and those in class as educational. If there is

media education occurring with high art and literary adaptations in a classroom, students may not be able to make connections between instruction and the types of popular media in which they are most commonly immersed. I have used popular films in my class, to the consternation of some of my colleagues. But, by focusing on popular media that students have categorized as “enjoyable viewing,” an educator can attain both parts of Buckingham’s (2003b) goals in literacy – increasing understanding while maintaining enjoyment. It also creates validity to the class because students see how critical media literacy principles can be utilized in examining mass media, the texts with which they most commonly interact, and not just “art” films.

The use of popular media can also help in making the class less teacher-driven. As I have previously stressed, students must be invested in the media education process or they will only be able to see through the instructor’s eyes once they leave the classroom. Enjoyment of the media should not be discounted or seen as a barrier to understanding media; rather, strong educational outcomes can result from using texts and genres in which students are well versed. Critical thinking skills can emerge from instruction focusing on having students examine their enjoyment and response to reading, viewing, and listening to popular media (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999).

There are possible drawbacks to using popular texts in media instruction, however. First, as mentioned earlier, there may be content concerns with contemporary texts. Teaching at a school in a conservative community means that I must choose texts that will be strong educational tools but that will not offend class members or parents based on sexual content or excessive language. Additionally, in presenting texts that students are familiar with, it is possible that they will not view it in a new context or with fresh

eyes in order to gain the knowledge of media that the text could bring. I also worried that in focusing on popular texts, students would adopt the common approaches and techniques that they are well versed in – shortcuts as it were – to media production that allow students to parrot styles rather than internalize processes and hold them as their own.

The educational unit of this study focused on teen films. While there are many definitions of teen film, the one I used is films that focus on teens' struggles with creating their own identity and that are set in high school locales. Identity and representation of characters in the text and in the audiences are key elements as they will best lend themselves to a critical media literacy approach. Considine (1985) suggests that teens are influenced by the images of teens depicted in mass media:

In looking at the images in these films, it is necessary therefore to consider, not only what we see and are told, but what we do not see and are not told. The adolescent, still in the process of establishing his or her own self-image, may well fall prey to mistaking the screen image for the self he or she is to become. Adolescence itself is a time of role and identity experimentation. Standing in the wings of life, waiting to be cued, the young person may well mistake the cues Hollywood sends...For some adolescents, the film industry's repetitive images and stereotypes offer the opportunity for a pre-packaged identity that subverts the natural emergence of an authentic self. (p. 276)

The setting of films is important as the high school environment creates its own microcosm. Many aspects of teen society are represented in films set in high schools, even in school environments that do not show a depth of economic or racial diversity.

Considine (1985) reports, “The depiction of school on the screen, like the depiction of family, serves as an image of society as a whole” (p. 113). There is an energy to the films set in high schools and a fractured focus that dictates how the story is told. Oftentimes, the films follow several characters or cliques as they function in and out of the school. As such, the films do not always follow the arc of a single protagonist, but rather smaller arcs of numerous individuals or groups. These films align best with the educational goals of creating a democratic classroom, examining messages conveyed by teen depictions, and providing a starting point for media creation.

Additionally, by relying on films that center around the school environment, my class saw a template for films they created on campus during the film class period. The setting became their own rendition of the mass media representations. After examining teen films, the students were tasked with creating their own films that brought voice to their unique teen experiences.

This production of youth media can also help push the students’ voices into a social realm that allows them to engage in the world around them, the final goal of critical media literacy. The need for these voices is crucial. According to Giroux (1996):

Youth as a complex, shifting, and contradictory category is rarely narrated in the dominant public sphere through the diverse voices of the young. . . they are simply restricted from speaking in those spheres where public conversation shapes social policy and refused power to make knowledge consequential with respect to their own individual and collective needs. (p. 307)

Therefore, teen films, and by extension the new media realms that they influence may be an ideal venue for building curriculum that supports critical media literacy education.

However, as a teacher in a conservative community, I am limited in the teen films that I have available in order to watch and analyze in my class. By extension, the films they made would not be able to be peer reviewed if they contained objectionable content. This was a primary challenge in building a unit centered on viewing and creating teen film texts.

There are tremendous benefits to a teen film focus that hopefully will outweigh the concerns. By sharing power in the classroom and exploring how teens are depicted in popular media, students may uncover how media influence their previous knowledge and interactions with others. Returning to the discussion of film viewing as conversation, the understandings held by participants in a conversation are influenced by previous experiences. Do the students see popular media as a means of developing our previous experiences? Are the interactions teens have with other teens influenced by conceptions that have been created in viewing teens in mass media? These explorations – how media representations influence the perceptions of teens and their peers, how media depictions influence unmediated conversations, and how students react to teen depictions in media – in this study will be guided by the tenets of positioning theory and film spectatorship.

### *Positioning Theory*

For this action research study, two different theories will be utilized: positioning theory and ideas of spectatorship. Positioning theory focuses on human interaction and explores how these interactions are used to create storylines that make words and actions meaningful. Harré and van Langenhove (1991) suggested that rather than fulfilling roles, which could be viewed as static, participants in conversation and interaction engage in a dynamic interplay wherein positions are assumed and assigned. This theory is important

to explore because, as noted earlier, the interactions between teacher and students in a critical media literacy environment must be dynamic. Static, traditional roles may not be the most effective in the classroom. Harré and van Langenhove (1999) state:

Positioning can be understood as a discursive construction of personal stories that make a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts and within which the members of a conversation have specific locations. (p. 16)

The three aspects to be considered in any interaction are position, action, and storyline. This triad influences the dynamics of the current interaction and will carry to future interactions of the parties involved.

Harré and van Langenhove (1999) state that the first component to consider in interaction is the position, or the rights and duties that dictate the actions that can or cannot be performed by a person. These positions are both self-defined and placed on us by others. Brinkmann (2007) uses the example of the teacher who holds a position of someone with the duty to arrange situations that will help students learn and develop. Students, traditionally, have duties to learn and respect the educational institution. My students tend to enter the classroom with ideas of what rules will dictate their actions in my class. The desks are in rows. I stand at the front. Their years of public education have trained them that I have knowledge and they are to listen to me share it with them and then repeat it back on a final assessment. This is a blanket, and slightly cynical statement, but it helps define an initial hurdle I faced in increasing critical media literacy in a large class.

The second component of positioning theory, according to Harré and van Langenhove (1999) is the storylines, or social episodes that develop as a result of people

acting from their specific positions. These storylines were an important component of my research, as it helped provide a context to my students in understanding how films and education affect them. Individuals may not be able to determine or clearly define their positions, but may be able to understand position better if they can explore the storylines that drive their relationships. In terms of teens, these storylines can include interactions with teachers and other students. My research explored the concept of storylines as presented in teen representations in film and discussed how those storylines influenced the actions or positions of teens. Do films provide templates for storylines that are mirrored by teen audiences, and if so, do teens recognize this influence?

Harré and van Langenhove (1999) state that the third component of positioning theory is the act: a significant action that is given meaning as a part of an unfolding storyline. Did changes to my curriculum and pedagogy alter the storyline and acts of my students? While the production assignment of this unit of study was a significant component of instruction, the discussions and writings of the students are the acts that receive meaning in the changing or static storylines that occur in my classroom.

Once an interaction has commenced, initial positions can be accepted or challenged, and these reactions influence the storyline and social force of the encounter. In many classrooms, the teacher positions him or herself as the authority figure and students as lacking power and knowledge. Students can accept or reject this positioning, though the teacher may not be aware of a student's compliance or defiance. Students position themselves in relation to their peers, teachers, and families based on their perceptions of themselves and those around them. The storylines of the students are built based on these interactions, and past interactions affect those in the future. These



storylines can be crucial in developing an awareness of self, or an identity. These storylines can also develop between students and the film texts that they encounter.

As Brinkmann (2007) suggests, it is easy to see how each of these components functions in a traditional classroom. I am unaware of how exactly I position my students and myself in the film classroom. I have been very cautious to not proclaim my opinions to films that are enjoyed by my students, as I do not want them to see their opinions as wrong. This would work contrary to what I want to accomplish in the classroom. But through my instruction, am I developing a storyline where the goal of the class is to respond in a way that is a true representation of the feelings of students or to respond in a way that the students believe will please me?

Positioning theory focuses most predominantly on social interaction of individuals, but it can also be applied to the interactions between a reader and a text. Among the origins of positioning theory discussed by Harré and van Langenhove (1999) is the field of marketing, which strives to use communication strategies in determining the proper place for a product among its competitors. Enciso (2001) argues that social positioning develops as a result of our previous interactions, and that images, stories, and other accumulated daily experiences also contribute. Among these accumulated experiences, one can consider interactions with many different media texts. Texts can be examined in positioning theory as they are built with semantic constructs that can position a reader into a storyline which can influence actions. Therefore, positioning theory can apply to relationships that exist between teacher and students, also making students aware of interactions that they have outside the classroom and how media consumption may influence those interactions.

Ellsworth (1997) carries this idea into the realm of film by using the term *address*. The idea behind address is that a filmmaker creates a work for an imagined audience and creates codes and cues pointed to that person. In an attempt to limit a viewer's wandering interest and hold his or her attention, constructions are made, and often these touch on power, gender, and racial relations. Even though the audience is absent at the time of the creation of the film, and the filmmaker is absent during the viewing, a social interaction is occurring that fits the positioning theory mold. This idea also aligns with critical media literacy as it can allow students to determine the power structures behind the creation of a film. Can students see beyond the text itself to understand that the film is a mode for interaction with its creator? And conversely, when students take control of the production process, how do they position the absent audience? The film itself, and the creation process of the film, can be explored as a storyline, following the tenets of positioning theory. Activities and instruction can help students understand how film can influence their non-mediated storylines.

### *Spectatorship*

Since students will be studying media representations, it is important to consider spectatorship as a component of the unit of study. While the unit of instruction will not specifically educate students about the theories of spectatorship, the idea of students positioning themselves with regard to a text, and how a text positions spectators, shares many commonalities with spectatorship. For this study, examining the theories of spectatorship and positioning theory side by side can be beneficial, as positioning theory evolved from social constructivism and education whereas spectatorship emerged from media studies. The theories of spectatorship focus on the relationship of the viewer and

the text and the process of a viewer in making sense of the components of a film. The major focus of this study was analyzing whether or not students could recognize the power held by filmmakers and audiences in a media experience, and debate what impact filmmakers have on the perceptions of groups shown on screen in the eyes of those that view those representations. These questions are central to the exploration of spectatorship.

Teen films often overtly focus thematically on the development of identity and awareness in teen characters. The students in my classes are often going through the same process. Development socially, intellectually, and emotionally is tied to the teen years, but it can also be tied to spectatorship. Spectatorship, in its earliest form, was based on explorations of how audiences decoded cinematic messages. Metz (1974) examined the semiotics of film viewership and the process that a viewer goes through in interacting with a text. The film text is managed by systems, like language, and people learn how to understand filmic images and ideas as they do language. The decoding was not tied to specific film texts, but to understanding how the understanding of film in general happens. Metz suggested this process is innate – a position also held by later theorists.

The field of spectatorship expanded when linked to psychoanalysis and the belief that viewing a film was a passive process that allowed the spectator to return to an imaginary state and being susceptible to the invisible manipulations of the text. Lacan's psychoanalytic theories of development formed a basis that film theorists used to build ideas of the role of spectators in film and spectatorship. McGowan and Kunkle (2004) stated, "Lacan provided film studies with a way of making sense of film's appeal.

Specifically, Lacan's insights into the process of identification allowed film theorists to see why film was effective in involving spectators in its narrative" (p. xi).

Lacan (1977) defined the mirror stage as the stage of development that happens at about six to eighteen months of age when a child misrecognizes herself in the mirror. This mirror stage links the imaginary and symbolic realms. In the mirror stage, an infant sees the fragmentary image in the mirror, and the misrecognition is formed because the infant creates a connection with the image and believes she has control over her body that she, in reality, does not have. This belief in power builds the ego and returns the infant to the pleasurable imaginary state. The steps of Lacanian development can be connected to film viewing as the process that a spectator engages in while watching a film replicates the shift between the imaginary and symbolic worlds. The passivity of the viewer and the structure of classic Hollywood film language combine to convince the viewer that he or she is a part of the cinematic world and while in the pleasurable imaginary state, will not be aware of the values communicated by the film text.

The initial foundations of Lacanian-influenced spectatorship (Metz, 1982; Baudry, 1985) tied the ideas of Lacan to ideology and argued that a power of influence existed in filmic images, but were flawed when considering the possible individual reactions to film that could happen. This approach suggests that viewers are subjected to the meaning systems of the film and that all viewers could receive the same ideological meaning from films, regardless of cultural background. In Lacanian psychoanalytic film theories, the spectator was always passive and subject to the meaning systems of the film. Although the psychoanalytic model remains important within academic film studies, its

assumptions have been challenged by several theoretical positions that pose alternative ways of thinking about the film spectator.

As stated earlier, positioning theory is a dynamic and fluid belief system where parties continually assess and assign meaning. Can the same dynamism be at play in viewing film? My students might erroneously suggest that they are merely passive subjects, as they enter the film studies class stressing that, in most cases, movies are just for fun or are a social structure that allows them to be together with peers. Some have argued that they receive the same cinematic messages as their peers.

The Lacanian approach does not coincide with critical media literacy and its focus in uncovering the power systems that influence meaning-making. However, if students could approach films in the same exploratory manner in which they consciously and unconsciously test the world around them in their teen years of development, a greater degree of meaning-making could result. Anderson (1996) conjectured that making sense of film is significantly the same as making sense of the real world; the same perceptual and conceptual systems are engaged in both realms. If this is the case, the skill sets that high school-aged students use to navigate the world around them could be focused on dissecting film messages and meanings to great success. Additionally, students could consider how media representations of teens may have influenced their perspectives and choices in creating identities for themselves and those around them.

Later development of spectatorship theories placed more power on the part of the spectator in meaning making. These more active models support the need to critically examine film, and look beyond the text itself at the motivations of the film creators. One of the most influential theorist in spectatorship studies, Mulvey (1989), stressed that

female spectators may be denied access to the patriarchal language of film. According to Mulvey, the filmmaker perpetuates the ideas of women as an object of the male gaze in film creation through the representation of gender by a patriarchal power structure.

Though Mulvey's ideas, like Lacan, are less effective if one considers that a film audience is not homogenous in terms of gender, culture, or identity, her theories moved film analysis and spectatorship into a realm where theorists considered not universal effects of film, but how sub-groups of audiences may perceive or react to film images.

Diawara (1993) promoted a more active role for film viewers suggesting that audiences could resist the dominant readings of African-American images in a film and understanding their intent. Audiences could create opposing perspectives while viewing the text. Mulvey and Diawara proposed that films promote a worldview of the film text that can influence the viewers if the viewers are not consciously aware of the messages communicated. I will extend these theories to the teen culture, which is varied based on economics, locale, ethnic background, and education among other things, but can be seen as a viewing block in a similar manner as the female and African-American viewers that Mulvey and Diawara wrote of. Teens function as audience and must determine how they will respond to images and representations created by non-teen filmmakers.

Students in my class did not fully understand spectatorship – it was not an explicit component of my unit of instruction – and did not necessarily see mass media as a means of promoting cultural stereotypes and certain kinds of social identities. But, students were encouraged to determine how they responded to components of film centered on the teen experience. As students who have grown up enmeshed in film and television, they have become adept in assimilating screen images in their own way. Kintsch (1998) suggested

that a film spectator taps into concepts located within a person's long-term memory to integrate film information into coherent scenes, so, obviously, our personal experiences impact our media experiences. However, Kintsch (1998) continues by stating that once a spectator creates coherence from media, he or she begins to draw implications from it. The long-term memory bank we access to create a context for media is influenced not only by our non-mediated experiences, but also by our interactions with media. It could be argued that a teen's experience in high school is influenced by how the student measured the experience in relation to his or her understanding of the teen years or the high school experience based on media representations encountered earlier in life. Additionally, interactions that students have with other teens in a school environment and the storylines they create in the course of those interactions may have been influenced by media representations of specific character "types" promoted by media depicting teens.

By focusing on teen film as the central texts of this unit, students will be able to consider the representations of characters and activities on the screen in relation to their own experiences. Mass media depicting teens are almost exclusively not made by teens, so the media creator is outside the culture and is therefore not an authority on the portrayal. Considine (1985) stated, "In the case of the cinema of adolescence, the images revealed distort our vision of young people" (p. 275). However, these portrayals are often accepted as authentic and can influence the perceptions of the viewers. Students should be able to speak from their own experiences about teen depictions in films.

The intersection of critical media literacy, positioning theory, and spectatorship centers on engagement, fluidity, and an examination of interactions between individuals, but also between an individual and a text. These three theories give a foundation that

could allow secondary film students to consider the representation of teens in film and the power that the students could hold in accepting or rejecting those representations when placed in the position of media creators.



## Chapter 3

### Methods and Procedures

#### *Methodology*

For this study, I will be examining the results of my modified film class content and pedagogy. The new curriculum content and mode of instruction delivery was based on critical media literacy, positioning theory, and spectatorship. The method used in this study was action research, which is an approach used often by educators to examine issues or problems they face, especially in their individual classrooms.

I have chosen an action research approach to the study because the central focus of my research is to examine my own practices. Cresswell (2008) suggests that when action researchers engage in a study, they are interested in examining their own practices rather than studying someone else's processes. However, it is important to note that I am not the only stakeholder in this research question. Of equal concern and participation are my students. The action research approach also takes the reflections, ideas, and contributions of these participants into account as well.

Kemmis and McTaggart (2003) chart the history of action research before arriving at a definition of the approach. Action research is an idea attributed to Kurt Lewin, who conducted research in the 1930s in community action programs in the United States. While Lewin's work is widely regarded as the basis of the action research mode, many different fields developed ideas about the meaning and approach of action research, and through the late nineties, the definitions and modes of action research were quite eclectic. In determining how best action research in an educational field can be defined today, Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) report that it is qualitative research conducted by a

teacher, wherein interpretive modes of inquiry and data collection allow the educator to make improvements to his or her own practices. It is important to note that action research is not successful if it exists solely in the realms of theory. The impact of the results of this mode of research is a result of action and reflection on the part of the teacher-researcher. While this thesis has presented a number of theories, they were theories used to build the basis of the action that drives this project, namely the instruction within the classroom.

It is also interesting to note the commonalities that exist between the action research mode and the goals of critical media literacy. Berg (2007) defines action research as a process of collective research based on reflections and empowerment. Since action research has a strong tie to social activism, emancipation is also a component of the definition. While at first I shied away from including emancipation in my definition of action research because it seemed at odds with my goals of the research as an educator, I believe that the transparency that existed in the research – my students understood the research goals and were aware of their contributions to this project – gave the students an understanding that they had a say in how we examined the central research question. Just as a goal of critical media literacy is examining the power structures behind media and giving students deeper analysis skills that allow them to progress beyond a simple functional literacy of media, action research gives equal power and say to all of the collective stakeholders in the research and can allow them to see how their actions and reflections influence the data. The means of research in this study tie specifically to the desired results of the classroom.

The action research approach is a research method that exists without a specific beginning or end to the research model. The work that existed prior to this thesis and the continuing questions and research that continues after the completion of this project are also components of the action research process. Theorists agree that the research cycle for action research is cyclical, but many have different terms for each individual component of that cycle. Stringer (1999) creates a spiral made up of steps termed look, think, and act. Each of these points pushes forward, but can also lead back to a new way of looking, thinking, or acting. Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) lay out the steps of the spiral as planning a change, acting and observing the process, reflecting on the consequences, re-planning, act and observe again, and the cycle simply continues. Mills (2000) identified a similar four-step process for an action research project. The process includes first, the action of defining an area of focus on the part of the researcher and then second, engaging in self-reflection and creating an action guide for the research.

This thesis represents a complete cycle of action research. The planning stages were a result of my graduate studies, and, as my knowledge of current media literacy trends increased, so did the dissatisfaction with the curriculum I had in my film studies classroom. I realized that there was a need for change in what I was doing. But this recognition would not have been enough if there were no actions to carry it along. I have been an educator who frequently tried to adjust what I taught and how I taught, always looking for better means and methods. However, I never consciously made a plan of approach to tackle the perceived inadequacies in my classroom, nor had I formally observed and reflected on the results of my actions. All good teachers observe and think,

but they may not participate in action research if they do not continue on to plan, act, and reflect.

There are many approaches I could have taken in my film class, either implementing ideas tried elsewhere or creating my own approach. Kitchen & Stevens (2003) state that before educator researchers make changes, they must assess what they are doing presently; identifying an issue and then, documenting and reflecting on their current actions to revise future actions. I first asked myself if my current classroom was creating more literate media consumers and producers. Defining and narrowing the field is an important step in action research, and while I was examining the impact of instruction based on three predominant theories – positioning theory, spectatorship, and critical media literacy – I was able to make connections between the three that allowed my unit of instruction to have a basis that connected all of the theories by focusing on teen representations in film. This unit was a means to guide my actions.

Mills (2000) stressed that once a researcher has an action plan, he or she can engage in data collection. For me, the planning stages included the creation of the data collection instruments – as they were, for the most part, the daily assessments in my unit of study. Mills (2000) also encourages action researchers to use multiple sources in the gathering of data hence my reliance on student work, focus group interviews, class discussions, and self-reflection as part of the research. This research approach is qualitative, so the data exists as written and verbal responses as part of a reflection on ideas brought forth in instruction. Another key component was the creation of media projects. Descriptions of the projects and student responses to their own creations and those of their peers were also examined as another data source.

After data collection, the action researcher engages in analysis and interpretation of the information. A key necessity of the analysis stage, according to Stringer (1999) is to ensure that the accounts of the action are created collaboratively. While care was made to include several sources of data collection in the research, the analysis needed equal care to reflect the perceptions of all stakeholders in the study. For data analysis, all data sources were examined and coded by me to find common responses and outliers from students and me as the instructor. To complete the cycle of action research, this step of analysis uncovered recommended action that can lead to defining an area of focus for a new approach to the research.

An important step in the process of action research stressed by Berg (2007) and Cresswell (2008) is that results of action research should be shared with the study participants. The timeframe of the research process did not allow me as the researcher to share results with class members who participated in this research. The conclusion of the unit marked the conclusion of the class, and students no longer met together. Additionally, by the time data collection, coding, and analysis was completed, the school year had concluded. I did share interview transcripts with focus group members, but this sharing of raw data was the extent of including additional stakeholders in the results. My experience in this researcher process has allowed me to understand the timeline better, and I am confident that I will be better prepared to get results to other shareholders in a timelier manner for future research projects.

While action research is important for the researcher and other stakeholders, it can also contribute to broader educational discussions even though the research is focused on a specific problem of the researcher. The research poses new questions that may be

tackled by the initial researcher or spur thoughts and planning of other educators. Action research is effective for individuals, but in order to impact a wider base and be a force of empowerment, the results need to be shared. While my desire to adjust my instruction to improve critical media literacy is a research problem that affects my classroom, the results of this study may also interest other educators looking to establish or modify media education classes in their own schools. Buckingham (2003b) states that the current state of media education is one of exploration and one of several questions about which methods or content will be the most effective in an increasingly media-saturated, post-modern society. The field of media education, it seems, is ideally suited to the action research approach.

### *Self-Reflection*

At any point of the action research cycle or spiral, it is important to consider the role and impact of self-reflection. Self-reflection is important in creating an action plan for research, but it can also be a valuable tool in the collection and analysis of data. While it is important to include self-reflection in the data collection stage of action research, it is also important to note that self-reflection is but one of several sources of data to be considered in this study. As a researcher, I kept journals documenting my reaction to the unit of study and the actions and reactions of students in the class. These journals were considered with other data, but the narrative that they formed was used to support the words and work of the student and was not the central framework of data analysis. It is important to note the difference; some might suggest a blurring difference between action research and self-study. In both, the teacher functions as researcher, and often times, the research focuses on the researchers' own practices. And, as each step of the process

compels thought in the researcher, it is easy to see how the researcher and educator can become central to the research. But, if the narrative of the analysis focuses on the researcher, the methodology shifts from action research to self-study (Feldman, Paugh & Mills, 2007). These researchers acknowledge an overlap that can exist between action research and self-study, but state that the three factors that can pull research into self-study are a) bringing the importance of self, on the part of the researcher, to the forefront, b) making the experience of the researcher a component of the data collection, and c) a critical view of the researcher and educator and his or her role in driving the study. The included research does include my experiences as the educator/researcher as a component of the data collection in the form of journals that I maintained during the course of study. However, as the method of research for this thesis is action research, special attention was paid in making sure the data presented from journals of the researcher does not overshadow the experiences of the students as part of this study.

### *Context and Participation*

I have created a unit of study based on my research, presented earlier, regarding the theories and writings on critical media literacy, positioning theory, and film spectatorship. The unit focused on viewing teen depictions in film, discussing the history of teen films, debating theories of spectatorship, and determining how teens position themselves with regard to teen representations in film. This unit of instruction, with the accompanying notes and supplemental materials, is included in Appendix A. The research was conducted at a large suburban high school in Utah with a largely homogenous student make-up with regards to ethnic, socio-economic, and religious background. The homogeneity may influence the results of the research, especially with

regard to how students position themselves against media representations. The make-up of the class, and the school, does not allow for deep examination of teen lives different from those of the majority of the school. As a result, the types of media shown and discussed for this unit were selected to best fit the class demographics.

I teach six sections of Film Studies each academic year – three sections per semester. Data collection for this thesis was limited to one of my three film analysis classes taught during fall semester of 2008, but the unit of instruction created for this research was delivered in all three classes. The collection and analysis of student work occurred in one section, but I created journals regarding my experiences and insights about the effect of the instruction in all three classes.

The unit of study focusing on critical media literacy and teen film was delivered in the final four weeks of a twenty-week Film Studies course. Data collection began in December 2008, and concluded in January 2009. The unit concluded with students being asked to create teen films that represented their own reality and then responding to films created by their peers. The central question for the unit was: how do teen depictions influence their perceptions of self and other and how do these perceptions influence their interactions with other teens, parents, or teachers?

#### *Data Collection*

During the unit of instruction, all students in the class responded to daily writing prompts (see Appendix B). Each prompt was tied to the educational objectives of each unit, but also assessed the students' response to the material and instruction style of the unit of study. Students who chose to opt out of the study still completed daily writing assignments for a grade in the class, but their writing was not considered during data



analysis. The unit concluded with a production project where students created teen films that they felt represented their own reality and compared those films to mass media teen films. Descriptions of these films and the written response to the films are included in this study. The research procedures for this study were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Brigham Young University.

All students in the class had the opportunity to opt in or out of participation in a focus group. Interviews were conducted with the focus group members to determine their responses to the unit of instruction outside of formal assignments and discussions with me as their instructor. More than six students expressed an interest to be a part of the focus group, so the members of the group were determined by assigning a number to each student who wished to participate in the focus group, and then having the random number generator at the Web site [random.org](http://random.org) generate a list of six numbers. The students who coincided with these numbers, three females and three males, were asked to be part of the focus group discussions. The focus group included three juniors and three seniors. Participants in the focus group received extra credit for the additional out-of-class time required.

Data collection for the focus group included audio recordings of group discussions with the students prior to the start of the unit of study and at the conclusion of the class. The pre-assessment discussion focused on having the students explore their understandings of film reality, the influence of media on teen perceptions of themselves and other teens, and how the instruction and instructor to this point in the class had affected their perceptions of film. Amy Cowin, another film instructor at the research high school and a former administrator, conducted this discussion. Focus group

discussions were guided by a list of topics provided by me to Ms. Cowin. The pre-assessment questions are included in Appendix C. The pre-instruction discussion did not follow a rigid line of questioning, but rather, Ms. Cowin had the authority to veer from the listed topics to ask questions that would provide greater depth or follow lines of discussions proposed by the students.

At the conclusion of the unit of study, the focus group, again led by Ms. Cowin, gathered together to discuss their response to the class, the projects, and the unit. The post-instruction focus group was designed to focus on the ability of students to vocalize the results of the instruction and its influence on their understanding of film or the understanding they have of students in the class. These questions are included in Appendix D. As with the pre-instruction focus group, students were asked to discuss their response to the class and the instructor as a whole. In an effort to determine the success of the curriculum and instruction in achieving a higher degree of critical media literacy, many questions focused on the students' response to their own and their peers' films. Did working with other students or viewing their films give the students any greater understanding of their classmates? Again, Ms. Cowin had discussion prompts but was free to depart from the "script" to explore ideas developed by students in the group.

I also tracked my thoughts and reactions to the unit of study in a written format. My journal entries focused on my response to the content and delivery of instruction with the unit. By design, the class that was the focus of this study was the third class in which I taught this unit during the fall semester, so the journal focused on my perceptions of how other students and classes responded to instruction and how I modified my original plans based on the response of earlier classes to the lesson. The modifications done to the

instruction were minor, and the lesson plans included in Appendix A are an accurate representation of the instruction delivered to all three classes during the research period.

### *Data Analysis*

The research presented in this thesis is qualitative in nature. The analysis of qualitative action research requires coding the data, examining the data for themes, foundations, and contrasts and presenting the data in a written format. However, as a researcher, it falls to me to determine which data are important and which can create a narrative that engages other readers and educators and can lead them to examine their own practices.

When approaching the data for this research, I first examined and coded the transcripts of the focus group interviews, finding themes tied to pre- and post-assessment from the standpoint of students participating in the instruction. I also coded the transcript of the final discussion in the class, which focused on self and peer evaluation of the film production project in the class. My hope in looking to these data first was to define the expectations and statements of accomplishment of the students so that data from the daily assignments could be used to create a narrative from the perspective of the students – where did the class start, where did they end, and what path did they take to get to that point? Of course, the conclusions and journeys of each of the students varied and a clear narrative was problematic. So, I chose to resist the act of pre-planning the presentation and analysis of data, and instead begin writing around key responses from students that I had coded.

Richardson (2005) embraced the idea that a key component of the presentation of qualitative research is the act of writing. Whereas the sociohistorical approach stresses

that a researcher must know what he or she wants to write before the writing process begins, Richardson (2005) stressed that the writing process is one of exploration, of self and of the data, that can uncover narratives that, while problematic in the fact that results are not-clear cut, give a more accurate representation of the variety of voices and ideas contained in qualitative research.

After I had examined and coded the data from student work and discussions, I revisited my journal entries to code them and find out how my views were or were not indicative of the students' experiences. In the analysis of the data, I initially focused on where coding of data from my work aligned with coding of data from student work. However, the narrative that could have been formed from these alignments would have not been indicative of the experiences of the teacher and students. I avoided a simplified narrative. The postmodern environment suggests that all theories and methods should be open to inquiry and not accepted as definitive. Language, including the language of writing, is influenced by individuality and does not hold universal meaning. Richardson (2005) suggests that an understanding of postmodernism supports two important ideas to be considered by qualitative researchers, "First, it directs us to understand ourselves reflexively as persons writing from particular positions at specific times. Second, it frees us from trying to write a single text in which everything is said at once to everyone" (pg. 962). I had no clear answers, and the data analysis mirrors my process as an educator to make sense of the data analysis process.

Therefore, the presentation and analysis of the data of this study follows a pattern similar to the action research cycle. The evolution of the following chapters allowed me, as the researcher, to debate the effectiveness of the unit, the instruction, and how this

experience would change me as an educator. And these debates were driven by an evaluation and re-evaluation of student responses. The narratives that have come forth in the data presentation represent the voices and ideas that strike me as an educator as the best representation of the varied voices of the stakeholders in this process and those that may have the biggest impact on other educators who look to this research in an effort to examine and change their own practices.

More detail about the data coding and analysis process is included in the introduction to the next chapter.

## Chapter 4

### Presentation of Data

#### *Introduction*

This chapter will focus on presenting the data collected for this study. The study examined the experiences of students and the instructor during a four-week unit focused on critical media literacy. The data are in the form of written and verbal responses from the students during the course of the unit of instruction as well as my observations collected in a journal while I was teaching this unit. The data were reviewed and coded to find recurring themes and ideas presented by the students and instructors. During the coding process, special care was taken to examine responses that tied to the main focuses of the unit, including how students position themselves with regard to the instructor, their peers, and media depictions of teens, and the ability of students to uncover media messages and the reasons driving media creation of texts marketed to teens.

The students had written response assignments nearly every day during the course of the unit, and in the process of coding, I realized that the major themes that emerged were tied to three key events during the course of instruction: a) creating a Truth in Teen Films Pact, b) responding to teen films viewed in and out of class, and c) the filming and screening of original teen films that served as the culmination to the unit. These three components comprise the main subheadings of this chapter.

The first days of instruction were centered on teaching students about genre conventions and the history of teen film. Once this foundation had been laid, the students were asked to consider which aspects of teen genre conventions they felt should be embraced and which should be excluded to accurately communicate the teen experience

in film. This assignment was termed the Truth in Teen Films Pact, and the results of the lists and processes are included in this chapter. After determining which types of stories and depictions they thought would work best for them as audiences and filmmakers, the students watched and responded to teen depictions. Finally, the students were given cameras and asked to create films that allowed audiences to see the teen experience from their perspectives.

While several of the students' comments outside of these significant assignments added insight to the experience of the students, these major assessments most clearly helped to create a narrative about the experiences of the students during the four weeks of the unit. These assignments also provided a variety of student viewpoints that added dimension to the data representing the experience of the class as a whole. Adding to these dimensions were my comments as instructor, looking at the lesson structure and my perception of what the students shared and how they shared it.

The chapter is bookended with comments of the focus group students prior to and at the conclusion of the unit of study. The comments of the focus group participants are tied to their pseudonyms (Ann, Megan, Shane, David, Sarah, and Michael). Names or pseudonyms were not used for comments included in this chapter by class members who were not part of the focus group.

The students in the focus group presented an adequate cross section of the class as a whole. Ann was a very vocal student who participated in the class discussions and was first to volunteer. Megan was quiet in class, though her writing reflected a solid grasp of the material. She became quite vocal in expressing herself in the focus group discussions. Michael was a student who loved production elements and did what he

needed to for the analysis sections of class. Shane had a taste for independent film and was often very public in his rejection of more mainstream media. David struck me as a student aware of his popularity, and as such, he was very cautious in expressing opinions. Sarah was the quiet student who struggled a bit with the work load and did not really connect with others in the class.

### *The Focus Group Pre-Assessment Discussion*

I spent 16 weeks with this group of film students prior to delivering the unit of instruction and collecting data for this thesis. Prior to the unit created for this study, each unit of study focused on introducing the students to a specific element of filmmaking and introducing a critical lens. During this time, the students gained an analytic base in understanding film. The focus of the class was on allowing the students to form and defend opinions of film, and giving them the terminology and critical lenses that would better allow them to state and explain their opinions. These were basic objectives that I felt I was able to measure based on the written assessments. The papers they wrote for class demonstrated the improving abilities to formulate their reactions to film. The writing assignments had been very specific in asking questions about critical responses to film, but still, the exploration had happened and grew in depth and perspective.

However, in the pre-assessment focus group interview, the students did not articulate their critical or analytic knowledge of film that had been gained in the previous four months. The focus group knew they were participating in research, and in discussing their film experience with a third party, their focus was on film elements rather than on their experiences and understanding in analyzing larger meanings in filmic texts. The



focus group chose to show off their film knowledge by concentrating on the functional literacy they had gained.

Buckingham (2003b) defines functional media literacy as an ability to make sense of a media text or gaining simple proficiency in media-related skills such as how to operate a camera. I will use a modified approach in defining functional media literacy for this thesis. My definition is being able to recognize the components of a media text but not using that knowledge to evaluate the text as a whole, looking for the intended or received messages of the text. This definition could be analogous to a student learning phonics and letters but not being able to see how the individual components can work together in a number of ways to create a legion of different meanings. Moving beyond functional literacy into critical literacy requires one to examine a media text from the perspective of the author and the audience.

In the first four months of instruction, my students learned the tools of the film author (the use of design, camera, story structure, etc.) and the individual meanings that those tools can convey, but can they piece together these meanings to see a whole?

The focus group interviews would suggest that this is an area that they are still lacking in. Or, it is a skill that they do not put much value into. The students in the focus group focused almost exclusively on the filmmaking elements that had been part of the previous instruction, demonstrating their functional media literacy. During the pre-assessment focus group interview, when asked if the class had changed the way she looked at film, Ann responded:

I still look for story. Just mostly the same thing. Nothing's changed about how I view a film. But I do pay attention to the stuff I've learned. It's interesting to, like,

see. And [Mr. Moss] also, like, helped us pick out hidden things in films that you might see, and I always look for that.

But, when Ann mentions the “hidden things” she is not referring to meanings or intents of the author per se, or the power structures behind the creation of film and perpetuation of media representations. Instead, she is speaking of the meaning behind specific camera angles or design choices made in film. She is stressing her functional media literacy skills. This is seen when another student in the focus group, Shane, backs up her comment by stating, “Whenever I watch a movie now, I’ll be like, ah, there’s a triangle. It’s a dynamic figure in this film. I don’t know. Just little things like that.”

As I examined what the students were saying, and how they were saying it, I realized that the tools embraced by the students in their responses were those that I had given them. My desire was to give them the tools to assess the effectiveness of a media text, but it appeared that they did not use the tools in any way other than those I had modeled in class. They did not seem to “make it their own.” Michael demonstrated his attained knowledge by stating, “I just feel like I pay more attention to camera angles now. Seeing, like, how they reflect imagery and stuff. Like, if it’s below the guy that makes him more powerful or something.” The students parroted what I had told them regarding the use of camera angles, design choices, and plot structure. In learning common denotations of film language, they felt like all answers regarding film analysis had been opened to them. They were not basing their reactions to a film on my judgments and opinions, which I consciously try to avoid sharing with the class, but they were repeating the readings of the tools that I had given to them. As such, my instruction seemed to embrace Lacanian psychoanalysis, suggesting one reading for all audiences.

The unit of instruction that is the basis of this study was built around critical and analytical foundations and does not have a functional literacy element – we were not discussing any clear filmmaking element. The students did not have a concrete measure for film understanding which may have affected their confidence in what they have “gained.”

It is interesting to note that in a moment of self-assessment during the first focus group interview, students clung to the means of content knowledge that was easiest to explain – those of functional media literacy. One of the concerns in building a film class rooted in the goals of critical media literacy is determining how students will demonstrate or share their knowledge or skill base. This is a matter of assessment that is a hurdle for any expansion of media literacy education. It is easier to assess functional literacy and easier for students to feel that they can demonstrate their knowledge. When examining media messages and power structures, there is no one right response, just a process. And how does an instructor judge the use of that process?

And, do students believe they have learned at all? My journal entry prior to the start of research for this thesis, with no knowledge of the responses of students in the pre-assessment focus group stated:

They are confident in their inability to be influenced by film. I have a failsafe argument, usually, which is giving them a movie quote quiz. If they can retain lines of dialogue from a movie, is it not possible that they retain ideas, messages, behaviors, perceptions, or styles from films? They do not want to make that leap. I stopped myself today because I almost veered into the “media is bad” trope. In discussing impact, it is easy to go negative, or dictate what media images make

the students think or do. The students think I am a bit cynical. They agree that they spend their money, but they see themselves as too sophisticated to succumb to media messages. I don't know what makes them think that. I teach that generally, high angle shots belittle the subject and low angle shows give the subject power. There are no rules like that in critical media literacy. But where to go when I don't want to push or dictate, but students deny the power?

Obviously, my concerns about how to approach the content of this unit existed even as I embarked on the instruction. And, seeing how my students attached themselves to clear-cut meanings of functional literacy, it was a well-founded concern.

Students who feel that they have gained media literacy by looking through the eyes of their instructor will not have the skills they need to analyze texts based on their own experiences and understandings outside the classroom, and the educational time has been in vain. One component of this research is allowing students to feel confident enough to position themselves as experts in media and not necessarily subservient to the knowledge base of the instructor, or as reliant on the instructor as an arbiter of taste and quality. As such, I wanted to gauge how students position themselves with regard to the instructor's values and opinions with regard to film.

This is an area that I am very cautious about. Every week, I ask my students to share in a discussion their responses to films they have seen outside of class. One week, a student mentioned that he had seen a movie and thought it was terrible. I agreed with his assessment and went further pointing out other weaknesses in the film – but the weaknesses were based mostly on my own judgments, not any quantifiable “mistakes” on the part of the filmmakers. Another student had seen the same film and refused to state

his opinion about the film after I had given my negative critique in class. My assumption was that he had liked it but was afraid to say so after I had publicly pointed out the problems with the film.

In exploring how students position themselves with regard to my ideas and opinions about film, the students in the focus group were asked to explain how they felt their views of film aligned with those of the instructor. One student, Ann, stated, “I think that we have similar views of film because we agree on a lot of films – like what’s good and what’s bad.” It is unclear whether the similarities in views existed prior to instruction in the class or were a result of that instruction. Of more concern to me because of the possible hurdle it creates in bringing a greater degree of shared power in the classroom was a comment by Megan. She responded to Ann’s previous comment by stating, “But at the same time, we don’t have like the same education as him so he might, like, take things different than we do.” I was glad she declared a degree of independence in her views, and that she connected a greater degree of understanding with education, but I was worried that she, and other students, would always see themselves as subservient to my greater analytic ability.

The autonomy of the students in analysis will help them have the skills they need to examine media when they leave the classroom without looking through my eyes. But if the students stay connected to their functional literacy, this dependence will continue because I have given them the meanings of many of the film elements that they now hold so dearly. In my journal I write, “What will happen when I put cameras in their hands? They understand film. They respond to film, but reacting to film is not the same as creation. I am anxious to see their unique visions.” Watching film was easy; responding

could have led me as the instructor to hear what I wanted to hear. Filmmaking from their own perspectives would prove to be a challenge – one that their previous instruction may not have prepared them for.

### *Taking a Critical Role*

*Truth in Teen Film Pacts.* The first lessons in the unit of instruction focused on introducing ideas of genre and genre formulas that exist in Hollywood film. For these lessons, I did function as a traditional instructor, passing along my mode of defining generic conventions in general and with regard to teen films. The key elements of genre, according to the instruction, were icons (items and symbols), archetypes (recurring characters), rituals (significant events), and types of stories. The class examined the history of teen film to theorize where these formulaic elements came from and why certain ones continued to exist while others came in and out of popularity. Students saw the history and evolution of teen film through my eyes based on the writings of primarily Shary (2002) and Considine (1985). However, once I had given the students this foundation, I put into their hands the power to accept or reject these elements and start thinking from the viewpoint of a filmmaker and a critical audience member – one that needed to consider the validity of the filmic portrayal of his or her daily life.

In order to position the students into the role of more active media consumers and more active drivers of classroom instruction, I gave them an assignment to create what I termed the Truth in Teen Film Pact. The class divided themselves into groups of three and each group was given a poster and markers to create a list of elements that they believed should or should not be included in films that depict teens. For this list, they could accept or reject the generic conventions that we discussed in class, or could

examine character types, events, relationships, design elements or stories that they felt they would adhere to if they were to function as filmmakers and were asked to bring their own unique vision or perspective to the film medium. Students chose their own groups for this assignment and my anticipation was that they might decide to work with others who had similar ideas or reactions to teen films.

The students were instructed to take on the role of potential media creators while completing this assignment, but this list was also a basis for responding to teen films in class. The list gave the class a means to determine the validity of a film depicting the teen experience based not on my rules, but rather based on criteria that they themselves had created. It was important that, for this assignment, I gave them no specific guidance and made no judgments about what they created or the process that they took in making the list. It was a means of leading the students to trust looking through their own eyes. I listened to their discussions, watched what they created, but did not support or negate their choices.

*Contradictions and commonalities.* The results of the lists were interesting, mainly due to the contradictions that existed between the groups. None of the lists specifically supported or rejected the teen generic conventions we discussed in class, using terms that I gave them. Instead, they created their own terminologies. One list stressed that films needed less, what they termed “drama.” They saw the Hollywood depictions of teens as contrived in their efforts to build a traditionally-structured storyline. Two other groups noted that teen films specifically needed “drama” in order to be effective. All three groups used the same term, but viewed it as both a positive and a negative, as something to be both embraced and rejected. One of the most poignant

comments with regard to how the students viewed the “drama” in teen films was simply, “don’t glamorize.” The students didn’t clarify beyond that phrase, but it was the statement that occupied the center of their poster, visually taking the anchor position for all of their other comments. The simple, two-word phrase communicated a lot of power for me as the students declared a need for more straight-forward and complicated teen depictions, as it was surrounded by comments such as “Beauty shouldn’t determine personality,” and a desire for more real “arguments” and “friendships.”

Other direct oppositions existed as well, especially with regard to cliques. All but two posters mentioned cliques. One poster decried the existence of cliques in teen films – “life isn’t dictated by your clique” – whereas another poster wrote “CLIQUE” in all capitals, seeming to stress their importance. Comments regarding cliques suggested students wanted to see more “group jumpers” – students who functioned outside of classifications – and “isolated cliques with many that are not part of cliques.” One group suggested that “teens don’t fit into only one stereotype.” Again, the feeling seemed to be that these teens, as filmmakers, did not want simple labels or classifications placed on them, even those who stated that films should be more clique-driven. The group that was most direct in stating that teen films should show “cliques with more power” also included the term “realistic friendships” on their poster.

Many students suggested that the sphere of teen existence needed to expand in teen films and move beyond the halls of the high school. Two groups mentioned that families need to be more present in films stating there should be more emphasis on “influence of home on life.” Another group wrote that teachers should not be “just stupid



or mean.” These groups viewed the roles of adults in current teen film as antagonistic – a role that these students would not accept for their pact.

*The process and critical media literacy.* At the root of the discussions and debates that happened in the groups as they built their pacts was the purpose of teen film. It was exciting to listen to them come to terms with what a film should do and how it should do it. One of the key ideas that emerged in this discussion was the principle of reality in film. Were teen films created by Hollywood obligated to show, as accurately as possible, what teen life is like? Or, rather, did audiences and filmmakers have an unspoken agreement that what they see on screen is for entertainment only? Were there dangers in how teens were presented, or did teens just accept the film as fantasy? These were questions that helped solidify many critical media literacy objectives, but that would not have been effective if I had brought them into formal instruction. The students may have just been gauging what I wanted to hear about the role of reality in teen film instead of grappling with the ideas on their own.

While the lists themselves suggested the thought processes that were employed during this activity, a more accurate indication came from the focus group in their closing interview. During this discussion, the students were asked about creating the Truth in Teen Films Pacts. Shane remarked that filmmakers have no responsibility for accurately presenting the teen experience, “‘cause they make it for entertainment. If they actually made it real, no one would want to go see it. They would be, like, if I want to see reality, I would just live my life.” Michael followed up this comment by saying, “It would be like seeing a home video.” Both of these students urged a more realistic and complicated portrayal of teen life in their pacts. Ann concurred with these comments but did not

necessarily condone the belief that teen film must be unrealistic, stating, “Nothing’s really that realistic in a teen film. It’s more just, like, funny – like things that would make teens laugh rather than how their life really is.” These students idealized what teen films could do while making the pacts, but their views changed after producing their films. They did not see the narrative power that could exist in their own, unique existences.

One other group was direct in their beliefs, writing on their pact, “no documentaries.” The students indirectly suggested that filmmakers have the power of what people would see and how they formed opinions about what it meant to be a teen today. The students, as actual teens, did not trust that the realistic representation of their lives would interest anyone. One poster included the phrase “reality is boring so it should stay that way.” So even when students did want realism in the filmic representations, they saw their own reality as boring. This is a belief that was mentioned later in the unit and a hurdle that I did not specifically anticipate needing to overcome during the unit of instruction. How does a teacher build pride in a student’s own unique experience and vision? I can accomplish this in my theatre classes, but was not successful in bringing that component into the film classroom. It may have influenced the types of films that the students made once they had cameras in their hands – a rejection of personal view in order to follow existing conventions. While no students completely embraced the prevailing teen portrayals in their Truth in Teen Films Pact – every group found a long list of things that they would change in teen films if they had the power – but most every student embraced the standard generic conventions as filmmakers. This will be discussed in more depth in the Production section of this chapter.

In the class period before the students created their pacts, I ask about some of the limitations of adhering to generic conventions. When they did not respond, I asked how many of them developed ideas of what high school would be like before becoming a sophomore based on media representations of the experience. Most raised their hands. When I followed up asking if high school met their expectations, not a single student stated that media depictions had prepared them for what it was really like. While completing the pact in class, the students were instructed to examine what worked or did not work for them with regard to teen depictions in mass media. It seems that the students who stressed that teen films did not have to be based in reality and the film medium as a whole was for entertainment and not enlightenment or learning about the human experience, had forgotten the ideas shared in the previous class period. But while teens may be able to discount what they see as not representative of their lives, younger or older audiences may develop unfair or inaccurate ideas about what it is like to be a teen today based on what they see. Only a couple of groups considered this important influencing power of teen media depictions. A member of a group that truly tried to change how teens are shown on film got frustrated at the rest of the class, suggesting that other groups were not taking the assignment seriously because they focused only on what the students wanted to see and not considering what other audiences may take from media representations. It was interesting to note the students who went beyond their own perspective and commented on the power that teen depictions can have in influencing the perceptions of non-teens. In the final focus group discussion, Sarah said, "People are like, oh, if you are going to watch this movie, don't let your dad see it. He'll never let you go hang out with your friends. And it's just like, yeah, right. That's not even how it

happens.” When the realm of stakeholders expanded beyond simply the students in the group, there seemed to be more of a desire to find elements for the pact that would allow non-teens to see a more accurate representation of what is important to teens.

The process of watching the creation of the pacts caused me to make a significant adjustment to the unit of instruction. At the completion of the assignment, I had planned to have all of the groups post their pacts, and then we as a class would consolidate all of the lists into one master list that everyone in the class would agree on. In planning this step, I did not anticipate the contradictions that would exist. I asked the students to post the lists and share a couple of elements from them with the class. In my journal, I wrote, “There is not a lot of unity or commonality to the Truth in Teen Films Pacts. As they display their individual pacts, I determine not to create one for the class as it would become too contradictory and confusing.” If the class were to create a compromise, the elements that they had such passion for would be lost and the end result would be neutralized and homogenized to the point that their individual voices would be lost. What would remain would be something similar to the current teen film conventions. While it may have been an interesting activity to show how individuality and a unique vision can be lost as more people become involved in dictating where a film will go, that was not the goal of the lesson. I decided that each individual pact would remain and the groups that created the pacts would be the groups who would work together in the film production assignment. The students were ones that they were comfortable with and they had discussed the purpose and goals of teen film, so that was a plus. But they were also groups that did not force individuals to work with students they would not immediately choose; students who may have different backgrounds, values, or beliefs.

### *Response to Viewing Teen Films*

*Rebel without a Cause*. As part of the unit of instruction, the class suggested movies to view and watched and discussed clips from several different teen films, but the centerpiece of the unit in terms of teen film viewing was the 1955 Nicholas Ray film, *Rebel without a Cause*. There were a number of reasons I chose this film as the full-length teen feature we would watch in class, and the selection of this film had positive and negative impacts with regard to increasing the students' critical media literacy.

Since the unit of instruction explored the birth and development of teen film, I decided that viewing *Rebel* would allow the students to see an important early teen film, one that influenced many of the generic conventions that they still see today in films depicting teens. So, it was a historically important film. Also, I wanted the students to have a fresh experience with whichever film we were watching in class. I did not want them to carry with them biases and reactions to films viewed previously that would affect how the students positioned themselves with regard to the teen experience shown in the text. As teens are the target audience for many teen films, most contemporary teen films are familiar to the students. Additionally, I teach in a conservative community, and I needed to find a teen film that did not include content that might offend some students or parents. So, I needed to find a film that fulfilled all of these criteria, but still would offer an experience that would impact the students to consider their own reactions to the characters and situations in the film.

When researching teen film, I read up on *Rebel without a Cause* and Nicholas Ray. Several authors stress the impact that the film can have, even on contemporary audiences. Andrew (2004) stated that young people today can still be affected by the

impact of *Rebel without a Cause* because it addresses the heart-breaking elements of human existence including anxiety, uncertainty, and loneliness. Ray was a unique filmmaker who worked in the height of the Hollywood studio system, and demonstrated the expected approaches of the time including shooting on soundstages and pushing material towards melodramatic emotion, but also attempted to find a degree of realism in the performances and dialogue of the film.

However, bringing a film from an earlier time period in film history, and one that veered towards melodrama, led to a degree of distancing among the students. A college professor of mine suggested that the film might have been too operatic for today's audiences. In my journal, while watching the students viewing the film and laughing at moments designed to have an emotional impact for younger audiences, I wrote:

The performances of the film were more of a hurdle than I anticipated. I have been exposed to more performative modes and examples in film than they have been. The only exposure to films decades old that some of these students have had was in this and other classes. We watched *Singin' in the Rain* earlier in the semester, and the acting style is accepted as being broader because it is a musical. Even with the surprised responses from the class with regard to the moments of overdone emotion or performance, the students were able to articulate their strong reactions and position themselves with regard to the depictions that existed on screen.

At the conclusion of the film, the initial reactions of some of the students are driven by anger and frustration, while some students have a very favorable reaction to the film. Most of the students who complained about the film centered their frustration on the

character of Judy. Her objectives are not as clear as Jim's, or Buzz's gang, or even Plato.

In my journal, I write:

They question Judy a lot. Why does she connect with Jim on the day her boyfriend dies? This hurdle is a big one in having them buy into the new family Judy and Jim build. Natalie Wood's weepy, bitchy, loving character confuses them and by extension confuses Jim because they don't know what he sees in her.

Judy's actions cloud so much of the film, which may have been a result of how the students perceived how the character was written or acted. But it gave the students a strong point to build their filmmaking decisions on; I asked them what about Judy's depiction would they avoid as filmmakers? How would they approach a similar character in terms of scripting, casting, or directing to make her more sympathetic to an audience? They have ideas including, "she just broke into tears all of the time – she shouldn't have done that" and "she can't fall for Jim that night." Their responses show that they are thinking as filmmakers and considering future audiences for their films.

*Defining effective teen films.* This discussion led to asking the students to defend which teen films showed a more accurate depiction of teen life, especially in terms of what the teens want and the relationships they have and build – two things that I think *Rebel without a Cause* is effective in portraying. I ask them to take the lead in selecting appropriate media and I position myself as a student, claiming that they best understand the functions of contemporary teens. The titles that the class supported the most were *Juno*, *Superbad*, *The Breakfast Club*, and *Mean Girls*. Students instructed me in how the relationships, objectives, and obstacles experienced by the characters in these films tied into their own daily lives. For example, one student liked *Superbad* because he felt teen

life was “trying to make it through school and finding out what is going to happen next,” and another student remarked that *Mean Girls* works because what teens are trying to do is “find themselves.” The comments that arose centered on the need to fit in, the driving objective of Cady in *Mean Girls*, or the need to not stand out, which is crucial at times for Juno. As I listened, I recognized that they could have made the same comments about Jim in *Rebel*, but it is obvious that *Rebel* is not their film and Nicholas Ray is not their filmmaker. One student suggested that Juno was a better teen film because it was “sloppy.” It did not feel as manufactured to this student as *Rebel without a Cause* did therefore it was more real. The ending is unexpected, the relationships change, and, most importantly to this student, the parents function as both villain and savior for Juno.

A key component of positioning theory is the creation of storylines. The students in my class created storylines based on the age of *Rebel* and the style of filmmaking. The storyline dictated a distance between the students and the film that many were unwilling or unable to overlook. The students may be more willing to create storylines that show connection with films that belong to their generation and star performers that they feel are part of their generation. In trying to position my students as equal stakeholders and having valuable media knowledge, allowing them to suggest more viable texts was essential. But, did granting them the power to suggest alternate texts completely shut down their ability to consider and appreciate *Rebel* as a seminal teen film?

*Positioning against teen media representations.* My belief was that the students left our post-viewing discussion of *Rebel without a Cause* with a low opinion of the film, especially when compared to more sterling examples of contemporary teen film that they brought in as illustrations. However, an interesting shift happened as the students came in



to test on the film in the next class period. Their opinions of the film, when writing about it on their tests, increased from the vocal dismissals many had given it at the conclusion of viewing. The comments were more balanced and strove to find strong qualities within the film. I don't know if the shift was a result of more time to consider the film, or the result of thoughts stirred up in comparing the film to more recent teen films.

Additionally, all students had to respond to a question I created and may have led them to consider the film and characters the way that I did, and their responses simply demonstrate that bias. Whatever spurred the change, it was interesting to see more depth in the feedback from students. To paraphrase the writings of one of the students, *Rebel without a Cause* contained realistic and compelling relationships and situations, but the execution "was a bit cheesy."

The test asked the students to specifically focus on Jim's relationship with his parents, the depiction of Buzz as the villain, and the truth behind Jim's objectives in the film. These questions were designed to challenge students to consider how they would position themselves in relation to these iconic representations.

When discussing the representation of parents and the relationship that Jim has with his parents, most students recognized a realistic foundation, but remarked that the filmmaker pushed things a bit too much. One student wrote that the teens in the film "see their parents as a joke, upset since they feel they have no one to look up to." Students, for the most part, connected with the generational conflict that existed. Many defended the truthful depiction of the tension between Jim and his parents with comments such as "in real life teens don't like their parents," or by focusing on the attempts of Jim's father to create a connection on student wrote, "a lot of teens have one parent they can talk to and

one they can't." However, the students believed that when the conflict grows overt, when the violence and yelling comes to the surface, the film becomes too much. One student's test declared, "There is one circumstance that bothered me. Most teens don't go as far as to almost choke their authorities." In my journal, I note, "They see the story elements (generational conflict) and the acting style as completely overdone. Perhaps their generational conflicts are more subdued, they avoid overt conflict, or they have been raised to see generational conflicts in a different light." They do not see the same storylines played out between Jim and his parents that they may perceive being played out in their own lives. I theorized that busy schedules and electronic communication is building distance between these teens and their parents, a distance that does not remove conflict, but changes how that conflict is expressed. In my journal, I continued, "what if they have learned generational conflict from the movies and the current films show absent parents, so narrated conflict is the norm rather than argument on display." Teens in films seem to discuss their conflicts with parents rather than let the audience see firsthand. Is it possible that the students positioned themselves and created storylines about generational conflict based on what they have seen in the media rather than what they recollect from their own experiences?

Not all students saw the teen and parent conflict as accurate. One student wrote, "Because I have a great relationship with my parents, I have a hard time seeing why everyone else can't." What struck me most about this comment is the limited scope that the student declared about teen experiences. Because he functioned a certain way, he assumed others did the same. Since his stance was different than many media representations, his views could bring a new twist on a relationship many teens think they

understand – similar to how *Juno* presented relationships between teen and parents. Unfortunately, the limitations of the production component of this unit precluded him from exploring a relationship of this sort that exists outside the school environment. A couple of other students stated that the relationship in *Rebel* was real because parents just don't understand teens. However, when given an opportunity to create media that will help parents understand them better, the students often choose to simply replicate conventions that parents have seen and that have created positioning and storylines that teens are not comfortable with.

When discussing Buzz, the students yearned for a more conventional villain. In the Truth in Teen Film Pacts, several groups rejected the easy classification and simplification of teen characters. These groups desired complexity in teen characters. Yet, it is interesting to note, that nearly all of the students did not like how Buzz was shown in the film. Buzz is a character who appears first as a bully, menacing Jim outside the observatory and engaging him in a knife fight. However, at the bluff, Buzz shows his respect for Jim and talks directly to him about the expectations he has to fulfill. Buzz and Jim connect for a moment before an accident at the bluff results in Buzz's death. Students wrote that they wished Jim and Buzz hadn't been so "buddy-buddy" in the film, that Buzz had stayed as a villain and had not built a relationship with Jim. More students, however, wished that Jim and Buzz could be friends and that Buzz had not died. For example, one student wrote, "I would change why they started fighting, but leave the part where they become friends." Another student wrote, "I would change that they never played chickie and that when they talked, they decided to call it off, then they would be friends." Either Buzz needed to stay a villain, or he could have become a heroic and

likeable figure, but that would mean he could not have senselessly died. In both cases, the complexity of the character and relationship that the students wanted in theory was rejected by many of them in practice.

It is unclear if students wanted Jim and Buzz to be friends for the sake of being able to better understand Buzz or because it meant that Jim had achieved his key objective in the film – fitting in, defining himself, and finding acceptance with someone. The last essay question on the test asked students to validate or reject Jim’s central drive in the film. The test references Jim’s line, “If I had one day when I didn’t have to be all confused and I didn’t have to feel that I was ashamed of everything. If I felt that I belonged someplace. You know?” and asks if the desire expressed by Jim is still an objective of teens today. Nearly every student who answered this question confirmed that the desire for identity and inclusion are key components of the teen years. One student wrote, “So many teens fear failure and feel like they don’t belong.” Another student echoed these thoughts, stating, “There is no stronger goal for teens than inclusion.” In terms of character drives and thematic elements, the students seemed to find a connection with *Rebel without a Cause*.

I tried to be very careful in the phrasing of the question so I didn’t endorse the idea that the objective of Jim was the same as teens today. Instead, I wanted students to determine if what Jim wanted, as a fictional character from 1955, aligned in any way with what they, as real individuals over 50 years later, wanted. The feelings of the class showed a degree of introspection and poignancy. One student wrote, “A lot of times, kids give up a little of who they truly are just to fit in because they have such a strong desire to be included.” Another student suggested that all teens wanted was for society to accept

them as they are and not shut them out for being themselves. The student's use of the generalized term "society" made it unclear whether she was considering other teens or adults, families and friends or strangers who may make judgments about them. But the process of making sense of the film seemed, with this question, to mirror the process of making sense of the world around them – a key tenet that the unit strove for in terms of spectatorship. One last student tied the relationship of Jim and his parents to the ideas of inclusion by writing, "Teens just need a home, a place to belong." Judging by the discussions and test responses, the students were grappling with the ideas of critical media literacy as they re-examined their initial reactions and looked beyond the structure of the film or the elements and components (such as the performances) to really consider underlying messages. They made connections with the text, and used the film as a foundation for exploring their own drives and desires in life. Of course, I served as a catalyst for further consideration because of the test, but that is the function of a media educator. Now, what would result if I stepped out of the role of the guide in this process, and gave the students the freedom to take these ideas and explorations into their own hands as media creators?

### *Teen Film Production*

*Guidelines and goals.* The unit of study concluded with a teen film creation project. Ideally, the students would have taken their ideas generated from the Truth in Teen Films Pacts, their considerations and observations about media depictions of teens we viewed and discussed in class, and their basic film element knowledge to create teen films that reflected their unique perspectives. The project consisted of scripting and planning assignments completed in class, and one class period devoted to filming. Since I

did not want to require students to edit the films because I could not provide the technology to do so in class, and many students did not have editing software readily available to them, the project was created to be edited in the camera. I also wanted the students to think in terms of the story as a whole, but also about the individual shots that would be required to tell this story. The decision to edit within the camera forced the students to constantly think in this manner. This decision was what necessitated the numerous pre-production assignments and components; the students needed to have a plan since they had to move from one shot to the next so the juxtaposition of shots as they filmed them were assembled by the camera to create a complete film. In addition, I hoped that the fact that there could be no wasted shots would force the students to take each shot seriously and compose and rehearse it so it would happen just as the filmmakers wanted. One group wanted to edit outside of class, and I allowed them to do so, but I took their advantage into consideration while grading.

To shift the ideas of what their final films may look like, I spent part of a class period away from Hollywood teen films to show a selection of amateur films – films that were made quickly and sometimes with not many more resources than those available to the students. I selected a couple of shorts to show, and I asked students to suggest others. I think this shift in focus excited the students. In my journal, I wrote:

Today, the students grasped a passion, I don't know if that is the right word, for their projects. We watched YouTube videos, selected by the students, and it seemed to spur them. We have looked at Hollywood and big budget things for so long; it was interesting to examine work that was more in their realm to create.

This exercise seemed to give them ideas about how simple stories and approaches could be effective in capturing an audience's attention.

*Conflict in the instructor role.* However, while I had been excited by the insights that my class shared in discussion and writing about their growing comprehension of the power of teen depictions and their power of film to share these depictions to nurture greater understanding among viewers, their initial script ideas were mired in trite conventions. As I circulated through the room and heard groups share ideas, I never heard the individuality and unique vision I hoped this project would uncover. They discussed broad, simple characters engaging in over exaggerated conflicts. Two groups came up with nearly identical storylines about a nerdy teen character who is bullied and mocked, then lifts weights, and returns to humiliate his bully and take his girl. While the story has a strong, traditional structure, it also has stereotypical characters and events that exist in several other media iterations. Most of the story ideas were comedies, almost farcical in nature, where the teen characters were foolish, arrogant, or oppressed by school authorities.

I didn't know what my role as an instructor should have been at this point. I did not want to reject their ideas and force them to adopt concepts that I thought should be in their films, that I thought would convey the complexity and nuance of their lives. I removed myself from being the arbiter of quality, and instead simply watched the process and asked how they planned to accomplish what they wanted to do and if they felt that whichever story they selected would best show off their understanding of teens and films. They all agreed it would, and, most importantly, they all seemed excited about their stories. I let them proceed.

As I was conflicted in my role during this process, I thought back to a statement that a student had written on her test earlier in the unit. She stated, “We often do things as teens more for the crowd, not so much for our own benefit.” This statement, applied to the pre-production of the films, could be viewed in two ways. First, as the students were working in groups, they may have been reluctant to share more personal ideas about what their films could be like with other members of the group. The group process may have led to accepting safer options, as I feared a class Truth in Teen Films Pact may have. And secondly, knowing that the films would be screened for the class, it is possible some students were worried about how their peers would accept their ideas. Accepted conventions and broad comedies were safer in this environment than more searching teen examinations.

And, it is possible that the constraints of this project shunted the degree of creativity that I had hoped for. These students had basically three 87-minute class periods to conceive, plan, and produce a two to three minute teen film. Under those types of schedule requirements, it is easiest for students to attach themselves to conventional stories and characters.

I checked students to make sure they had scripts and the rudimentary storyboards that would help guide them through the filming process. Some members of the class had added time constraints placed on them as I realized that the four cameras I had access to at the school needed to be shared among six groups. I had assumed more groups would have access to a video camera, but that was not the case. I sent the groups out across campus to shoot their films. I encouraged them, since they were editing in the camera, to set up and rehearse each shot a couple of times so that all of the parties – the actors and



the camera operator, knew exactly what was going to happen as they recorded. I roamed through the school, the grounds, and the parking lot to observe their progress. Each group I saw functioned in a very streamlined manner, knowing what they wanted and finding a quick way to set up and film each shot. There were discussions and experimentations, but I did not observe any conflicts among groups about how something should be done. It was a smooth process, even for those who did not get the entire period to shoot because they were sharing a camera.

While there was no time for a formal reflection at the end of the filming day, I asked students how it had gone, and most were excited about the process, but worried about the quality of the final product. Even though they had planned and rehearsed set ups, they did not always happen as they had hoped on the actual take. Part of that were the performances; some students were nervous in front of the camera. Part of that was unfamiliarity with the equipment. We adjourned until the next class period when we would screen our creations.

*Screening of student films.* The films all had similar elements in them, due largely to the fact that they were all filmed on school property during class hours. Some of the common themes that existed in the films were revenge – the two groups that planned nearly identical nerd and bully stories ended up with nearly identical films – questioning of school policy and procedures, competition, and a sense (or fear) of being recognized as being different. These themes manifest themselves in different ways. One group had a film where the students had been called from class to see an administrator, and one does not return. The reason for the disappearance was clear to the filmmakers, but unclear to the audience. The feeling of the film was that there are policies we do not understand, and

reasons for being singled out by authority figures that we do not comprehend. This was not the goal of the filmmakers, as they had planned a more detailed film, but the gaps brought a more ominous tone and made the film, in my opinion, more effective.

Another film told a straight-forward tale of a student, new to the school, who is shown disdain by one student, but is helped by another. One film showed students being sent to attendance school, the penalty for tardy students in our school. The banishment to attendance school was fraught with high emotion and anguish; it was melodramatic and overdone for effect. The group decided against its originally planned tragic ending – the students report to attendance school and are destroyed – for one that is a bit more, the term I used was “hopeful.” Even though the situation is exaggerated, the group recognized that they should pull back a bit. They felt that the ending made their statement against school policy a bit more palatable.

One film, probably the least competent in terms of its use of film technique, showed a girl at a party (filmed in a classroom) who hooked up with a boy. The next shot was in the same classroom and the girl was being mocked by another girl for being pregnant, which resulted in a poorly-staged brawl between the two students amid giggles of awkward embarrassment. Next was a shot of a nurse saying congratulations and handing a blanket to the student sitting on the ground. Nearly all of the shots were long shots, the actors rarely stayed in character, and little thought was given to composition or environment. The events were rushed and the story had no complexity. In examining the initial scripts of the students, I feared that all of the films would end up looking like this one, but they did not.

There were effective moments and shots in each that emerged despite the time and equipment limitations. There were surprising moments that elevated the films beyond the careless or the mundane, even in the poorly executed pregnancy film. In my journal, I wrote my reaction to the final shot in this, the poorest quality film in the class:

It is rushed and silly, but the final shot was of a child playing that pans over to the girl and her boyfriend sitting next to each other and watching the child. It is simple and real. Beautiful, in my opinion. That moment showed an untarnished, unforced look at the teen experience that the earlier melodramatics did not. I love that one shot.

There are moments like this throughout the films that allowed me to see a glimmer of what might have happened if the students had had more time, more access to equipment, and more importantly, more courage in the stories that they wanted to tell.

*Reflection on student films.* There were mixed reactions to the films in class. Generally, the class liked the work of their peers and was more critical of their own work. A lot of the frustrations were with editing in the camera and caused problems that the filmmakers were more likely to see. One group rehearsed each scene several times for performances, timing, and camera work, but scenes got cut into and out of early so key components were missing.

The films had flaws and effective moments, but the students were optimistic of what they gained from the process. One girl stated, “It turned out better than I thought it would.” Several students nodded in agreement with this statement. In the final focus group discussion, when asked what component of the class was most effective, Megan

stated, “I think the filming was the biggest impact. You know, you don’t think it’s really that hard to go make a movie until you do it.”

In a class discussion, I asked what happened that allowed the students to be successful in their films. Many students suggested that it was the act of getting a camera in their hands. While the pre-production work helped to focus their ideas, the real creativity did not occur until they had a camera. Shane articulated the thoughts of many in the class when he stated:

We didn’t follow the storyboards that much. When we got the camera, we got new ideas. We walked around and we, like, added stuff and changed a whole bunch. We were thinking out of the box when we got the cameras and we were walking around. When you are sitting here, writing, your brain can’t think of what to do other than what’s around you.

He continued on to explain that the script helped generate rough ideas, but his group didn’t really know what they were doing until they started shooting. Another student who was part of the group that filmed the new student at school story echoed this idea:

We came up with a lot of our camera angles on the spot. We didn’t, like, write it down, necessarily. Everything we came up with was freestyle, right off the top of the head, right on the spot. Like, if you look at our storyboards and look at our movie they don’t seem like they’re the same. I mean the concept is the same, but...

It seems like success in incorporating a production element in a film classroom can come from incorporating the cameras into the pre-production stage of idea generation and creation.

However, the scripting and storyboarding is equally important. One of the filmmakers who created one of the bully films argued, “A lot of people have so many different ideas, and they try to do them all, let’s do this, let’s do this, let’s do this...If you have a storyboard, at least you have a general idea of what you are going to do. It bundles up all your thoughts.” It is interesting to note that the filmmaker who created a film that I considered quite derivative discussed trying to incorporate everyone’s ideas in the scripting process.

While the films did not turn out the way that I had anticipated when I envisioned this unit, there is some artistry and individualism that I had not anticipated upon hearing their original concepts and ideas. More importantly, the students were involved in a process that allowed them to consider message – changing the ending of the attendance school film to allow their argument to be better accepted – and allowed them to move beyond the intellectual use of film elements that occurred during the scripting and storyboarding process. While the students approached these classroom assignments in a very structured way, an almost functional literacy view of the process, they found and trusted the creativity and exploration that resulted from holding a camera. My biggest disappointment was that they did not capture events or perspectives that broke free from the conventions of other media representations. This may have been a hurdle that the instruction may not have allowed them to overcome, as they may have made “safe” depictions so as not to stand out from the class. Even the student who expressed frustration with other members of the class for not taking the Truth in Teen Film Pacts seriously participated in one of the bully and nerd films.

## *Final Assessments*

*Class discussion.* On the first day of the Film Studies class, as the students entered I wanted to explain why the school offered the class and what I wanted students to understand about film and media, I read the following quote by Luis Buñuel: “In the hands of a free spirit, the cinema is a magnificent and dangerous weapon.” On the last day of class, after we screened and discussed our films, I read the quote again. I asked them if they felt that they, as filmmakers for this class, had wielded a magnificent and dangerous weapon. The class nodded in agreement and one student muttered, “Yeah. Sure.” I asked them to defend this stance, and the class sat in silence. I suggested to the class that they were just saying yes because that was the focus of the instruction, not necessarily of their experience or practice.

In the face of this challenge, one student stepped up and defended the films and the filmmakers, saying, “We got to see things from a different perspective. We got to see things we usually don’t get to see, so to see it on film is pretty cool.” It was at this point that I as an instructor realized that the student may have said this to appease me, but it may have been that the students were more in tune with what each other was trying to accomplish, more so than I was. It made me feel like an outsider in the class. I saw many of the moments in the films as similar to each other and to other media depictions of teens, but the students were able to see differences that may have eluded me as their instructor. They may have surpassed me in their ability to see the intent of the filmmakers similar to themselves.

However, their appreciation of each other’s work was tempered by a belief that they would not have power as media producers. I asked if they would continue to make

movies and show them, and a student remarked that they had little power to pull an audience outside of the classroom, declaring, “You don’t need a lot of money, but if nobody knows who you are, nobody’s going to watch your film.” I asked the rest of the class if they believed this, and another student remarked, “Nobody’s going to watch it.” While they appreciated the work of their peers, again, they displayed a lack of trust in the power of their views, perspectives, and abilities.

*Focus group final interview.* While I had seen an increase in critical media literacy among the students during the course of instruction in the teen film unit, when the focus group gathered for their post-instruction interview, again, they built their explanation of the knowledge they attained in the class on elements of functional media literacy. However, they also touched on deeper meaning, even though they were unsure of how to articulate that knowledge. Megan explained:

I think that I still, like, I still watch the film the same way I would have before, but I pick out, like, camera angles, and the music, and like symbolism and all that kind of stuff. Like, I look deeper into the film. Which kind of adds to, like, what the film means.

I had no clear way of showing the students what they had gained in the process, so they struggled to verbalize it.

#### *Summary of Data*

In the final focus group interview, when asked if the students had similar or different opinions about film than the instructor, Ann stated that the class and I had similar opinions, “but at the same time, we don’t have like the same education as him so he might, like, take things different than we do.” It is interesting to note that this student

saw education as a way of viewing film in a different way. Education was a means of finding new perspectives. That was the goal of this research and the changes I made in the content and instruction in my film classes.

The unit of study included many forms of assessment to track students' skill and knowledge acquisition. The various modes of assessment – projects, assignments, formal and informal discussions, written essays and tests – revealed different thoughts and responses to the critical media literacy instruction from the class as a whole and members of the focus groups. The responses and work of the students was both encouraging and shy of expectations.

When asked by an outside faculty member to demonstrate the knowledge gained in the film class, the focus group members reverted to repeating what they had learned about film techniques and elements, thereby demonstrating what I termed functional media literacy. However, when pressed in the classroom environment, the students examined the depth and complexity of teen identity on film, thereby demonstrating a stronger critical media literacy base.

The teen aspect that the students connected most with in the teen film watched in class, the desire to be accepted, may have influenced the choices made by students in producing teen films of their own. While the films were entertaining and showed technical competency, the themes aligned with generic conventions and did not reveal new perspectives in the teen experience. While this may have been a result of the students' desire to blend in and not be mocked for their unique approaches, it is important to note that in classroom discussions, students remarked that the films contained more originality and self-expression than was acknowledged by the instructor. The students



supported the idea that the production element was a key component in gaining a greater knowledge of film and media. By stepping into the role of filmmaker, the students were able to consider how filmmakers and absent audiences can connect and position themselves against one another.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion of Results

#### *Empowerment and Action*

Harré and van Langenhove (1999) state that the third component of positioning theory is the act: a significant action that is given meaning as a part of an unfolding storyline. In order for students to become empowered as media consumers and producers, they need to act. In responding to teen film and considering how depictions in teen film affect non-mediated experiences, the focus was on storylines and positioning. How did students define themselves, others, or the text? However, empowerment comes from action. As students leave the class, what do they do in their interactions with a text? How do they create media messages? What choices or actions guide them? And are these actions different as a result of this class? While empowerment was the goal of this research, there was no way of measuring this in the scope of the research conducted here.

There were some acts resulting from storyline and positioning that students participated in during the course of the instruction. At the least, they committed their visions to film by creating their own short films. They took the lead in validating their work to me as the teacher. But then, they left my class. When I see these students in the hall, they stop me and share their opinions on films they have seen. I hope that the ideas shared in this class have made an impact on how they function in the future.

My action is different. The following sections of this chapter will examine some of the changes that have happened, especially in how I create positions, storylines, and, most importantly, acts within the context of my classes.

### *The Challenges of Assessment*

The educational objective for this unit was, “Students will demonstrate their understanding of generic conventions in film and critical media literacy by creating a short media production that blends their own experiences with teen film conventions in order to promote an accurate teen representation.” The goal of the research was to see if the unit and method of instruction created greater critical media literacy. Did the students achieve that educational objective?

The question I had several times during the course of my graduate studies, and that I pose here is, how does a teacher effectively assess students’ progress in terms of critical media literacy? As mentioned earlier, critical media literacy is a process based in higher order thinking. The challenge is measuring this process, and measuring it individually.

As a teacher, I am continually asked, and feel an obligation, to review my assessments. Are they reliable? Are they accurate? Are they fair? In the qualitative approach to this research, I found student and teacher responses that created a narrative and tried to convey what happened in the class during this unit of instruction, but there are few hard facts to support the ultimate success of the students in achieving the stated goal of the unit.

The biggest difficulty in assessment is the role of the instructor. The instructor cannot dictate the desired results of the students or else the students may perform in a way that pleases the instructor but does not showing a lasting change or skill acquisition. This type of assessment approach will not work in determining a student’s level of critical media literacy. I have theatre students come to me in frustration because an

English teacher at our school asks students to define the motivations of Hamlet, but marks the students wrong if the motivation they select is not one embraced by the teacher, even if they can defend their choice. I felt that I may have been on the brink of doing that in the final assessment of students for this research.

I had ideas and pre-conceived notions about what their final film projects would look like. I had hoped for complex and challenging stories and portrayals, or a rejection of the classic structure. In short, I anticipated a real revolution in filmmaking. What they produced was not revolutionary, in my opinion, so I was willing to write the project off as not completely successful. However, the students saw validity in their peer's work and value in the process they undertook. In order to correctly determine their level of success, I have to look at the films through their eyes. But, the assessment rubric was created through my eyes; I knew the objectives of the unit and what skills I wanted students to demonstrate. Where can these two approaches meet?

This is the key question that has emerged from this research. How can I as an instructor share the burden of assessment and instruction with students to make sure that the learning that results from the class is of worth to the students, built around their values and perspectives, and indicative of the skills that I know they should have in order to have power in a media-saturated environment? These are similar questions that I ask in my other classes, but they take on an added urgency in a media classroom, mostly because the knowledge I can gain about the subject on my own will always be lacking.

My research uncovered the areas I deemed important for a critical media literacy unit, but there are no national standards to compare what I find important with what other teachers have found to be important or possible. The unit was aligned with NCTE

National Standards for the English Language Arts because I felt that aligning it in that way may help others, especially English educators, who look at this research as a starting point for media education in their classes.

One of the key components of action research is to capture many voices at many points during the course of the research. I consciously built this unit with several means of checking student understanding and progress, and this is the approach that would seem to work best in assessing media students. In the previous chapter, I discussed how I asked students to respond to *Rebel without a Cause* in two venues – a class discussion and written essays on the test. The two assessments were on different days and used different modes, though both were linguistically-based. By using both of these assessments, I gained a more complete, and, as it turned out, a more complex response from students. I had students create pacts to guide them as filmmakers, let them function as filmmakers, and then reflect on where their films did or did not align with their pacts. Each of these individual assessments may not have allowed an instructor to know if the students understood how media messages are constructed, changed, lost, or misconstrued, but when the assessments are examined together, a more complete picture is created.

Variety is not the only key. To be reliable, assessments need to work equally to determine mastery across a range of students. That reliability can only come with time. I have had the opportunity to teach this unit again since I did so as part of this thesis. I have made changes to rubrics and assignment descriptions that, I believe, help clarify things for me and my students. I will be moving to a new school next year, and I anticipate that this process will start anew because the community and the students will be different.

Another consideration is the role of students in the assessment project. While I

was hesitant to engage myself in the pre-production steps of the creation of teen films for fear of influencing the final product, students could be involved in that process. If students were to swap scripts and teen film pacts with another group and have the reviewing group determine if the filmmakers were creating works that align with their pacts, then the assessment is student-driven. Students can move into the role of arbiter of value.

In response to my continual question, how are we going to assess critical media literacy, I say, it is going to take a lot of work. It requires research, trial and error, variety, and a willingness to share the process with the students.

#### *The Research Approach to Instruction*

One way to share the responsibility in the film class is to adopt the mindset that I had as a researcher into my everyday role as instructor. In order to be successful as a researcher, I was always seeking feedback from the students, and this need for feedback was very transparent. I announced that the students would be participating in research and had them sign release forms. I established a focus group, I recorded some class discussions, and I was recording my reactions and observations in a daily journal. I became more aware of the students' progress and examined their responses closely to see the ideas or concerns that may have existed underneath. I was dependent on the observations of the students, which was important, but I also reiterated that dependence to the class. In this way, the positioning of students in a shared role of instruction was explicit.

In Chapter 4, I stated that when given the opportunity to demonstrate their film knowledge, the focus group centered their comments on functional media literacy. That

was not always the case, however, and one of my favorite comments from the focus group discussions was offered by Megan. When asked to state how this class has changed her perceptions, she stated, “Like, I look deeper into the film. Which kind of adds to, like, what the film means.” The statement is simple, but it has an impact on me because it confirms the knowledge or skill acquisition for this student. And, it gave the student power because she was asked to express her level of achievement. As a researcher, I wanted to know what students have learned, even if they struggled to articulate it. As a teacher, I do not do this enough. But as a media instructor, this is crucial.

To be successful in my goals as a media educator, I need to continually ask my students to express what they think, not only about the texts we watch, but also about the instruction. The students may feel a greater sense of ownership over what they have learned if they are asked to articulate it. And, most importantly, the students may gain a feeling that the instruction is for their benefit and is tailored to their needs, and therefore become more committed to the ideas behind it. In this way, students begin to function as co-researchers, equally invested in the process.

Students can also contribute in selecting texts and materials to examine as part of class assignments. The class became quite engaged when I asked them to argue which teen films may have been better for the unit in depicting teen reality than *Rebel without a Cause*. This shift helps position students as those with the knowledge and authority in media. Perhaps this feeling of authority may lead to a stronger commitment to their own personal experiences and viewpoints in creating their own teen films.

### *Power Structures in Media Education*

The examination of agency and power structures is at the root of critical media literacy. At the start of this project, I had considered that the power structures in place in media creation and communication of media messages lie with those with money and notoriety. This is a view that was also held by the students who suggested that without money or fame, they would never be able to draw interest in their media creations. This is a limited “top-down” view that mirrors Buckingham’s (2003b) definition of the conservative approach to education, wherein a teacher received knowledge at the university level, and then passed it along to the students. The misconception, on my part and on the part of the students, was that filmmakers, especially creators of mass media, have the knowledge and means to pass messages on to passive, and ignorant, audience members.

Just as students can and do contribute to a progressive educational environment, so, too, do teens contribute to the power structures of film. I thought that I would give them that power by allowing them to function as media creators. But that is not the only means of displaying that power.

Ellsworth (1997) demonstrates the power that teen audiences have, by arguing that a filmmaker creates a work for an imagined audience and creates codes and cues pointed to that person. Teens have the ultimate power since filmmakers are creating storylines, characters, and looks that they believe will engage a teen audience. But, the examination of teen depictions in film, both specifically by watching and discussing teen films, and by talking about general teen genre conventions, showed that my students are quick to dismiss teens in mass media until asked to explore them with some depth. The



sense seems to be that filmmakers and audiences both implicitly acknowledge the simplistic and surface treatment of teens in most Hollywood films. As long as filmmakers perceive that teens do not want something different from their films, they will not adjust their approach.

It is interesting to note the power structures that exist in film theory, as well. For example, Considine (1985) stated, “For some adolescents, the film industry's repetitive images and stereotypes offer the opportunity for a pre-packaged identity that subverts the natural emergence of an authentic self” (p. 276). The students in my class, however, suggested that they have the ability to see the invalidity of teen depictions and do not embrace them as a model of identity. Megan reported, “I think that teen film is really inaccurate because of the way that they show the characters. Like, I don’t know anybody like most people that they show in teen films.” Obviously, neither Considine nor Megan speak for all teens, but by asking my students to develop Truth in Teen Film Pacts and express their views of film reality and purpose, they begin to function as film theorists, and can share views that allow others, such as myself, to gain a deeper understanding of teen reactions to media.

### *New Questions*

The action research cycle acknowledges that during the course of research some questions are answered while others emerge. The process allows the researcher to examine his or her own practice, and this exploration brings new insights that can become the basis for future research.

One key is to determine the most effective progression in media education. I had designed this unit to conclude my class, but that decision was driven by schedule as much

as by the belief that the final assessment would serve as a valid conclusion to the class. However, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the students had participated in lessons based heavily in functional media literacy earlier in the course. When examining critical media literacy at the secondary level, what is the proper order to introduce instruction on film language, critical lenses, personal response, and elements of production? I frequently commented on how students often resorted to functional media literacy components in explaining their knowledge acquisition. Is this because it was easier or because it was the foundation? Would students look at film differently if they were introduced to personal responses, messages, and power structure examination earlier in the class and that becomes the foundation? Or would they be ill-prepared for that instruction at the start of class?

Another question I am considering is whether or not having students work in groups on their film productions causes a loss of an individual view. Does the fact that the students are planning and creating their films in groups, albeit groups of their choosing, mean that their individual voices are lost in the final product? I noted my concern about having the class as a whole create a Truth in Teen Films Pact for fear that the individual tenets would be lost, and the final list would be safe and homogenized. Was this the case in their production assignments? Having them work in groups had several logistic benefits – they did not have to recruit outside actors and crew, and all of the work could be done during the film class period. But does it allow some students to coast and not examine how they would approach the task? Shane commented that working in a group was an advantage to their project, “I thought it was easier with a group. Because we got a lot of ideas from other people in the group. We just kind of

pushed them all together to create this story.” The sharing of ideas can allow others to see the teen experience from the perspectives of others in their groups, but it also means that not all of those ideas will be seen in the final film. Is it important for individual voices in order for students to have ownership of the films and the process? Would individual projects create a greater degree of critical media literacy?

But, what assignments can give students an autonomous voice? The group projects such as the film and the pact allowed me as a teacher to view the process, and the process is crucial in building assessment. Are autonomous projects needed for effective critical media literacy?

Another question I face is whether teaching about critical media literacy is most effective when the instruction is based on mass media (i.e. Hollywood films) or if greater understanding can be gained from exploring films made outside the mainstream. I noted how much excitement existed in the class when we watched YouTube videos in class. Should these films play a larger part in a critical media literacy instruction? Would an exploration of these unique visions that are often not tied to strict classical structure create a stronger base for students asked to go out and create films on their own? Or, does the instruction still need to tie to popular mass media as those are the films that students may have more interaction with outside of class and the popular forms influence more independent creations? Cope and Kalantzis (2000) suggested that new educational models, built around the idea of multiliteracies, require “increasing multiplicity and integration of significant modes of meaning-making” (pg. 5). I found a degree of success by relying on a broad base of instructional materials, but I am unfamiliar with many emerging media forms.

In maintaining my researcher mindset, the answers to these questions are ones I may tackle in future classes or I will seek out research conducted by others who have explored questions similar to these. As an emerging field, educators working within the media literacy realm need to be willing to test these questions in their classrooms and share their results with others. Answers discovered by others may not fit my approach as an educator or the specific needs of the students in my community, but it may give me ideas to experiment with on my own.

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## Appendix A

### **Critical Media Literacy in Teen Film Unit**

**Objective:** Students will demonstrate their understanding of generic conventions in film and critical media literacy by creating a short media production that blends their own experiences with teen film conventions in order to promote an accurate teen representation..

**Subject:** Media / Film / English

**Class Level:** Secondary

**Main Concepts:** Genre conventions, historical context of media, film medium, film reality, film analysis, film production

#### **NCTE National Standards for the English Language Arts**

- 1.** Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
- 2.** Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
- 3.** Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
- 6.** Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
- 7.** Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
- 8.** Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
- 9.** Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
- 11.** Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

**12.** Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

**Curriculum Placement:** This unit is designed to be taught in any class that will have a unit that focuses on media (media/film, English) but it can be modified to be taught in a history class (stressing historical impact of genre and teen films) or any class that wants to increase literacy or find a way to add film production to their curriculum. Ideally, students have been introduced to basic film elements such as story structure, personal response to media, and basic cinematography techniques. This unit can work without that background, and it may affect the cinematic quality of the final product, but production quality it is not an important aspect of the grading of the final product.

These lessons are designed for 90-minute class periods.

## Critical Media Literacy in Teen Film Unit

### Lesson One

#### What is Genre?

**Educational Objective:** Students will demonstrate their understand of the genre conventions of icons, archetypes, and rituals by identifying their use in film clips from different genres.

Materials Needed: Whiteboard, clips from films of three different genres.

**Anticipatory Set:** Tell the students that the class has been given a grant to make a film about soccer. We want to start filming next week, but we have to figure out what needs to be in it. Announce that the story will be about a soccer team made up of the players that no other team would select. Ask the following questions and write responses on the whiteboard:

What is going to happen in the film? (Guide them to think about what will happen to the team during the film and how the movie will end.)

What characters do we need in the film? (Who is on the soccer team? Who is on the opposing teams? What about the coaches?)

What do we have to be sure we include in the film? (Important scenes, moments, sounds, images)

**STEP 1: Transition** – Ask the students how they knew what would be in this film. How did they know who would win the big game? How did they know there was going to be a big game? Have they seen a film that has all of these elements? Why would we want to make a film if it was so similar to others that we had seen?

**STEP 2: Instruction** – Introduce the students to the term genre. Tell them that genre is a classification of film and they had just listed components of the sports genre. The sport and age of the athletes may differ from film to film, but the basic elements on the board are similar for each sports film.

**STEP 3: Guided Practice** – Tell the students that there are three components of genre that they will need to know for this class: Icons – images or objects that are repeatedly used within a genre and gain significance through repetition (an example would be the sheriff’s star in a Western), Archetypes – characters or character types that are repeatedly seen within films of a certain genre (for example, the not-too-bright and skimpily attired female in a horror movie who ends up being the first victim), and Rituals – activities or actions that are repeated (for example, the argument that the two potential lovers get into at the start of any romantic comedy, the gunfight at the end of a western, the “big game upset” at the end of a sports movie).

Using the list on the board of sports movie genre items, have students determine which are icons, which are archetypes, and which are rituals. Mark them as the students call classifications out to you.

**STEP 4: Instruction** - Tell the students that genres were introduced early in film history and were a means to streamline the film production process. In order to make films in an economic way, studios followed an assembly line process where they reused stock characters, locations, storylines, and costumes to make films. Those films were profitable, and the approach still exists today.

Ask students to hypothesize as to why genre movies were and continue to be popular. Why, if we know what a film contains, are we interested in watching it? Why go to an action film if we know the hero will always win or to a romantic comedy if we know that they will end up together?

**STEP 5: *Class Discussion*** – Divide the class in half. Present the following statement to the class: “Audiences would rather have know quality than the unknown.” Have half of the class argue that this statement is true (1 minute) and then have the other half rebut that and argue that the statement is false (1minute). The decision to make genre films is an economic one: the films make money. Ask the class to suggest why they go to genre films. Did any of the arguments presented by the class make sense?

**STEP 6: *Guided Practice*** – Have the class name genres while you write them on the board. Avoid listing simply comedy or drama because they are too broad. Encourage students to think a bit more specifically (family drama, slapstick comedy, romantic comedy). Some genre might include sports, horror, slasher, teen, war, western, musical, detective, mystery, action, adventure, comic book/superhero, etc.)

**STEP 7: *Individual Practice*** – Show the class three short clips from films of different genres. For each clip, each student must identify which genre it is and 2-3 icons, 2-3 archetypes, and 2-3 rituals of each genre shown in the film.

**ASSESSMENT:** Students can be assessed through their participation in class discussion and activities and their written response to the film genre clips.

## Critical Media Literacy in Teen Film Unit

### Lesson Two

#### The Teen Film Genre

**Educational Objective:** Students will demonstrate their understanding of teen film conventions and how they align with actual teen experiences by determining which aspects of their lives would fit teen genre conventions.

Materials Needed: Whiteboard, several digital still cameras or video cameras, history of teen film lecture notes

**Anticipatory Set:** Hand out some cameras (still or video) to students in the class. Tell them that they will need to work in groups capturing images in the room that would be found in a teen film. Have each group capture 2-3 images.

**STEP 1: Transition** – Display the images captured on a projector in the classroom. Have the students who captured the images explain if the image is an icon, archetype or ritual and why it is a component of a teen film.

**STEP 2: Check for Understanding** – What teen generic elements were not found in the classroom? What was here? Do teen films reflect the reality of the students in this room? Have students think about the last question even if they are unable to articulate their opinions.

**STEP 3: Group Practice** – Divide the class into groups of three (different than groups they may have worked with for the anticipatory set). Each group needs to discuss teen films and select one that they feel is the most representative of their lives. They need to be able to defend their answer.

**STEP 4: Class Discussion** – Bring the class back together and have each group share which movie they selected and why. These presentations should be brief. Encourage students to be direct in their justifications. Note titles that result in class agreements or disagreements.

Ask the students if genre films are supposed to be realistic. Genre shows shorthand that the audience understands. Do we have any “shorthand” in how we lead our lives? Are there fashion choices, catchphrases, or things that we do that communicate stereotypes to others? Do teen films or media in general have anything to do with those shorthand moments in real life? Does genre influence society or vice versa?

**STEP 5: Instruction** – Lecture on the history of the teen film genre (See attached lecture notes).

**STEP 6: Class Discussion** – Have the students create a list on the board of icons and rituals in a teen film. List all suggestions to create a genre recipe. Encourage students to give examples or multiple examples when they name an item. It is not a genre convention if it does not appear in multiple films.

**STEP 7: Guided Practice** – On the board, list the five archetypes of teen films according to Shary (based on the characters from *The Breakfast Club*): The Delinquent, The Sensitive Athlete, The Popular Girl, The Nerd, and The Basketcase. Have the class add to or refine the list of archetypes. Get into their original groups of three and brainstorm items that could be added to the list. Have each group share their ideas and add them to the list on the board.

**STEP 8: *Individual Practice*** – Have each student determine which archetype on the board is closest to who they are. How would they be classified if they were in a teen film. Each student must write a response and a justification of their choice and hand it in before leaving.

**ASSESSMENT:** Students can be graded on participation in discussions and activities in class and on their archetype written assignment.

## History of Teen Film Lecture Notes

Teenage classification can be traced to establishment of high schools as we now know them in the 1920s.

Industrial Revolution – Adolescents left school by 14 to work or marry and raise children. Transition from childhood to adulthood was direct and transition period was not seen as a separate period of development

In 1950s, several shifts happened to bring significance to teen years and teen culture  
More students attended college so they stayed in public education longer  
Economic prosperity meant adolescents did not have to work at younger age  
More expendable income and access to cars gave teens more independence  
New technology of television kept adults at home giving teens more latitude to define themselves outside of family

Since adults were staying home more to watch television, Hollywood had to market films to younger audiences, those with money, freedom, and the desire to be out of the house.

Early teen films included the music of the generation, rock and roll, and had characters who defied the older generations – rebels. This appealed to younger audiences but scared older audiences. Adults felt like the country was being overrun by teen culture. Films usually had a conflict between adults and teens at school, at work, at home.

### 1960s

Films directed to teen audiences increased in numbers, but declined in budgets and quality. In 1968, viewers between the ages of 16 and 24 made up 48% of the film-going audience.

### 1970s

Malls created a new gathering area for teens with the sole purpose of socializing and spending money. As the presence of malls in America increased, so did the switch from movie houses to multiplexes, which were often located near or within malls. Multiplexes provided more options for teens in locales where they regularly congregated and spent money. Studios had more screens to fill and they knew which filmgoers had the most access to those screens.

### 1980s

Introduction of the PG-13 rating. A rating geared specifically for teen audiences. The first film of the teen film resurgence that really defined how filmmakers could use the lives of teens as a template for teen film – an ensemble of students making their way through the maze of curricular and extra-curricular high school life – was *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982).

The film had frank dialogue and sexual content that were based on the observations of writer Cameron Crowe as he went undercover in his former high school. This was a film made by adults that tried to be as accurate as possible in its depictions. The film also avoided glossing over issues like teen sexual activity and pregnancy with easy solutions. It contains memorable characters (new variations on exiting archetypes), realistic, but quotable dialogue, and an episodic structure that gave new patterns for the teen films that followed.

The film influenced many of the teen films of the 1980s from raunchy sex comedies (*Porky's*, *American Pie*) to attempts at more realistic and humane portraits of high school life (*Pretty in*



*Pink, The Breakfast Club, Mean Girls*). The teen genre elements established in the 1980s and 1990s, though based on ideas shown in earlier films, truly codified the genre and built the audience expectations that contemporary high school students now have for films based on the high school experience.

Sources:

Doherty, Thomas Patrick. *Teenagers and teenpics : the juvenilization of American movies in the 1950s*, Temple University Press (2002)

Shary, Timothy. *Generation Multiplex: the image of youth in contemporary American cinema*, University of Texas Press (2002)

## Critical Media Literacy in Teen Film Unit

### **Lesson Three** **Defining Reality**

**Educational Objective:** Students will demonstrate their understanding of mediated reality by capturing “real” images in the classroom and creating a pact that defines what would be required for them as media creators to capture reality in their media productions.

**Materials Needed:** A collection of art prints (Impressionist, Cubist or Surrealist, Norman Rockwell, Renaissance, a photograph), clips from several films of different types (SELECT CLIPS, *Hoop Dreams*, *Mean Girls*, *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*), several sheets of poster paper

**Anticipatory Set:** Display five art prints at the front of the class. A nice variety for this exercise might be an Impressionist print, a Cubist or Surrealist print, a Norman Rockwell print, a Renaissance print, and a photograph. Have each student take out a piece of paper and rank the five prints in order from the image they think is the “most real,” to the one that is the “least real.” Try not to give more instruction than that.

*Transition* – Have students share their responses. Have them justify why they made the choices that they did. Where did the image come from? Are they subjects or events that ever existed? Do we know? Are the students drawn to the “real” images or the ones that are more “unreal”? Is the purpose of film to capture the real or the unreal (hopefully the class is divided on this question and can argue their own personal view).

**STEP 1: Modeling** – Usually, the photograph is labeled most real. Holding up the print, ask them about what reality is being portrayed. What is missing? Have everyone with a camera phone take it out and look through their photos to find the one that is the most real. Have those students show the image to a neighbor and have the neighbor describe why it could be real. What truth is captured? What is left out?

**STEP 2: Instruction** – Like photography, film has the ability to capture a reality. The final image is less manipulated by an artist than the paintings displayed in the anticipatory set. It is capturing actual subjects in an actual setting. We can argue that the subject is posing or the environment is created, but there is a physical reality to them.

**STEP 3: Individual Practice** – Have each student get out a piece of paper. Show three short clips from teen films that are filmed in different manners (*Hoop Dreams*, *Mean Girls*, *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*). Before showing the clips, tell the students that they will each have to list which physical elements in each clip make it real. They should not focus on the story or the characters, rather what about how the movie was filmed makes it seem real. Some things for them to consider: set and environment, camera angles, editing, sound. They need to find moments of reality in each clip.

**STEP 4: Group Practice** – Have students get into groups of three (different groups than they have used so far in this unit). Each student will share their responses with the others in the group. Look for instances when the groups agree on moments from the script and when they disagree.

**STEP 5: Group Practice** – Pass out a poster paper to each group. Based on the discussions in the groups, each group must create a “Truth in Teen Films Pact.” On the poster, they will need to list

rules that teen films must follow if they are to represent reality. Have them first focus on physical elements, but they can also talk about what types of stories, characters, or dialogue that should or should not exist. Everyone in the group will sign their pact at the end, so they all must be comfortable with it. Circulate throughout the room helping groups and clarifying instructions as needed.

**STEP 6:** *Guided Practice* – Have each group attach their pact to the wall at the front of the class. With the time remaining, you will need to create a poster that contains one pact for the whole class. What are common elements on each list? Keep asking, “How do we achieve reality?” Make sure you address things such as casting, acting, camera work, design, and editing. Once you have a common pact for the class (keep it simple, not too many points) have everyone come up and sign the class pact.

Depending on the length of the lesson, creating a classroom pact may be used as the anticipatory set for Lesson Four.

**ASSESSMENT:** Students can be assessed on their group pacts and participation in classroom discussions and activities.

## Critical Media Literacy in Teen Film Unit

### **Lesson Four** **Reading Reality**

**Educational Objective:** Students will analyze the reality of a teen film by applying their rules of reality to the film *Rebel without a Cause*.

Materials Needed: Classroom pact poster from Lesson 3, video clips of the classroom from Lesson 2, whiteboard, copy of the film *Rebel without a Cause*, projector or TV

**Anticipatory Set:** Post the class' "Truth in Teen Films Pact" that was created last lesson. Tell each student to take out a piece of paper and write down how the clip you are about to show meets or does not meet the elements of the pact they created. Show the class the clips created by the students in Lesson Two.

*Transition:* Discuss how the clip did or did not adhere to the pact created by the class. Focus on how it was filmed, the subjects involved, and how images work together. The clips may not show a narrative, so that component can be excluded.

**STEP 1: Guided Practice** – Ask the students to share which teen films best fit the pact created by the class. They must defend their answers. If there is disagreement, have two students defend their position and the class can vote on whether it fits the pact or not. Ask if the teen films they selected were commercially successful. Can commercial success and reality work together? Why or why not?

**STEP 2: Instruction** – Introduce the film that they will be watching, *Rebel Without a Cause*. The following are key points to include in the introduction:

Released in 1955, directed by Nicholas Ray

One of the first teen films, setting genre conventions for films that followed

Film that established James Dean as a star, he died before the film's release, but youth audiences responded powerfully to him as a character and as an actor.

In the 1950s, several adults were concerned about the rise in teen culture and juvenile delinquency (rebellion against expected norms). Other films of the 1950s viewed youths as dangerous. This film tried to explore the teen's viewpoint focusing on relationships at school and at home.

**STEP 3: Instruction** – Nicholas Ray was trying to capture a realistic portrayal of teens. His criteria may have been different from the classes, and his environment was different than the students. As they watch the film, have the students focus on 1) how does the film fit genre conventions, 2) how does it fit their criteria for realism in teen depictions, and 3) what is their personal reaction to the film? Have them jot down moments that may affect them positively (what works) and negatively (what doesn't).

**STEP 4: Group Work** – Show the film *Rebel Without a Cause*.

**ASSESSMENT:** Students can be assessed on their written response to they clips they created, class discussion, and notes from viewing today's portion of the film.

## Critical Media Literacy in Teen Film Unit

### **Lesson Five**

#### **Reading Reality, Part 2**

**Educational Objective:** Students will analyze the reality of a teen film by applying their rules of reality to the film *Rebel without a Cause*.

**Materials Needed:** Copy of the film *Rebel without a Cause*, projector or TV, white board

**Anticipatory Set:** Have the students come up to the white board and write down what they thought was the best moment from viewing the first half of *Rebel Without a Cause* last class period. They can choose a moment that highlighted the teen genre, one that they felt captured reality, or one that they had a positive personal reaction to.

*Transition* – Choose a couple of moments on the board and ask the student who wrote it to defend why that moment worked for them.

**STEP 1: Instruction** – Briefly summarize the events from the first half of the film. Remind the class that the three components of the film that they need to focus on are 1) how does the film fit genre conventions, 2) how does it fit their criteria for realism in teen depictions, and 3) what is their personal reaction to the film? Have them jot down moments that may affect them positively (what works) and negatively (what doesn't). You may ask the class to jot down notes again in response to what they see, or just have them watch.

**STEP 2:** Start the film and let the students watch it to its conclusion.

**ASSESSMENT:** Students can be assessed on viewing the film and notes taken while watching.

## Critical Media Literacy in Teen Film Unit

### Lesson Six

#### **Reaction to Teen Film**

**Educational Objective:** Students will demonstrate their knowledge of genre, teen genre conventions and film analysis by reviewing the information and taking a test.

**Materials Needed:** *Rebel without a Cause* tests, copy of the film *Rebel without a Cause*, white board and three markers, Teen Film Pact created in Lesson 3.

**Anticipatory Set:** On one side of the room, display a sign or write on the white board “Loved It” and on the other side of the room have a sign or white board that say “Hated It.” Have everyone in the class move to one side of the room or the other based on their response to the film. Having read their notes on the film viewing, you may know who belongs in each camp. You can also divide the class arbitrarily and have them defend whichever side they end up on. Each side of the class must come up with three arguments that best support why the film worked/did not work.

**Transition:** Have each side share their arguments. The arguments should stand on their own, do not allow rebuttals or disagreements from the other side. Encourage them to listen. Have class take their seats after sharing their arguments.

**STEP 1: Class Discussion** – Have the students address the following question with regard to the film. Did previous discussion make them see the film differently? Did arguments from the other side of the class sway them? What was their personal response?

**STEP 2: Guided Practice** – Have three students come up in front of the class and write down responses as the class yells them out. The question is how did the film fit teen genre conventions? One student will write down Archetypes, one will write Rituals and one will write Icons. Students who suggest conventions from the film will need to delineate which heading it should go under. Ask students if the elements they are naming are still seen in teen films today or if they have changed or disappeared. Why do they think the conventions have changed or stayed the same?

**STEP 3: Individual Practice** – Post the Teen Film pact from Lesson 3. Pass back the film notes that students wrote while watching the film the past two days. Each student needs to find one moment from the film that supports the class pact and classifies *Rebel without a Cause* as a “real” film.

**STEP 4: Student Driven Learning** – Have a student volunteer to share which moment from the film they selected and show that moment of the film to the class. Have the student who suggested the moment defend why it fits the class pact. Call on a couple of students to do this activity. Push students to look at as many different elements as they can in each clip (acting, design, camera)

**STEP 5: Assessment** – Pass out the **Teen Genre and Rebel without a Cause Test** (attached at end of lesson). Have the students complete the test.

**ASSESSMENT:** Students can be assessed on their participation in classroom activities, their written response, and their work on the test.

## Critical Media Literacy in Teen Film Unit

### Lesson Seven

#### Contemporary Teen Film

**Educational Objective:** Students will synthesize their understanding of generic conventions and mediated reality by examining and discussing how contemporary forces influence teen genre conventions.

Materials Needed: DVDs for three recent teen films (for example, *Clueless*, *10 Things I Hate About You*, *Pretty in Pink*), TV or projector, Teen Film Pact created in Lesson 3, copies of Teen Film Genre Project/Grading Rubric handouts for the class

**Anticipatory Set:** Since the students have seen *Rebel Without a Cause*, they have seen a film that established some teen genre elements. How have these elements changed or remained the same in the last 50+ years? Hold up three teen films (*Clueless*, *10 Things I Hate About You*, *Pretty in Pink*). For each film, have the students raise their hand if they have seen it. Divide the class into four groups, one for each film. Each group needs to include students who have seen that film.

*Transition:* Each group needs to discuss which genre elements (icons, archetypes, and rituals) are in the film that they have been handed. They need to make a list of these elements. For each, they need to determine how that genre element compares with its use or exclusion from *Rebel Without a Cause*. They need to be able to present genre differences and similarities that exist between the two films.

**STEP 1: Group Instruction** – Once they know how their film supports or rejects genre elements from *Rebel Without a Cause*, each group will have to select one brief clip from the film that best demonstrates how the film uses or rejects genre conventions. Each group will have five minutes to discuss how genre elements are used today and show a clip from their film that demonstrates their use. The groups should not spend too much time deciding on a clip as any clip should support their arguments. The information is most important.

**STEP 2: Group Presentations** – Each group will get in front of the class, show their clip, and share how their film fits genre conventions and compare it to *Rebel Without a Cause*. Ask questions of each group to make sure they have an understanding of how recent films support or modify the conventions explored in *Rebel*. Since the groups will be large, look for students who try to “just sit.”

Some suggested questions:

Do these characters show the depth or complexity of the characters in *Rebel*?

How are adult/teen relationships presented in this film? How do they compare with those in *Rebel*?

How does the use of teen music change the feel of your film compared to *Rebel*?

How is your film more tailored to your generation than *Rebel*?

**STEP 3: Guided Practice** – As each group concludes their five minute presentation. Ask them the following question:

Which elements from your film, or from *Rebel*, would you use if you were making a teen film? Be specific. Talk of casting, locations, camera work, fashions, music, etc.

**STEP 4: Instruction** – Tell the students that they will be creating a scene from a teen film in class. Hand out the Teen Genre Film Project papers to the students and review it with them. Assign them to work together in groups of four. (By you selecting groups, you may put students with differing personalities together, or put similar students together in groups. The results can be intrigued either way.) The grading rubric for the project can be copied onto the back of the project information sheet.

Post the Teen Film Pact for students to reference as they discuss story ideas.

**STEP 5: Group Practice** – With the remainder of class, the group should brainstorm story ideas. Their focus with the rest of class should be the script, next class they will create storyboards. Since the scene is less than 2 minutes, the scripts will not be long, but the groups will need to write up a script for the next class, so encourage them to write their ideas on paper and flesh out the dialogue and action. As the teacher moves from group to group, ask which specific genre elements they plan to include. Remind them that these conventions will be a part of their grade, but they can determine how to use it in order to meet their needs.

**ASSESSMENT:** Students can be assessed on their teen film presentations, and their work in groups on creating scripts.



## Teen Genre Film Project

You will create one scene from a teen genre film. Your group will be responsible for writing, directing, shooting, and acting in the scene. The final scene can be no longer than 2 minutes. Your scene must demonstrate elements of the teen genre formula (icons, archetypes, or rituals), but it must also abide by the Truth in Teen Films pact.

The process is as follows:

- Your group will discuss ideas for scenes to write and film. All films must be filmed in the school during film class period.
- The group will write up a brief script (dialogue and descriptions of actions) and a storyboard (drawings of what the final shots will look like).
- Each group will review their scripts and storyboards with Mr. Moss to make sure that the script is feasible, within time limits, and demonstrates genre formula and Truth in Teen Films.
- The group will cast actors (from within the group), assign camera operators, and finalize which locations they will shoot in.
- The script and storyboards are crucial because you will edit within the camera. This means that you will film one shot, pause the camera, reset your next shot and begin filming again.
- Content must be appropriate for inclusion in a PG movie.
- Your group will turn in your tape at the conclusion of filming to be viewed in class.
- After the film screening, group members will discuss the success of their film in demonstrating genre formulas, presenting teen reality, and engaging an audience.

## Teen Genre Film Project Grading Rubric

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Superior</b>	<b>Excellent</b>	<b>Satisfactory</b>	<b>Unsatisfactory</b>
<b>Script</b>	Group submits a script for review by instructor. Script has a beginning middle and end and final film follows approved script.	Group submits a script for review, script does not have a complete structure or film does not follow written script.	Group does not submit script for review, but does shoot their film according to a script.	Group does not create a script prior to filming.
<b>Storyboard</b>	Group submits a storyboard for review by instructor. Group and instructor agree on modifications, if needed. Final film follows approved storyboard.	Group submits a storyboard for review, group does not listen or accept modifications or film does not follow storyboard.	Group does not submit storyboard for review, but does shoot their film according to a storyboard.	Group does not create a storyboard prior to filming.
<b>Genre Formula</b>	Film includes at least one identifiable icon, archetype, and ritual from a teen film.	Film includes at least one identifiable item from two of the following three categories: icon, archetype, and ritual from a teen film.	Film includes at least one identifiable item from one of the following three categories: icon, archetype, and ritual from a teen film.	Film contains no identifiable genre elements from teen films.
<b>Film Reality</b>	Group can defend how film aligns with Truth in Teen Film Pact. Acting, locations, dialogue, and camera work all support pact.	Group tries to follow pact, but has elements of acting, location, dialogue, or camera work that distract from the truth of the piece.	Group is not successful in aligning with the pact in all but one area (acting, location, dialogue, camera work, etc.)	Group purposely disregards all pact elements.
<b>Overall</b>	Film captures the attention of viewer, shows a smoothness of construction (camera work and transitions), and demonstrates the creativity of the group members.	Film captures the attention of viewer, minimal technical glitches, vision of the group is sometimes overshadowed by reliance on look and feel of other teen films.	Film is often hard to watch, relies too often on parodies of other teen films and demonstrates little group individuality or creativity.	Film is confusing, dull, or unoriginal. Little thought put into the work as a whole.

## Critical Media Literacy in Teen Film Unit

### Lesson Eight Teen Scene Creation

**Educational Objective:** Students will demonstrate their ability to create media using generic conventions and their own experiences and creativity to write, plan and film a short scene from a teen movie.

**Materials Needed:** Piece of paper for each student, Teen Film Pact from Lesson 3, a camera for each group

**Anticipatory Set:** Have each student take out a piece of paper and fold it in half. Demonstrate to the class how to rip a section of the paper out so that when the paper is unfolded there is a rectangular opening with about a 2 inch frame.

*Transition:* Hold the paper up and explain how each student now has a frame that gives them a “Camera’s eye view.” By holding up the frame, they can see what a camera would capture. Directors sometimes create a frame with their hands, but now they have one of paper. Have each student get out of their seats and examine the room through their frame. They need to find a unique view of the room that could be caught by a camera. Once they have found an interesting shot in the room, they are to sit down.

**STEP 1: Guided Practice** – Pass a piece of paper out to each student and have them draw whichever shot they have discovered. Their drawing should replicate what they see through the frame. Artistic ability is not required. The students can keep checking by holding up their frame to make sure they are drawing what the camera would capture. Once they finish the drawing, they should return to their seats.

**STEP 2: Instruction** – Tell the students that what they have just drawn/created was a storyboard. Filmmakers use storyboards as a means of planning out the visuals of a film. Just as the script gives a map of what will be said and done, the storyboard is a map of how the camera will capture those words and actions. Each filmmaking group will create storyboards. It is especially important for this project because the students will be editing within the camera (by pausing the camera, composing the next shot and filming again.)

**STEP 3: Instruction** – Tell the students that the groups will have two assignments today. The first will be completing the script of their scene that they started last class. Once the script is complete, the group will bring their script to the instructor for a story conference. During this conference, the instructor will make sure the following requirements are met:

- Scene is less than 2 minutes
- Scene includes at least one icon, one archetype, and one ritual from the teen genre
- Scene does not contain inappropriate content
- Scene is not just a remake or parody from an existing teen film
- The scene shows the unique teen perspectives of those students creating it
- The scene has a beginning, middle, and end
- Each scene should have a title

During the story conference, the instructor needs to understand what the group wants to accomplish and speculate as to whether the script will let them do that. Each conference should last 3-4 minutes maximum. During the conference clarify who will be operating the camera and who will be performing in the scene.

**STEP 4: *Group Work*** – As groups are finishing their scripts and participating in story conferences, they will also be creating storyboards for their films. Suggest that the students should discuss and plan the images as much as they can in the classroom, but that they should go to their location with their frames to see what they camera will see. Playing around at the location and creating storyboards will serve as the rough draft for the film and will allow them to capture their film in an efficient manner next class period. Post the Teen Film Pact in the room and remind students to adhere to it.

**STEP 5: *Instruction*** – Tell the students that they all must be back from their locations five minutes before class is done. At that time, they will turn in their storyboards, which you will review and hand back next class. At the conclusion of class, stress that next class period all of the films will be shot and screened. They will have only 30 minutes to film, so they will need to work quickly and follow their storyboards. They will need to bring any costumes or props they need for their film to next class.

**ASSESSMENT:** The students can be assessed on their participation in story conferences with the instructor and by turning in their storyboards.

## Critical Media Literacy in Teen Film Unit

### **Lesson Nine** **Teen Film Festival**

**Educational Objective:** Students will demonstrate their teen film literacy by sharing and discussing their media projects.

**Materials Needed:** A video camera with tape for each group, projector or TV to view films, popcorn

**Anticipatory Set:** Hand each group their storyboards and a camera. If the storyboards need modification, briefly share your thoughts with the group.

*Transition:* Tell the groups that they will be filming their teen film scenes today. They will need to follow their scripts and storyboards. They will be editing in the camera, so they will need to shoot in order and have each shot composed so that it is what they want. Refer once again to the grading rubric so they understand what they will be graded on for their final films.

**STEP 1: Group Work** – Have all students take out their cell phones and set alarms to go off in 30 minutes. When the alarm goes off, the students need to be back in the classroom. If a group does not have a cell phone, tell them that you will be their alarm

**STEP 2: Group Work** – As each group is out in the school filming, roam between locations to watch the filming process. During this time, answer questions if students have them, but leave the filming to the students. These are their projects and should reveal their perspectives as much as possible. If group seems to be lagging in completing project on time, remind them of their timelines.

**STEP 3: Presentation** – At the conclusion of the 30-minute filming period, meet the students back in the classroom. Screen the films in the order that the groups returned to the classroom. As the films screen, the rest of the class needs to take out a piece of paper and answer the following questions for each film:

- What was the most interesting moment of this scene?
- How did they capture genre elements?
- How did they make the scene “real”?
- How did they make it unique?

Encourage the students to watch the films and jot down notes between screenings.

**STEP 4: Discussion** – Once all of the films have screened, get the class to talk about their response to each film as an audience member. Have them relate the answers they had to the four questions. Ask if the films could reflect the unique perspectives of the filmmakers or if the connection to the genre elements diluted creativity in what they saw. How could an individual vision override genre conventions?

Ask if they felt that as filmmakers, they were successful in capturing a more “real” teen experience than appears in Hollywood teen films. What led to their success or lack of success in terms of film realism?

**STEP 5: *Eating*** – Once all the films have screened and the discussion is completed, pull out the popcorn to celebrate the classes achievements. Eat and enjoy. Collect the students’ written responses to their peers work.

**ASSESSMENT:** Students can be assessed on their completed films (using grading rubric) and on their written response to their peers’ work.

## Critical Media Literacy in Teen Film Unit

### **Lesson Ten**

#### **So What Was It All About?**

**Educational Objective:** Students will hand in written/filmed reflections on their work and the work of their peers in relation to capturing genre conventions, adding their individual identities, and presenting mediated reality.

**Materials Needed:** A video camera with tape for each group, a copy of Interview Questions for each group

**Anticipatory Set:** Have the class get back into their filming groups and give each group a camera. Tell the class that they have one last filming assignment for this unit. Hand out a copy of the Interview Questions page to each group.

*Transition:* Tell the class that each group will have to film their response to the questions on the Interview Questions page. They can hand the camera around as they each respond, or film all group members as they all respond, or any other way that they wish. All that is required is that the group responses to the questions and the responses are captured on film.

**STEP 1: Self-Assessment** – Give each group 8 minutes to complete this self assessment assignment. Collect the cameras from each group when they are done.

**ASSESSMENT:** The students can be assessed by viewing their video response to their work.

# Teen Film Final Interview Questions

- What was the most successful element of your film?
- Did the final film turn out the way that you had anticipated? Why or why not?
- Did you find the genre conventions and the truth pact helped or hindered the production of your film? Explain.
- What would you have done differently during the filming process (writing, storyboard, filming)?
- What is the most important thing that you learned about film production during this project?



## Appendix B

### Writing Prompts for Students

#### DAY 2

Have you ever considered reality in film before? Do you think the pact created by the class is an accurate tool for examining film reality?

#### DAY 3

Select one film that depicts teens and discuss how it aligns or does not align with the class pact.

#### DAY 4

Describe a time when your reaction to a person was influenced by a media representation of a person of similar characteristics. Did your perceptions turn out to be accurate or do you know?

#### DAY 5

Which teen character archetype do you think people would use to classify you? Do you think this classification is accurate?

#### DAY 6

In *Rebel Without a Cause*, Jim's character states, "If I had one day when I didn't have to be all confused and I didn't have to feel that I was ashamed of everything. If I felt that I belonged someplace. You know?" Jim's statement can be seen as the objective of his character, what he pursues throughout the whole film. What would the main character in a teen film made by you want? Are there any other films where the teens have the same objective as the one you would put in your movie? How well did that film display the teen's objective?

#### DAY 8

What was your goal in making your film? Were you able to achieve that goal?

#### DAY 9

Whose film did you have the strongest reaction to? What about that film prompted that reaction?

#### DAY 10

What do you think your role in this class is? Is it different than your role in other classes?

## Appendix C

### Focus Group Interview Questions

#### Pre-Instruction Discussion

- What has been the most important thing you have learned about film so far this quarter?
- Do you think you have similar views about film as your instructor? Why or why not?
- What are the main things you look for in determining the quality of a film?
- What do you think your role in this class is? Is it different than your role in other classes?
- How much do your life experiences align with the teen experiences you see portrayed in films?
- Do you feel your assumptions about other teens or students is based on ideas you have gained from watching teen depictions of certain character types on film? Explain.
- What impact do you think film has on teen perceptions and actions?
- When you have made films before, did they capture your views and identity or are they based mostly on other film and media sources?

While these questions will be the focus of the discussion, the interviewer may ask follow up questions to delve deeper into responses or gain greater clarification regarding the responses of the students.

## Appendix D

### Focus Group Interview Questions

#### Post-Instruction Discussion

- Which element of this unit of instruction had the greatest impact on you?
- Which element of the unit had the least impact on you?
- Do you think you have similar views about film as your instructor? Why or why not?
- What are the main things you look for in determining the quality of a film?
- How much do your life experiences align with the teen experiences you see portrayed in films?
- Did you agree with the Teen Reality in Film Pact created by your class? Why or why not?
- Do you think teen films should be examined for realism? Should character depictions be examined in entertainment films?
- What impact do you think film has on teen perceptions and actions?
- Do you think you will look at films differently as a result of your experience in this class? Why or why not?
- How successful do you think the film you created was? What were the best part and the worst part?
- How accurately were you able to capture your life experiences on film? Is it accessible and truthful?
- What types of reactions do you think your film would get from other teen audiences?
- What do you think your role in this class was? Is it different than your role in other classes?

While these questions will be the focus of the discussion, the interviewer may ask follow up questions to delve deeper into responses or gain greater clarification regarding the responses of the students.